

@ A Georgia Tech study of older adults has challenged the common stereotype that senior citizens don't like or use newer technologies.

**BELOW:**  
Technologies used by senior citizens in their homes include cell phones.

# No Fear of Technology

*Study debunks myths, shows senior adults use and like many new home and office technologies.*

BY JANE M. SANDERS

Retiree "Barbara" likes the immediacy of e-mail to stay in touch with her children and grandchildren, who live far away. She even shares photos with them via the Internet.

Despite what he describes as the annoyance of carrying a cell phone, "Richard," whose memory isn't what it used to be, relies on his phone to be his address book.

These older adults and others like them are debunking the common stereotype that senior citizens don't

like or use newer technologies. They reflect

the findings of a new study that show senior adults use a variety of

technologies in their homes and offices and for health care. It appears the benefits of these devices outweigh the costs.

Senior adults ages 65 to 85 like to use these technologies because they support their

activities, and they provide convenience and desirable features, according to research led by Georgia Institute of Technology scientists. But study participants also disliked some technologies because of their inconvenience (e.g., too much effort required), complexity and lack of reliability. Researchers expect to use the information to improve technology design and training.

"Technology has the potential to improve the quality of life of older adults and to provide support for age-related declines," says Tracy Mitzner, a research scientist in the Georgia Tech School of Psychology. "But the potential assistance technology has to offer can only be met if older adults are willing and able to use technological devices and if these devices meet their needs."

The National Institutes of Health funded the study through the Center for Research and Education on Aging and Technology Enhancement (CREATE), which involves research at Georgia Tech, Florida State University and the University of Miami. At Georgia Tech, the center's directors are Professors of Psychology Wendy Rogers and Arthur Fisk.

To collect detailed qualitative data for the study, Mitzner and her colleagues conducted six focus groups — moderated discussion sessions — at each of the three CREATE institutions. In all, 113 senior adults — both men and women of varying ethnicities and education levels — participated.

Focus groups reported using an average number of 20 different technologies, and many of them were newer innovations, such as digital cameras. As expected, the participants use the largest number of technologies in their homes. Technologies cited included the telephone, cell phone, computer, television, blood pressure monitor, blood glucose monitor, programmable thermostat, garage door opener, printer, copier, fax, microwave oven and programmed irrigation systems.

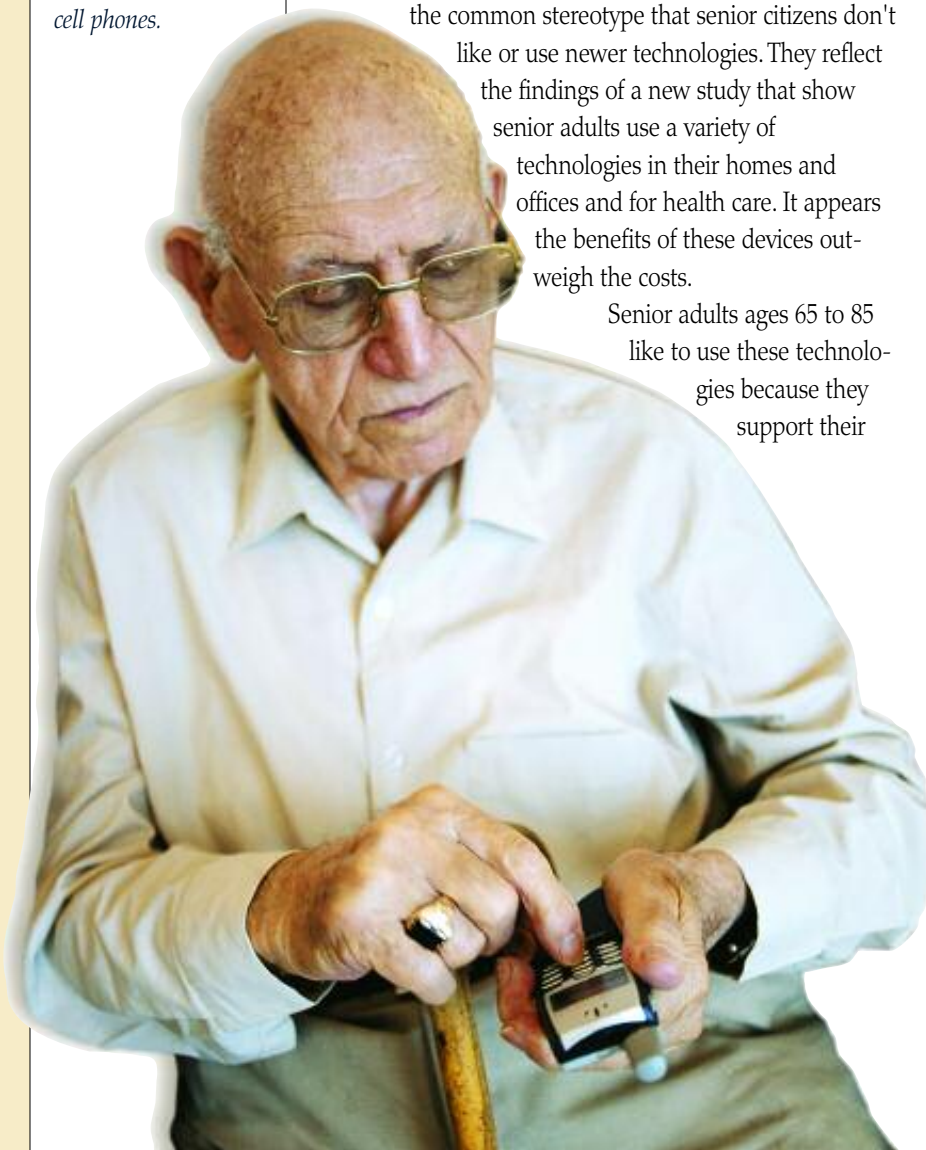




PHOTO BY GARY MEEK

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*LEFT: Older adults, such as these at the Harriett G. Darnell Senior Multipurpose Facility in Atlanta, are debunking the common stereotype that senior citizens don't like or use newer technologies. They reflect the findings of a new Georgia Tech study, which shows senior adults frequently use a variety of technologies in their homes and offices and for health care.*

Focus groups reported using an average of 15 different technologies at work. Some of the technologies they used at work overlapped with those used at home. In the health care domain, focus groups cited an average of eight technology items, including the computer, which they used to look up health information and to order prescriptions online.

“What we found was contrary to stereotypes that depict older adults as avoiding or afraid of technology,” Mitzner notes. Research done in the late 1990s indicated that older adults had adopted many “old” technologies, such as microwave ovens and videocassette recorders.

The study also found “no statistical difference between the number of technologies used by people in the lower and higher education groups they were divided into,” Mitzner says.

The findings also countered the myth that older adults would have more negative than positive experiences with technology. When asked about those experiences with the technologies they use at home, 60 percent of their responses were categorized as likes compared to 36 percent dislikes; another 4 percent of the replies were undecided. Patterns of likes and dislikes were similar for technologies used at work and for health care. Also, there was no significant difference in attitudes with respect to education level.

Researchers found that older adults liked technologies for their ability to enhance activities — primarily

communication, health care monitoring and maintenance, and research and education. They also reported liking technologies for their features, such as access to information, speed and portability. And they liked the convenience of technologies because they reduced effort and saved time.

Senior adults' dislikes primarily related to issues of convenience and features. Dislikes related to convenience included financial considerations (for example, the high cost of printer ink cartridges), increased mental effort (for example, having to remember multiple steps) or physical effort (for example, having to carry along a cell phone), and interruptions, such as telemarketing calls and junk e-mail.

“Understanding these attitudes older adults have about technologies can inform us about interface and software design, as well as many other aspects of technology design and training,” Mitzner says. “The goal is how to improve design so technologies can be used more easily by older adults and optimized for them. And designing to meet the needs of older adults helps improve design for people of all ages.”

The researchers' focus group database also includes information on how older adults learn to use technologies and their preferences for training. Researchers are now analyzing this data and expect to report results later this year. **rh**

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**Tracy Mitzner,** research scientist in the Georgia Tech School of Psychology