
SENIORLAB: AN INNOVATIVE, USER-DRIVEN LIFELONG LEARNING PROJECT BASED ON THE EXPERIENCES OF SENIOR CITIZENS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the results and experience obtained from the SeniorLab project at CitiLab, Cornellà, Spain, whose aim is to promote the use of ICTs among senior citizens in order to explore their capacity for innovation, towards the design and development of the digital society. During 2008, the team (composed of 12 members), developed projects by and for senior citizens, following a project-based approach and involving Living Lab methodologies. The main results obtained are the creation of a senior, user-driven community that focuses on improving senior citizens' quality of life through open innovation; the expansion of the original team to 40 members for the 2009 edition of the project; and a variety of projects that reflect the heritage and historic memory of the group.

Rationale

Senior citizens are usually the group with less experience in the use of the Internet, as shown by numerous studies¹ It could be thought that the Spanish (and Catalanian) case is an exception, due to historical reasons that have resulted in Spain being relatively behind in alphabetization with respect to the rest of Europe. Nevertheless, the European Commission report of December 2007² shows that this is also the case in other European countries.

Society's image of senior citizens is, in general, shown in a negative light, mainly because of social prejudice and economic factors, that associate old age with a plethora of negative concepts, such as burden, dependency, cost, illnesses, obsolescence and lack of productivity. On the other hand, this growing segment of the population is being perceived as a potential market for service companies, and is also being addressed by governments, which are providing support for the social and health needs of this age group.

The objective of Seniorlab is to put senior citizens at the centre of the knowledge society, under the belief that senior citizens should not have to adapt to new technologies and tools, but rather that these should be adapted to senior citizens' needs, and it should also be taken into account what they can provide to society. Seniorlab is, in this context, a social innovation that regards people -senior citizens in this case- as the drivers of social and cultural innovation.

Profile of team and participants

The execution of this project has also allowed us to define a profile of the target audience, based on the team members and participants; this in turn has helped us define the strategies to be adopted in order to expand the group and the area of influence of the project.

Seniorlabers retired between 1980 and 2008, and for the most part worked at factories (one of which, *Can Suris*, has been transformed from a textile factory into a technology and innovation centre for the community, CitiLab), or any of the big industries that were the economic driver of the city back in those days. For most of them, the technology revolution happened after they had retired, or were close to retirement, and they never had the need to get involved with technologies in a work situation.

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that this is a generation that is somehow acquainted with innovation; they are the post-Civil war generation, the one that had to deal with the transition from agriculture to factories, face

¹ http://www.uoc.edu/in3/pic/cat/societat_xarxa/informe.html

² http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-QA-07-023/EN/KS-QA-07-023-EN.PDF

industrialization and new revolutionary technologies (such as cars and television), change the role of women in society, and embraced democracy.

Methodology

Seniorlab uses a project-based learning approach, and also borrows from the Living Lab methodology³; members meet twice a week, and receive formative sessions on the technology tools they require for the projects being developed. The members of the team also participate in meetings to follow-up on these projects, discuss and propose new ideas for innovation, and share experiences with other groups and organizations that are interested on this area.

The team is composed of 13 members, divided into two subteams:

Leading team:

- 1 Main project coordinator
- 3 sub-project coordinators
- 2 technology support
- 1 technology and administration

Volunteers: 6, most of which are also enrolled in the *Universitat de la Gent Gran* (Seniors University), at Cornellà.

For the 2009 edition of the project, we expect to have around 30 new members. The Volunteers subteam will thus have two groups, advanced and beginners.

The development of a pedagogical approach that suited learning in the context of Seniorlab projects was not easy; in the end, the approach was to learn from the participants themselves which were the best ways for them to adopt new technologies, and one of them was to relate technology to their lives. For example, slideshows became family photo albums, and video was used to create a record of the places they have grown and worked in. This in turn meant they not only had to learn technologies, but also how to do research: how to conduct interviews, how to search for a file, how to document facts. It is essentially a combination of project-based learning and a Living Lab methodology: the users are at the centre of the open innovation process, and are involved at every step of it.

Three main issues have been identified through the development of the project:

- Less economic independence, as a consequence of retirement
- Hardware may represent an obstacle for people with special needs, or whose physical abilities have been affected or reduced
- Social isolation and dependence

Seniorlab projects are focused on finding solutions to these three aspects; technology allows for the creation of collaborative projects that help in reducing some expenses. Using open innovation, users can get in touch with hardware companies and work together in a design that addresses some particular needs. And the use of communication technologies and social networks helps in overcoming the feeling of isolation and dependence. In fact, Seniorlab is itself a social space that helps seniors integration to society.

Results

The project has just reached its first year of life. As stated in the project's proposal, the main objectives were:

- Build a community of senior citizens, oriented towards social and technological innovation.
- Create an observatory for projects developed by and for senior citizens.
- Establish a workshop or laboratory for the development of projects

³ Open Living Labs, <http://www.openlivinglabs.org>

So far, the main results obtained are:

- As of today, Seniorlab is a Living Lab community composed of 13 members, who during 2008 have developed a number of innovation, learning and diffusion projects centred around new technologies.
- Seniorlab has played the role of observatory for innovation projects developed for and by senior citizens.
- The activities developed at Seniorlab have been focused on the interests and needs of the members themselves; instead of starting with ICT courses, a different approach was taken: through the use of focus groups and observation, the interests and needs of the group were identified, and then it was decided what tools were necessary for the execution of the related projects.
- The training sessions were done as workshops rather than as formal courses, based on the requirements and feedback of the participants.
- The construction of a TALLER is underway, and it was realised that not only a physical space was needed, but also a virtual one. For this, a blog was created (<http://seniorlab.citilab.tv>).

Additional results are the promotion of a techno-social identity among senior citizens, bringing them closer to technology; a high level of enthusiasm and involvement in the project; and providing the participants with a basic knowledge on tools such as blogs, video recording and slideshows.

There are also some specific results, related to the projects developed by Seniorlab, and which are structured around two main axes:

1. Memory and history axis:

The knowledge and wisdom of senior citizens are usually related to memories; these memories have been turned into a record by means of technology.

- Gender experiences: the "*Dones*" ("Women) project, a video based on interviews.
- Life experience: the "*Memoria personal e Historia*" ("Personal memory and history") project. Recordings about Franquism, including reflections and a comparative analysis; video edition in process.
- Life and city experiences: the "*Barri Riera*" ("Riera neighbourhood") project, that reconstructs the birth and growth of this neighbourhood, based on interviews and testimonials.
- Professional experience: the "*Can Suris*" project; through interviews, the life of this textile factory is recreated, thus recovering the cultural and social heritage of the building. This building has been transformed into a technological centre for the community, Citilab, which hosts numerous organizations, including Seniorlab.

2. Technology axis: Seniorlab participants have received training in those tools they need for the development of projects, such as basic knowledge of computers, e-mail, office suites, creation and edition of blogs, recording and editing of digital images and video, and slideshows.

Future work

So far, the Seniorlab experience has been a successful one, and we intend to keep on developing new projects and ideas, always driven by the users themselves. All projects have been proposed as prototypes that can be improved and expanded, either from the content or the technology point of view. Proven methodologies and tools could be applied to new environments, and current projects could be improved and enhanced by using new tools and applications.

In order to give continuity to this idea, new fields are being explored, and strategies to expand the team are being designed. Some of the future projects under consideration are:

- Open doors day, extending an invitation to senior members of the Citilab community (so-called Citilabers + 50)
- Senior fashion: based on an idea by one of the team's volunteers, contacts are being established in order to explore designs adapted to seniors. The group would test these designs.
- Establish contacts with organizations that are working on tele-assistance, and explore possible collaborations.

- Senior economy: based around strategies that allow seniors to access new technologies, regardless of economic limitations.
- Increase the interaction with the Universitat de la Gent Gran, since its members are seniors which have an interest in innovation and education projects.
- Expand both the group's interest and members, in order to create a truly interdisciplinary team
- Promote the group at a nacional level, and host the first national conference for seniors
- Consolidate the structure and management of the project, as well as finding external financing and sponsors

References

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