THE COLUMBUS FOUNDATION

Digital Navigator

In November 2021 we carried out a design project to better understand the technological access needs of seniors and New Americans in Columbus.

THE PROBLEM

As the internet and digital technologies continue to permeate all aspects of our lives, it is essential that community members can use technology in all the ways they want and need to. To gain a better understanding of how populations without lifelong exposure to digital technology navigate online spaces and what tools might allow them to do so more effectively, we collaborated with seniors and New Americans to ideate on innovative solutions that might better support their ability to digitally navigate technology.

THE APPROACH

This six week long project employed human centered design with equity and systems thinking as central elements. Throughout the duration of the project, our design team conducted approximately 18 hours of interviews with seniors and New Americans throughout Columbus to determine their technology assistance needs.

The design team included community members: Beseret, Gilda, Juliana, Juanita, Lydia, and Shamso. Community Partners included: Elizabeth Enck from Jewish Family Services and Bisha Rumicho from the Columbus Metropolitan Library. In addition, designers LaToya Jordan and Bre Przestrzelski joined the team which was led by Heather Tsavaris and supported by Mark Lomax and Matt Martin from The Columbus Foundation.

WHAT WE LEARNED

During the interview process we heard loud and clear that any tech help people needed happened in an instant. They needed "just in time" or urgent help when they needed it. They were not necessarily seeking classes or long term obligations that would allow them to learn tech. They wanted on-demand, real-time help that would let them both preserve their dignity and get their questions answered. This was true for New American parents navigating online school platforms as well as seniors navigating telehealth options.

A prototype we created to address this was a "Ten-Minute Tech" idea that could include a short tech help video that could be replayed multiple times or a ten-minute impromptu session with someone who could help explain a relevant concept that someone needed help with immediately. Residents reacted well to the more bite-sized tech help that seemed relevant to the problems that were top of mind for them.

Some seniors spoke about how learning technology, on their terms, allowed them to unlock more social connection and joy—especially as lockdowns wore on into 2021. However, the overwhelming number of seniors we spoke to revealed how they felt so left behind in the current technology era.

"We're like a canoe out on the ocean." *- Juanita, senior*

"My friend thinks if he has a question he can just drive downtown and ask someone. I am trying to tell him, there is no one to ask anymore."
- Esther, senior

Overwhelmingly, we heard that when people don't know how to navigate technology well and have to ask others for help, even if it is from loved ones, they feel like a burden or that they are "stupid." Any technology help that is offered, needs to deeply understand this and overcorrect for it. Some questions our team explored were:

- Could an information exchange, i.e. seniors or New Americans sharing something they know well in exchange for tech knowledge mitigate this concern?

- Were there ways to efficiently include "exchange" portions in a digital navigator program?

A prototype created and tested to address this was a "Digital Swap" idea. Seniors or New Americans could come for a tech question and would be able to share something relevant they were expert in as well. The prototype was particularly well received, as this idea allowed for agency and dignity across all involved in the mutual learning process.
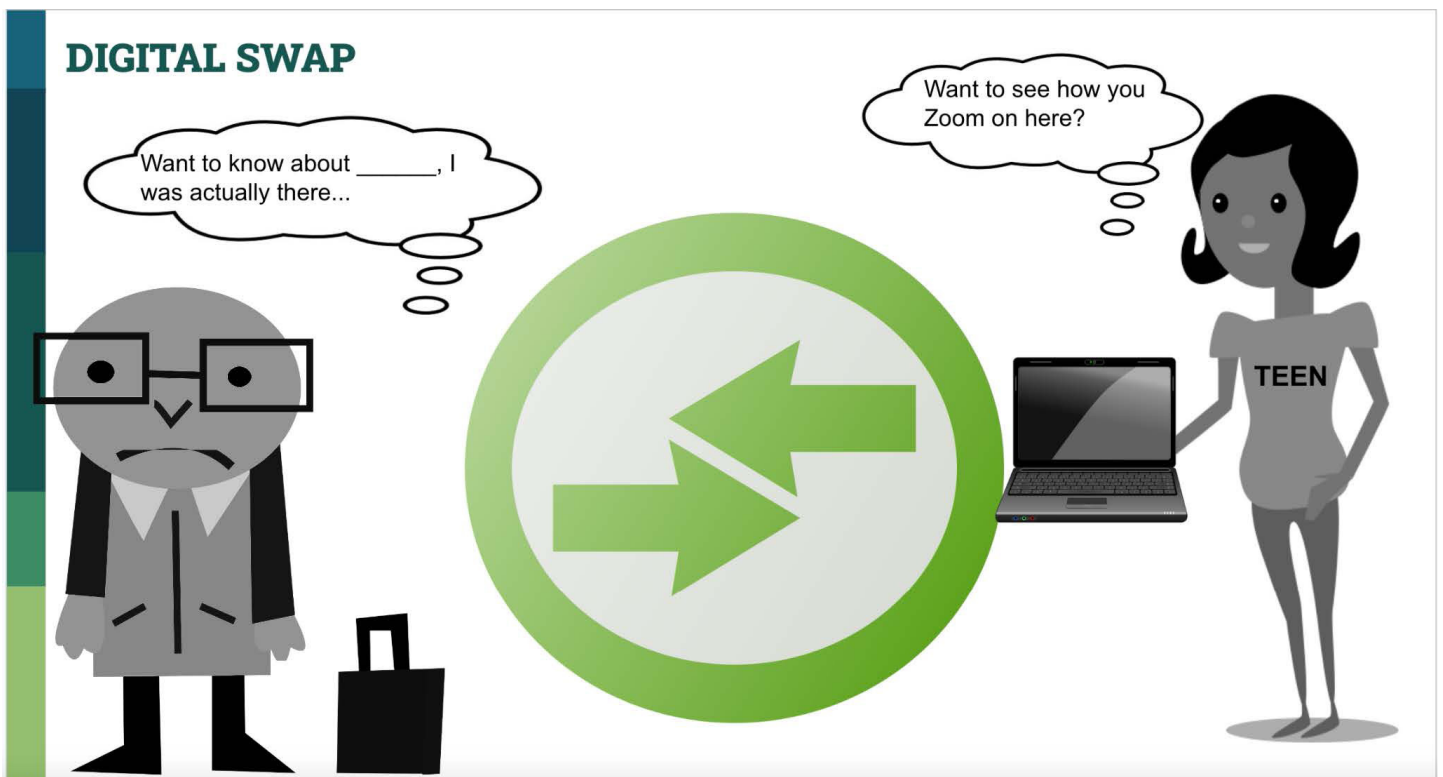
THE IMPACT

We will need to get from the library + JFS how they want to characterize what specifically they took; i.e. JFS and Goodwill are offering office hour kind of help at local library branches in lieu of pre-scheduled classes. They have found residents are more likely to drop in and get the help they need instead of signing up and showing up for pre-arranged classes.

2023