The speed and scale of the changes affecting both business and society demand new thinking and new solutions. At Fujitsu, we are addressing these challenges in a responsible and sustainable way by exploiting new and emerging technology.
A new digital divide

The phrase “digital divide” normally refers to inequalities between urban and rural populations. But there is a new digital divide opening up between digital natives – people who have grown up with technology – and those who risk being left behind.

This is not a trivial divide. As commerce has shifted online, the widest ranges of goods and services – and the keenest prices – are no longer accessible on the High Street. If you can’t use comparison websites, you can’t secure the best deals for energy, travel or insurance. At the same time the web has become the de facto source for the kind of advice and guidance that was formerly distributed by local government offices.

Furthermore, the growth of online content and social media mean that those who are not connected to the web are left adrift of the global conversation. Many older people are aware that they’re missing out, but often lack the skills or motivation to go online. While people in all age groups have increased their internet usage over the years, in the UK people over 65 still form the smallest sector, with fewer than half online\(^2\).

In 2000,\(^1\) 810 million people were aged 60 or over. In 2050, the number will rise to 2 billion. That’s 22% of the world’s population.

Widening access to everyday technology

As we get older, we find it harder to learn new things – at least, we think we do. Encouraging more people over the age of 60 to use IT requires a fresh look at how we can help them to learn the necessary skills.

Older people are unlikely to take traditional classroom courses and prefer to learn with someone they can relate to directly. Research shows that when teaching the elderly to use computers, the type of training and the system design make a significant difference to the student’s success. Training should include subjects like email, social networking, video conferencing and security.

Banks are offering free IT training to their older customer base – which may account for the relative success of mobile and internet banking within this group. Computer skills courses run in local libraries and adult education centres are also popular. We need to ensure that good quality, well-structured courses are available as widely as possible. Access to IT must be seen as a right rather than a privilege.

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\(^1\) World Health Organisation; http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2012/toolkit/background/en/

The future old – us and our children

The need for basic training in computer skills will begin to taper off as technologically experienced people age. However, older people will still require special consideration, especially as regards usability. Rather than attempting to predict the needs of the ageing population, it makes sense to include older people in the design process.

Mainstream products and services tend to be targeted at a young, aspirational profile, with devices and sites alike designed for style, excitement and status. But older people have other concerns, such as legibility of information and the size of buttons. The slimmest mobile phones are also the hardest to hold confidently.

Involving older people will enable the IT industry to develop products and services that are functional and beneficial for this growing group. It also makes business sense. By downplaying the needs of older people, businesses are turning away customers.

We and our children are the older generations of the future. We can build a brighter future for ourselves by taking the wants and needs of older people more seriously. We want to live full lives for as long as we can – and that means living comfortably online as first class citizens.

The smarter life

Technology also has an important role to play in ensuring our wellbeing as we grow older. The fragmentation of families and strain on local services mean that assistance from IT in the home will make a valuable contribution to keeping older people safe, well and independent.

At Fujitsu we are working hard on building intelligent home environments with embedded sensor systems that can monitor health and mobility.

Our current project in Ireland uses up to 110 sensors streaming data in real time. Such systems will enable people to look after themselves better while triggering appropriate, informative messages to carers and first responders when necessary.

The new face of public services

Governments around the world are embracing technology enthusiastically. IT is reducing costs, widening participation and stimulating economic growth.

The UN is closely monitoring the development of e-government around the world. In 2014, the top ten countries for e-government were South Korea, Australia, Singapore, France, Netherlands, Japan, USA, UK, New Zealand and Finland.

The UK’s Digital by Default strategy aims to move all government services online. Key services such as passport renewal, vehicle tax and electoral registration are already well established. However, if we don’t address the age-related digital divide, the government’s aims will not be met in full.

Online Transactions - Digital by Default

“If technology fails to empower our ageing population, we will all lose”

The UK is looking to provide an alternative means of access which allows certified companies to verify a person’s identity so they can access government services.

We believe other solutions, designed to make it easier for older people to get online, are also needed. For example, siting easy-to-use kiosks in public areas such as post offices, libraries and health centres would enable older people to make online transactions in familiar locations with backup from staff available should they need it.

Conclusion: Taking everyone into our future
The benefits of digitalisation must be made accessible to all parts of the community. As populations in developed countries grow older, it is incumbent on decision makers to ensure older people are not left stranded in the more expensive, isolated and fragmented world of the past. Government has a role to play, not least in the general desire to reduce the costs and extend the reach of public services.

But technology companies must take a lead too. We must design our products and services with demographic trends in mind. This is both sound business sense and the right thing to do morally. The social and economic benefits of technology belong to every member of the community, whatever their age.

“Older people must not be excluded from the benefits of digitalisation”

Three things you can do today – for an age-inclusive tomorrow
- Explore how the ageing population will affect the lives of your customers – and your business
- Reach out to customers, partners and government and play an active role in developing products and services for older people
- Ensure that relevant demographic data contributes to your strategic thinking and market models

Fujitsu would be delighted to discuss the megatrend implications for your organisation. Please contact the author Tim.Chapman@uk.fujitsu.com

About megatrends
This paper is one in a series of megatrends papers written by Fujitsu to help inform organisations of the current and future trends impacting business and society. Highlighting how human centric innovation is responding to these global challenges, they aim to enable you to consider how you can contribute to a more prosperous and sustainable world.

Other papers tackle the challenges and opportunities of urban migration, population growth, healthcare, energy demand, and the Internet of Things.

Contact
Tim Chapman
Security Architect
Fujitsu Distinguished Engineer
Phone: +44 (0) 7867 825828
E-mail: Tim.Chapman@uk.fujitsu.com

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