

6. Make the service user friendly

We recommend to make the service as 'user friendly' as possible. In the case of older people, some of them may suffer from the effects of aging, such as reduced vision or hearing, or reduced motor skills or cognitive skills—all of which may impact their abilities to effectively use the service. Based on a study by the "Web Accessibility Initiative: Ageing Education and Harmonisation (WAI-AGE)", a number of recommendations and requirements for older people have been developed—which partly coincide with the W3C guidelines for accessible content. The following recommendations are especially useful:

- Provide a simple interface and clarity about the basic functions; this is better than offering many and complex functions;
- Use a sufficiently large font size, and provide the option to change font size, for example: "change font size: A A A";
- Use a maximum of five to seven menu options and present these clearly, for example, as large buttons with clear titles;
- Enable people to jump between hyperlinks, using the 'TAB' keyboard button (used by some with reduced motor skills);
- Show (most of) the content in one view so that users do not need to scroll down for relevant content;
- Make explicit 'where the user is' in the website, for example, by using specific background colours for 'closed' or 'open' pages;
- It may be needed to organize a helpdesk, either temporarily, for example during a user trial, or on a continuous basis;
- It may be worthwhile to enable people to personalize the user interface for each individual person.

7. Project management and learning

Technologies are developing rapidly and people are adopting new products and services rapidly—think of social networking and tablet computers. From a project management perspective, this means that one must be able to adapt rapidly to changes. For example, one may need to update and modify the project plan every six months in order to allow for adaptability and flexibility. Furthermore, one needs to carefully identify the various interests and stakes of each project partner, and to discuss whether the project is still in line with the project partners' different interests and stakes. Such discussions need to be facilitated not only at the project's start, but also during its subsequent stages and iterations, because things can change in the course of the project. Finally, it is critical to be open for learning. For example, by trying-out approaches and solutions, by sharing 'lessons learned' and by learning from others.

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About the WeCare project

The WeCare project (www.wecare-project.eu) was part of the European AAL Ambient Assisted Living programme, (www.aal-europe.eu) and was funded by the National Funding Agencies ZonMw in The Netherlands, Tekes in Finland, ISCIII in Spain and Enterprise Ireland in Ireland, and by the WeCare project partners.



The project involved diverse partners in Finland, Spain, Ireland and The Netherlands: industrial partners Ericsson (The Netherlands), Skytek (Ireland), Videra (Finland) and Simac ShareCare (The Netherlands), service providers and user organizations Caritas Foundation (Finland), ASSDA (Spain), ANBO (The Netherlands), and research organizations I2BC (Spain), VTT (Finland) and TNO (The Netherlands).



WeCare



The WeCare project has aimed to help older people, and people around them, to engage in social interactions, and thus to increase their well-being. The project has developed and evaluated a series of online social networking services. In four countries, a co-design process was organized between project partners and prospective users, which resulted in four prototypes. These were evaluated in user trials. Based on our findings, we would like to propose several practical recommendations for the development of online social networking services for older people, and of appropriate business models and policies.

1. Organize human-centred design

We advocate organizing a human-centred design (HCD) process. In such a process, potential users participate actively and creatively throughout the project's iterative cycles of research, design and evaluation. A HCD process involves multi-disciplinary teamwork in order to address diverse topics, such as user research, service design, application development, organizing user trials, business modelling and policy making.

Furthermore, we advocate organizing co-design workshops during the project, involving relevant actors, potential customers and stakeholders, and diverse groups of users, for example, older people and people in their social networks, and informal and formal carers. Co-design workshops were especially valuable in helping to develop a shared language and understanding.

Moreover, we advocate carefully interpreting the findings from user involvement and co-design, and articulating user requirements, based on these interactions. Please keep in mind that talking with users and stakeholders does not necessarily imply doing exactly what they say. Rather, it means listening carefully and making decisions prudently. It is critical to identify requirements that users find most important and to prioritize these.

Finally, we advocate focusing not only on those people that participated in workshops and trials, but also on those that did not participate—on the wider, potential target group. This inclusive approach will help to draw more general conclusions and to better translate the findings from workshops and user trials to a wider target group. This will also help to apply the project's results in further dissemination and deployment.

2. Combine face-to-face and online

We advocate combining 'face to face' meetings and 'online' tools. It may be necessary, for example, to organize meetings with people in a social network (family, friends or neighbours) around the older people (primary users). In such meetings, people can discuss ways to request and offer support or to organize social activities. Next, online tools can enable people to engage follow-up activities on a continuous basis. Without such meetings, people are less likely to use the online tools. Often, they need to establish communication patterns in a face-to-face manner first, before they can take these communication patterns online.

In addition, it may be necessary to organize interventions with formal carers or care professionals—who will also use the service. Those people need to be motivated or incentivised to participate too. And they often need to learn new working procedures in order to use the service in their work contexts.

Moreover, for successful deployment of an online service, it may be necessary to make some specific people responsible for moderating (of discussions) and curating (of content) in the online service.

One can improve the match between people's needs and the service's functionality by identifying people's real needs or shared interests, and to frame or modify the service in such a manner that it better matches these needs or interests. One may, for example, find out that two people have a similar hobby, and then connect them to each other, so that this hobby can provide a point of entry for further socializing. Making such matches may raise privacy concerns, which must be dealt with carefully.



A co-design workshop with prospective users



Integrating social networking and daily life, social activities.

3. Try-out and improve business models

It is critical to discuss viable and feasible business models from the start of the project. Organizing meetings with potential customers and stakeholders in order to generate and evaluate ideas concerning value proposition, target groups and revenue streams early-on, and in iterative cycles, can help to develop business models that 'work'. In very general terms, a business model can be created 1) from a cost reduction perspective, for example, focusing on reducing costs of health care—which could be interesting for care providers or insurance companies; 2) from a marketing perspective, for example, focusing on ways to reach a specific target group—which could be interesting for home shopping or telecoms companies; or 3) from a 'user pays' basis, for example, asking users to pay a monthly fee.

Since the markets for online social networking services are complex and diverse (many stakeholders, many initiatives, many target groups, many regulations, etc.), one needs to articulate precisely the service's added value. This can be done in dialogue with potential users (older people and their social networks), customers (care providers, housing companies, insurance companies) and stakeholders (local governments, policy makers). Many business models for online services are based on 'free' usage. In such cases, other revenue sources need to be found, for example, from a municipality, care provider or not-for profit organization—which procures the service wholesale and offers it to its citizens, its customers or its target audience.

4. Foster local and existing networks

It is recommended to create links between the people and events online, and people and events in real-life. Local action, local participation and local engagement are often necessary for the success of an online service.

Not-for-profit organizations can play a critical role in motivating and empowering people to use the online services. For example, social workers can follow these six steps: 1) Find people that might benefit from using the online social networking service; 2) Establish relationships and build mutual trust; 3) Identify (latent) unsolved needs or problems ('pain'); 4) Identify shared interests or goals ('passion'); 5) Inspire and motivate people to connect to each other, to engage in face-to-face interactions; and 6) Enable help people to use online tools for online interactions.

Online social networks can only become successful if its participants experience the network as 'their own'. Then will they invest in it and experience the benefits. It is therefore critical to foster—at least initially—communication and shared activities, in order to get things started and to reach a critical mass.

Furthermore, it can be helpful to 'use' face-to-face events to promote usage of the online services, to raise awareness about the service, to recruit participants for user trials, or to disseminate the project's findings.

Moreover, it is recommended to identify 'role models' within the target group, and to involve them in reaching out to their peers, and in promoting the service

5. Develop flexibly, with modules ('pick and mix')

The human-centred design approach allows for the development of different services for different target groups. In order to efficiently develop customized services, we advocate developing services based on modules, and to combine these to develop different versions. This 'pick and mix' approach reduces development lead-time and costs, and enables one to keep up with technology trends and to anticipate emerging technologies, such as tablet computers.

Furthermore, it is critical to use—whenever possible—technologies or modules that are already available, especially those that are available in the public domain, in order to reduce development time and costs.

Moreover, one can follow an 'agile' development approach, focusing initially on those functionalities that are most relevant for users, such as communication and usability, and to focus on 'technical' functionalities, such as security or stability, later-on, in an iterative process.

During user trials, one must pay attention to the 'provisioning' of the service. In user trials, it may be necessary to install or configure specific pieces of software. This needs to be done with a minimum of inconveniencing or bothering the users.



Four different versions of the WeCare service were developed in the four different countries, in order to match local contexts and needs and preferences of local users. The different versions were based on one shared architecture and platform, which offered the following functions: a real-time video-communication service, tools to share news and to discuss, tools to plan and organize community events, tools to request and offer mutual support or informal care, and streams of relevant information.

With this 'pick and mix' approach, developers can pick those options that the people in their target group value, and combine these in order to develop a tailor-made version of the service.