

# CSA Journal

## Helping Older Adults Get Comfortable with Technology Use

When older adults feel empowered to learn new technology, they transform their own lives and change their communities, too. The founder of a pioneering nationwide nonprofit shares the organization's journey and advice for helping seniors to adopt new technology in everyday life.

By Thomas Kamber, Founder and Executive Director of  
Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP





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For many people, picking up an iPad to pay a heating bill or accepting a video call from a friend may feel as easy as picking up a phone off the wall. But for others, including many older adults, real barriers keep these technological abilities out of reach. Older adults may lack access to the Internet, knowledge of what they could be accomplishing with technology, or the basic confidence to start learning new tech skills. In this article, I share how my non-profit, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP, helps seniors overcome these barriers in order to add useful technology to their lives — and along with it, more ease and connection to the people they love. I offer recommendations from our nearly 20 years of experience for anyone assisting older adults learning new technology.

## Maria's Story

In the space of one terrible year in 2019, Maria Arnold, 63, lost her husband, her mother, and a grandchild. She tried counseling to manage her feelings of grief and loss during the pandemic, but she found herself stuck, unable to act on her counselors' recommendations. "I was very depressed. They were hitting against a wall," she said (Senior Planet, 2021). Making things worse, she found herself increasingly dependent on others for taking care of daily tasks, many of which required technology skills she didn't have.

Then she found out about a program sponsored by the New York City Housing Authority and the

Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer where she could get a free tablet and Internet service provided by T-Mobile. Importantly, she signed up for the technology classes provided by Senior Planet, the flagship program of OATS.

At the time, Maria had little knowledge or experience with technology, which left her disconnected from so many of the platforms and services built to make life easier. With the help of technology trainers, Maria was able to learn the skills needed to use the Internet and use everyday functions that could make her life easier.

"I learned how to do emails, I learned how to use my tablet, I learned how to download, I learned how to use YouTube," said Maria. Technology opened up the world of telehealth for Maria, allowing her to have more choice and autonomy in her health decisions. "I learned I can research a doctor, I can see if the doctor is good, if I like what he says. And if I don't want that doctor, I don't have to have that doctor — I can request another doctor. And I'm able to put my appointments in the calendar."

More than just learning skills, Maria experienced personal transformation. She was able to use digital photos to remember her loved ones, a recommendation that originally came from her grief counselor. When reflecting on this period, Maria credits the trainers she worked with at Senior Planet for helping her to get through a difficult time. "They let me move forward," said Maria (Senior Planet, 2021).

Our goal when working with Maria, as with all older adults, is to provide them with not just a supportive and interactive learning environment, but with a space that also inspires individual transformation, conviction in one's ability to learn, and the ability to use technology to change the world. In a short period of time, Maria went from being reliant on others to having the confidence needed to pay her bills online.

In Maria's words, "I was like a little bird in a cage waiting for them to feed me. Now I fly. I am an eagle. I can fly wherever I want." Stories like Maria's are what OATS is all about. We launched OATS in 2004 with a mission to help older adults learn how to use technology and live better in the digital age. At the time, the Internet and technology were revolutionizing our lives, but older adults were too often disconnected from new technology.

Some lacked the resources needed to learn about technology. Others lacked the general understanding of how technology and the Internet could make their lives better. And another group simply needed the confidence to believe that they had the ability to understand technology.

Regardless of the reason, we realized that there was a significant need to better connect older adults to technology — and to push back against the archaic and faulty narrative that seniors did not want to learn new technology. The digital age was opening opportunities and breaking down barriers for people all over the world — why not older adults, too?

In the nearly two decades since OATS has been in operation, we have worked with tens of thousands of older adults, first in New York City and in a short time expanding our reach across the country. We evolved to work with local partners to deliver programming specifically designed for seniors, significantly expanding the availability of quality programming for seniors. Through our work, we've witnessed first-hand how technology can change lives: making seniors more independent, more connected with their friends and loved ones, and more able to handle everyday tasks and challenges.

We've also developed a strong appreciation for the transformative power of older adults in their communities. Take Marian in New York — when the pandemic hit, on top of everything else, she felt a terrible loss because she couldn't continue her volunteer work registering people to vote. But Senior Planet, she says, "helped me realize I had more skills than I thought. They opened up a whole world that I had rejected. Now, I do my volunteering remotely — I can call someone in Texas and request an absentee ballot for them all from my computer program." In the

process of learning new technologies, older adults do more than change themselves; they also impact the world around them.

## Building Senior Planet

As OATS continued to expand, we set out to create a vibrant and welcoming space just for older adults who wanted to learn how to use technology. We recognized that seniors already had some resources available to help them build technological literacy. Community colleges, AAA offices, senior centers, and libraries are still excellent places for older adults to reach out when they want to expand their tech skills. However, when it came to accessible and friendly technology education dedicated for older adults, we saw an opening for innovation. We wanted older adults to feel welcome and included in our new location and sought out their advice and input during the design process. And instead of working with rugged and outdated devices, we would invest in state-of-the-art technology, including computers, mobile devices, and high-speed internet.

That was the thinking behind Senior Planet.

In 2013, OATS opened the first Senior Planet Exploration Center in New York City, where it immediately became a home for seniors who wanted to take courses on technology and meet new friends. The Center was America's first technology-themed community hub for older adults. In our first year alone, thousands of seniors visited our Senior Planet Exploration Center, eager to experience this new cutting-edge senior center for themselves. What we quickly learned was that by creating a space that was inspiring — and specifically designed for older adults — people wanted to be there and felt that it was a place where they could truly accomplish their goals. When you enter a space whose design reflects a lot of thought and consideration, you want to reciprocate by putting a lot of thought into what you do there.

The store-front concept and thoughtful design helped to get Senior Planet participants in the door, but our curriculum is what kept them there. The Senior Planet curriculum has been recognized for its ability to not only teach technology but also provide a meaningful set of conceptual and practical tools to help people do more in their lives. And by offering our classes completely free of charge for older adults, we eliminated potential financial barriers to entry. OATS now has Senior Planet centers operating in different parts of the country, including Denver, Palo Alto, and North Country, New York. We're proud to say that many seniors have grown comfortable using technology with the help of our classes, instructors, and community.

## The Digital Pivot

Our challenge of helping older adults become more comfortable using technology took an unexpected and harrowing turn when the coronavirus pandemic hit in March 2020. Seemingly in an instant, our Senior Planet centers were closed for in-person programming in order to keep everyone safe and help stop the spread of the virus. With the loss of our physical locations, we immediately tried to determine how we could continue to provide services to older adults, most of whom now were left unable to see their family and friends.

We understood that in the age of social distancing, our work was now more important than ever before. Older adults, many of whom remained uncomfortable or unwilling to use technology, now needed to rely on a range of technologies to keep them connected to their communities.

Without knowing how long our Senior Planet centers would have to stay closed, we made the decision to move all of our programming online. We knew that our classes and programs would look considerably different, and nothing could replace the joy of being together in person, but OATS had the expertise and experience to make this shift work for older adults.

Our goal with Senior Planet online programming remained the same: to create a cutting-edge and easy-to-use space where older adults could learn and grow. With the help of our incredible trainers and staff members, we were able to bring the Senior Planet community online, with a focus on bringing older adults together during an especially difficult time and empowering them with the skills to use applications like Zoom and Instacart. We provided a weekly schedule of Senior Planet classes on our website and took steps to make our website as easy as possible for seniors to navigate.

By bringing Senior Planet programming online (and keeping it free of charge), we gained many new active members of our national community. From January to November 2021, older adults engaged in Senior Planet's virtual programming over 250,000 times. In a fall 2021 survey of almost 900 participants, 73% said that being an active participant in Senior Planet provided them with a feeling of community as places have closed during the pandemic (Kamber, 2021).

The pandemic forced all of us out of our comfort zone, including older adults, many of whom became reliant on technology in their everyday lives. In April 2021, AARP reported that seniors' technology use skyrocketed during the pandemic, with more than 40% of respondents viewing technology more positively than they did before the pandemic.

Even as more older adults are growing comfortable using technology, there remains a glaring digital divide in our country, with millions of older adults lacking Internet access. A study from The Humana Foundation and OATS published in early 2021 found that 22 million older adults, representing more than 40% of America's 65+ population, do not have wire-line broadband access at home. As the study notes,

Poor broadband not only limits access to essential public health information, social services, and digital healthcare services like telehealth and apps that manage chronic conditions, but it can also lead to risk of social isolation, which has been linked to negative health outcomes, reduced quality of life and premature death. (OATS & Humana, 2021)

The data underscores our challenge: for all the progress that has been made in getting older adults comfortable using technology, too many remain disconnected.

The challenges that OATS identified back in 2004 are still very much present today. New technology, and the thought of learning and starting something new, can be very intimidating for older adults, especially if they do not have the proper support systems in place. The mental barrier is very real and can be a significant roadblock.

## Recommendations

Based on our nearly two decades of experience working with older adults, here are our recommendations for helping older adults get comfortable using technology:

- 1. Before recommending technologies, ask about user patterns.** Too often we jump to making technology recommendations before asking the user what their goals are. Asking questions at the outset of the process ultimately allows you to provide something that is the best fit and set up for the individual. Encourage older adults to think about what type of technology consumer they are and want to be. Identify specifically what their needs are and then choose technology that will advance those goals.

We also recommend that when learning technology, newcomers use the same technology as their friends and family, creating an organic and ever-present support system. If someone's entire network is made up of iPhone users, it's going to be more difficult for that person to casually ask

for help to, for example, change the settings on an Android. Setting up a social environment to ensure that older adults have support is a great way to foster a feeling of connectedness and avoid a desert-island-effect in learning.

- 2. Over-engineer your solution, assuming a longer adoption period.** In this context, *over-engineering solutions* means scaffolding the learning process for the older adult you're working with, walking with them step by step as they learn how to use a new device, app, or software. Instead of aiming for wholesale change all at once, put forward a schedule of management and realistic milestones so the older adult can see progress. If the end goal for a new learner is to connect with family and friends, start with setting up an email address and focusing on that first step for a few weeks, allowing the user to become comfortable with the process before moving on to another platform like Zoom. This helps the newcomer avoid feeling overwhelmed by the endless possibilities on the horizon. We have coined the concept of a "frustration-threshold": the point in time when a student self-terminates their learning due to building frustration. It is critical to recognize when this threshold is approaching and know how to avoid it.
- 3. Empower older adults to seek out cutting-edge technology.** Technology from the 90s or old software programs can cause additional frustrations, like waiting forever for a computer to boot up or joining a social media platform where there is no interaction. The purpose of incorporating technology into the lives of older adults is not to add stress to their lives, but rather to help them thrive on the platforms that will best connect them *now* with loved ones and resources. At OATS, we prioritize three main platforms that we think work well: PC laptops, Chromebooks, and iPads. We recommend that whenever possible, people start their technology journey with a brand-new device that is loaded with the most recent software and apps.

Beyond the tactical work, there are bigger issues with strategy and systems change at play. Most people working with older adults and technology want to plug into a larger community of advocacy that helps older adults not just learn as an individual but also build community and movement to change policy and legislation. In this way, we can find new ways to use technology to provide independence. Websites like Seniorplanet.org and AARP's Virtual Community

Center (VCC) represent online communities for people interested in active participation. For those interested in advocacy, there are nonprofit organizations like the National Digital Inclusion Alliance and the Consumer Technology Association Foundation. These are just a few, but there are likely others that can help organizations across the country make the transition from personal to real social change. •CSA



**Tom Kamber** is the founder and executive director of OATS and Senior Planet. He is a leading expert on aging and technology and is regularly featured in national media. Tom has taught courses on technology, urban studies, and philanthropy at Columbia University, is widely published in professional and academic journals, and has presented his work on five continents. He is also a co-founder of the Afro-Latin Jazz Alliance (which has won multiple Grammy awards) and serves on several nonprofit boards of directors and public commissions. After a series of successful collaborations, OATS formally joined the AARP family as a charitable affiliate in 2021.

## ■ RESOURCES

Information about the Connected NYCHA partnership with The Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer's, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), and the NYC Department for the Aging: <https://oats.org/client-projects/connected-nycha-older-adults/>

Information about Senior Planet centers: <https://oats.org/world-class-programs/senior-planet-centers-2/>

Senior Planet's free online courses: <https://seniorplanet.org/get-involved/online/>

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