

HOW HAVE BAB PROJECTS USED TECHNOLOGY TO REACH & ENGAGE PEOPLE AGED 50+?



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Overview

Ever heard someone joke that older people are bad at using technology? The chances are you will have done, probably multiple times. The stereotype that older people do not have access to (or choose not to use) technology is a powerful one.

Yet how accurate is it really? Estimates about the use of technology and access to the internet vary depending on the research methods used and the specific focus being looked at. Examples of recent data on this topic include the **Office for National Statistics**, the Centre for Ageing Better and the Bristol Quality of Life survey.

This report contributes to the existing learning about this topic by **exploring how projects within the Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) programme have used technology** to reach and engage those aged 50 and over. What has worked well, and why?

A number of BAB projects came together for a roundtable discussion on this topic in August 2019; this report shares the key insights from their discussion. In this context we use the term 'technology' to refer to a whole range of devices and communication channels including websites, social media, e-newsletters, phone apps, videos, radio interviews, online forms, electronic events calendars, text messages and many more.

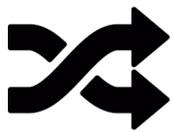




It is difficult to identify which types of technology are most effective

When asked, participants in BAB projects often said that they had **heard about it through word of mouth**. However it is difficult to pinpoint where this original knowledge came from. For example did someone else see it on social media or hear about it on the radio, and then tell the individual?

Many different avenues, including different forms of technology, could eventually emerge as 'word of mouth'.



Engage people using a range of different technology options

There is **no one form of technology that all BAB projects have found to work well** when engaging people aged 50+. It is important to use a range of different technological options in order to maximise your chances of reaching and engaging the demographic you are aiming for. Sometimes this involved **being creative and experimenting** with technology in different ways, such as producing a video and seeing whether this worked well or not.

Some find social media (particularly Facebook) to be a very useful tool, whereas others believe it has been less successful for their projects. Many found that those aged under 70 were more likely to use social media than those aged over 70. This age trend was not seen to the same extent among those who use email. These trends are likely to change in the coming decades as future generations, with different relationships to technology, grow older.

BAB projects found that, with all forms of technology, it is **important not to assume that individuals will see the message and respond immediately**. For example while some people will check their email every day, others may only do so once a week or less. Projects should keep this in mind when using technology to engage with people, and to factor this into their communication timeframe.

Some of the technology that BAB projects have used include: websites, Facebook, Twitter, e-newsletters, Next Door app, Meet Up app, videos, radio interviews, online forms, electronic events calendars and text messages.

Pages 3 and 4 outline how some projects have used social media, organisational mailing lists, text messages, workers' email lists, audio and video.

➤ Example: Social media

Some BAB projects have used **boosted Facebook adverts** to reach a greater number of people aged 50+. This has worked well, particularly for projects that operate at a neighbourhood-level.

Key learning about Facebook adverts was to have an image containing some of the basic information to catch people's attention, and then a link with further details. Although these adverts are not too expensive, particularly when only used for certain activities rather than everything, it still requires a communication or technology budget.



BAB projects also identified and joined relevant Facebook groups, for example relating to the neighbourhood they work within or the type of activity they are offering. It worked well to **share any adverts or posts to these specific groups**, as group members are already likely to have an interest in the content. Similarly, some projects asked **active local residents to help them spread the news on social media**, which tended to work well.

These Facebook groups worked best when they **encouraged people to engage and interact with the post**. For example asking people what their favourite cafe is in Bristol, or asking for music requests for a disco. Although not always possible, these posts may be more noticeable and people may pay more attention to the content.

Projects felt that Facebook is suitable for both neighbourhood-specific or city-wide activities, whereas Twitter is better suited to events that are city-wide. Similarly, it is easier to target a specific demographic when using Facebook compared to Twitter or other forms of technology.

A benefit of social media is the **ability to track how many people have seen or engaged with a post**. However there is still no way of knowing whether these individuals are hearing about the project for the first time or whether there has been some form of previous engagement. Despite these statistics, it is therefore **still difficult for workers to know whether they are reaching the people they are aiming to**.

➤ Example: Organisational mailing lists

An organisation's mailing list can be an important channel for people over 50 finding out about activities and events.

BAB projects found that it worked well to **regularly ask people to join the mailing list**, for example when they attend an event or when they phone up to enquire for the first time. By doing so, it ensures the mailing list constantly grows and includes people who are actively interested at that point in time.

BAB projects saw their organisation's mailing list as **a way to help people to stay connected**, particularly within the context of project funding coming to an end. By continuing to receive the organisation's e-newsletters after that specific project finishes, individuals may find out about other activities and organisations that they are interested in engaging with.

➤ Example: Text messaging

Some BAB projects used text messages to engage with individuals who were already involved in the project's activities. Usually these **text messages were reminders of meetings or appointments**.

In some situations, for example projects that involve many different appointments, it may be useful for these text messages to be automated, in a similar way to that used by some GP surgeries. In these circumstances, it would free up worker's time and ensure that reminders are consistent.

➤ Example: Workers' own email contact lists

Some workers in BAB projects have their own email contact lists of key stakeholders that they circulate information to. These contact lists might include local community activists, residents, organisations and councillors.

Timing was often important with these email communications, ensuring information is sent at an appropriate time in advance and not too frequently that the messages get overlooked.

➤ Example: Videos

At least one BAB project used the **TV screens in GP surgeries** to reach and engage people aged 50+.

They developed a 30-second video containing information about the project and its activities. Once developed, it was free to include on the TV screens of the two GP surgeries within their neighbourhood.

➤ Example: Audio recording

One project uses technology to **audio record people's opinions and perspectives**. This is useful when writing articles, developing case studies or finding out what difference the activity makes to someone.

If used correctly, voice can be as powerful as video and some people may feel more comfortable talking about the project than being filmed on a video.



Use technology to reach the friends, family and neighbours of those you wish to engage

Some forms of technology, particularly social media, have the added value of being able to reach the friends, family and neighbours of people aged 50+. Reaching this wider audience can be a way of using technology to **indirectly reach your target audience**.

For one BAB project who used Facebook to advertise within a specific neighbourhood, it was necessary to lower the age bracket of the advert to 40+ in order to reach Facebook's minimum audience requirement. By doing so, this had the added benefit of reaching the family, friends and neighbours of those aged 50+.

Similarly, BAB projects found it **common for spouses or partners to receive emails on behalf of both individuals**, or for one person in a couple to be the main point of communication.



Challenging stereotypes

In addition to using technology to reach and engage people, BAB projects also used it for other purposes.

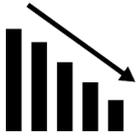
One example is using it to challenge stereotypes of older people. This included **using a diverse range of images and sharing stories or news articles which challenged these stereotypes**.



Do not use technology just for the sake of it

Not all forms of technology will work for all types of project. One example is a BAB wellbeing project that has a Facebook page but has disabled the option of comments and direct messaging, as they do not have the capacity to respond as quickly as individuals may need. This may be particularly important for projects that involve direct mental health support.

BAB projects felt that **if the technology was not regularly updated then there was often little value in using it at all**. This included websites, social media and electronic events calendars. If technology is going to be used, then it is important for the organisation or community group to create a culture where there is a 'buzz' around using this technology and keeping it up to date. BAB projects felt that keeping technology up to date often required someone to coordinate it and remind others.



Knowledge and confidence with technology can decrease over time

BAB projects noted that **access to technology relies on having certain levels of resources, knowledge and confidence**. Computers can be difficult for some people to access, and may require them to use the facilities at the library.

Projects gave examples of individuals who at one stage had the knowledge and confidence to use technology how they wished, but who lost this over time for example due to a break in usage or to medical conditions such as a stroke. **This loss of confidence does not necessarily relate to age, but rather lack of regular practice.**

Many BAB projects informally supported people with technology, for example answering their questions about a specific problem or looking up the details of an event someone is interested in attending. Many felt that there was a need for regular IT support sessions, either drop-in or those which run as a group, in order to provide direct guidance and signposting.



Accessibility of your technology

BAB projects used technology (for example their websites) in English, recognising that **this is only accessible for those who read English and may be more difficult for others to understand**. While some projects had translations of certain information (such as leaflets and forms), this had not been done with technology.

While many forms of technology can be amended to make it more accessible, for example altering the colour contrast or size of the text, not everyone will know how to do this or feel confident finding out.

It works well to offer individuals the chance to state their communication preferences as, for example, some people prefer to receive information via text particularly if they use text to speech readers.



Support for workers to engage using technology

BAB projects valued having someone, usually a communications officer, who could support them to make the most of technology. By **spreading this knowledge throughout the team** and embedding it in everyone's practice, it also helped to minimise any disruption caused by staff changes as all were able to use the technology.

Particularly with social media, understanding the algorithm (for example how to ensure a higher number of people see a post) is greatly beneficial. Moreover, it is important for workers to have the **knowledge and confidence to appropriately manage social media accounts**, for example handling negative comments.

BAB projects believed a key way to **set boundaries** was to set up work social media accounts to use for everything related to the project, instead of using personal accounts. Some organisations have guidelines about how workers should use technology, which projects tended to find useful and supportive.



Data protection challenges

The introduction of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) in 2018 **caused a reduction in the number of people on the mailing lists for some BAB projects.**

Similarly, some BAB projects found that some people aged 50+ were reluctant to give out their email address in certain situations. This may relate to whether the project setting was formal or informal, and whether that individual is used to sharing their contact details.



Connection between loneliness and engaging through technology

Some BAB projects believed that individuals who are lonely and isolated may be **less likely to engage with technology, particularly social media**. One aspect of this may relate to having a smaller support network to help with questions and problems that arise, as well as lower levels of confidence and motivation to engage in this way. However this is anecdotal and will not be the case for everyone.

Projects reflected on the implications of technology, particularly the **trend of fewer venues accepting paper leaflets and instead opting for information displayed on a screen**. While this works well for some people, it does not work well for others and has knock-on implications for loneliness and the ability of projects to reach people through paper leaflets.



Further BAB learning resources can be found at:
<http://bristolgeingbetter.org.uk/learning-so-far/>