



# ICT and the over 50s: do telephone advice lines and computers make it harder for older people to use career guidance services?

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) was commissioned by the Ufi Charitable Trust to explore this question. In a parallel project they also asked the question: 'In what ways is career management for older people different from that for younger adults?' The results of this other study are available in a separate briefing.

We conducted interviews in the autumn of 2007 with 55 older people who had sought advice about learning or work from nextstep services, from learndirect (both of these work with adults of all ages) and from some other agencies that specialise in work with older adults. We also interviewed some of the staff who work with these older adults.

The findings from this study will be of interest to all who offer careers advice to people over the age of 50 (one quarter of everyone in the labour market). It is particularly relevant to planning for the adult advancement and careers service.

This briefing summarises the main findings of the study. It was prepared by Ruth Hawthorn, Senior Fellow of NICEC, based on fieldwork conducted by Lyn Barham, Dr Judy Alloway, Leigh Henderson and Heather Jackson.



**NICEC**

National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) conducts applied research and development work in the field of guidance and career development. It is a network organisation and subsidiary of CRAC: The Career Development Organisation. NICEC's objectives are to develop theory through a sustained output of publications, to inform policy through representation on national bodies, convening policy consultations and other activities and to enhance practice in the broad fields of career guidance and career development through staff development, consultancy and research.

**CRAC**

The Career Development Organisation

CRAC: The Career Development Organisation is the independent, charitable organisation dedicated to career development and active, career-related learning. CRAC is focused on innovation in career development, creating CPD programmes for career practitioners, devising and disseminating original research, delivering training on behalf of clients and producing practical conferences.

## The research

The immediate idea for this study followed an evaluation of the *learndirect* pilot of full careers guidance by telephone (Page et al., 2007), which suggested that while the quality of the guidance to older adults was good, and comparable to that for adults below the age of 50, older adults were not using the service so much as younger ones. Also, although satisfaction rates overall were still high, older adults were less happy with it. Why was this so?

At the same time that this research was commissioned, *learndirect* itself was exploring how better to serve people over 50. Now the service flags its relevance to that age group on the front page of its website, which was not the case when our interviews were conducted. Ufi has developed full guidelines for advisers of the older workforce (<http://olderworkers.advice-resources.co.uk/>) and commissioned a website of resources targeted at older people themselves ([www.fiftyforward.co.uk](http://www.fiftyforward.co.uk)). However, this does not make our findings less relevant: if there are some older people who are uncomfortable using this medium, how can we support them?

Also at the start of this research, the government had made the decision to develop an advancement and careers service for adults in England that would draw on the best practice of existing face-to-face services and those delivered at a distance, including *learndirect* and *nextstep*. This followed recommendations from the Leitch Review on skill development and a year-long review of existing adult guidance services. At age 50, many people in the labour market have a good 15 years still ahead of them. If a new service for adults is to co-ordinate provision delivered in this range of ways, how can it best serve older adults, and perhaps others less confident with new technologies?

Over a period of four months in the second half of 2007 we interviewed a national sample in England of 45 users of publicly-funded face-to-face advice and guidance, and 10 users of *learndirect*, between the ages of 50 and 75. We also interviewed 12 practitioners working with those groups. We had hoped to be able to explore the views of users and advisers at Jobcentre Plus, now making full use of internet and telephone, but protocols prevented this. However, we were able to include some older Jobcentre Plus clients on a sub-contracted programme.

This study was qualitative and exploratory, and limited by available funding. But we were able to explore issues which would permit decisions to be taken about further work.

## Summary of findings

### Older workers and ICT skills generally

1. **Never generalise.** The older people in our study showed a considerable range of ability and willingness to use telephones, internet and e-mail for enquiries about learning and work. There were some who were able and willing to use these media and there was a significant group who were not able or not willing to do so, even for general everyday purposes.
2. **Can doesn't mean will.** Confidence in using these media generally did not automatically imply willingness to use them for learning and work enquiries. All those who were recruited through face-to-face services, including those who were able to use electronic media, expressed a strong preference for face-to-face help.
3. **Can't doesn't mean won't.** But nor was lack of confidence in internet or e-mail use, for general purposes, necessarily a bar to using them: some who did not regard themselves as confident users did nonetheless use them when necessary. Many older advice seekers were learning to use internet and e-mail, and many clients and advisers believed that if older people who were not currently ICT users had sufficient motivation they would not necessarily experience a problem.
4. **No clear order of preference.** Older people who preferred face-to-face advice were not necessarily technophobes: several said that if they were seeking information they would rather use the internet than the telephone if they could not get it face-to-face.

### Telephones

5. **Is it age?** Many of the objections to the use of telephone for advice about learning or work, on the part of our face-to-face sample, were not specifically age-related. The objections related to calls to employers about jobs, to colleges about courses, and to telephone advice. They included:
  - worrying that they would not remember all the things they wanted to talk about
  - strong dislike of telephone menus
  - not being able to interpret the meaning or intentions of the adviser without visual clues
  - not feeling themselves to be very articulate
  - strong dislike of leaving messages on telephone answering machines
  - wanting written information for accuracy but also for accountability
  - not wanting to talk about personal matters with someone they did not know
  - not having very confident English (and having a mother tongue not included among those on the *learndirect* minority language helpline).

Some reasons were not necessarily age-related but perhaps more likely to affect some older people:

- hearing loss
- the cost of telephone calls to people on very low incomes.

6. **Advantages of a telephone service.** Our *learndirect* users were happy to use the telephone because they were able to obtain help without having to make the journey to a face-to-face service (and they preferred the telephone to the internet).

Many face-to-face service users agreed that this could be helpful to people who could not physically get to a service. Although nearly all still preferred face-to-face, they conceded that other advantages of a distance service might include that it could:

- be accessible at all times (also expressed as immediacy and convenience)
- result in discussions less likely to digress
- provide access to a wide range of information
- permit printing out information to think about it
- be easier than face-to-face if you do not like the adviser.

7. **Quality of the telephone service.** Most of our *learndirect* users had sought quite straightforward information and were happy with the service even when the answer was that the course they wanted was not available. Some who had sought more in-depth guidance were content to have abandoned their initial plan on the basis of the first call and to think more before phoning again. This is the kind of process associated with a good on-going guidance relationship with a face-to-face adviser.

While the view of some face-to-face advisers was that telephone advice would not be able to give older service users the complicated advice they needed, our discussion with *learndirect* advisers demonstrated a very high level of understanding and concern for older service users. This is not to say that one group is better than another, but does suggest that it is the adviser, and the professional support that they receive, that actually matters.



## Internet and e-mail

8. **Importance of ICT skills generally.** Advisers of older adults, both face-to-face and at a distance, were in agreement that computer skills were important for confidence in achieving wider goals, and encouraged clients to acquire them. Some had IT skills courses or facilities linked to their guidance service. One service took groups to explore computer facilities in the public library.
9. **'Do you have access to a computer?'**, a question sometimes used to establish whether it is appropriate to direct someone to web-based resources, is not a good indicator of whether they can use them. Several of our respondents had a computer at home which was not connected to the internet; others were on-line at home but it was another family member who was the internet user; others were on-line but were very limited in their skills or liking of the internet.
10. **Using it away from home.** Problems associated with internet use for those who do not have internet at home, beside any lack of skills, included:
  - difficulties of conducting searches in the specific time-slots available at public libraries
  - difficulties in assembling the necessary information for filling in on-line questionnaires or application forms away from home.
11. **Reasons given for not liking to use e-mail.** Problems associated with e-mail use, beside lack of skills, included wanting reliable information straight away.
12. **Promotion of ICT based services to older users.** Promotion of *learndirect* telephone and web-based advice was not reaching older people as effectively as it might. Some were aware of the television commercials but either did not know what they were about, assumed leardirect was only about learning or computers, or assumed they were for younger people. Some told us they ignore all television advertising. Other methods are needed.
13. **Information needs of older clients.** Many clients and advisers expressed the concern that a national database could not hold the particular local information that would be needed by some older users. This concern was expressed by *learndirect* advisers as well as face-to-face advisers.

## Collaboration between distance and face-to-face services

14. **Referral** between *learndirect* and *nextstep* is particularly important for older clients, because local provision is likely to be important to some, and specialist national advice to others. It was not felt to be working well by advisers on either side. The *nextstep* providers we spoke to did not rate distance advice highly enough to recommend it, and believe that *learndirect* does not refer people to *nextstep*; The *learndirect* advisers felt frustrated that they could only refer adults with qualifications below level 2, however out of date their higher qualifications are. This mis-match is of urgent concern for those planning the adult advancement and careers service.

## Recommendations

1. **Choice of media.** Some older adults are happy to use electronic media to obtain information and guidance, so services to develop provision for older people will benefit them. Others will continue to prefer, and in some cases need, face-to-face services.
  - Adult careers provision should continue to include a face-to-face service, and ensure that it meets the needs of older adults.
2. **Age-friendly.** Many older people are concerned that staff may not appreciate their particular constraints or attitudes. Some older people do prefer an adviser of their own age, and this may even be true of some *learndirect* users.
  - Training on the issues concerning older people should form a regular part of professional development for staff in all services, face-to-face or distance
  - A service that is to attract older users should have at least some older advisers.
  - An all-age service should consider developing specialist staff with a brief to maintain the expertise of colleagues in work with older adults
3. **Promotion** of careers advice to older adults, based on what our older clients said about *learndirect*, should make certain messages absolutely clear:
  - that it is free
  - that it is about work as well as learning
  - that it is not only to do with computers
  - that it encourages older users.



Our respondents suggested that as well as *unambiguous* television advertisements, other ways might reach more older adults. They suggested local newspapers and radio; notices in libraries and on other notice boards in places they tended to go such as coffee shops, residential centres or Jobcentre Plus; and letters or leaflets through the door.

4. **Paper back-up.** If it is to help those without internet and e-mail skills or access, telephone advice must offer to mail out paper-based back-up materials.
5. **Co-ordination.** If they are to help older adults, telephone and face-to-face services must improve referral arrangements between them.

On the part of face-to-face services, this will require:

- a systematic and thorough training programme for advisers on what the telephone and web-based careers advice services provide and how to make best use of it and its supporting materials
- no exclusions to use of face-to-face services based on qualification level. This disqualifies many older users who need to retrain because their qualifications have become old and unusable.

On the part of telephone services, this will require:

- thorough training for advisers on the nature of the detailed information that local services can provide, that cannot be held on national databases, and which is important for older users.

6. **Training.** Face-to-face advisers as well as telephone and e-mail advisers would benefit from the training suggested by the *learndirect* advisers in our study, namely for:
  - working with older people
  - labour market information that relates to the over 50s
  - identifying transferable skills
  - funding options with eligibility criteria for 50+ age group
  - more detailed information on Jobcentre Plus programmes such as New Deal, to include case studies as to who is eligible and how they apply
  - working on 'solution focused' approaches
  - the impact of the age discrimination regulations
  - financial advice and referral.
7. **Always offer support.** Face-to-face services often provide internet access and materials using new technologies on site. Where this is so, they should offer support to all their users, whether or not over 50, in the use of telephones and computer applications. This help should be given by staff that are trained, friendly and sympathetic to the needs of its target groups. They can be volunteers so long as they too are trained and supported. Checking that a client 'has access to a computer' is not enough to ensure that they can use ICT. An indignant rebuff is better than a client slipping away because they don't want to show that they don't know how to use the equipment.
8. **Bring ICT support for all services users in line across all the providing agencies.** ICT plays an increasingly large part in how Jobcentre Plus delivers its services, as well as *nextstep* and *learndirect*. The proposed adult advancement and careers service will bring publicly-funded advice into a coherent single system. All these services will need to address the needs of those less confident in the use of ICT. This will help those over 50 included in this group, and others besides.

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