A Year Better

ICT FOR BETTER LIFE

WORK PACKAGE 2

MAPPING DIGITAL SURVIVAL SKILLS AGAINST DIGCOMP AND DIGITAL SOLUTIONS AVAILABLE TO ESCAPE DEJECTION AND LONELINESS

Country Report Poland

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1. Introduction

Poland's population is **ageing rapidly**. As of 2023, more than **9.9 million people** in Poland were aged 60 and above - comprising **26.3% of the total population**, up from 17.2% in 2005. **Longer life expectancy** and **declining birth rates** mean that older adults form an increasingly significant part of society. This **demographic transition** is reshaping public expectations around ageing, retirement, and active participation. The shift is particularly visible in the context of the **COVID-19 pandemic** and its aftermath, which significantly accelerated the **digitalisation of everyday services and social life**.

During the pandemic (2020–2021), services such as **healthcare**, **banking**, **public administration**, and **communication** rapidly moved online. For older adults, this sudden shift created both **opportunities** and **new risks**. **Digital competence** proved essential not only for accessing critical information and services, but also for maintaining **independence and social ties** during periods of physical isolation. Seniors with even **basic ICT skills** were able to stay connected with loved ones, order essentials online, or schedule telehealth appointments. Those without such skills were left more vulnerable to **exclusion**, **loneliness**, and **unmet needs**.

Yet, Poland enters this digital transformation with one of the **lowest levels of digital literacy in the European Union**. According to *Eurostat*, only around **43% of Polish adults** have at least basic digital skills (vs. the 56% EU average), and among seniors the gap is even more pronounced. Only **15.4% of people aged 60-74** possess basic digital competences, and **less than 5%** have skills above the basic level (*GUS*, 2023). At the same time, **61.9% of seniors** reported using the Internet in the last three months - a figure that has grown significantly since the pre-pandemic period, but which still excludes a large segment of older Poles.

According to the *Active Ageing Index* (**AAI**), which measures the capacity and actual participation of older people, **Poland ranks among the lowest in the EU**. The AAI score for Poles aged 55-74 was **31.4 in 2020**, below the EU average of 37 (*European Commission*, 2020). This reflects relatively **low participation in employment**, **lifelong learning**, and **digital activities**. For example, the employment rate of older workers (60+) is only around 15%, compared to the EU average of **20-25%** (*Statistics Poland*, 2023).

The **statutory retirement age** in Poland (currently **60 for women** and **65 for men**) continues to influence early labor market exit, although increasing life expectancy is prompting discussions around **extending professional activity**. **Digital competence** is becoming a cornerstone of such discussions, enabling older adults to work remotely, engage in lifelong learning, and remain **active citizens**. This is closely linked to the development of **Poland's "silver economy,"** where seniors' social and economic participation is not only encouraged but increasingly **necessary due to demographic trends**.

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The government has recognised the urgency of digital inclusion through programmes such as *Active+ 2021-2025*, EU-funded initiatives, and local NGO-led training campaigns (*Ministry of Family and Social Policy*, 2021-2025). The policy shift reflects the growing understanding that **digital exclusion reinforces broader social exclusion and dependency**, especially among the most vulnerable older adults.

This **Country Report** provides a **comprehensive analysis** of digital inclusion and senior education in Poland, aligned with the **AYB WP2 methodology**. It examines current levels of digital literacy, access to technology, barriers to inclusion, and relevant policy frameworks. It also evaluates the specific **digital skills required for independent**, **socially connected ageing** and outlines opportunities for training and upskilling that align with the *Digital Competence Framework* (**DigComp** 2.2) and the *Active Ageing Index* (**AAI**). The report also places emphasis on the **prolongation of labor force participation** and **changing retirement attitudes**, exploring how digital readiness can support **flexible working models** and **self-sufficiency in later life**.

2. Key Findings

Senior internet use has risen post-COVID but remains limited in scope. As of 2023, **61.9% of Poles aged 60-74** had used the Internet in the past 3 months (*GUS* 2023), a significant jump from pre-pandemic levels. However, this still leaves nearly **4 in 10 seniors offline**. Moreover, only **15.4% of seniors** in this age group possess at least **basic digital skills** - in contrast to 54.6% among adults aged 16-59. The skills gap is even more severe for those 75+, where both access and skills are lowest. Many older internet users can perform only **rudimentary tasks**, limiting their **digital independence** and participation in increasingly online services and communities.

Access to technology is improving, but digital divides persist. The spread of smartphones and mobile internet has facilitated access for some seniors, who increasingly rely on mobile devices over desktop or laptop computers (*GUS* 2023). The wider availability of mobile internet and easier-to-use devices has supported more seniors come online. Nonetheless, **substantial disparities remain**: only around 50-60% of Polish households headed by seniors have internet access, compared to 97% among younger households. **Affordability**, **digital confidence**, and **infrastructure gaps** (especially in rural or remote areas) continue to be structural barriers. Rural seniors and the oldest old (75+) remain the most digitally excluded groups. Older adults with **lower income or education** are significantly less likely to own devices or use the internet regularly, with **regional differences** further deepening digital **inequality**.

Narrow usage patterns reflect limited confidence and support. Most digitally active seniors restrict their internet use to **simple**, **low-risk tasks** such as reading news, messaging family, or checking weather or bank balances. Significantly fewer engage in **interactive** or **transactional services** - e.g. only a minority of seniors use online banking, e-government portals, or e-commerce, whereas these are routine for younger users (*GUS* 2023). These patterns indicate a broader gap not just in skills, but in **confidence**, **motivation**, and **personalised support**. Many seniors avoid exploring digital tools not because they lack access, but because they do not feel

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safe, **competent**, or **welcome in digital spaces**. Fear of making mistakes, anxiety about privacy, and feelings of inadequacy are widespread. A 2021 study by *Fundacja Orange* found that **47% of seniors feared making irreversible mistakes online**, and over half reported **distrust** in digital services, particularly in areas such as **healthcare**, **banking**, and **administration**. Only 28% said they **felt safe using digital tools**, according to *CBOS*. These emotional barriers are often rooted in **prior negative experiences**, lack of guidance, or the perception that digital competence is "for younger people." Shame and fear of judgment also discourage many from asking for help, further deepening both social and **digital exclusion**.

COVID-19 was both a catalyst and a stress test. The pandemic forced rapid **digitalisation** of many services that seniors rely on, such as **e-health**, **public administration**, and **civic communication**, prompting many to engage digitally for the first time. Some acquired **basic "survival skills,"** such as video calling or accessing e-prescriptions, often with support from family members or volunteers. However, the crisis also **exposed** and **deepened existing inequalities**. Seniors without digital access or competence faced **acute loneliness**, **barriers to healthcare**, and **bureaucratic exclusion**. For example, many older adults were unable to use online appointment systems or register for COVID-19 vaccinations - translating digital illiteracy directly into reduced access to vital public health services. This dual experience sharpened the focus of **policymakers** and **communities** on bridging the digital divide, recognising **digital competence as essential** not only for inclusion but also for health, autonomy, and crisis resilience.

Supportive policy framework emerging. Since 2021, the Polish government has strengthened its digital inclusion strategy for seniors. The flagship *Active+* programme (2021-2025) prioritises **digital literacy** alongside **social participation** and funds hundreds of **NGO-led training initiatives** across the country. Additionally, Poland's broader digital strategies (such as the *Operational Programme Digital Poland*) dedicate funding to train those at risk of digital exclusion, including **people 50+ in rural areas**. The policy consensus is that improving seniors' digital competences is **key to their well-being** and to **national development** in an ageing society.

Labor market implications and the challenge of prolonging working lives. Low digital proficiency is a major barrier for older Poles remaining in or **re-entering the workforce**. Employers increasingly require basic computer use for even **elementary jobs**, disadvantaging seniors who lack these skills. Consequently, **Poland's older worker employment is low** – e.g. the employment rate of 65-69 year-olds is only about 15% and many retire as soon as eligible. There are promising examples of initiatives to upskill older workers (for instance, local **senior employment centers** providing digital training in Gdańsk), but these remain isolated. Going forward, **flexible retirement pathways** (combining part-time work and pension) will depend on equipping seniors with **digital skills** to continue working remotely or in new roles. Digital competence is thus increasingly seen as **essential for prolonging seniors' careers** and supporting Poland's "silver economy."

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Growing ecosystem of senior digital education. Alongside government efforts, a growing **ecosystem of institutions** is addressing senior digital literacy. Poland has a strong tradition of *Universities of the Third Age* (*Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku*, *UTW*) and **senior clubs**, which engage tens of thousands of older learners. Until recently, however, **less than 12%** of Third Age Universities offered courses in digital literacy. This is now starting to change, with more programmes teaching "digital basics" to retirees, often using peer or intergenerational learning formats. **NGOs** and **foundations** (e.g. *"Digital Lighthouse Keepers"* initiative) have mobilised **volunteer tutors** to help seniors navigate smartphones and the internet. **Public libraries** are also playing an increasing role, offering **free internet access**, **computer stations**, and **digital skills workshops** tailored to seniors, often led by librarians or local volunteers. Community-led initiatives like these, supported by EU-funded projects (such as the 2023 *REMEDIS* project workshops on online safety for seniors), demonstrate **effective methods** such as locally rooted training, tailored curricula (**geragogy**), and mentorship in building digital confidence. However, the scale and consistency of support still **vary across regions**, and many hard-to-reach seniors, especially those living alone, with disabilities, or outside urban centres, lack access to any **regular digital guidance**.

3. Digital Literacy Levels and Access to Technology

Overall internet use among Polish seniors: Internet adoption by older people in Poland has been **steadily rising**. In 2024, **69.3% of Poles aged 55-74** reported using the internet **at least once a week** (*Eurostat*). While this marks clear progress, senior internet use still significantly **lags behind younger age groups** - virtually all adults under 50 are online. The oldest seniors (75+), not captured fully in the 60-74 statistic, remain **largely offline**. The data indicates a clear **age gradient**: even within the 55-74 range, younger seniors are more connected than those 70+, and usage drops sharply after age 75. In practical terms, a substantial portion of Poland's elderly (around 4 out of 10 in the 60-74 bracket, and an even higher share beyond 75) **are not using the internet at all**, highlighting a persistent **digital divide by age**. Most seniors who do use digital tools rely **primarily on smartphones**. Tablets are also common, particularly among older adults with vision or mobility limitations, due to their larger screens and ease of use. Desktop computers and laptops are less frequently used and often shared within the household. While broadband availability has improved nationwide, older adults, especially in rural areas, still face **connectivity challenges** or rely on limited mobile data packages. These constraints affect not only access but also the **quality** and **consistency** of their digital engagement.

Digital skill levels: Among seniors who do use the internet, digital skill proficiency **remains very low**. In 2023, only **15.4% of Poles aged 60-74** were classified as having at least **basic overall digital skills**. This "basic skills" indicator (as defined by *Eurostat*/*GUS* methodology) includes abilities such as **information search**, **online communication**, **problem-solving**, and **basic software use**. The 15.4% figure suggests that the vast majority of Polish seniors are digitally **illiterate** or **semi-literate** - even if some can perform a few simple tasks, they lack a broader competence. In contrast, 54.6% of people aged 16-59 demonstrate basic or above-basic digital skills. These low proficiency levels mean many older users struggle with anything beyond the

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most **rudimentary digital actions**. Despite gradual progress, digital skills among older Poles remain **critically low** and continue to be a **fundamental barrier** t**o full participation in today's increasingly digital society**. Digital proficiency is also closely linked to **educational background** and **place of residence**. Seniors in rural areas, those with lower levels of formal education, and those on limited incomes are significantly less likely to own devices or use them independently. **Only 40% of seniors** in rural communities report **regular internet use**, compared to over 70% in urban centres.

Usage patterns: The online activities Polish seniors reveal much about their digital literacy. The most **common uses are information retrieval and communication**. Seniors predominantly go online to **read news** and to **search for health-related information**. Increasingly, they use **messaging apps** and video calls (e.g. *WhatsApp*, *Skype*, *Messenger*) to stay in touch with family, often on devices provided or configured by relatives. Social media use among Polish seniors remains relatively limited but is growing, with Facebook being the most popular platform due to its family and local community features. In contrast, **transactional** and **productive uses remain low**. Seniors are far less likely than younger adults to use **online banking**, **online shopping**, or **public e-services**. For example, **only 37%** of Poles aged 65-74 had **ever made an online purchase**, placing Poland below the EU average on senior e-commerce uptake. Many still **manage finances offline** or rely on family, often driven by distrust and fear. *Fundacja Orange* (2021) found that 47% of seniors **feared making irreversible mistakes online**, and over 50% distrusted digital services, especially in healthcare and banking. *CBOS* (2021) reported **only 28% felt safe using the internet**. These patterns reflect more than just low skill levels - they point to **deep-rooted confidence issues** and **systemic usability barriers**. Many older adults report that digital tools feel **overly complicated**, **poorly designed** for their needs, or **change too frequently**. Interfaces often lack accessibility features, and updates to apps or websites can be disorienting for those with limited experience. Seniors also commonly lack the knowledge to keep devices updated or secure, increasing dependence on others and discouraging independent use. Feelings of **inadequacy** and **shame** often prevent them from seeking help, especially among those without strong family support. This reinforces limited use and deepens the digital divide.

Digital divide implications: The current landscape in Poland reflects only partial digital inclusion of older adults. While a majority of seniors in their 60s are now online to some degree, their use remains limited to basic tasks, and digital skills are often minimal. At the same time, a significant minority, particularly among those aged 70+ and older adults in rural or low-income settings, **remain completely offline**. This divide has important implications: seniors without access or digital skills face growing risks of **exclusion**, missing out on **essential services and information**, **social engagement**, and **economic opportunities**. As everyday life in Poland continues to digitalise - through e-prescriptions, online public services, and cashless payments - digitally excluded older adults may find it increasingly difficult to **manage routine tasks independently**. This can lead to greater **reliance on others**, **reduced autonomy**, and **increased vulnerability** to isolation. Those who have even basic connectivity (e.g. the ability to make a video call or search for a bus timetable online) can significantly enhance their quality of life and autonomy.

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4. Policy Framework for Digital Inclusion and Senior Education

Poland's approach to digital inclusion for older adults has evolved notably in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. While digital inclusion is a national priority, efforts **remain fragmented and uneven** in terms of reach and long-term sustainability. The framework comprises a mix of strategic programmes, institutional actors, and civil society initiatives, many of which are supported by EU funds. However, the needs of older adults often **require more tailored solutions** that reflect their **learning pace**, **life circumstances**, and **confidence levels**.

National strategies and policy instruments

One of the most important documents guiding Poland's digital development is the ***Strategia Cyfryzacji Polski do 2035 roku*** (*Digital Transformation Strategy 2035*). It sets out goals for **universal digital access**, **digital skills development**, and **inclusive participation**, with explicit recognition of vulnerable groups, including seniors. Yet, the strategy lacks detailed implementation mechanisms specifically targeting older adults.

The now-concluded ***Operational Programme Digital Poland*** **(*POPC 2014-2020*)** made significant contributions to digital competence-building across various groups. It funded projects such as ***Polska Cyfrowa Równych Szans*** (*Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities*), which trained thousands of local digital ambassadors known as *Latarnicy Polski Cyfrowej* to **support senior learners in rural and small-town settings**. This **peer-to-peer**, trust-based model became a national best practice.

Its successor initiatives under the **EU 2021–2027 financial perspective**, including Poland's ***National Recovery Plan*** **(*KPO*)**, continue to allocate funding for improving digital skills, particularly for older adults and digitally excluded groups.

A more focused policy is the ***Active+ Multiannual Programme*** **(2021–2025)**, led by the *Ministry of Family and Social Policy*. This programme explicitly **prioritises digital inclusion** among its four pillars, alongside social activity, participation, and ageing preparedness. Each year, *Active+* funds hundreds of **grassroots projects**, run by NGOs, libraries, senior clubs, and universities of the third age, that deliver digital skills **workshops**, **intergenerational IT sessions**, and the development of **senior-friendly tools and mobile apps**. The programme also promotes sustainability by developing training kits and recruiting volunteer tutors.

Additionally, broader strategies like ***Polityka Społeczna wobec Osób Starszych 2030*** (*Social Policy for Elderly People 2030*) reinforce the principle of lifelong learning and highlight the role of digital competence in maintaining autonomy and quality of life.

Institutional roles and coordination

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Key governmental actors include the ***Ministry of Family and Social Policy*** (coordinating *Active+* and senior policy), and the ***Chancellery of the Prime Minister***, which assumed responsibility for digital affairs after the dissolution of the *Ministry of Digital Affairs* in 2020. **Local government units** implement many of the funded projects on the ground, co-financing senior education centres and digital workshops. Public institutions such as **libraries**, **cultural centres**, and **municipal offices** play a vital role in delivering **community-based learning**, often offering **free internet access** and basic digital training. Many libraries, in particular, have emerged as **trusted hubs of digital support for older adults**.

Civil society remains an essential force. Organisations like ***Fundacja Orange***, ***Fundacja Zaczyn***, and ***Federation of Universities of the Third Age*** (UTWs) are actively involved in programme delivery, teacher training, and advocacy. Senior councils and local volunteer groups increasingly engage in initiatives like **digital mentoring**, **"adopt-a-grandparent" schemes**, and intergenerational workshops with youth groups or scouts.

Legislative and EU-level alignment

Legal provisions also shape the policy landscape. The ***Act on Counteracting Digital Exclusion*** allows for subsidies for disadvantaged populations, including **low-income seniors**, although funding **remains limited**. Amendments to the **Labour Code** protect pre-retirement employees, encouraging employers to invest in older workers' skills rather than force early exits.

Poland adheres to **EU accessibility requirements** (e.g. WCAG 2.1), ensuring public websites are more navigable for seniors. Digital platforms like ***gov.pl*** and the ***Patient Internet Account* (*IKP*)** now offer simplified login methods and senior-oriented tutorials. Poland is also a participant in EU-wide initiatives such as the ***Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition***, ***Digital Decade 2030***, and *Erasmus+* partnerships, which fund pilot projects and exchanges of good practices (e.g. *ICTSkills4All* or *REMEDIS* training programmes in geragogy).

Policy outcomes and promising practices

Despite fragmentation, several effective models have emerged:

- **Latarnicy Polski Cyfrowej** - a successful peer-led support network offering low-threshold, locally relevant training in rural areas,
- **Mobile Senior Academy** - a van equipped with laptops brought workshops directly to remote communities, overcoming mobility barriers,
- **Library-based learning** - many libraries now offer regular digital workshops, combining equipment access with trained staff and familiarity,
- **SeniorApp** - a mobile platform combining social services, security features, and digital learning modules tailored for older users,
- **Digital Development Clubs (Kluby Rozwoju Cyfrowego)** - informal community hubs offering hands-on learning in a friendly environment,

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- **REMEDIS (2023)** - a research-based project training senior tutors in methods suited to older learners, now informing national training policy.

Gaps and challenges

While promising, these efforts often **depend on local leadership** and **temporary funding**. Many programmes lack scale, consistency, or monitoring. There is no **national tracking system** for senior digital skills, nor a comprehensive strategy to coordinate efforts across regions. Support structures **are weakest in rural areas** and among the oldest and most isolated seniors. Despite increased policy attention, digital inclusion for older people remains uneven. Going forward, greater **institutional coordination**, **sustained funding**, and **standardised good practices** - anchored in geragogical principles - will be crucial to narrowing the digital divide and ensuring equal digital citizenship for Poland's ageing population.

5. Survival Digital Skills for Social Inclusion and Loneliness Prevention

In a digital society, access to **basic online services**, **communication tools**, and **safety practices** has become essential to maintaining **autonomy**, **well-being**, and **social ties**. For older adults in Poland**, digital "survival skills"** are increasingly necessary for avoiding exclusion and participating in daily life. These competences enable seniors to perform **essential tasks**, such as communicating with family, managing health, or accessing public services, **safely and independently**. As more aspects of healthcare, administration, and everyday communication move online, the absence of even basic digital skills puts older people at risk of **social isolation** and **practical disadvantage**.

Survival digital skills can be understood as the **minimum set of abilities** needed to function in an increasingly digitalised society. They closely align with the ***European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens*** (***DigComp 2.2***), particularly at **levels 1 and 2**, which refer to performing familiar tasks with some guidance. In the Polish context, these skills include the ability to **send messages**, **make video calls**, **search for trusted information**, **use e-services**, **protect personal data**, and **operate basic digital devices**. These functions correspond to everyday needs, such as accessing prescriptions via the ***Internet Patient Account*** (***IKP***), checking public transport schedules, or submitting forms through the ***Electronic Platform of Public Administration Services*** (***ePUAP***).

Beyond their practical relevance, these skills carry **emotional** and **social importance**. Digital competence allows seniors to maintain **contact with loved ones**, **participate in civic life**, and **continue learning**. For those living alone or in remote areas, this connection is vital to **mental health** and social inclusion. ***The Active Ageing Index*** (***AAI***), while not listing digital skills explicitly, **highlights social participation**, **independent living**, and **continued learning** as key to quality ageing. Basic digital engagement, such as joining a video call, ordering groceries online, or

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receiving e-health advice, can significantly improve perceived self-efficacy and reduce feelings of loneliness.

Despite their growing importance, these skills remain out of reach for many older adults in Poland. Even when devices and internet access are available, **seniors often struggle with interfaces** they perceive as **confusing** or **unintuitive**. The process of logging into services like *ePUAP*, understanding verification steps, or navigating online banking systems can be discouraging. **Emotional and psychological barriers** also play a major role: **fear of making mistakes**, **distrust of digital platforms**, and the belief that **technology is "for younger people"** frequently deter seniors from engagement.

The lack of **personalised support** further deepens the digital divide. Seniors who do not have younger relatives nearby often have **no one to turn to for help**. Feelings of shame or fear of judgment prevent many from asking for assistance, reinforcing patterns of **disengagement** and **exclusion**. Moreover, **access alone is insufficient**, as knowing how to **navigate the digital environment** safely and confidently is what truly enables inclusion.

At the same time, **promising models** show that progress is achievable. Effective initiatives focus on **practical tasks** and **real-life scenarios**, using **step-by-step instruction** and **building trust**. Training curricula developed by NGOs often include modules on **safe online shopping**, **accessing health portals**, **using messaging apps** to connect with grandchildren, and **recognising fraudulent emails or websites**. These courses align well with *DigComp* areas, especially in communication, information literacy, safety, and basic problem-solving. **Community-based approaches**, such as digital mentoring or intergenerational tutoring, have proven particularly effective in building confidence and motivation.

Poland's **low lifelong learning rate** among seniors - **less than 0.5%** of people aged 65+ participate in any formal or informal education - makes the promotion of digital skills even more urgent. Teaching survival skills through local **libraries**, **senior centres**, or **mobile academies** not only enhances digital competence but also fosters **empowerment** and well-being. Seniors who master even **basic digital tools** are more likely to stay **socially connected**, **remain independent**, and **participate in economic and civic life**.

In summary, **survival digital skills are essential** for ensuring that older adults in Poland are not excluded from the **benefits of digital transformation**. These skills enable **communication**, **autonomy**, and **informed decision-making**, and are directly linked to seniors' ability to **live independently** and maintain social ties. **Training programmes and policies** should continue to target this **foundational competence set**, addressing not only technical but also **emotional and social barriers** to meaningful digital inclusion.

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6. Barriers and Gaps in Digital Literacy and Online Engagement

Despite the growing importance of digital inclusion, many older adults in Poland continue to face a range of **structural**, **emotional**, and **practical barriers** that prevent them from fully participating in digital life. These challenges extend well beyond the question of access, revealing deep-seated issues of **usability**, **confidence**, **economic insecurity**, and a **lack of appropriate support structures**.

One of the most persistent obstacles is the **limited availability of tailored**, **senior-oriented training**. Although many local initiatives, libraries, and public institutions offer digital workshops for older residents, there is no comprehensive or sustained national system dedicated to the digital education of seniors. As of 2023, only around 12% of Universities of the Third Age offered digital courses. In rural and smaller communities, such opportunities may be entirely absent, and when courses do exist, they are often **not adapted** to the **learning pace**, **needs**, or **sensory capacities** of older adults. Many programmes are **short-term**, **underfunded**, or **lack continuity**. Seniors who wish to improve their digital skills frequently do not know where to start or whom to approach for help. Geragogical principles (educational methods tailored for seniors) remain **underdeveloped** in Poland. Feelings of **shame**, **pride**, or **fear of appearing "out of place"** in public classes further discourage participation.

Equally impactful are **psychological barriers**. Many seniors experience **technophobia** (fear or anxiety related to digital tools) stemming from a belief that technology is **alien**, **unsafe**, or **reserved for younger generations**. Older adults often fear making irreversible mistakes or falling victim to scams. Nearly half of Polish seniors feared damaging devices by "pressing the wrong button," and over **50% distrusted digital platforms**, especially in health, banking, or personal data contexts. **Only 28% reported feeling safe** using the internet. **Low self-confidence** is a key factor. Programmes such as ***Latarnicy Polski Cyfrowej***, which rely on **local**, **peer-led**, **one-on-one support**, have shown that trust-based mentoring can significantly reduce these barriers.

Economic constraints also play a major role. A substantial share of Polish retirees live on modest pensions, and after covering basic expenses, many **cannot afford new devices**, **internet subscriptions**, or maintenance costs. This issue is particularly acute in **rural areas**, where broadband access is limited and mobile data can be costly. Affordability programmes, such as subsidised internet plans or discounted devices, have not yet been widely implemented.

Even when devices and connectivity are in place, **digital tools themselves can be exclusionary**. Many websites and apps are **not designed with seniors in mind**, using **small fonts**, **technical jargon**, or **multi-step logins**. Platforms like **ePUAP** or **online banking services** often feel **overwhelming** or **unsafe**. Constant **interface updates** can also discourage continued use, especially after a senior has only recently grown comfortable with a tool.

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Infrastructural and **geographic** barriers persist. Despite improved national coverage, many remote areas remain underserved. Seniors with **mobility issues** or **living alone in rural regions** may lack both reliable internet and nearby **digital access points**, such as libraries or senior centres.

Cultural and motivational barriers also weigh heavily. Many seniors do not perceive a need to engage digitally, especially if their needs are met via **traditional means** or with **family assistance**. The mindset of "this is not for people of my age" or "I don't need it" still limits digital uptake. Changing this perception requires **showing personal benefit**, such as the joy of video calling grandchildren or the convenience of ordering prescriptions online.

Meanwhile, **institutional digitalisation** can unintentionally exclude those who lack the skills to navigate new systems. The transition to **e-services**, such as online tax filings or ZUS accounts, has sometimes **outpaced the digital readiness** of the elderly. While **offline** alternatives exist, many seniors feel overwhelmed, leading to **frustration** or **withdrawal**.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** further amplified these divides. Some older adults adopted digital tools under pressure, gaining basic skills. Others experienced **stress**, **confusion**, or **partial digital literacy** that has not translated into long-term independence. Misinformation, especially during lockdowns, has deepened **distrust** and **hesitancy**.

Taken together, these overlapping issues contribute to a **cycle of exclusion**: those who **lack access**, **skills**, or **confidence** are less likely to use digital tools, deepening **isolation** and **dependence**.

They also reveal several critical gaps:

- **Skills gap** - between what seniors need and their current digital competence (only 15% possess basic skills),
- **Access gap** - in terms of affordable, user-friendly devices and connectivity; even though internet coverage is high in Poland, the effective access for all seniors is not yet achieved,
- **Support gap** - a lack of structured, one-on-one, or local mentoring systems; institutional support (like hotline or on-demand digital assistants for seniors) is not always systematically available,
- **Content gap** - limited availability of digital tools designed specifically for seniors' contexts and needs.

Addressing these challenges will require **coordinated**, **long-term efforts** that go beyond infrastructure. **Empathy-driven design**, **motivational outreach**, and **geragogical approaches** must become central to Poland's digital transformation. Without such commitment, a significant segment of the population will remain disconnected from the benefits of digital society.

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7. Challenges, Opportunities, and Skills Gap Assessment

Digitalisation in adult education for seniors in Poland presents both **persistent challenges** and **promising opportunities**. While awareness of the digital divide is growing and a number of initiatives are in place, most existing programmes still **fall short** of equipping older adults with the competences they need to participate **confidently and independently** in digital life. The gap between current capabilities and the evolving demands of digital society remains **substantial**.

The foremost challenge is the **sheer scale of the digital skills gap** among older adults. As of 2023, only around 15% of seniors aged 60-74 possess at least **basic digital skills**, with virtually no representation at higher proficiency levels. Millions of older Poles would benefit from foundational digital competencies, making this one of **the most urgent public education challenges** facing Poland today. The scale is comparable to past nationwide literacy efforts, yet digital skills remain **underprioritised** in the mainstream adult education system.

One key issue is the **limited adaptation** of adult education structures to the realities of senior learners. Many programmes are designed for younger audiences, using **formats** and **paces** that exclude older participants. There is a general lack of **personalisation**, **continuity**, and **geragogical sensitivity**. High dropout rates or lack of participation are often linked to training that is **too fast-paced**, **overly technical**, or delivered in **intimidating group settings**. Traditional adult learning centres focus mainly on vocational upskilling or job-seeking support for the working-age population, while seniors - especially those no longer in employment - **remain underserved**.

Psychological barriers compound the challenge. Seniors frequently express a **fear of "breaking something"** or making **irreversible mistakes online**. **Only 28%** of seniors **feel safe** using digital tools, and more than half express **distrust in digital services**, particularly in banking and healthcare. For many, **low self-confidence**, **embarrassment** about asking for help, and a belief that **"technology is for the young"** prevent them from even attempting to engage. These emotional inhibitors are among **the most difficult to overcome**, and they significantly contribute to continued disengagement.

Socioeconomic disparities further entrench the divide. Seniors with **lower incomes or education levels** are much less likely to own digital devices or afford internet subscriptions. In rural areas, **broadband connectivity remains uneven**, and cultural attitudes also influence digital uptake. Many older adults continue to **rely on younger family members** to perform digital tasks on their behalf.

Design and usability issues exacerbate the problem. Many websites, apps, and devices are **not designed with older users in mind**. **Complex login procedures**, **small fonts**, **multi-step verifications**, and frequent **updates** discourage those with declining vision, motor limitations, or

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cognitive fatigue. As a result, even when access exists, usage often remains limited to the simplest, **most familiar functions**.

Despite these challenges, there are **significant opportunities**. **Community-based models** such as *Latarnicy Polski Cyfrowej* and *Digital Development Clubs* have proven effective, showing that seniors engage more readily when training is built on trust, delivered face-to-face, and focused on meaningful, real-life tasks. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a dual effect: while it exposed digital exclusion, it also **increased awareness** of the importance of digital engagement, prompting many seniors to make their **first online steps**.

Poland also benefits from a **favourable policy environment**. Programmes such as **Active+** and EU initiatives like the **Digital Decade**, **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, and **Erasmus+** provide financial and institutional backing for scaling effective solutions. **Intergenerational mentoring programmes**, **digital volunteer schemes**, and **training for senior educators** (as promoted by the REMEDIS project) offer concrete examples of scalable, impactful approaches.

However, major **skill gaps persist**. Benchmarking training offers against the DigComp 2.2 reveals that most initiatives focus on **basic communication**, **internet searching**, and **device operation**. More advanced areas, such as **digital safety**, **content creation**, and **problem-solving**, are underrepresented. As a result, many seniors remain dependent on others for digital tasks and struggle to adapt.

The **critical success factors** for effective training are now well understood: **personalisation**, **practical relevance**, **emotionally supportive environments**, and **trainers skilled** not only in digital tools but also in working empathetically with older adults. Follow-up opportunities and **peer learning environments** help reinforce learning, prevent skill loss, and build confidence. Programmes that emphasise **early "wins"**, such as successfully sending a message or checking a prescription online, can catalyse further engagement and **shift attitudes**.

In conclusion, Poland faces considerable challenges in senior digital inclusion - from bridging a massive skills deficit to overcoming cultural inertia - but it also has significant opportunities at hand, including supportive policy, a willing younger generation of helpers, and improving technology. By leveraging the drivers and focusing on critical success factors, Poland can make substantial progress.

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8. Recommendations for Training and Upskilling Pathways

Drawing on insights into Poland's current situation, the following recommendations outline strategic actions to enhance digital literacy among seniors and create effective upskilling pathways. These aim to address identified gaps and barriers, build on existing opportunities, and ensure that future interventions are tailored to seniors' specific needs - ultimately fostering **digital self-sufficiency**, **inclusion**, and **active ageing**. To close the digital skills gap among seniors in Poland, training efforts must become more consistent, inclusive, and adapted to older learners. The recommendations combine the strengths of public institutions, civil society, and EU-level support.

1. **Develop a coordinated national senior digital literacy programme** - Poland should create a long-term national initiative or campaign under a clear banner, possibly led by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in collaboration with the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. This programme should:

- Set measurable targets (e.g. training 1 million seniors by 2030),
- Coordinate resources across ministries, local governments, and NGOs,
- Include a public awareness campaign to motivate seniors – using media outlets popular with older audiences (TV, radio, newspapers) to showcase success stories of seniors who embraced digital life, thus breaking stereotypes (e.g. "It's never too late to go online - and here's how to start.").

This initiative would ensure that digital upskilling for seniors remains a national priority in policy and budgeting for the coming years. It could also serve as a platform for sharing resources (e.g. a dedicated website with simple tutorial videos in Polish, printable guides, and a map of free training offerings by region).

2. **Expand community-based training with flexible formats** - local, accessible training is key for reaching seniors. Digital training should be available where seniors already are: in **Senior+ clubs**, **libraries**, **cultural centres**, **churches**, and **local clinics**. This could involve equipping these venues with the necessary technology (through grants for hardware like tablets or laptops) and funding regular instructors or volunteers. Suggested training formats:

- Structured **short courses** for those who are comfortable with classroom setting,
- Drop-in **help desks** or "digital cafés" where seniors can come with specific questions or practice informally, perhaps hosted weekly at libraries,
- **One-on-one tutoring**, pairing a senior with a volunteer (could be a student, as part of intergenerational projects),
- Mobile **digital academies** in rural or remote areas,

- Leverage existing senior events (like health seminars or social gatherings) by adding a short digital skills segment or info booth at those events.

All training should feature **inclusive design**: small-group, hands-on practice, and content focused on "survival skills" first. Materials must be senior-friendly (e.g. **large-print handouts**, **step-by-step guides** with screenshots, and **mnemonic aids**), and participation should be **free of charge**. All training should be offered free of charge to avoid financial barriers. Training should be aligned with **DigComp's foundation level**, prioritising **communication**, **safety**, and **practical services**.

3. **Develop intergenerational mentoring program** - mobilising young people as digital mentors offers mutual benefits. Programmes could pair tech-savvy volunteers (students, scouts, corporate volunteers) with individual seniors or small groups for 3-6 months of tutoring. Volunteers should be trained in **empathy**, **patience**, and **geragogical methods**. This approach supports seniors while fostering **intergenerational solidarity** and **social cohesion**.

4. **Provide ongoing support and local access points** - to avoid skill attrition and address ad hoc challenges, post-training support is essential:

- A **free senior tech helpline** where seniors can call and get help with an IT question or problem,

- **Senior digital clubs**, informal groups that meet at a community venue where seniors can practice together, share experiences, and help each other under light supervision of a facilitator. These clubs turn learning into a social activity (important for sustained motivation) and create peer support systems.

5. **Integrate digital skills into health and social services** - seniors often interact with healthcare providers and social workers - these can serve as touchpoints for digital upskilling related to health and wellbeing.

- Clinics, social workers, and family doctors could help seniors access **Internet Patient Account (IKP)** or explain e-prescription retrieval,

- Ministries of Health and Social Policy should coordinate a **"Digital Health for Seniors" programme** to train frontline staff as digital ambassadors (teaching seniors to use e-health tools), install easy-to-use kiosks or tablets in clinic waiting rooms with guided access to health resources, and ensure every senior is offered a tutorial on e-prescriptions and teleconsultation options.

6. **Adress affordability and access** - no senior should be excluded from going online due to financial or infrastructural constraints. Key actions:

- **Subsidized internet plans** for low-income seniors via partnerships with telecom providers,

- **Device donation programs**, encouraging businesses upgrading their IT equipment to donate used but functional smartphones, tablets, or laptops to NGOs for refurbishment and redistribution,

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- **Guaranteed public Wi-Fi** and communal equipment in every Senior+ facility, library or community hub; access must be paired with guidance - receiving a device should always include orientation or training.

7. **Promote user-centered design and senior-friendly digital services** - this is a broader recommendation that goes beyond training and into the realm of **inclusive design**. Service providers (e.g. government agencies, banks) should involve seniors in **user testing** for their websites/apps. Simple adjustments like a **"Senior mode"** with larger text and simplified navigation could be built into popular apps (some banking apps now have this feature recognizing older customers). This recommendation also includes ensuring that **non-digital options** remain available for critical services to uphold inclusiveness and avoid forced digitalisation.

8. **Tailor content with seniors' interests and needs** - training and digital content for seniors should include **applications that matter to them**, thereby **increasing motivation**. For example, collaborate with cultural institutions to create digital content appealing to seniors (virtual museum, online bridge or chess clubs, genealogy resources, etc.). If seniors find content online that **resonates with their interests** (hobbies, history, religious content, etc.), they are more likely to engage regularly. The recommendation is to support the creation of local online communities for seniors where older adults can **practice skills in a meaningful context** (discussing topics they care about). Another idea is to incorporate **nostalgia** and memory into digital training: e.g. teaching seniors to digitize and share old photographs, which not only teaches scanning/uploading (content creation skills) but produces something **emotionally valuable** that they can then share with family, reinforcing the usefulness of digital tools for preserving legacy and connecting generations.

9. **Monitor progress and adapt** - GUS and other public institutions should continue collecting age-disaggregated data on ICT use, with an emphasis on the 75+ age group. Programme evaluations should measure not only **skill acquisition** but also impacts on **loneliness**, **autonomy**, and **health management**. Regular feedback loops from participants should shape curriculum updates. Partnerships with universities and research institutions (e.g. gerontology or education departments) can support evidence-based practice.

By implementing these integrated and scalable recommendations, Poland can empower seniors with the digital skills needed for social participation, independent living, and quality ageing. The key to success lies in making digital training local, relevant, and emotionally supportive, so that all seniors, regardless of age, location, or background, can confidently navigate the digital world.

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