

Organisations must increase flexibility to keep elderly population connected and engaged

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(Medical Xpress)—Staying mobile and socially connected is crucial to the quality of life of older people, but awareness of the issues they face is low, say Massey University researchers.

Dr Juliana Mansvelt, from the School of People, Environment and Planning, says that it is important that organisations don't dismiss [older people](#) as inactive just because they require physical assistance to leave their homes.

"It would be a shame for organisations to view these people as unwilling or unable to engage with them, simply because they find it difficult to get out of the house. The truth is that the older people we have interviewed desire meaningful [social connections](#)," she says.

"In the face of [adversity](#), many of them are actively and creatively mobilising people and resources in order to remain active and connected to their communities. They want to interact with a range of people and organisations."

In a new paper titled "The Problems and Possibilities of Mobility for Home-Based Elders in New Zealand," Dr Mansvelt and her co-author Professor Ted Zorn argue that organisations need to be more flexible in their systems and customer service behaviour or they will isolate and disempower their older customers.

Professor Zorn, who heads Massey University's College of Business, says there are good business reasons to do so. "This is one of the fastest growing [demographics](#) – and that's why the banks and supermarkets we have been working with are really eager to engage with us."

The paper is part of a three-year research project led by Professor Zorn for the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. The research programme aims to improve the engagement of older people with organisations and their communities to create more positive ageing experiences.

Dr Mansvelt found that it wasn't just an older person's [physical ability](#) that determined their level of mobility. The built environments they had to negotiate and ageist attitudes were also important factors, and negative experiences could affect a person's subsequent desire to engage with an organisation.

"I found that for those with significant physical mobility and hearing and/or eyesight impairments, everyday practices that more able-bodied people might take for granted could be difficult," she says. "For example, going into a shopping centre becomes a series of encounters involving everything from transport and parking, to finding one's way around and purchasing, with each practice posing a different set of challenges."

Massey researchers are currently working with a number of organisations to improve their interactions with older people. In many cases, simple, practical changes like training staff to be respectful and flexible, not over-filling shopping bags, supplying shallow-tray supermarket trolleys, and providing practical seating and rest areas, can make large differences to the satisfaction levels of older customers.

"What comes through most strongly in our research is the need to raise

the awareness of organisations," Professor Zorn says. "These changes are often not rocket science. Most organisations can immediately identify things to do differently and they are very positive about how useful it's been for them to go through the exercise."

In her study of home-based elders, Dr Mansvelt got insight into the lives of older New Zealanders. Many had multiple impairments and very few used computers or had internet access. Social isolation was a problem for some, with a number expressing a desire to leave their homes but a reluctance to ask for assistance for other than essential trips like doctor's appointments.

"They talked about the adaptations they'd made and the things they were able to do with pride, and many demonstrated considerable resilience in the face of significant challenges," Dr Mansvelt says. "However I noted a number of people who were struggling financially, and others who didn't want to burden their families or friends, and I think there are additional challenges for those who live in rural areas. Social isolation and services to rural communities is a real issue that needs more research."

Both academics stress the need for voluntary, government, and commercial organisations to consider the impact of societal and organisational changes on older people. Many changes – like new technologies or larger stores – can improve the experiences of customers, but it is important to make accommodations for those who have limited access to, or challenges in negotiating, these technologies or spaces, says Professor Zorn.

"For older people to feel connected and feel like they matter, they need flexibility," Dr Mansvelt says. "We need to recognise they may be mobile in different ways and enable the normality of doing things differently."

Provided by Massey University

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