

Be a “Silver Surfer”

Have you heard of the “digital divide”? This term is used to describe the imaginary line between two large groups of people – one group which has access to computers and a basic understanding of its language and usage and the other group that does not. When the term was first used the primary divider was economic as computers were rather expensive. More recently the term has been applied to an age that is usually 60 or higher. Most people under age 60 who have worked outside the home have been forced into using a computer whereas computer usage is more likely to be a personal choice if you are now 60 or older.

Although I have not been able to find any solid recent statistics, AARP and others are all asserting that seniors (also known affectionately as “Silver Surfers”) are the fastest growing segment of computer users. Most estimates are that between 33% and 40% of all seniors are computer users. Today, those who are not users most frequently use excuses related to their degree of personal discomfort or feelings of insecurity or lack of knowledge whereas 15 years ago more excuses were related to the cost of computers or the lack of access to computers. Therefore today’s seniors need a large dose of encouragement from their friends and children/grandchildren, the medical community, senior centers and public library personnel and others with whom they regularly communicate.

While avoiding usage of computers may keep some seniors in their comfort zone, they are missing so many positive opportunities not the least of which is the internet. Your personal world can be significantly enriched and expanded by tapping into the internet. Just a few of the most common internet uses that “Silver Surfers” report being of value include:

- **Information...** Using the computer to do research can be both rewarding and interesting. You can find out about your favorite hobbies and passions, however unique they might be, and discover that there are other people out there who share your interest and are willing to share with you. You can also research medical conditions and help yourself become better prepared for your doctor visits. You will find maps and directions to every conceivable location, up-to-the-minute weather information, world news, lotto numbers, and much, much more.
- **Communication and Personal Relationships ...** Keeping in touch with friends and family through email will definitely enrich your life. You will be able to hear and see (by using a simple camera attachment) what your children, grandchildren and good friends are up to on a daily basis without the expense of a large phone bill. You can do genealogical research, find out about services offered by a local organization, track down old classmates/friends, or make travel arrangements to visit others.
- **Entertainment...** On line games are very popular and plentiful and a fun way to engage your mind. Online magazines are plentiful, as are newsgroups and discussion groups focused on particular topics. Your computer might also become a great tool for expanding your hobby or learning a new one. If you love photography, software and your digital camera can give you the ability to alter your photographs without a darkroom.
- **Shopping...** Once you learn the basics and understand security, shopping on the internet can prove economical and interesting. You will be able to compare prices quickly without going to multiple stores, read reviews by other purchasers, look up ratings of large ticket items such as cars and appliances and have your purchases delivered to the address of your choice.

- **Organization...** It only takes basic computer skills to learn how to store information. Your computer can actually replace your address book, calendar, file folders of investments, insurance statements, and health and tax records.

Research has shown that seniors who become adept at using a computer appear to have fewer depressive symptoms than others who aren't so technologically connected and it certainly enhances independence and eases loneliness.

Computerized brain fitness programs are also known to improve memory, focus and concentration. Yes, there are indeed therapeutic uses of computers. If you become an active user of technology, you can counter some of the intellectual decline which is part of the natural aging process. Also several computer based physical activity games and programs (Wii system is the current most popular) can significantly improve physical flexibility, balance, strength and agility.

The Delta College *50+...Just Like Gold Program* offers special one-day computer classes at its Midland Center (located at 1025 Wheeler). This fall you will have two options for taking the "Computer Basics Class" only for those 50+ in age...Friday, October 22 or Friday, November 5. It is the perfect class if you want to learn about how to use a computer without having to learn a lot of technical terminology or the technical aspects of how a computer functions. If you already know the computer basics but want to learn more about the internet, consider taking the "Internet Basics Class" only for those 50 + in age on Friday, December 3. Each person will be using a computer so you will be learning by doing. Lunch and handouts are also included. To enroll in one of these one-day classes call the Delta College LifeLong Learning office (989) 686-9444.

Learning new things, having new experiences and challenging yourself are all healthy exercises for your brain. Cyberspace is an absolutely amazing place. Be a "Silver Surfer"!

Sue Montesi
Dean of Learning Centers and Innovative Programs
Delta College