Now is a great time to improve your computer skills

By Kristen Castillo (Published: Thursday, January 19, 2012)

Skype, Twitter, Google and Photoshop — you've probably heard these terms, but you may not know a lot about them.

"Seniors are beginning to get that 'left behind' feeling," says Jerry Taylor of SeniorTech, a company that offers personalized in-home computer lessons for seniors and retirees. "For example, every day they watch a TV show which tells them, 'For more information, go to http://www.something.com/.' They're frustrated because there's usually no phone number given."

Getting started

Whether you're an avid computer user or a novice, you can enhance your tech skills.

In Jerry Taylor's one-on-one tutoring sessions, most of his students are 55 or older. Some are even in their 90s. No matter what the client's age, there's one thing Taylor won't do.

"I never touch their keyboard or mouse," he says. "I insist they do everything — no matter how long it takes."

Lessons that work

Many senior centers, community colleges and community groups offer computer classes for seniors. SeniorNet is a computer resource for seniors that partners with computer "learning centers" throughout the country.

Prices for many of these classes range from $25 to $40 per student.

You can study many computer topics including email, blogging, graphic design, photo sharing, desktop publishing, researching on the Web and fun with Internet games.

Getting social

From navigating social media sites, such as Twitter, to video chatting with their grandchildren via Skype, many seniors want to know how to communicate in high-tech ways.

"In the past, I've taught social media classes like Facebook," says Taylor, noting many

seniors want to learn programs to help them stay connected with family and friends.

"They're getting in touch with their kids, grandkids and sharing information about their day. People are embracing it with a lot of enthusiasm."

According to The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, social networking among Internet users over age 65 has grown 150 percent in the past two years, while Internet users ages 50 to 64 have doubled their social networking in the same time period.

Some seniors want to use their computer skills to support their small businesses and social interests. One Senior Surf student wanted to learn to set up a Facebook page for his retirement community.

"People are using these skills in creative ways," says Taylor.

Benefits and challenges

Enhancing your computer skills can boost your self-confidence and ease loneliness, too. With a few computer sessions, you'll be able to email your family, share photos with a friend and play games like Scrabble!

Plus, you can search the Internet for information on your health, look for new recipes, read news articles and even watch TV or listen to music. You can also post your own videos to websites like YouTube.

"Computers are not just for kids," is the motto at SeniorTech and for good reason. People of every age can be plugged in to technology.

But that doesn't mean computing isn't challenging at times.

"Quite often, well-meaning children or grandchildren come over and try to 'give Grandpa a computer lesson,'" says Taylor. "It never works! Young people confuse 'showing' with 'teaching.' They think if they sit at Grandpa's computer and go 'click, click, click' at 90 miles per hour that Grandpa will learn something. No way!"

It's best to hone your skills in classes, especially for seniors, since the classes will be geared to your skill level and interests. If you struggle with a computer's "touch pad" navigation, buy a mouse to make computing easier.

Taylor says fear is the most common obstacle. "They're so afraid they'll do something wrong and 'break' the computer," he says. "I remind them that the most important button on the computer is the 'off' button. If the computer is frustrating you, turn the darned thing off, and come back later!"

With patience and a little know-how, you'll be surfing the Web, sharing photos and getting social all with just the click of a button!