

Seniors have begun to embrace technology but are still under-represented in the tech industry

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Technology has impacted our lives in so many ways. And while youth tend to be the early adopters, many members of the senior population have embraced technology in ways that have served to improve their quality of life and even overall health.

"Like any population, it's tough to generalize - there is so much diversity in the senior population; some seniors may have been on the cutting edge of technology themselves for most of their lives, while others less exposed by the nature of their chosen careers or personal circumstances," explained Emily Jones Joannis, co-founder and CEO of Connected Canadians, an Ottawa-based non-profit organization dedicated to connecting older adults with technology training and support. "For many seniors who have harnessed the power of technology in their lives, it's been a tremendously empowering and rewarding experience; for others who may have been victims of cyberfraud, quite the opposite.

"Education is key - providing access to technology training can make all the difference, which is why Connected Canadians works so hard to provide technology training free of charge to older Canadians."

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift toward embracing virtual medicine in a way that many older adults see as being a positive change.

"Connected Canadians experienced an outpouring of requests for help in accessing telehealth appointments during the pandemic," Jones Joannis explained. "We know from our own clients that this has been a really positive change for many seniors, who are now able to access medical care from the comfort of their homes.

"Similar to the shift in thinking about remote work, we believe attitudes toward accessing health care remotely have also made a permanent shift and this will deeply impact the way these services are delivered moving forward."

New technologies - extending even to personal wearables - are changing the ways that seniors monitor their fitness.

"iPads are usually one of the most effective and easy-to-learn devices for seniors who are new to tech, but even wearables like Fitbits, or nutrition tracking apps are eagerly embraced by older adults to help improve general health and wellness," Jones Joannis said, adding that the organization will be launching a program this summer to help seniors stay fit online.

In addition, technological advances related to the "Internet of Things" are proving to be promising for



seniors suffering from dementia.

"I've had some really interesting conversations recently with colleagues working with dementia patients using IOT technology to help improve quality of life using unobtrusive and creative methods, considering not only dementia sufferers but also caregivers who also can benefit tremendously from well-designed technology systems," she added.

With all the benefits technology can offer, Jones Joannis said that Canada needs to continue to invest in this population. With an aging population, technology represents an incredible opportunity - but only if certain societal barriers are removed.

"The biggest barriers, in my opinion, are cost, and societal ageism. Cost, for obvious reasons - and why our organization exists - because we believe there needs to be a source of free technology help for Canadian seniors, and ageism, because it is the last acceptable 'ism' in today's society, which is incredibly deep-seated and hard to redress," Jones Joannis explained. "We believe that providing all Canadians with the means to make their voice heard in today's digital world is a step in the right direction; however, there are many other factors at play. When seniors are isolated, self-directed ageism can impact not only an older adult's attitude toward gaining new skills but

also their overall well-being."

For Jones Joannis, the senior population has been under-represented in funded initiatives for skills development. But the realities of today's world puts a premium on digital skills training for this demographic.

"Canada has long recognized the need for digital skills training for younger women and youth in general, and I support these initiatives wholeheartedly. However, older adults are a massively growing demographic that also needs digital support, and comparatively, very little public funding has been provided for this need," she said. "A U.S. study (PEW, 2017) found that, when surveyed, 73 per cent of older adults preferred to have help when learning a new device, and when we surveyed Canadian older adults - both clients and non-clients - we've had similar results, a little over 75 per cent.

"We've had a major funder tell us that as the pandemic abates, digital skills training for seniors is no longer as pressing a need, but we wholeheartedly disagree with this statement and look for like-minded partners to support us in our mission. Accessing the online world is no longer a luxury - it is a right - and the need for digital literacy skills for all Canadians is more critical than ever before."