

Involving older people in the development of IT products

Roos Eisma
UTOPIA Research Manager
Dept. of Applied Computing, University of Dundee

At this point you're hopefully convinced of the need to ensure that your product is appropriate for older people and can easily be used by them.

In some of the other talks you will have heard about the diversity of the older population and the difficulty of designing guidelines. The best way to get feedback on your ideas and your product therefor is to ask older people themselves.

In this talk I will discuss at what points of the development process users can be involved, and how working with older people differs from working with other groups of users.

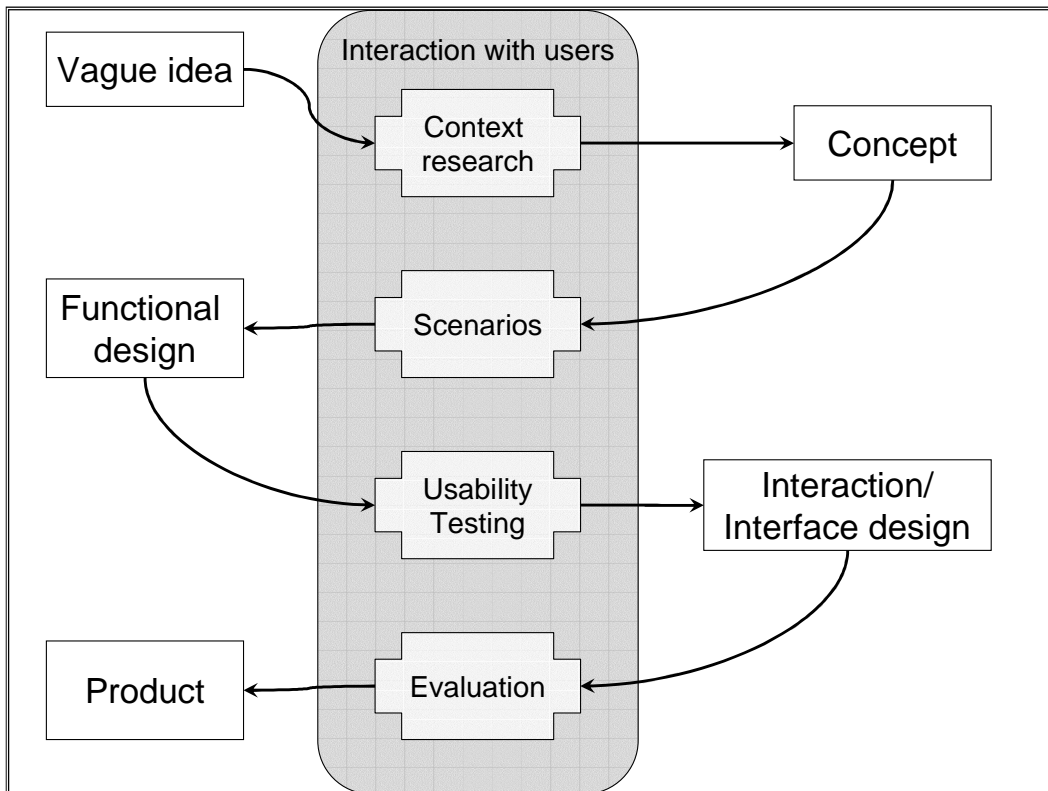
This is not meant as a complete guide to involvement of users in the development process, but as a starting point for you to think about how you could implement this yourself.

It is also possible to get an external party to do some of this for you: from recruiting elderly participants to conducting a range of requirements gathering and usability studies.

or...
How older people and
researchers have fun



And as we have found in the UTOPIA project: collaborating with older people in your project often is rewarding, enjoyable and entertaining for all parties involved!



There are various points in the development process where older people can be involved. When and where these are depends on the style of development and the type of project, but this illustration is meant to give you an idea of different types of involvement.

1. The early stages when you are starting to formulate an idea are possibly the most important. This is where you form an image of what the product is, how it is used, and what the context is. In this stage you can use for example interviews, focus groups and questionnaires to get more insight in older people's lives, how and where your product would fit in, and what criteria would determine success or failure for this group. This can be characteristics of the product like the functionality or the design, but also about the wider context of the product, for example where they could buy it or what form of support would be available.

2. Once the product and its intended use begin to take more shape you can use scenario based techniques to illicit feedback. This confirms that your ideas about how the product is going to be used are correct. Scenarios make it easy for the participants to imagine using the product, and they may come up with all sorts of smaller and larger barriers to successful use ("I would need to put on my reading glasses first")

3. Once the functionality is clear the interface and interaction have to be developed. A range of prototypes (paper or digital) can be used to test the usability of the product for older people.

4. The complete product can be evaluated.

Where to find participants:

- Charity organisations
- Educational institutions
- Community organisations
- Sheltered housing, residential homes
- Church groups
- Social clubs
- Day centres

Most of the older people that participate in our research were recruited through groups. Charity organisations often run coffee mornings for older people where they welcome people giving a presentation. Universities and colleges run computer classes for the over 50. Participants of those courses often have an interest in computers and technology. Other groups, such as church groups or social clubs for a specific hobby or interest are not necessarily aimed at older people but often consist of people over 50.

Sheltered housing complexes and residential care homes can provide access to frailer older people.

In all cases we started by contacting the person responsible for running the group to explain about the project and to ask permission to give a presentation. We also asked their advice about the content and format of the presentation, so these could be fine-tuned to that specific group.

*“ I am always happy to meet people who would like to come along to the groups.
I think it is very important that people with disabilities are not excluded and also, that they are kept informed about what is going on in the 'real' world. I believe that it is very good for their self esteem and self respect to be asked their opinion and that to be included actually benefits their self confidence. ”*

Stroke group organiser, Dundee

In our experience the organisers almost always welcomed a presentation. Often they are looking for content for their meetings.

Think about...

- **Diversity**

Age, gender, class, education, computer experience, impairments, interests, living situation

- **Building and maintaining the relationship**

Contact, presentation, questionnaire, invitations, newsletter

- **Social aspects**

Time for a chat, coffee & biscuits, support

- **Enjoyment**

Interaction, new experiences and technologies

Depending on the size and type of your project you should try to consult as wide a range of older people as possible. There is not a single type of person who is representable for the whole population. There is a full generation in age difference between the younger and the older older people!

Think about what the involvement in your project gives to the older people. They are not like students who will do anything for a tenner! Invest time and energy in establishing a relationship. In UTOPIA for example we produce a newsletter two or three times a year to keep participants informed about the project and what we have done with their contributions, and to keep in touch when we may not be involving them in any activities for some time. Whatever activity we organise always includes time for refreshments and some social interaction both between the participants amongst themselves and between the participants and the facilitators. Be prepared for questions about problems with technology they have at home!

Many of the participants join because they are interested in new developments, and they enjoy sessions where we introduce them to new (for them) technologies and give them the opportunity for a hands-on experience.

And remember the ethical aspects – give the participants enough information about your project, explain that they can withdraw at any time, ask permission before video or audio recording them.

Interacting with older participants

- **Group composition**

Size and homogeneity

- **Dealing with impairments**

Location (home or away), duration, materials, interaction

- **Manners**

"that's lovely dear"

- **Techno-talk**

Barriers in language and experience between developers and participants

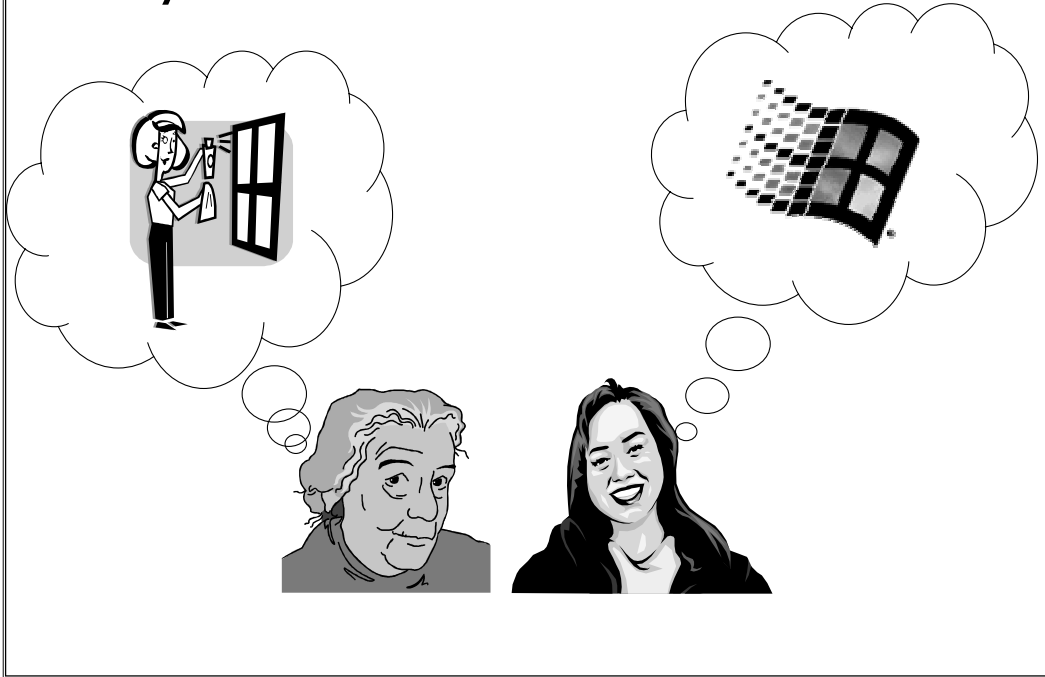
Many aspects of user involvement are the same for any user groups that is involved, but there are a number of points that need special attention when working with older people, and especially when you are involving them in a technology development process.

In general the group size should be smaller, and sessions shorter. Choose the location carefully (stairs, location of toilets) or go to the participant's location when working with frailer older people. All materials used should be readable and audible for participants with visual or hearing impairments.

It can be more difficult to get honest feedback on products. Sometimes a participant would ask if we had made the product before willing to give negative comments on it. In addition, people may not be aware of problems they have with products or with everyday life as they have got used to it or don't realise that it could be otherwise.

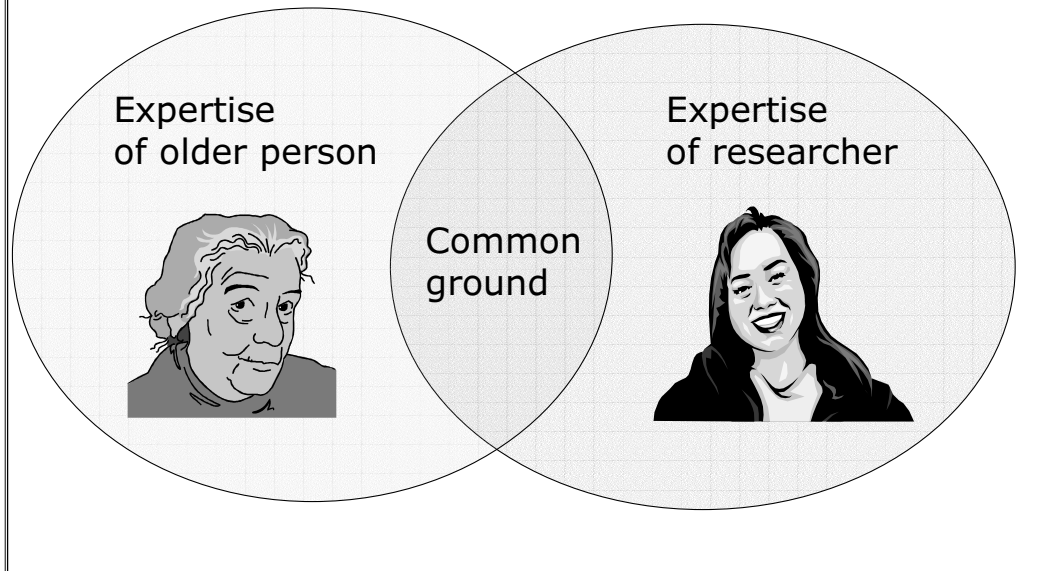
When you try to talk about technology be aware of how many words you use that are not familiar to the participants, or that have a different meaning to them. Many older people have very limited experience with 'modern' technologies and will not be able to comment or offer suggestions because they don't know what is possible.

Do you know what I mean?



People that have grown up with computers, for whom computers and other new technologies are part of everyday life, often don't realise how many words and concepts are alien or confusing to older participants.

Mutual inspiration: answer the questions I'm not asking



What we like to achieve during the involvement of older participants is that they contribute more than what we ask for. We like them to think with us, to understand what we are trying to achieve, and not just what we are asking. We may be asking the wrong questions!

They are the experts in how their life is, what their needs and wishes are, and what it is like to be older. We are the experts in what technology can do, what changes could be made, and we must find a common ground where we can discuss those topics in a language that we both understand.

Inspiration: hands-on activities



We have used workshops which included demonstrations and hands-on sessions with new technologies, ranging from hand held computers to computer games. Feedback indicated that this usually is the part that the participants enjoy most. It enables us to observe them using the technology, to see the problems and misunderstandings, to see what they like and enjoy. It enables them to discuss aspects and possibilities of technology applications which they were unaware of before.