bridge the gap

Enhancing the Social and Digital Participation of Older People

Fact Sheet

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About This Fact Sheet

This fact sheet addresses organisations and stakeholders that concern themselves with the social and digital participation of older people. It was developed within the Erasmus+ project **Bridge the Gap!**, which aims to train, empower and support older people to become active in their neighbourhoods, to put forward their ideas for age-friendly environments and to master the digital tools that help them implement their ideas.

The fact sheet aims to provide information on the approach and activities of the **Bridge the Gap!** project and the topics of ageing and social participation in the digital era. In addition, projects and initiatives to create age-friendly environments in Europe with the support of digital tools are presented as inspirational best practice examples.

In compiling this fact sheet, the organisations involved in the **Bridge the Gap!** project have carried out desk research in their respective countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands) and conducted interviews with experts, practitioners, stakeholders and older people who could potentially become active in the project. As part of the desk research, we investigated, among other subjects, the current state of digitalisation in times of demographic change and approaches promoting age-friendly environments or the digital participation of older people. The interviews were conducted (mostly) via telephone or videoconferencing. In total, 56 interviews were organised.

www.bridgethegap-project.eu

Our special thanks go to everyone involved: Thank you for sharing your knowledge, ideas and experiences with us!

Introduction

The comprehensive changes that accompany digitalisation are visible in all areas of life. What does this mean for the increasing number of older people in society? Are they being "left behind", as is often said, or are they benefiting from the opportunities of digitalisation? What role do digital media and the Internet play in the social participation of older citizens and what hurdles must they overcome? We will explore these questions on the following pages.

"I like this project so much because it enables older adults to participate socially and become active, and it is often this group that is overlooked."

— Expert interviewee,
Mobility Agency Vienna, Austria

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Our Vision

In order to live a high quality of life, we can assume that it is crucial for people to live autonomously through self-determination for as long as possible. This requires both a world without barriers and neighbourhoods that support autonomy and social participation. Social participation, in turn, increasingly also encompasses digital participation. However, digitalisation calls for new knowledge and skills in order to fully participate in society. It is therefore highly important that we reduce the digital gap that divides certain groups (e.g., older people) from those with full access to the digital world.

There are many creative and sustainable ways that enable older people to live autonomously and shape living environments that support their independence and social participation. Older people can benefit most if they themselves actively change their environment according to their own wishes. **Bridge the Gap!** aims to train and empower older people to implement their ideas for an age-friendly environment with the support of digital tools, thus making them more confident in using information and communications technology (ICT) (see page 18 for more information about the project).

Aging, Digitalisation and Participation

The European Union is facing a longevity revolution with a remarkable increase in life expectancy and a growing number of older people. According to recent data, the proportion of those aged 65 years or above in the EU-27's population is projected to increase from 20.3% in 2019 to 29.4% in 2050 (Eurostat, 2020). Accordingly, it is important that the living environments of older people meet their needs and wishes and offer good conditions for active and healthy ageing. Social participation can be seen as particularly important in this context.

> "Age-friendly environments foster health and well-being and the participation of people as they age. They are accessible, equitable, inclusive, safe and secure, and supportive. They promote health and prevent or delay the onset of disease and functional decline. They provide people-centered services and support to enable recovery or to compensate for the loss of function so that people can continue to do the things that are important to them." (WHO, 2021)

Numerous research findings indicate that learning and social participation in later life is crucial for one's well-being, health, self-esteem and mental agility. Social participation can take many different forms, such as participation in activities or networks, home care, religious activities, paid work, volunteering or involvement in a political organisation. The approach of the **Bridge the Gap!** project focuses on the importance of older people actively participating in their community in a meaningful way according to their individual interests.

In order to promote the social participation of older people, it is worth first taking a look at the barriers that can hinder this participation. The people we interviewed reported a wide range of barriers older people face regarding social participation. These include, among other things, health restrictions, family responsibilities, low self-confidence, inadequate offers of activities and a lack of information regarding participation opportunities. In Lithuania in particular, many additional obstacles were mentioned, such as the prevailing culture of isolation and silence, lack of tolerance, negative attitudes and a weak sense of community. In addition, some older people in Lithuania have negative feelings towards community events, which were imposed and obligatory in former Soviet times.

In times of increasing digitalisation, digital skills are becoming more and more important and a prerequisite for social participation. Obtaining information, participating in events as well as maintaining or establishing contacts increasingly require the ability to use digital tools.

Benefits and Challenges

"The main advantage of having digital skills is to be prepared for the future and to remain independent of others."

— Volunteer providing digital trainings to older adults, the Netherlands

We asked both experts and older people what advantages digitalisation could have for older people and what challenges they face in the age of digitalisation. The answers were very diverse. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, the possibilities that the Internet offers in terms of maintaining social contacts and social participation were highlighted. In addition, the availability of information and services is also highly valued by older people (see box on page 6). Frequently cited challenges include the confusing nature of information and offers as well as rapidly changing devices and applications. In addition, the sometimes complicated operation of many digital tools poses cognitive and physical challenges for many older people. Often, fears also play a role: malware, fraud, hidden costs, data security and the concern of breaking something were mentioned. In addition, financial resources or a poor infrastructure in terms of Internet provision can also be a barrier.

The obstacles mentioned above require knowledge and skills to be able to move safely and competently in the digital space. In order to acquire this knowledge, people need to be willing to learn new things and be convinced that the use of digital tools is of personal benefit. In addition, older people often need support from the people around them in order to familiarise themselves with new devices and applications.

The use of digital tools means greater freedom and independence for many older people. On the other hand, for those who do not have sufficient digital literacy, advancing digitalisation means an increasing dependence on others.

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Benefits of Digitalisation for Older People

The interviewees noted that ICT not only creates more possibilities for communication as it allows easier, faster and more comprehensive social contacts, but it also helps in dealing with daily issues. In cases of reduced mobility, older people could, with the help of digital tools, perform dozens of tasks just by pressing a button: make doctor's appointments, monitor waiting lists, order food for delivery, pay bills, communicate with family and friends and plan and book both local and international trips. They could thus be self-reliant and independent. Further, digital tools can enhance intellectual curiosity, personal development and learning possibilities. Some older people even start businesses. According to the experts and active seniors interviewed, increased social activity and information accessibility from using digital tools makes people feel less lonely.

There are also many ways in which digital technologies can have a positive impact on the lives of older people in the areas of housing, mobility, care and health. You can find more information about these topics here:

https://tinyurl.com/8thReportEN

The Digital Divide: A Matter of Age?

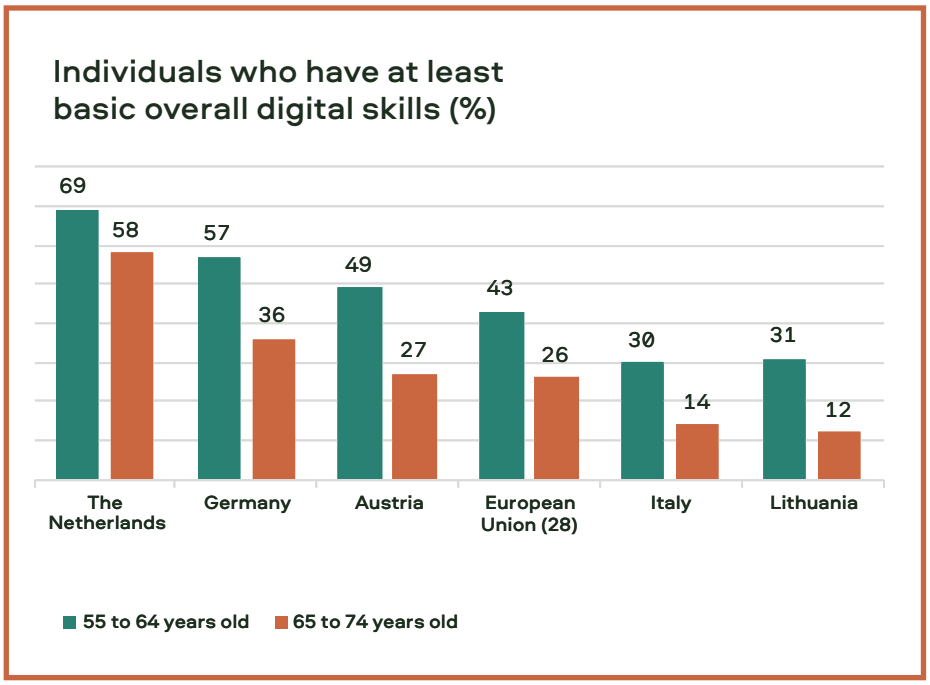
"We urgently need change and change may come from senior citizens: that's why we need to upgrade their digital literacy."

— Volunteer in the publishing sector, Italy

"[The] digital divide between the generations ... describes the gap between age groups in terms of their access to and use of modern information and communications technologies (ICTs); such technologies typically include mobile telephones, personal computers, laptops, tablets, the internet and related services." (Eurostat, 2020, p. 151)

With the rapid development of information technology and the Internet, emerging differences between the various groups of individuals who use and do not use technology fast become obvious. Initially, the focus was placed on physical access to the latest information technology and the Internet. Today, however, the digital divide is measured by the effective use of technology, often driven by skills, perceived benefits and the appropriate motivation.

Across Europe, the use of ICT decreases as age increases, but the differences between age groups have become smaller in recent years. Although the number of online users in older age groups is increasing and



Source of data: Eurostat, Individuals' level of digital skills (online data code: ISOC_SK_DSKL_I), 2019

the digital gap is tending to close in all the countries reviewed, a **digital divide** still exists and the proportion of those who do not use the Internet is still quite high in many European counties. This is also reflected by the digital skills of older people (see diagram). Looking at the digital literacy of people in older age groups (55–64 and 65–74), there are considerable differences within the European countries and also between the countries participating in the project. In Italy, not only is the proportion of those with at least basic digital skills comparatively low, but the proportion of older people in the total population is the largest in Europe. Accordingly, the problem is particularly pronounced in Italy. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, the digital participation of seniors is already comparatively high

However, the digital divide should by no means be regarded simply as a matter of age. Mediating factors that play a significant role include level of education, income, employment status and biography, health, mobility, available social (support) networks and geographical location. Older women have more often worked in jobs that are less technology-related and usually have a lower pension. Financial resources also play a major role in technology use because the acquisition costs of digital technologies as well as the expense of educational offers are an additional barrier to access. As a result, there is a clear gender difference in the use of digital technologies and digital participation that is found in all countries: Women tend to use digital devices less than men.

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What Do Older People Use ICT for?

The available data on ICT use in the countries participating in the **Bridge the Gap!** project is difficult to compare due to the different survey methods used. In those countries where data was available, there was a clear trend towards greater smartphone use among older people. In addition, messenger services, such as WhatsApp, and video calls are increasingly used by older people, whereas social media platforms are used comparatively rarely. In general, writing emails is the main reason digital devices are used, followed by searching for information and doing banking or administrative business, such as completing tax returns. Health-related information in particular is of great importance for many older people. However, more advanced usage, such as posting content independently on the Internet, is still comparatively rare among older people in most countries.

Consequences and Changes

"You catapult yourself into old age and loneliness if you don't take advantage of these opportunities."

— Potential learner, female, 86 years, Germany

As social participation increasingly depends on digital participation, those who are not sufficiently equipped with devices, Internet access and knowledge on how to use digital technologies are also increasingly left behind socially. The increasing importance of digital technology for people's social participation was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. When personal contact was limited, activities only took place online and digital skills became a prerequisite for participation and maintaining social contacts. This highlighted the need to equip people with the necessary infrastructure (stable and fast Internet connections) and digital skills. These objectives are also high on the political agenda – at a European, national and regional level – which is reflected in many policies and approaches aimed at closing the digital divide. In the course of our research, we found that providing Internet access and teaching people how to use it is already a difficult undertaking, whereas encouraging the use of ICT and convincing people that using digital tools is beneficial is an even greater challenge.

The actual use and willingness to use and try new digital tools is complex and older adults have different experiences, needs and expectations. Furthermore, different prior experience (i.e., "technological biographies"), current needs and individual possibilities, e.g., financial means or the availability of a motivating and supportive environment, are crucial factors.

"During the lockdown we celebrated five anniversaries on Zoom. We could not go out and celebrate as we used to before, but we still had fun meeting and celebrating online."

— Potential learner, female, 74 years, Lithuania

The COVID-19 pandemic gave many people a reason to discover the Internet as a tool for organising everyday life and maintaining their contacts and hobbies. Older people started having video conversations with children and grandchildren and they were "forced" to learn online shopping and online banking. This is reflected in the increasing Internet usage of older people. In Germany, for example, the proportion of people aged 70 and over using the Internet rose to 75% in 2020, whereas in 2019 it was only 58% (Beisch and Schäfer, 2020). It is uncertain whether these newly discovered possibilities will continue to be used when life returns to normal or whether the pandemic will only have a short-lived effect.

We have seen that access to the digital world offers many advantages and opportunities for older people. We therefore believe it is important to familiarise them with digital technology and make them curious about using it. Both the experts and the older people that were interviewed stressed that individual benefit and fun should always be at the forefront when teaching digital tools. The opportunity to try and practice, as well as a permanent point of contact where people can get support when they need it, are also important prerequisites for promoting digital skills in a sustainable way.

However, it should always be kept in mind that people have different needs and interests. If someone decides not to use ICT for whatever reason, this must be accepted. It is, therefore, very important that companies and governments also provide analogue alternatives to digital services.

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Creating Age-Friendly Environments Supported by Digital Tools

Some inspiring Highlights

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many initiatives had to resort to digital means, such as videoconferencing or social media, in order to continue their activities. The pandemic thus provided many with the motivation to use digital opportunities to manage their own interests. But even without the pandemic, digital means were already being used in many age-friendly projects. The following examples of specific initiatives and projects show how digital tools can be used to work together with older people for an age-friendly environment.

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Digital, gesund altern

AUSTRIA

"When is something fun? How does joyful learning take place? When I get in contact with someone. This brings fun to learning."

— Expert interviewee, Digital, gesund altern

The project **Digital, gesund altern** (Digital, healthy ageing) promotes neighbourly connections, an autonomous life and health literacy among older people in 14 municipalities in Lower Austria. "Smart cafés" are organized on a regular basis where older adults can connect with others and learn about digital devices, both from each other and "smartphone companions", who also join the meetings. The smart cafés take place in coffee shops and public libraries and a group of up to five adults usually meet. The emphasis of smart cafés is on peer-to-peer learning and creating a comfortable environment to try new things and explore devices and functionalities together. Furthermore, an app called Stupsi (linked to the term "nudging") was developed that encourages older adults to promote their health through individual or group activities, and to meet to explore their living environment together – fostering connections between the digital and analog worlds.

https://www.waldviertler-kernland.at/cms/digital_gesund_altern/

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Social Media for Neighbourhood Watch

THE NETHERLANDS

The group messaging function in WhatsApp is being used in the Netherlands to create so-called WhatsApp neighbourhood prevention groups. Neighbours can share information and alert each other to the presence of suspicious persons or other dangerous situations in the neighbourhood. Examples include alerting neighbours to a woman who was ringing doorbells with the aim of cheating older adults, or the occurrence of burglaries through back doors in street X. Sometimes, the local policy officer also participates in the group. When entering the neighbourhood, a special sign (see picture) is placed to warn criminals off. These signs can be found all over the Netherlands.

Pane e Internet

EMILIA-ROMAGNA, ITALY

"Digital tools help older citizens in overcoming solitude, improving self-esteem, lifelong learning, social interaction and therefore also social participation."

— Vice-president of the Emilia-Romagna regional parliament, Italy

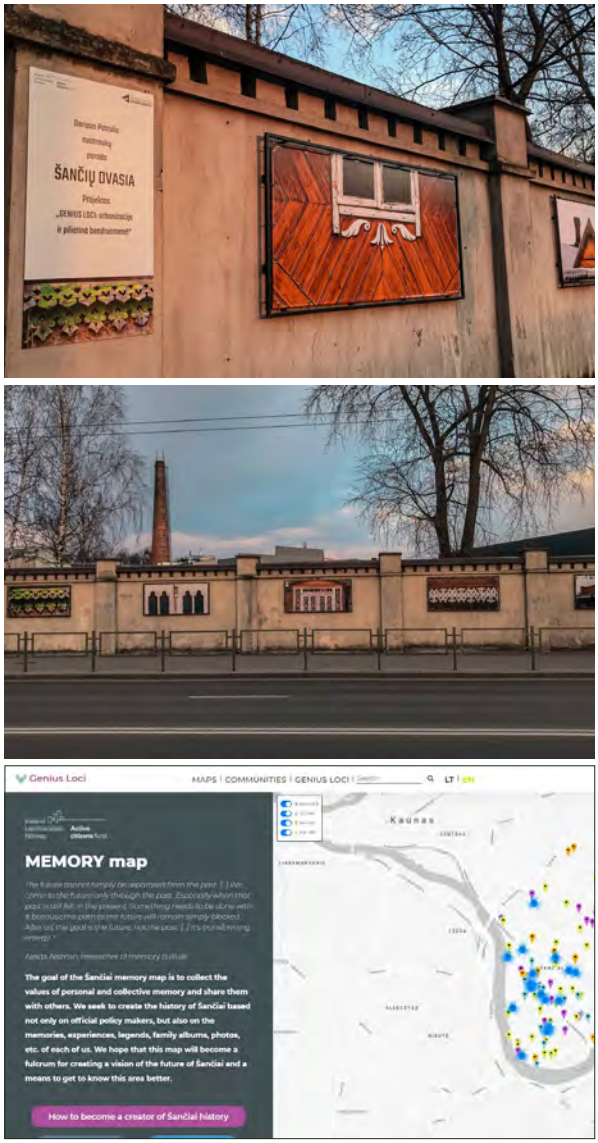
The Pane e Internet (Bread and Internet, Pel) project began in 2009 as a pilot initiative and aims to enhance citizens' digital competence and reduce the digital exclusion of, among others, citizens in the region of Emilia-Romagna aged 45–74 who have never used the Internet or online services. This is done by the establishment of so-called "Pel points" by the largest municipalities and the municipality unions. Pel points promote citizens' digital competence development through a lifelong learning perspective, as well as their awareness and critical use of digital technologies and online services, especially those offered by the public administration. This is done through digital literacy training, digital culture initiatives (workshops, conferences, laboratories, etc.) and digital facilitation services, including one-to-one assistance provided mainly by volunteers in public libraries.

Genius Loci: Urbanisation and Civil Society

ŠANČIAI COMMUNITY, KAUNAS, LITHUANIA

The three-year (2020–2023) project Genius Loci, funded by EEA grants, aims to solve the problem of uncoordinated and non-democratic urbanization in Kaunas Šančiai district and to involve local people in the planning of new developments in this historical territory. One of the project objectives is to create a virtual community space for civic processes and to increase the number of users of digital tools to promote public participation in civic activities. During the project lifetime it is planned to implement over 50 civic activities and partnerships with Šančiai residents and other stakeholders. These include education, creativity, map-building and capacity-building activities. The first output of the project is the Šančiai Memory Map. The purpose of this map is to collect and share images and narratives of its collective and individual history. The map should include not only officially protected cultural heritage buildings and sites, but also personal images conveying memories, legends relating to the place, etc.

https://sanciubendruomene.lt/en/



© Saulius Piksrys, Exhibition of Darius Petrulis photos of architectural details on old houses in Sanciai, Šančių bendruomenė, interactive digital memory map

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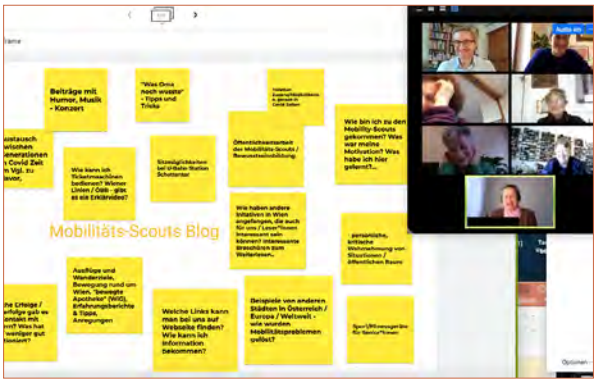
SeniorenNetz

MÄRKISCHES VIERTEL, BERLIN, GERMANY

Mariane Grabowsky thought it was a shame that many older people did not use the Internet and were thus missing out on many of the benefits of digital technologies. For this reason, together with the association Netzwerk Märkisches Viertel, she initiated the pilot project SeniorenNetz in 2017. In cooperation with various organisations and stakeholders, they built an information portal and an interaction network. The age-friendly digital infrastructure was built together with the participation of senior citizens and is intended to strengthen the digital competence of older people and promote exchange between the generations. The online platform www.seniorennetz.berlin lists relevant offers and information for older people in the district. For people who do not have access to the Internet or a personal computer at home, two information pillars with integrated tablets and printers have been set up. In addition to the information portal, courses are offered by, with and for senior citizens.

www.netzwerkmv.de



© queraum. kultur- und sozialforschung, online meeting in November 2020

Mobility Scouts Go Blogging

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

"In our activities to create age-friendly neighbourhoods, you could think like a reporter: What do I need to do make a story public? Research information online as a first step, for instance."

— Mobility Scout, Vienna

A group of older adults who participated in the Mobility Scouts project have been active in creating a (more) age-friendly living environment in Vienna since 2018. In 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the group still wanted to actively advocate for their ideas and needs and decided to explore digital paths and new ways of advocacy. In a co-creation process, the group started to jointly run a WordPress website and blog to draw attention to their projects and reach a wider audience. During the process, they acquired many new digital skills. Regular online meetings via Zoom are organised to enable the exchange of experiences among the participants, learn from expert inputs, discuss further developments of the project and foster peer-to-peer learning.

www.mobilitäts-scouts.at

Stumble Campaign

THE HAGUE, THE NETHERLANDS

During the local fall prevention week in 2020, it was reported that The Hague performs rather badly regarding fall incidents in or outside the house. This report prompted the older people's council of The Hague, the Stedelijke Ouderen Commissie (SOC), to research this topic more closely. They launched a reporting point, where older adults could report the presence of loose, crooked or sagging paving stones. The initiative is a combination of traditional and social media. The SOC made the appeal by contacting their member organisations and by publishing it in local media. The SOC received over 400 notifications from older adults. The notifications were assembled in a report that was well received by the alderman of the city of The Hague, who promised to improve the situation. The presentation of the report and the response of the alderman was filmed and published on YouTube: https://youtu.be/NkdR3Pjs9aI.

https://tinyurl.com/StumbleCampaign

© Fondazione Mondo Digitale

Nonni su Internet

ITALY

The non-profit Fondazione Mondo Digitale (Digital World Foundation) started the **Nonni su Internet** (Grandparents on the Internet) project in 2002 to promote digital literacy among people aged 60 and older. In this project, older people are trained in free courses of 30 hours each by high school or university students, coordinated by ICT teachers. Each course is enhanced by multimedia work that tutors and senior citizens perform together as an exercise in working on the PC, from creating an online dictionary of yesterday's toys and games to photo albums with digitised vintage photos. Already more than 37,000 older people have become certified "internauti senior" (qualified older Internet users).

www.mondodigitale.org/en/what-we-do/areas-intervention/active-aging/nonni-su-internet-0

Susitikim, Mieli Senjorai

VILNIUS AND KAUNAS, LITHUANIA

The idea of the project **Susitikim, mieli senjorai** (Come together, dear seniors) was to propose creative and health-enhancing activities for older people where seniors can try things they have never done before, e.g., painting, line dancing, Callanetics or crafts, in workshops and thus find a hobby they could further practise independently. The project promotes the idea of healthy and active ageing and creates a positive image of older people in Lithuania. It was well promoted through different media channels. Because face-to-face workshops were no longer possible during the COVID-19 lockdown, this challenge was met by moving some of the activities online to Facebook or YouTube. In 2020, the property management company Mano būstas joined forces with the project and introduced digital skills training. The company administers multi-storey apartment buildings, where many apartment owners are older people. Mano būstas created an eHOME app for paying bills, registering faults, monitoring repair work in progress, following the news, communicating with the property manager, voting and participating in decision making.

https://susitikim.wixsite.com/mysitesusitikim/apie-mus

Sprayhilfe statt Gehhilfe

HANAU, GERMANY

A good example of how digital technologies can be integrated as tools in initiatives is the project **Sprayhilfe statt Gehhilfe** (Spray Aid Instead of Walking Aid). This was an educational offer on how to create graffiti. After an initial introduction to graffiti spraying, the group of over 10 older people met once a month to draw up designs for their artworks, creating their graffiti together. These were presented to the public in a group exhibition in November 2019. The project aimed primarily at strengthening their social interaction and self-efficacy, encouraging their creativity and contributing to a positive and diverse image of old age. As one project participant reported in the interview, working with the computer was a great help in creating the graffiti designs. The 86-year-old pensioner sees this as a good opportunity to apply and further develop her digital skills. In 2020, the project was given the opportunity to spray-paint 10 Telecom and electricity boxes. This opportunity allowed older people to actively participate in shaping the Hanau townscape and was a great pleasure for the participants.

https://menschen-in-hanau.de/de/sprayhilfe-statt-gehhilfe-update/

© Familien- und Jugendzentrum Wolfgang, Hanau

If you would like to learn more about the topics covered in this fact sheet or the projects described here, you can find national reports for each country reviewed on the **Bridge the Gap!** website: bridgethegap-project.eu/ressources/

About the Project

The Erasmus+ project **Bridge the Gap!** is being realized from October 2020 until September 2022 in five European countries: Austria, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands. In addition to this **Bridge the Gap!** fact sheet, we are co-developing a Training Concept and Curriculum together with older citizens as a basis for the training series that will be conducted in all partner countries in the second half of 2021. The training sessions aim to support older adults in developing their own ideas based on their interests and needs, building up strong teams and networks and implementing age-friendly neighbourhood initiatives. The curriculum will innovatively combine the issues of age-friendly environments and digital literacy.

Based on the training curriculum, the Training Kit will include the curriculum as well as tools and methods that have proven to be helpful in the trainings. It will mainly address training providers, trainers in adult education (with a focus on older target groups) and organisations working with and for older people. The training kit aims to inspire others to implement similar training activities in their local contexts.

As a consolidation of the **Bridge the Gap!** findings and results, the Digital Training will give an insight into the **Bridge the Gap!** training and provide helpful background information and resources to be used by practitioners in adult education and by older people in autonomous distance learning.

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