VInTAgE – Valorisation of INnovative Technologies for AGing in Europe

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1. Introduction

Since June 2006, with the Riga Ministerial Declaration on e-Inclusion, the need of a deeper reflection about barriers and possible solutions for a more concrete relation between elderly people and ICT represents an hot-topic in the debate on adult education at EU level. Europe is a continent that is aging more and more quickly, especially in rural areas [1], and European policies, from the Treaty of Lisbon in the year 2000 to the Europe2020 strategy, have always emphasized the importance to tackle the challenges associated with demographic ageing [2] especially through actions that empower older people to fully participate in the economy and society, promoting independent lifestyles and enhancing their quality of life.

1.1 The rationale of the V.In.T.Ag.E initiative

The project idea finds its consistency within the framework of the "European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion - to be part of the information society" which has been adopted by the Commission on the 8th of November 2007. Indeed, in the text of the communication [3], the Commission refers to the importance of accelerating effective participation of target groups at risk of exclusion and improving quality of life. In particular, it is said that "*industry, user organizations, Member States, and the Commission must implement the EU Action Plan on 'Ageing well in the information society'* (...)" [4]. In fact, the 14th of June 2007 - date of publishing of the EC Communication on the above mentioned initiative - can be considered the starting point of a wide and multidimensional work for the implementation of the action Plan on Information and Communication Technologies and Ageing in Europe [5].

On the basis of the "Ageing well action plan" numerous initiatives have been promoted and financed by the Commission with different financing instruments: research on ICT, e-health initiatives, lifelong learning projects, senior volunteering actions and many others innovative ideas. The general objective of all the realized projects has been always to help the older individuals to improve quality of life, stay healthier and live independently.

One of the most important research programmes in this field is AAL - Ambient Assisted Living. Last June 2010 the AAL Joint Programme launched an interim evaluation consultation among the most important stakeholders in Europe. In the first page of the summary report of the public consultation it is clearly stated that "*the ability to live independently for longer was described as the main benefit ICTs can bring to elderly people by a large number of respondents. ICT is often described as a way for the older population to access services easier, from healthcare to transport, from telecommunications to retail, from safety to public services. (...) The possibility to remain connected with their families, communities and the society is also a recurrent element among submissions, with social isolation and loneliness considered a particularly important problem by one respondent.*"

2. The VInTAgE project

The project has been submitted and selected for funding within the framework of the 2011 call for proposals of the "LLP – Lifelong Learning Programme", Grundtvig Multilateral Projects [6]. VInTAgE aims to propose innovative solutions to make ICT more accessible and attractive, promoting their benefits to the quality of life and independence of the elderly, as well as including local stakeholders from different fields of the society in order to create a European network which might exploit project results even in the future, in different European countries, facing new needs and problems.

The core of the project is to equip senior citizens with the skills that they need in order to cope with change and to remain active in society, by setting up favorable conditions in order to overcome the most common barriers and also more specific problems linked to different geographical locations and particular disadvantages.

The first activity undertaken by the partnership is an extensive social research in order to collect and compare information at European level directly coming from the main target of the project: senior citizens. The objective is to investigate on the real needs of elderly people concerning ICT and to integrate existing open source software, not only in consideration of technical and informatics requirements, but also to match their preferences about graphic design, contents, opportunities and customization.

At a second stage, training courses for elderly people will be organized within a wider initiative which will involve public authorities and private companies, as well as volunteering associations and adult education providers, Universities of the Third Age and local media.

Other specific and transversal objectives of the project are:

- the organization of an international workshop for trainers who are working in adult education

- the recovery and upgrade of obsolete hardware devices, the consequent reduction of dismantling costs and the protection of the environment

- the promotion of open source software in all spheres of the civil society

Therefore, we believe that the combined achievement of these objectives, together with a well-structured dissemination plan and targeted activities for the exploitation of results, will result in a significant increase in the

short term of the over-65 who feel confident in using ICT, as well as, in the long term, in the enhancement of digital skills of this target of citizens, as shown in the actions and priorities listed in the "*Digital Agenda for Europe*", published by Communication from the European Commission last 26 August 2010[7].

2.1 Bringing innovation in adult education

One of the innovative characteristic of the project is the self-increase of its sustainability and the results effectiveness, by providing the end-user with the software and the hardware. This idea comes from the fact that often elderly people live in an economic situation that doesn't lead them to consider computer tools as an essential thing. With the re-use of old computers and adopting Open Source Software, it is possible to satisfy all the needs and at no cost.

The technological development of recent years has shown that most of the operations related to the computer use are done almost exclusively via a standard web browser. Checking the e-mail, video conferencing, streaming video, listening to music are all operations that can be done without installing additional software.

On the basis of this analysis, many computer companies, with Google in the first place, have decided to launch on the market laptops with limited hardware potential compared with standard PCs; this is because the only software that is expected to run on it is the web browser.

It is then obvious that the hardware to be used for our project doesn't need to have any special requirements.

According to some studies carried out in 2009, an average user changes his/her computer every 2-3 years. The old computer only few times is used in other tasks, but most of the time, it is dismantled according to applicable regulations.

If, however, these old computers are collected, tested and configured with a special operating system compatible with the available hardware resources, you have a fully functional computer platform and, at the same time, reducing the amount of waste for disposal.

If one thinks on doing this with all the companies that each year dismantle their old hardware, you can get the potential of this operation.

The VInTAgE project promotes an innovative methodology which places the senior citizen and his digital learning needs at the center of an integrated system capable of providing the necessary resources in an efficient and long lasting way.

In fact, the innovative idea of the project, not only in relation to the tools, is to be as interdisciplinary as possible, combining training on multiple levels also with horizontal policies for the environment protection.

2.2 Training methodology

All the training activities undertaken in the project will take into account the main principles of liberal adult education.

Teaching methods, which will include also non formal education, will have the primary aim to help learners to develop the ability to analyze and to synthesize knowledge, empowering them to make good decisions.

Indeed, the goal is to transfer basic knowledge and improve the digital skills of learners, making this process as simple and enjoyable as possible, in order to be ready to overcome eventual barriers and problems and to approach computers without fear and not feeling inadequate.

The strategy to achieve these results will be based on the adoption of non-formal education methodologies, trying to avoid as much as possible frontal lectures, slides presentations and individual exercises, always in consideration of the target group characteristics.

The so called slow learning method will be adopted, helping the senior students to feel more comfortable, internalize knowledge more effectively, gain a better understanding in the long run.

The pedagogical characteristics of these trainings will be:

- One topic per day: focus on properly learning and internalizing one concept per day. If one desires to practice more, try to expand on the same concept at home.
- Revise: practice makes perfect, so revise often. The more you revise, the closer you get to mastery.
- Discuss and compare: group works and debates where learners can compare their difficulties and relative solutions.
- Pauses and breaks: each learner is free to take a rest whenever he or she wants without losing the explanation of core concepts
- Socialization: the group of learners will be invited to participate in several social activities out of the classroom in order to establish friendly relationships which, hopefully, will last even after the training course

2.3 Strategy for sustainability

The sustainability of the action will be ensured by setting up a local network of interest around the main topics of the project VInTAgE in each partner country, so as to establish a multidimensional and dynamic system for an horizontal and vertical mainstreaming of the results and to encourage a multiplier effect which aims to sustain the project beyond its lifetime.

Such an involvement of different type of organisations will bring to the realization of online tools for the coordination of their specific actions during and after the project, as well as for an easier and faster communication among their representatives.

The main tool for the achievement of these objectives will be an online platform, which will be at first tested in seven national versions as a simple database for the exchange of information between authorized users. The national editions of the database will merge into a more articulated platform for networking, which will be monitored and evaluated for the first year of operation in order to be revised, if necessary, and presented at the final event in Brussels, September 2013, as the European VINTAGE PCs platform.

References

[1] Eurostat - Ageing in the European Union: where exactly? - Issue number 26/2010
[2] Council - Ecofin - Conclusions on European 2020 Strategy. Brussels, 9 June 2010
[3]COM(2007) 694 final
[4] Ibid.
[5] COM(2007) 332 final
[6] Contracting number of the project 518135-LLP-1-2011-1-IT-GRUNDTVIG-GMP. You can visit the project website at www.vintageproject.eu
[7] COM(2010) 245 final/2