

Dutch learning centres for computer & internet skills

The information society has stepped into everyone's life. Internet activities such as health searches, e-shopping, on-line banking and email are tremendously popular.

WHY START WITH COMPUTERS?

The younger generations learn these applications easily, in a very natural way. But an important percentage of the elderly make no use of it because they simply lack the digital skills. They have an incomplete picture of benefits from using a computer or surfing the internet. On the other hand they are increasingly curious to learn more about the digital world encouraged by their neighbourhood and family. They like to know how to use the computer for electronic banking, to make their own Christmas cards, or email with children and grand children. Beside all these practical advantages, an important motivation is the feeling of 'being part of it' and being able to talk about it.

THREE YEARS EXPERIMENT

RIGOM (a Dutch welfare organisation for elderly in the south of Holland) tried to fulfil this need by starting a three year experiment. With financial support from the province of Noord-Brabant and various funds, they founded 25 well-equipped computer learning centres for elderly. The aim of these centres is to create a meeting point for seniors to learn, to practise, and to exchange their experiences about computers and Internet. The locations are easily accessible, close to the people's home, and in a familiar surrounding.

The first introductory course offers the seniors a low-cost, personal introduction to using computers and internet. It provides a better and more precise pic-

ture whether to continue with further courses or not. Most of the seniors start taking courses in word processing, graphics, or basic Windows skills. A few of the learning centres are equipped for these kinds of courses.

Afterwards they return to their own learning centre to meet others, use the computers to practise and exchange their experiences. Thus every participant can join in at a level that matches their own skills and background.



SETUP

The RIGOM learning centres usually contain two to three computers. They are housed in a variety of locations, including senior centres, community centres, and elderly care facilities. The whole setup is done in close corporation with RIGOM and local senior organisations. With professional effort RIGOM takes care of the acquisition of new seniors, manages the volunteers, and provides the necessary educational material and computer infrastructure. This support is rather strict but well organized, based on uniform procedures, rules, and regular meetings.

The process of preparing, building, and starting the 25 learning centres took more than three years. In the beginning only a few centres were active and every

month one or more joined in. This gradual process was a key factor for the success of this project. RIGOM was able to support individual centres intensively and more focused. Another advantage is that every starting centre learned and benefited from the previous experiences such as a better organisation, streamlined procedures, fully developed and tested course ware, and support for hard- and software.

SOME RESULTS

During the year 2004 more than 850 seniors took part in one or more activities in the learning centres. Over 210 senior volunteers helped the 'students' in a friendly, hands-on manner and usually on a one to one basis. In 2005 the estimated number of participants is over 1000 seniors.



About 65% of the participants took the basic course (basic computer and Windows skills) and over 25% completed a course on subjects as Internet/e-mail, Word, Excel, or graphics.

A typical reaction of one the participants "Never thought it would be that easy". The general opinion on joining a learning centre is very positive. It is challenging and fun to do so. People overcome their fear for buttons and computers in general.

Most of the learning centres are located in small communities and neighbourhoods. This is particularly valuable since these communities are losing many of their economical and cultural activities. The learning centres compensated part

of this loss by bringing back new activities and possibilities to meet others. In this way the programme contributes to the quality of life in these communities.

Many seniors experience that the computer turns out to be a useful and a joyful instrument in daily life thanks to knowledge and skills they were given by the learning centres. On future occasions seniors can rely on these centres whenever they like to talk about computers or exchange experiences.

FUTURE

The experimental period has finished¹. All the learning centres are in business. During the past three years RIGOM learnt a lot about organizing and managing these locations. Both the successful approach and the positive experiences among the participants and volunteers make this project to a success. It clearly satisfies a social need. For this reason RIGOM is incorporating the learning centres as one of their regular activities for elderly. It is an attractive service to seniors, very affordable (free introduction course, €1 fee per hour) given in a familiar setting and available close to their homes.

Reference

1. H. Koning. Computerhoeken Regio Maasland. Oss: RIGOM; 2005

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