

HALF OF ELDERLY CLIENTS OF BRC USE THE INTERNET

A study on the attitudes of pensioners to technology helps create a virtual assistant to support active aging

Almost half of the Bulgarian Red Cross customers over the age of 60 have a computer and are on the Internet, every third of them is using e-mail. The pensioners, cared for by Caritas Bulgaria, are far behind in the use of technology.

These are just some of the results identified by the first stage of the study of the attitudes of older people to modern technology and their home care needs. The study was conducted together in Austria by the European Federation of Older People, in Bulgaria by the Bulgarian Red Cross and Caritas Bulgaria, and in Slovenia by the University Institute for Rehabilitation. It covered a sample of 498 people around and above 60 years of age. The study is part of the project SAAM to develop a virtual assistant for active aging, which will be an integrated system of separate modules and software applications, fully tailored to the needs of its users.

The smartphones among the elderly, cared for by BRC and Caritas Bulgaria, are rare - they prefer to use old-generation mobile phones. Internet-based communication applications such as WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, Messenger are relatively rarely used.

However, in Bulgaria, all elderly people from our two partner social organizations have a television, a little more than a half – a radio. More than two-thirds of them measure blood pressure or blood sugar on their own.

The situation among the respondents in Slovenia is similar to that in Bulgaria. However, their Austrian coevals are much better acquainted with technology. Nearly all of the people asked there use a computer, Internet, and email. Older Austrians with a computer are even more than those with a TV set. Around 77% of retirees there have smartphones and communicate through Internet-based applications. Almost half use a tablet, 36% even have Facebook profiles.

More than half of the elderly, interviewed in Austria, Bulgaria and Slovenia have the confidence to be familiar with new technology. Twelve percent are afraid of it. Nearly two-thirds, however,





are ready to learn to stay up-to-date. A total of 39% of respondents said they were learning the novelties with ease.

Expectably, the youngest among the elderly - those under the age of 65, are more open to modern technologies. The share of retired people between the ages of 66 and 70 who use computers is almost 74%. More than half of those over the age of 70 also work with a computer. Almost as many people use Internet and email, though, almost every fifth of them does not know what a smart watch is.

In order to ensure the objectivity of the information, the survey included responders from large cities or capitals, small towns and villages. The majority of respondents live alone (38%) or in a household with two people (49%).

Most people in the 60+ age group suffer from hypertonia - half of men and 60% of women. The share of pensioners with diabetes is significant. These people regularly monitor their blood pressure or blood sugar levels and take medicines. That is why one of the functions of the future virtual assistant will be to remind users of that.

Over one third of men and 22% of women suffer from heart disease. Six percent of both groups have experienced at least one apoplexy. Useful for these users would be a device that is worn on the arm or the garment and constantly monitors essential vital signs such as blood pressure and pulse.

The potential users of the future virtual assistant are also people with motor problems. Every fourth woman and 12% of the men surveyed had arthritis. A SAAM module will be developed to warn them against environmental obstacles. Consortium partners work also on a system that will signal relatives and neighbours if the person falls and cannot rise to his feet alone.

Only 6% of male and female respondents admit to suffer from depression. However, it is proven that the main problem of elderly people is loneliness, which often leads to depressive states. The survey found that 3% of pensioners had no contacts with relatives, 4% did not meet or hear with friends. Many older people regularly communicate with relatives and friends by phone or e-mail, but personal meetings are rare. This data provides an opportunity to work on modules in the integrated virtual assistant system to stimulate activity and social contacts.

The presented results are obtained after analysing the quantitative data from the completed questionnaires collected during the survey. The second phase is a qualitative stage of the study that includes in-depth interviews with at least 30 potential users of the virtual assistant. The





objective of these individual investigations is to expand and detail the information received via the main survey.

Meetings with nearly 100 representatives from social circles of potential SAAM users will also be held in parallel with the interviews. Relatives of elderly people, social workers and social service providers will be able to share their ideas and needs for the future virtual assistant. This is extremely important for the project, as one of its tasks is to make the work of these people and institutions easier.

The study also includes meetings with experts in various fields - legislation, social security, telecommunications, etc.

