

ICT hand in hand with social innovation

Two of the The Ambient Assisted Living Joint Programme's most senior figures, **Lena Gustafsson**, President of the AAL's Association and **Silas Olsson**, acting Director of the AAL's central management unit in Brussels, talk to Projects Magazine's Tom Henry and provide a unique insight into the work being done to develop ICT solutions to help our growing older population in Europe live longer, independent, active and healthy lives.



IT CAN be something of a surprise when a younger generation suddenly finds itself growing up and growing older.

The certainties and energy of youth can give way to a more unsettled future in a world which appears to be moving past at an incredible speed.

This is particularly applicable in 21st century society, where the pace of technological change even outfoxes the young 'digital natives' who have grown up with ICT, never mind the older generation used to doing things in a slower, more person-centred way. The danger is that the older generation get left behind, struggling to cope with new technology when confronted with it. Many of us have stood behind an older person at an automated cash machine as they attempt to figure out what is happening on the screen; their frustration, and that of the person stood behind, is prompted by different motivators, but is no less distressing for that.

The Ambient Assisted Living Joint Programme (AALJP) uses new ICT technology in its projects to develop simple-to-use AAL solutions for supporting a growing older population in Europe to live longer independent, active and healthy lives. The 23 European partner states driven AALJP, which began in 2008 and is funded until 2013, in turn funds research, development and innovation projects resulting from regularly published calls for proposals.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these projects have a health-based emphasis. For example, the CARE project aims to create an intelligent monitoring and alarm system for older people living independently. This employs a visual sensor and real-time processing to watch out for critical situations, for example a fall in the home. The HearMe FeelMe project is aimed at older people with decreased hand-eye coordination and vision, and is an electronic medication plan which enables users to hear clear instructions about dosage, etc. via speakers in their home.

However, AAL recognises that 'health' is a broad term which includes dealing with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Therefore, projects are also encouraged which help to increase social interaction. The AGNES project exploits social networking technology to provide an information and communication channel to the older person, supplying news, updates on friends and relatives, birthday reminders, etc. while you can read about how the E2C project has tackled the often unspoken issue of loneliness of our elderly population, starting on page 20 of this edition of Projects.

Many of you reading this will be doing so at the annual AAL Forum, being held in Lecce, Italy. This important event gathers together project managers, researchers, innovators, policy-makers, cutting-edge technology companies and potential end-users to share information and knowledge, network and hear about the latest innovations in the field of ICT based solutions for assisted living across Europe.

Silas Olsson, acting Director of the AAL's central management unit, located in Brussels, says the AAL programme has two main aims. The first is that it should support projects based on ICT to find solutions to support older people. The second is to support European industry,

particularly SMEs, in their search to provide such solutions and compete in European and world-wide markets.

"The word 'solutions' is key as far as we're concerned," he says, "because it is solutions that we focus on most. It could be tools or practical assistance, but most importantly it is a service that builds bridges between people and makes accessible a range of services to support healthcare, social care and social interaction."

Silas acknowledges that the marriage of ICT and older people is not always a harmonious one, but he adds that the perception of older people struggling hopelessly with mobile phones, laptops and swipe cards is not at all always accurate.

"Statistics say that people aged 60 plus are picking up ICT in a very speedy way right now," he says, "so we are confident that those people now going into retirement are not part of any 'lost generation', as far as interaction with ICT and ICT based solutions are concerned.

"Now, the situation maybe somewhat different if you take those who are 75-80 plus, but in many countries across Europe there are IT courses funded by governments and NGOs that are aimed specifically at older people. Very often, these are people who have seen their children or grandchildren using technology very comfortably, and are keen to stay in touch using simple to use IT solutions. I can't say that the Holy Grail of finding such very easily-operable solutions has been reached just yet, but it is the case that we are getting there, and our funded AAL projects are working hard on it, and we hope to be seeing real progress in this easy-to-use direction in a few years time."

The key to finding such solutions is to involve the end-user from the very beginning, and AAL is exceptionally keen to make sure this happens with all projects.

"As an organisation involved in putting out regular project calls we don't have many 'musts', but we do have two," Silas says. "One is that the project must include the participation of an SME and the other is that it must involve an end-user organisation. As far as I'm aware we're the only European programme which specifies these criteria in order to submit a proposal.

"There are various ways projects can involve end-users. For example, universities and companies often use the 'living-lab' environment that involves a significant number of older people, meeting with them to discover and discuss needs and priorities. Also, pensioners' organisations and other groups which represent the concerns of older people can be exceptionally useful in providing information that projects need.

Why is there such an insistence on the involvement of SMEs at all stages of the project? Again, it comes back to that key word – 'solutions'. Silas explains: "SMEs are key to our development. The first reason is that among the sum total of companies across Europe, SMEs are seen as innovators capable of developing new ideas and adapting quickly to innovation.

"More specifically, SMEs are very often close to the communities they work for in that they are small, they interact with people and they are flexible – very often far more flexible than huge multinationals. That said, SMEs

are, by their nature, small and local and sometimes find reaching greater markets, perhaps in other countries, quite difficult. That can be a challenge, especially in this field where rules, regulations and cultural considerations regarding older people vary considerably, even across Europe.

“These challenges are also our challenges and so the AAL Forum is an ideal place to meet with projects, SMEs and experts to discuss ways of identifying new markets and making sure that market penetration is achieved.

“This is vital because otherwise there is a risk that solutions from Japan, China, South Korea and other countries will come into Europe and dominate the market, which is potentially huge. There is a race going on and we in Europe have to be quick to identify markets and assist SMEs with that, as well as with the development of their products. Trying to do this in a European market that is far from harmonised, as far as elderly people are concerned, is not easy but it has to be done.”

Lena Gustafsson, President of the Ambient Assisted Living Association, emphasises the need in Europe for all relevant stakeholders, including governments, to work together to get the market frameworks right for AAL solutions to support seniors. Although there are important niche markets with a steady and growing take-up of AAL solutions, the broad market take-up is still to evolve. Therefore, she says, at this year’s AAL Forum, amongst the many topics and subjects, highlighted and discussed, the interesting initiative launched by the European Commission about European Innovation Partnerships of Active and Healthy Ageing will be high on the agenda. One of the aims of the initiative is to bring stakeholders together to identify and remove the barriers for market take-up.

Lena acknowledges that the race to create ICT-based solutions for older people has thrown up questions about whether it is appropriate to replace face-to-face communication with ICT solutions. “It is a question we are often asked,” she says, “and of course there are concerns about whether ICT solutions will replace a visit from a doctor or other health specialists. The simple answer is that ICT should be used in addition to face-to-face communication – it is complementary. The home visit from a doctor or a friend calling in will always be very important, of course, but it is also true that economies in the West are heading towards a situation where the population is being required to look after its health on a more individualised basis. The types of ICT-based AAL solutions we have talked about should help seniors to monitor their own health effectively, and therefore be more aware when something is going wrong.”

This year’s AAL Forum is focusing on the gap between projects and results – “supply and demand”, as Lena puts it.

“We are also addressing the area of social innovation in this year Forum,” she adds. “As an organisation we are convinced that AAL products and activities in the near future will support social innovations, i.e. new ways of addressing social concerns that affect all people. In a world where social security systems are changing across Europe we think that social innovation will be one of the key phrases of the future and we are convinced that our AAL products and solutions will be part of this new way of thinking.” ★

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