

Seniors' perspectives on the learning and using ICT: findings within the project AWAKE

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Abstract: To identify educational needs of people over 50 and improve teaching and developing the offer of education for people over the age of 50, in the framework of Grundtvig project AWAKE (Aging With Active Knowledge and Experience) the survey was carried out in project's partners' countries: Poland, Italy, Romania, Lithuania and Latvia. The questionnaire was divided into four diagnostic blocks: Current situation, Needs and expectations, Possibilities and barriers and Volunteering. Each part contained the questions on the use of ICT (information and communication technologies).

Active aging includes various areas of human life: participation in the labor market; the household-related activities, including homework and other care; active participation in community life, including volunteering and active use of leisure time for hobbies, sports, travel, creative activities. Of course, a better use of the information and communication technologies can provide significantly greater benefit to the public, increase the individual's role in civic democracy and successful development. Therefore, this paper gives short overview of the project and contains evaluation of the use ICT in education of 50+ people in partners' countries as well as outlines the tips for Europe Union institutions.

Keywords: e-skills, e-inclusion, e-learning, ICT, seniors, training.

Introduction

During the past decade ICT (Information and communication technologies) has become available for the general population. However a gap remains between users and non-users due to several reasons: from missing infrastructure or access, to missing incentive to use ICTs, to lack of computer literacy or skills necessary to take in the part in the information society. Despite increasing levels of ICT usage in all sections of society, the digital divide is still creating a big gap in European countries (EC, 2006). ICT services are present in the everyday life of people and can play an important role in the improvement of everyday life issues such as health, communication, independent living, social contacts etc.

European countries are now facing similar problems connected with the ageing of societies. The number of older people in the population increases fast so it means that one should make sure, that senior citizens are strong and actively participating in social life group. Aging includes various areas of human life: participation in the labor market; the household-related activities, including homework and other care; active participation in community life, including volunteering and active use of leisure time for hobbies, sports, travel, creative activities. Of course, a better use of the information and communication technologies can provide significantly greater benefit to the public, increase the individual's role in civic democracy and successful development. It is very important to contribute to the inclusion of the people aged 50+ so that they can benefit from ICT services according to their specific needs.

In the face of the ageing process of many societies it's vital to take special care of the educational needs of those people, who together with the end of working career are forced to search other developmental opportunities. It's known that people are getting older in the moment when they stop developing. European project A.W.A.K.E. (Aging With Active Knowledge and Experience) is finding the ways how to effectively enable the education and development of people who are above 50 years old. Project is an aiming an exchange of experience and good practices between the partners to promote the mobility, the activation and lifelong learning idea among the over fifty people. With funding from Lifelong Learning Programme - Grundtvig Learning Partnership, the project is delivered by partners from Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), and Romania (RO) and is led by CSI in Poland (PL).

To identify educational needs of people over 50 and improve teaching and developing the offer of education for people over the age of 50, in the framework of project the survey was carried out in project's partners' countries. In this paper given the evaluation of the use ICT in education of 50+ people in partners' countries as well as outlined the tips for Europe Union institutions.

Materials and methods

The questionnaire developed based on the people 50 + educational purposes: living a happy and fulfilled life, which can be divided into three directions: self-development (personal, hobbies), professional development

based on an individual's career development and requirements of labor market, and inclusion in the labor market - preretirement age (the need to acquire new skills) and unemployment (requalification, need to acquire new specialty). All three groups of people who need to be educated require language knowledge, ICT and communication skills. These skills can be obtained in several ways: some people age 50+ continue to study in higher education institutions, attend courses (seminars, conferences etc.), self-taught or joining interest groups (intramural or virtual). It was also taken into account the three possible forms of education:

1. Formal education - a system that includes primary, secondary and higher education levels, the programs is certified by a state recognized educational or professional qualification;
2. Non-formal education - organized outside the formal education and to demand adequate educational activity (certificate);
3. In-formal - self-taught, everyday learning (family, workplace etc.).

The questionnaire divided into four parts – diagnostic blocks: Current situation, Needs and expectations, Possibilities and barriers, Volunteering. Rather each part (except for volunteer work) contained the questions on the use of ICT (Table 1).

Table 1

The instrument of the survey

Diagnostic Block	Content of Statements	Items on the use of ICT
<i>Characteristics of the respondent - gender, age, place of residence, education, employment, mobility etc.</i>		
I. Current situation (N=3)	Presented statements about the involvement in an educational program / course and how much time spent on studying and dedicating the self-development.	1. Are you currently involved in any educational program / courses on ICT? 2. To acquire new skills or knowledge, I'm a member of specialized social networks in Internet
II. Needs and expectations (N=13)	Presented statements cover the meanings, which are attributed to the learning of people 50+: what they want to learn, why want to learn - motivation, meaningfulness, expectations from learning, what teaching methods preferred, favourite ways of spending free time etc.	1. What would you like to learn? (<i>How to use computer and the internet</i>) 2. Which method of learning do you prefer? (<i>Internet; prefer learning face to face with a teacher, in a group or by himself.</i>) 3. What's your favourite way of spending your free time? (<i>Netsurfing</i>)
III. Possibilities and barriers (N=5)	Statements cover two aspects of people 50+ educational possibilities: are there provided any educational offer in the respondents' place of residence and its quality as well as barriers in participation in education.	Do you see any barriers in your participation in education in your place of living? (<i>No good connection; Lack of information</i>)
IV. Volunteering (N=5)	Presented statements about the desire to be a volunteer and in what kind of volunteering interested. Statements cover several potential values of volunteering as well.	-

Four types of the questions are used in the questionnaire form. The questions designated to investigate the attitudes and opinions of the respondents (diagnostic block 1-4): the respondents have to mark several items expressing the person's attitude to the formulated statement. Other group of questions is presented using the modified Likert Scale of 5 scores (diagnostic blocks 2) with the statement are formulated: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree and Likert Scale of 3 scores (diagnostic blocks 3-4): statements and three optional answers expressing the level of a person's experience with the statement are formulated: Yes, No, Don't know. Three open questions are given. Their purpose is to reveal the opinion of respondents of educational needs of people 50+. Four questions with short answers Yes, No.

The sample was selected in the following way:

1. By place of residence: rural / small city / medium town / city - 7-8 respondents in each place;
2. By gender: at least 15 women and 15 men;
3. By age structure: (51-60 - 10 respondents, 61-70 - 10 respondents, 71-80 - 5 respondents, 81 + - 5 respondents).

In total 204 persons participated in the survey. The characteristics of the survey sample are presented in following table.

Table 2

Characteristics of the Sample (N=204)		
Quality	Category	Presents
Gender	Female	58
	Male	42
Age	51-60	29
	61-60	50
	71-80	15
	80+	6
Education	higher	38
	post high school	20
	high school	16
	professional	18
	basic	8
Place of residence	rural	16
	small town	19
	medium	33
	city	32
Employment	self-employed	6
	employee	23
	pensioner	66
	unemployed	4
	other	1

Results and discussion

Much of the literature on older people and computers has focused on four main areas: methods of training older people to use computers and computer software; uses computers to improve the quality of life for older people, and attitudes to computers and computing, including perceived barriers and benefits of computer use, and benefits associated with computer use (Richardson at al., 2002).

The current survey results show that 14.71% of all respondents currently are involved in learning ICT by attending special educational program or courses. Evaluating the results of respondents' place of residence (country), currently Lithuanian seniors are the most active in acquiring ICT skills (Fig. 1).

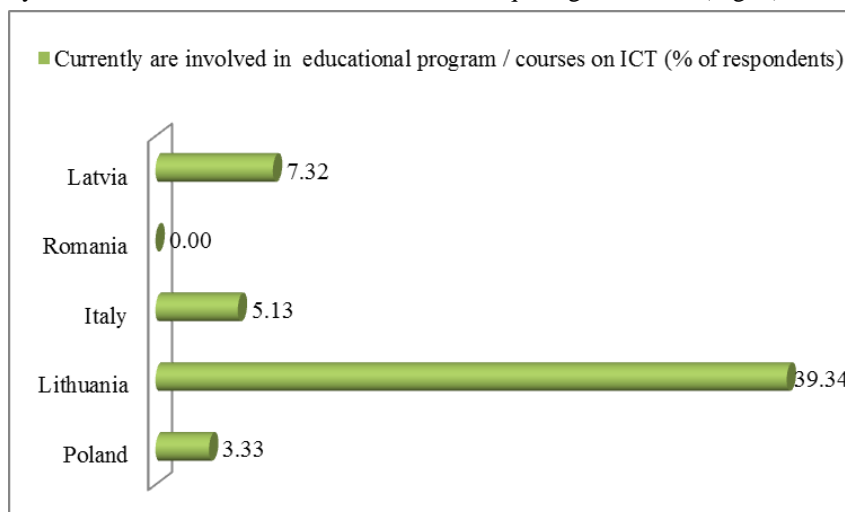


Fig. 1. Currently are involved in educational program / courses on ICT (N=204).

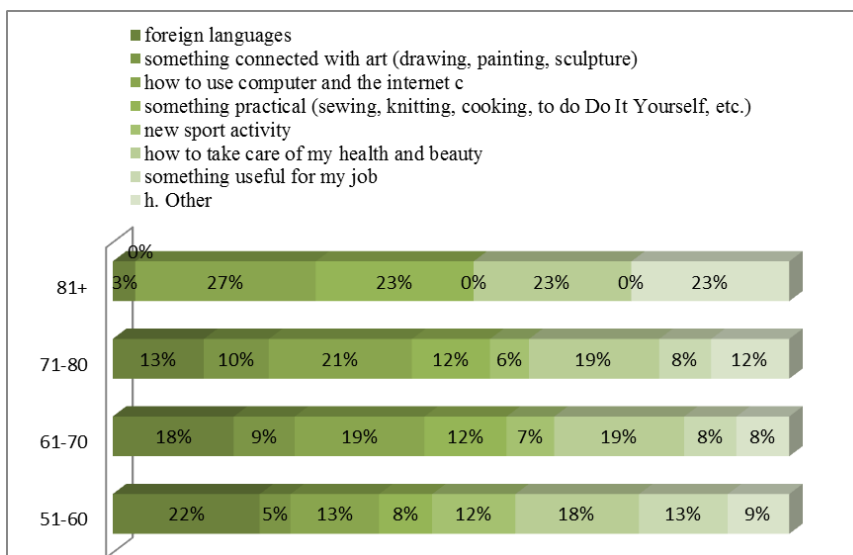


Fig. 2. People 50+ educational interests (N=174).

To acquire new skills or knowledge 18.65% of respondents are the members of specialized social networks on the Internet. Latvian seniors are the most active Internet and specialized social networks users for educational purposes (24.39%). Less active are the Lithuanians (6.86%) and Italians (5.13%). In turn, this type of training is not popular among seniors in Poland and Romania.

Statements of the second diagnostic block cover the meanings, which are attributed to the learning of people 50+: what they want to learn, what teaching methods preferred, favorite ways of spending free time etc. Seniors educational interests are given in Fig.2. Results show that greatest interest are the on how to use computer and the internet and how to take care of health and beauty.

Polish seniors have the greatest interest on ICT among the countries (Fig. 3). Less than one-third of the Latvian respondents want to learn how to use computer and the internet. The lowest interest has Romania seniors (only 27.27%).

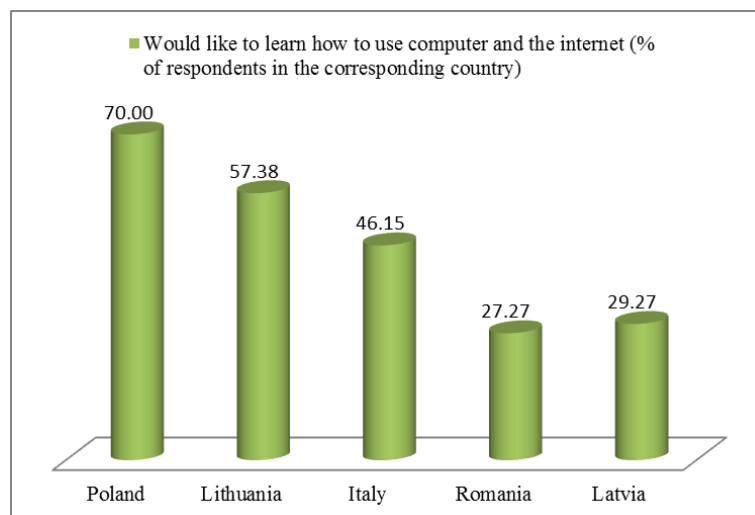


Fig. 3. Interest to learn how to use computer and the internet (N=204).

Analyzing the results by place of residence (country), In Lithuania and Italy the greatest interest to computers and Internet have people 50+ in medium towns (accordingly 42% and 20%), but Latvians – in small towns (38% of respondents) (Fig. 4). Romanian and Italian seniors in rural area do not have interest on issues related to ICT.

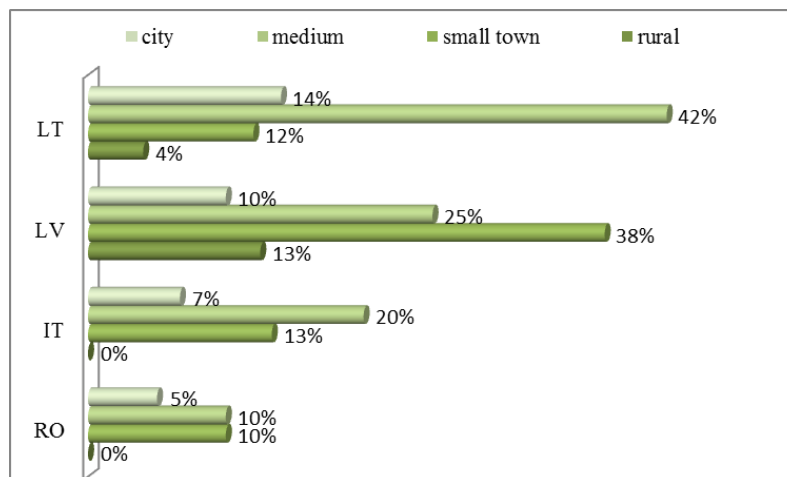


Fig. 4. Interest to learning how to use computer and the internet by place of residence (N=174).

Information on interest to learning how to use computer and the internet by educational level is given in Fig. 5. In Latvia the greatest interest have people 50+ with professional education and post high school – both 10%. In turn, In Lithuania the greatest interest has seniors with higher education (43%), in Italy – post high school (19%). The smallest interest on ICT has Latvian seniors with basic education (0%) and high school (2%). Analyzing the results on ICT as the first priority of educational needs by age structure it is seen that Lithuanian, Romanian and Latvians seniors aged 51-60 and 61-70 have quite similar distribution of ICT educational needs as first priority. In Italy the greatest interest (33%) on ICT is for seniors aged 71-80, but in Lithuania – seniors aged 81+.

Statements of the second diagnostic block cover also what teaching methods preferred by people aged 50+. Based on the survey results there are analyzed Internet as a method of learning by age structure (Fig. 6.), employment (Fig. 7) and gender.

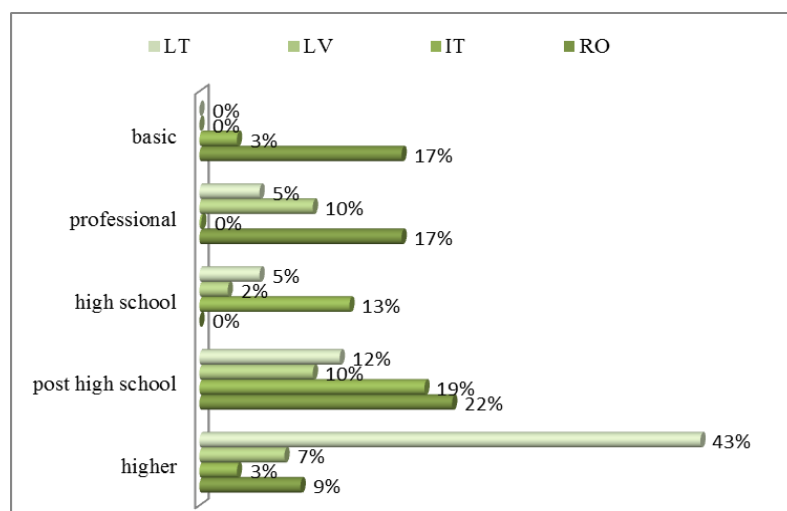


Fig. 5. Interest to learning how to use computer and the internet by education level (N=174).

The results show that the use of the Internet for educational purposes is the most popular in Romania, especially for people aged 61-70 (50%) and 71-80 (33%). Internet is the most used for training purposes by Italians aged 61-70 (50%). In Lithuania - distribution of the first three age groups is similar (accordingly 29%, 17% and 27% of respondents), but Latvian seniors' interest to learning through the internet is the lowest among the partner countries.

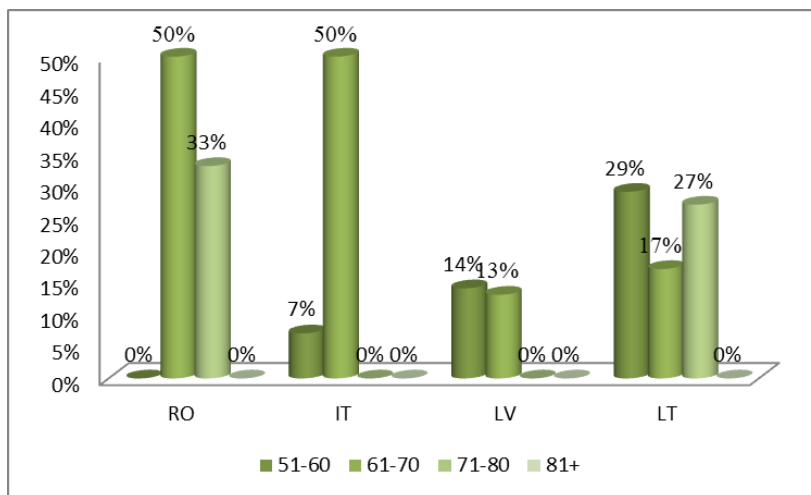


Fig. 6. Internet as a method of learning by age structure (N=174).

Latvian self-employed seniors would most like to use the Internet to learn something new (33%), but in Lithuania – unemployed seniors (44%). In Italy distribution among all types of employment are similar (except self-employed seniors), but in Romania the great interest have directly pensioners (10% of all respondents) (Fig.7).

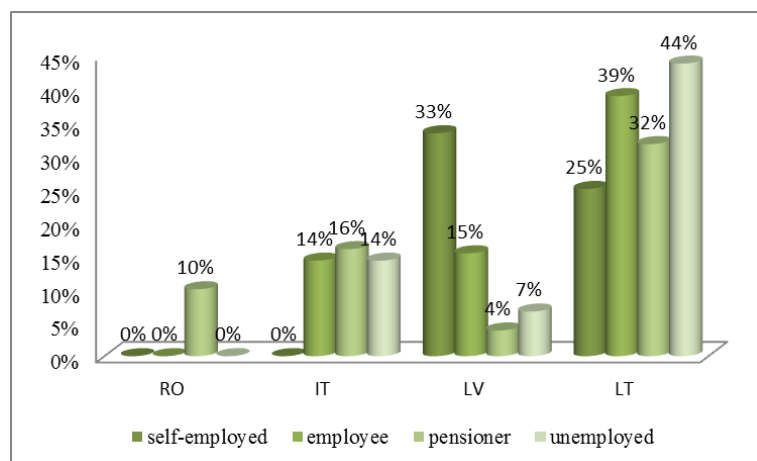


Fig. 7. Internet as a method of learning by employment (N=174).

Analyzing the information about internet as a method of learning by gender should be decided that Latvian and Lithuania seniors' interest on the Internet as a teaching method is greater in men than in women (accordingly 17% and 70%), but women – in Latvia 8% and in Lithuania 50%. In Romania and Italy, the situation is reversed - women are more interested in (accordingly 40% and 12%). In turn, to learn how to use computer and the internet by place of residence, distribution by gender (male - female) is the following: Latvia - accordingly 28% and 7%, Lithuania - 20% and 17%, Romania - 11% and 17%, Italy - 8% and 17%.

Several EU policies set the e-inclusion as the need to promote "active" living. In the EU, policies emanating from DG Employment and Social Affairs address active inclusion (linked to the labour market and better access to promote the integration of the most disadvantaged people), decent housing and homelessness, inclusion of vulnerable groups (including isolated older people etc.). The main goal for e-inclusion is improvement ICT access for people with disabilities and senior citizens (E.Mordini at.al., 2009).

Statements of the second diagnostic block cover the favorite ways of spending free time etc. Results show that netsurfing as the favorite way of spending free time recognized 13% of all questioned men and 8% - of women aged 50+. But the distribution by the age structure is as follows: 12% of people aged 51-60, 10% - aged 61-70 - 11% aged 71-80 and 4% of people aged 81 +. It should be decided that netsurfing is not popular among the married people. In Latvia divorced seniors spend the most time on the Internet (33%), in Italy – single (60%), in Romania – married seniors (5%), but in Lithuania – widowers (58%).

Increase accessibility to ICT equipment including assistive technologies to all senior citizens. It is important to recognize that access to ICT and the Internet is by no means universal and lack of ICT infrastructure is a significant barrier in many European countries. Information about access to public Internet provision should be

integrated in information and training programmes for senior citizens (EC, 2006). Statements of third part cover two aspects of people 50+ educational possibilities: are there provided any educational offer in the respondents' place of residence and its quality as well as barriers in participation in education. The results show that respondents have barriers in participation in education in their place of living and one of them - no good connection (Fig. 8). In Romania the quality of connection is almost only barrier to participate in education, but in Poland connection problem causes the least barriers to participation in education.

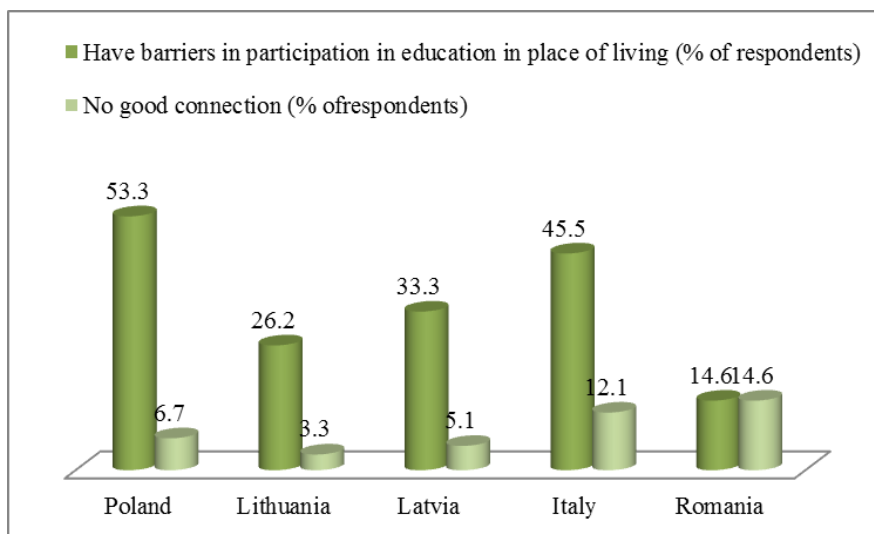


Fig. 8. Barriers in participation in education in place of living (N=204).

Conclusion

- The quality of life literature has focused on lonely, isolated older people who live alone, investigating ways in which technology can assist them to be independent, and ways in which computers can be used to break down their isolation, allowing them to be re-integrated into society (Richardson et al., 2002). Results on the net surfing as the favourite way of spending free time show that Internet can provide isolated people aged 50+ with increased opportunities for social contacts and can contribute to decreasing loneliness.
- The questionnaire contains statements on several learning issues: Internet as a method of learning; what teaching methods are preferred - learning face to face with a teacher, in a group or by himself; how old should be a teacher etc. Based on these results could be outlined some tips for the European Union institutions:
 - Use a participatory approach, that involves learners in the process;
 - Use an action-oriented approach – learning by doing; the use of project-based or problem-based activities;
 - In order to motivate seniors to acquire e-skills should be organized short courses that directly related to their daily lives. Seniors will be more motivated to use computers or Internet when they produce visible benefits to them and meet their actual needs;
 - Promote an environment of informal learning for seniors what is not planned in advance with strict program;
 - Use intergenerational cooperation (Junior to senior). However several studies show that sometimes it is unfriendly methods, particularly when being taught by young people who deliver material too quickly;
 - Use the knowledge and experience sharing and transfer method (seniors who have acquired the e-skills train other seniors). Seniors are tended to help each other and in training groups with varied ICT skills it has been observed that more ICT competent learners support those with less skills or slower learning pace (EC, 2006).
- Measures to promote ICT skills can be: regular (E-Skills Week in the framework of European Get Online Week, courses, consultations, clubs etc.) and various actions organized by Internet Providers, the state / local government bodies or the several interest groups. In the framework of the project are collected best measures examples from all partner countries. Based on literature review and on the Latvian experience of the seniors computer fun clubs are recommended for seniors who want to improve their skills in computer use, to be in the middle of a new appointment and interesting events. The aim of such measures is to interest the wider community on e-skills acquisition and application possibilities, to inform where and how to use existing e-skills or improve them as well as to learn about the e-services and how to obtain it more convenient use.

4. People aged 50+ in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania is the generation that was educated and started the development of their carriers in „communism” i.e. in conditions of socialism. One can name common characteristics: lack of initiative; think that everything must be provided by state or something else; hold the opinion that it is good to work in the same organization for a long time; not ready for changes etc. Thus providing education possibilities for this generation the primary condition is the enabling environment where is expressed praise very often: praise and praise again!
5. It shall be mentioned that the survey done in the framework of the project AWAKE is a case study which highlights only main the recent trends of the educational needs however it does not foresee any situation at all. The study can become a knowledge background for the development of educational products for people aged 50+ or improvement teaching methods as well as for creation e-learning systems for seniors.

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