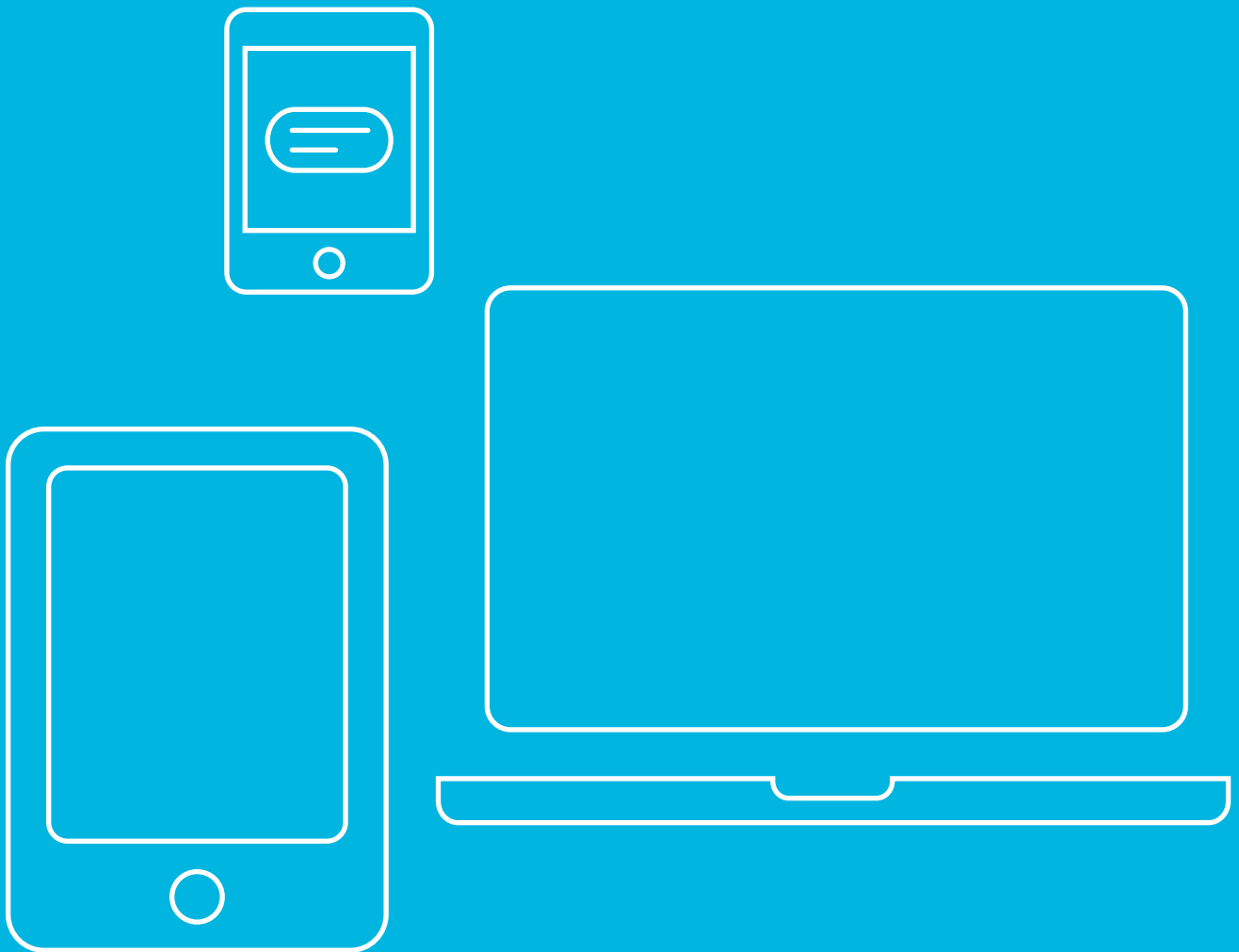


# Digital divide:

COVID-19 pushes B.C. seniors to close technology gap, but challenges persist



**Report**

April 2021

# Digital divide: COVID-19 pushes B.C. seniors to close technology gap, but challenges persist

The daily lives of British Columbians have changed dramatically over the past year, especially for senior citizens who are more vulnerable to COVID-19. With in-person interactions limited or non-existent for many, staying connected during the pandemic has pushed B.C. seniors to become more tech savvy. However, despite learning to use new tools, they still are not getting the most out of their online experience.

## Highlights

- B.C. seniors are spending more time online than ever before – a trend that has only further increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began.
- A new survey<sup>1</sup> conducted on behalf of BC Hydro finds when faced with being disconnected from family and friends, B.C. seniors became more tech savvy during the pandemic.
- About 60% have learned to use video calling applications like FaceTime or Zoom since the pandemic began, more than any other age group and about 60% higher than 18-34-year-olds.
- Their primary reason for learning how to use these applications is to stay in touch with family and friends, while most other British Columbian adults learned the technology for work.
- Overall, about 60% of seniors are spending more time online than they were a year ago, and 70% indicate they are spending about one to five hours a day on the internet.
- Despite becoming more proficient using some of the technology – and spending more time on the internet over the past year, it appears that seniors have not fully made the switch to online just yet and could be missing out on its many benefits.
- For example, while some are in a high risk COVID-19 category, they are 25% less likely to make an online purchase for essential items from the grocery store or pharmacy than other adults in British Columbia.
- BC Hydro data suggests the same trend with the adoption rate of MyHydro – an online account tool– being the lowest among customers of the age 55 or older.
- Lack of confidence using new online tools and needing support may be preventing seniors from adopting more new technology.
- In fact, 60% of those in the over 55 age group, said they typically need help when it comes to setting up a new device or using a new online application for the first time.
  - They are three times more likely to need help than the 18-34-year-old age group and about twice as likely as the 35-54-year-old age group.

## Solutions

BC Hydro recommends the following for seniors:

- Sign up for MyHydro: BC Hydro's online account tool can help seniors save on their bills, yet the tool has the lowest adoption rate among those over the age of 55. Benefits of MyHydro include:
  - Tracking electricity use and cost at any time, so there are no surprises.
  - Accessing BC Hydro bills 24/7 with up to three years of billing history to view or download.
  - Exploring convenient bill payment options, such as pre-authorized payments.
  - Setting up optional usage alerts and bill reminder emails.
- Go paperless: Seniors are the most likely to receive a paper bill from BC Hydro. Switching to a digital bill allows customers to get their bill faster, receive email notifications when the bill is ready, check and pay the balance online and decrease paper waste.
- Consider an equal payment plan: For those who do not want to make the switch to online bill payments, an equal payment plan provides predictable bills each month, and some customers find it helps with their budgeting

<sup>1</sup> Online survey conducted by Majid Houry of 800 British Columbians from Feb 12 to 16, 2021

## COVID-created distance

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the daily lives of most British Columbians dramatically, but especially senior citizens. Social distancing has been an essential public health strategy that unfortunately increases social isolation and has left more seniors at home and distanced from loved ones.

A new survey conducted on behalf of BC Hydro finds when faced with being disconnected from family and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic, many B.C. seniors became more tech savvy. With more British Columbians staying home and working from home, apps and technology that allow interaction have become essential to everyday life. However, despite becoming more proficient using some of the technology – and spending more time on the internet over the past year, it appears that seniors have not fully made the switch to online just yet and could be missing out on its many benefits.

This report will examine what technologies B.C. seniors are using to keep in touch with loved ones during the pandemic and what roadblocks remain for seniors when it comes to technology and digital literacy.

## Rise of videoconferencing

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, 94% of British Columbians said they are using electronic devices to stay connected with friends and family. The survey also found seniors—those over 55 years-old—are the most likely to have learned how to use a new technology to stay in touch.

With many staying in their homes more, video became one of the world's most important communication tools over the past year, and videoconferencing apps such as Zoom and FaceTime took the place of face-to-face interactions to bring people together for work or social interaction. In fact, Zoom usage rose dramatically in the spring of 2020, seeing 300 million daily meeting participants by April of that year, compared to 10 million daily participants in December 2019.<sup>2</sup>

Since the beginning of the pandemic, seniors were on the steepest learning curve when it came to video calls, with nearly 60% saying they had to learn how to use these applications. This is 60% higher than the learning curve of 18-34-year-olds, and about 10% higher than those in the 35-54 age group.

The reasons for learning how to use video applications also varied by age group. Seniors said their primary reason for learning to use these applications was to stay in touch with family and friends. In contrast those aged 35-54 said their primary reason was work (44%), while those 18-34 said work (33%) closely followed by school (25%).

## Top reasons for learning video apps

### Ages 18-34



Work **33%**



School **25%**

### Ages 35-54



Work **44%**



Appointments **15%**

### Ages 55+



Socialize with family and friends **50%**



Work **21%**

<sup>2</sup> Business of Apps data

## The social networks

In many ways, the pandemic has been a catalyst for older British Columbians to spend more time online. Overall, about 60% of seniors are spending more time online than they were a year ago, and about 70% in this age group are spending about one to five hours a day surfing the internet.

A big contributor to this increased time online is the use of social media. For example, about three-quarters of British Columbians over the age of 55 use social media, with most using it daily. In fact, external research shows 4 out of 10 seniors report utilizing social media even more as a mode of communication due to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> For example, outside of joining TikTok—which has attracted a mostly young demographic—seniors are the most likely to have joined all other social media platforms over the past year, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Much like with videoconferencing, staying connected is most important—60% of seniors said they use social media primarily to keep in touch with family and friends. This makes them the most likely to use these tools to keep in touch out of any age group. In contrast, those in the 18–34 age group are most likely to use social media out of boredom or loneliness, while 35–54-year-olds are almost likely to use it to keep in touch, but not to the same degree (45%).

## Main reason for using social media

### Ages 18–34



Boredom/  
loneliness **38%**

### Ages 35–54



Keeping in  
touch **45%**

### Ages 55+



Keeping in  
touch **60%**

## Tech troubles

Despite becoming more proficient using some technology – and spending more time on the internet over the past year, it appears that seniors have not fully made the switch to online just yet. And as a result, they could be missing out on its many benefits.

For example, while some seniors are in a high risk COVID-19 category, they are 25% less likely to make an online purchase for essential items from the grocery store or pharmacy than other adults in British Columbia. In fact, just 19% of older Canadian seniors (over the age of 65) are using online shopping for essential items, like groceries, for “health, wellness and/or independence” (of whom 60% report utilizing it more due to COVID-19).<sup>4</sup>

BC Hydro data suggests the same trend with the adoption rate of MyHydro, an online account tool, being the lowest among seniors. Seniors are also the most likely to receive a paper BC Hydro bill in the mail. To break down the numbers even further, about 93% of those ages 21–30 have a MyHydro paperless account and use only online billing. This goes down to about 86% in the 31–40 age category, and down to about 73% in the 41–50 age group. In the senior categories there is an even steeper decline—about 55% of those ages 61–70 use only paperless MyHydro billing, and just 42% of those over the age of 70 do the same.

<sup>3</sup> AGE-WELL

<sup>4</sup> AGE-WELL

## BC Hydro customer smartphone ownership by age

BC Hydro data suggests there is still a digital divide when it comes to age and technology, as account holders over the age of 55 are still the least likely to own a smartphone or any type of computer, and many do not feel as confident with technology as younger British Columbian adults.<sup>5</sup> For example, almost 28% of BC Hydro account holders over the age of 55 do not own a smartphone, and almost 9% do not own any type of computer—including laptop, desktop, tablet or all-in-one computer.

		Age			Total
		18 to 34	35 to 54	55 +	
Has smartphone	No	4.1%	6.4%	27.8%	16.8%
	Yes	95.9%	93.6%	72.2%	83.2%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

And while nearly 40% of British Columbians have purchased new electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers, or smart watches since the pandemic began, seniors are the least likely to have done so, and the data suggests this could partly be because they are discouraged at the prospect of having to set up and figure out new technology.

For example, 60% of seniors said they typically need help when it comes to setting up a new device or using a new online application for the first time. They are also three times more likely to need help than the 18–34 age group and about twice as likely as the 35–54 age group. When it comes to who is there to help—the over 55 group is most likely to have their kids help set up a device or application (49%), followed by a salesperson (35%) and customer support (26%).

## Closing the digital divide

While seniors are the most likely to say they are not confident in using technology, they are making strides in the right direction. Since COVID–19 began, seniors are also the most likely age group to say their skills with devices and technology have improved (26%).

New technology can sometimes be overwhelming, that is why it is vital to help seniors understand and take advantage of the benefits of technology through education, demonstration and resources.

For instance, when it comes to their BC Hydro account, many seniors are missing out on opportunities to make payments easier and save on their BC Hydro bill—mostly because they are not aware of the options available to them. For example, seniors are the age group least likely to set up a MyHydro account. MyHydro is an online tool that is used to track electricity use down to the hour. By using the tool and becoming aware of electricity use habits, many British Columbians have saved hundreds on their BC Hydro bill per year. Other benefits of MyHydro include accessing BC Hydro bills 24/7 with up to three years of billing history to view or download, convenient bill payment options, such as pre-authorized payments and setting up optional usage alerts and bill reminder emails.

In addition, a large percentage of seniors still receive a paper BC Hydro bill in the mail, which is not as convenient or environmentally friendly as a paperless, electronic bill. BC Hydro encourages its customers to go paperless if possible. Switching to a digital bill allows customers to get their bill faster, receive email notifications when the bill is ready, check and pay the balance online and decrease paper waste.

Another option for seniors to consider if they are not ready to make the switch to MyHydro, is to set up an equal payment plan. An equal payment plan provides predictable bills each month, and some customers find it helps with their budgeting. The last 12 months of electricity use determines the monthly payment amount, and each year, BC Hydro compares the amount a customer is billed with actual use, and the difference may result in a credit.

<sup>5</sup> BC Hydro Residential End Use Survey 2020

