



**WHITE
PAPER**

WHITE PAPER - Older Workers and Digital Skills: Capability, Confidence and Inclusion

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THE AGE DIVERSITY FORUM



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Executive Overview

Digital competence became a foundational requirement of modern work throughout the early 2020s, accelerated by hybrid working, automation and increased reliance on virtual collaboration. In 2023, public narratives frequently framed older workers as digitally “left behind,” suggesting that age itself was a predictor of lower capability. However, the evidence available at the time did not support this assumption. Instead, research demonstrated that older workers’ digital engagement was shaped by access to training, organisational culture, confidence-building opportunities and the presence of age bias, rather than inherent skill limitations.

This White Paper reconstructs and analyses the 2023 evidence to provide an authoritative assessment of the relationship between age and digital capability. It demonstrates that when training is inclusive, well-designed and psychologically safe, older workers build digital confidence rapidly. Conversely, stereotypes, insufficient support and poor learning environments suppress engagement and reinforce harmful misconceptions. With digital competence now essential for progression, wellbeing and inclusion, this White Paper highlights the urgent organisational and policy need to treat digital inclusion as a core component of age-inclusive practice.

Abstract

This White Paper examines evidence available in 2023 regarding the digital skills, confidence levels and learning experiences of older workers. Drawing on national surveys, polling data, qualitative accounts and employer insights, the study evaluates the extent to which digital skill disparities among older workers reflected capability, confidence or opportunity. Findings indicate that structural, cultural and training-related factors, not chronological age, were the primary drivers of digital exclusion. The paper concludes that age stereotypes, insufficient training design and inconsistent managerial support created environments that hindered older workers’ participation in digitally intensive work. Recommendations are provided for employers and policymakers seeking to build equitable, digitally inclusive workplaces.

About The Age Diversity Forum

The Age Diversity Forum is a research and advocacy organisation dedicated to advancing age inclusion across workplaces and societies. By combining data, organisational insight, academic research and lived experience, we support employers, policymakers and practitioners in designing inclusive, multigenerational and future-focused workforce strategies. Our work includes White Papers, advisory tools, research reports and thought leadership to advance evidence-based practice.



1. Introduction

Digital skills became increasingly central to employment in the early 2020s, with hybrid and remote work accelerating adoption of communication platforms, workflow systems and collaboration tools. In this context, public commentary often depicted older workers, typically those aged 50 and above, as less digitally capable or less willing to adapt to new technologies.

The 2023 evidence base, however, offered a markedly different view. Research demonstrated that older workers' digital preparedness depended heavily on organisational support, training quality and workplace culture. Rather than lacking ability, older workers frequently lacked access to structured learning, psychologically safe environments or opportunities to develop skills at a sustainable pace.

This White Paper reconstructs the findings from 2023 to assess how digital disparities emerged and how employers can design inclusive environments that enable older workers to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

2. Methodological Note

This analysis is based solely on evidence available in 2023 and draws from:

- National digital skills surveys
- Polling conducted among older workers
- Qualitative interview and focus group accounts
- Employer case studies
- Contemporary commentary from workforce and training specialists
- The Age Diversity Forum's internal synthesis

The objective is to present a structured and academically grounded assessment of digital inclusion as understood in 2023, without incorporating subsequent developments.

3. Findings

3.1 Capability vs Opportunity: Dispelling the Myth of Age-Based Digital Decline

A central finding from 2023 was that older workers possessed *strong baseline digital capability*, particularly in roles requiring routine use of digital tools. Where gaps existed, they were more strongly associated with opportunity deficits than with age-related cognitive decline.

Key opportunity-related barriers included:

- Limited access to digital training
- Training formats unsuitable for adult learning



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- Lack of support during technology rollouts
 - Managerial assumptions that older workers were “not interested” in digital upskilling
 - Environments where asking questions felt unsafe

This challenges age-based narratives by demonstrating that capability was not the root issue, opportunity was.

3.2 Digital Confidence is Environment-Dependent, Not Age-Dependent

The evidence showed that older workers’ digital confidence varied significantly based on:

- The level of psychological safety in teams
- The clarity of communication from managers
- The structure and pacing of training
- Prior experiences of positive or negative feedback
- Access to peer support

Older workers thrived when learning processes were supportive, paced and interactive. Conversely, cultures favouring speed, competitiveness or implicit comparison with younger colleagues suppressed confidence irrespective of actual skill.

This supports adult learning theory, which emphasises relational and environmental factors in capability building.

3.3 Age-Based Stereotypes Create Structural Barriers

Despite evidence contradicting capability stereotypes, 2023 research found that many organisations assumed older workers were:

- Less adaptable
- Slower learners
- Resistant to digital change
- More easily overwhelmed by technology

These assumptions often resulted in:

- Reduced access to training
- Exclusion from digital projects
- Fewer progression opportunities
- Negative performance evaluations
- Overreliance on younger colleagues for digital tasks



Stereotyping thus became a self-fulfilling barrier: lack of opportunity decreased confidence, which reinforced stereotypes.

3.4 Training Design Shapes Digital Inclusion

Training design was a critical determinant of participation:

Less effective approaches included:

- Self-directed e-learning without support
- Rapid-fire introductions to multiple tools
- “One-size-fits-all” digital rollouts
- Assumptions of pre-existing comfort with technology

More effective approaches included:

- Structured demonstrations
- Step-by-step guided learning
- Opportunities to practise with real tasks
- Peer learning and cross-age collaboration
- Follow-up sessions and coaching

Older workers, like many workers across age groups, benefited significantly from blended learning models combining demonstration, practice and support.

3.5 Digital Skills as a Gatekeeper for Progression

In 2023, digital confidence was increasingly linked to:

- Visibility in hybrid work
- Access to high-value projects
- Speed of professional communication
- Ability to engage with digital knowledge-sharing systems
- Managerial perceptions of competency

Older workers with lower confidence, often due to lack of training rather than lack of skill, were more likely to be overlooked or misjudged.

This embedded digital inclusion within broader organisational inclusion challenges.

4. Discussion

The 2023 evidence challenges deterministic views of declining digital competence with age. Instead, it shows that digital exclusion is cultural, structural and educational, not biological.

Organisational environments, leadership behaviour and training design exerted far greater influence over digital capability than chronological age. Older workers demonstrated strong commitment to learning when supported appropriately.

The findings emphasise that digital inclusion must be understood as:

- A leadership responsibility
- A training and design issue
- A fairness and equality challenge
- A strategic workforce imperative

Digital confidence is now a prerequisite for participation in hybrid work, meaning organisations that fail to support older workers risk perpetuating structural inequalities.

5. Recommendations

For Employers

1. Embed age-inclusive digital training

Offer structured, paced learning environments suitable for diverse experience levels.

2. Challenge age stereotypes

Train managers to recognise and prevent age-based assumptions in digital contexts.

3. Build psychologically safe learning environments

Encourage questions, experimentation and risk-taking without judgement.

4. Increase access to training across all grades

Ensure older workers receive equal opportunities to participate in digital development.

5. Integrate digital inclusion with hybrid work strategy

Recognise that digital confidence is foundational to effective hybrid working.

For Policymakers

1. Promote digital skills as a lifelong learning entitlement

Recognise digital capability as essential infrastructure for an ageing workforce.

2. Support employer adoption of inclusive training models



Develop guidance and incentives for adult-friendly digital learning.

3. Address digital inequalities in national workforce strategy

Embed age inclusion within digital and AI transformation agendas.

4. Encourage transparency in workplace training access

Monitor disparities in digital learning participation across age groups.

6. Conclusion

The evidence available in 2023 demonstrates that older workers' digital capability is shaped not by age, but by opportunity, environment and organisational behaviour. When provided with inclusive training and supportive cultures, older workers adapt effectively to new technologies and thrive in digital environments. Conversely, stereotypes and poorly designed learning systems generate unnecessary barriers, reinforcing both inequality and missed organisational potential.

Digital inclusion is therefore a central pillar of age-inclusive workforce design. As digital transformation accelerates, employers and policymakers must adopt evidence-based strategies that recognise capability across the life course.

7. References

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