- Technology / Aging

MAKING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ACCESSIBLE TO THE ELDERLY

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GROWING old is a concern that affects everyone at every level of society. It is a condition that cannot be controlled with the most obvious changes occurring physically.



And in many parts of the world, especially those that experienced an increase in birth rates after the Second World War, are now experiencing a sharp increase in the elderly of their population – as those from the Baby Boomers era approach their platinum years.

This potentially affects the country's productivity, as a huge portion of the population goes into retirement and yet they would require more care.

According to World Population Prospects 2019, by 2050, one in six people the world over will surpass the age of 65, while back in 2019 this ratio was only one in 11.

In 2020, the world was estimated to have 727 million people aged 65 years or older, but that number is expected to double to 1.5 billion by 2050.

This is significant as these numbers crest with the rise in digital transformation, which promises to bring powerful socioeconomic opportunities.

Hence, during the World Telecommunications and Information Society Day this year, the theme is 'Digital Technologies for Older Persons and Healthy Ageing'.

Creating better accessibility

With the increase in the dependence on information and communication technology (ICT), private and public sectors shift towards greater digital use in order to serve the population better.

However, not all these changes are particularly accessible to the elderly.

The World Health Organization has delineated that healthy ageing should include meeting basic needs, learning, growing and making decisions, maintaining mobility, building and maintaining relationships and contributing to society.

Integrating technology can be the solution by creating age-friendly environments that this slice of population can interact with.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialised agency for information and communication technologies, it is important to promote an inclusive environment that includes age-friendly technological considerations by ensuring higher digital literacy.

With the increasing population of those above 65 years of age, technological products and services designed for this portion of society would certainly hold huge potential.

Companies, industries, academic institutions and entrepreneurs are indeed encouraged to look into this unattended market, one that presents the opportunity to keep on growing at an exponential rate.

This will, in turn, increase the demand for goods and services hence will affect labour and financial markets further.

Basic necessities

As the world recovers from two years of the pandemic that saw an exhilarating increase in digital transformation for many products and services and businesses pivoting their traditional models to digital ones, we must not forget to include the ageing population, who still have basic needs to fulfil.

At the crux of digital transformation for the aged is to be able to meet their basic needs through technologies such as e-banking, e-commerce and e-health.

From purchasing groceries online to digital banking and the use of health apps to monitor and prevent serious conditions in older patients, platforms should be well designed in order to make processes easy to understand and trustworthy during the transition.

A user-friendly customer service can also help those clients who are not familiar with digital platforms.

Learning opportunities

Even e-learning platforms have opened up more options for the population that can impact healthy ageing, as academia can provide options to interest this segment of population, either by offering user-friendly screen user interactions or including contributions from older teachers and mentors for younger students.

There is also an opportunity for transportation models that can assist the elderly, with programmes and services that solve their mobility problems.

Social network support

There is also a need to address how changing social connections affect the elderly, as social isolation is an issue for this segment as social isolation and loneliness can impact health and the loss of economic and social potential.

Studies, however, show that older adults with internet connection, proper devices and are technologically literate fare better, as these technologies become an essential part of empowering them to thrive in challenging circumstances.

With an ageing population, government officials need to take this reality into account and define clear strategies. ICTS are today's means of achieving these goals in a scalable and safe manner.