Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

Members of the Cyber Guardians team.

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# Cyber Guardians to keep older people safe online

**In an increasingly digital world, where everything from shopping to socialising is now carried out online, being able to access the internet confidently and safely is more important than ever.**

But for many older people, concerns around online security may be putting them off embracing digital technology, potentially leaving them isolated or at a disadvantage.

Now a project led by Northumbria University is training a team of Cyber Guardians – older volunteers who are being given the digital skills needed to stay safe when using the internet.

The Cyber Guardians will share what they have learnt with others in their communities, acting as ambassadors for digital safety and inclusion.

The eight-month pilot project is being coordinated by Dr James Nicholson and Jill McGlasson of Northumbria's Department of Computer and Information Sciences.

It follows research by Dr Nicholson into where older people access advice about cyber security and the sources they trust when it comes to staying safe online.

As he explains: "We know that older people are the group in society most vulnerable to cybersecurity attacks and scams, and yet there is also very little engagement with this group in terms of training and information.

"Our research shows that peer to peer training can be very successful, but in order to achieve this we first need to train an initial group who can then go out and disseminate what they have learnt.

"Our Cyber Guardians are all retired people who are active in their communities and are keen to pass on what they learn to others to help them stay safe too."

The group of 14 Cyber Guardians are all in their 50s, 60s and 70s and regularly use the internet for a variety of tasks, including shopping, banking and staying in touch with friends and family.

Most of them were already confident in using the internet, however, much of their cyber security knowledge came from outdated advice.

The group will take back several key lessons following their training. These include having a strong, unique password, which should only be changed if they believe it may have been compromised; not sharing too much personal information online; and being vigilant with emails, in particular verifying the sender email address and pausing before performing any action, such as

clicking on a link or replying.

As Jill McGlasson explains: “Our volunteers are mostly retired professionals and most of what they know about online security is from their working lives. However, the advice has changed in recent years, so we helped them create safer, stronger passwords using the latest guidance.

“We also showed them how easy it can be to gather a lot of personal information about someone through social media posts, which can then be pieced together and used by hackers to try and access their accounts and information.

“The aim is not to scare people but simply make them think twice about what they post online – which is good advice for internet users of any age!”

The volunteers were recruited through the Old Low Light Heritage Centre in North Shields and the University of the Third Age (U3A) – a UK-wide movement which brings together people in their ‘third age’ to develop their interests and continue their learning in a friendly and informal environment, and which has local groups across the North East.

Kevin Magowan is one of the volunteer Cyber Guardians. The 73-year-old was already confident using a computer and the internet but hadn’t been aware of some simple steps he could take to keep himself safe online.

He said: “I have learnt a lot from taking part in the Cyber Guardian’s project. I realised that I was still using passwords I had set up a long time ago. Now I know how important it is to have a strong password and have also learnt about two factor authentication which I now use whenever I buy products online.

“I have also learnt about Wi-Fi security and how free Wi-Fi offered when out and about is not secure. I’m looking forward to sharing these tips and advice with other people in my community.”

Mike Martin, of the U3A Whitley Bay group, has helped coordinate the Cyber Guardians project and also runs iPad/iPhone user help groups for U3A and Old Low Light members. He said: “My experience is that older people are concerned about cyber security but don’t know what to do or where to start.

“I found people were asking for one-to-one advice when it came to learning about cyber security so we came up with the idea of training a group of volunteers who could then go out and offer that support to others in their area.

“We were expecting maybe three or four volunteers but ended up with 14! The idea is to teach a few simple tips and techniques which can then be shared and spread throughout our communities in the North East.”

The pilot project, which comes to an end in April, has been funded though UK Research and Innovation’s Not-Equal Network which aims to improve access to digital technology to support social justice.

The network will bring together researchers, communities and partners from industry, public sector and third sector organisations, to explore and co-create practical responses to issues of fairness and justice in technology design and its use.

It is hoped further funding can be found to allow the project to continue, with more volunteer Cyber Guardians being trained across the North East.

Find out more about Northumbria University’s Department of Computer and Information Sciences at https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/academic-departments/computer-and-information-sciences/

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## Cyber Safety

**Dr James Nicholson gives his top tips for staying safe online:**

- Use different passwords for all accounts (a password manager can help with this). Data breaches happen every day and these commonly include usernames and passwords. If an attacker gets hold of a username and a password, they will try that combination for as many services as they can. If you have the same password they could compromise multiple accounts easily.
- Create passwords that are hard to guess (see tips below). If an attacker gets hold of a username and password through a data breach, the password will usually be hashed (in gobbledygook). The attacker then needs to guess that password using a computer program. Make it difficult for them to guess it and take over your account.
- Try not to click on links in messages (e.g. email) if possible, go to the website directly in your browser (starting at the home page). Links could take you to a fake website where your username and password could be stolen, or malware could be installed.
- If you receive a message (e.g. email) or a phone call asking you to do something, take a minute to think about it and verify the message before you do anything. Attackers use urgency to get you to make poor decisions. By delaying your actions, you stand a better chance of making a good decision.

**Tips for creating passwords that are hard to guess:**

*Note: passwords are usually guessed using a computer program that makes millions of guesses every second, not by someone manually trying passwords.*

- Length is the most important part: the longer the better. Consider using three random words separated by fullstops (e.g. turkey.ballroom.kaboom) as these tend to be easier to remember than completely random password (e.g. td5Jkl!b)
- Avoid using personal details as part of your password (e.g. date of birth, your name, names of loved ones, location, etc.) – this information can be easy to find online, and can be added to the guessing possibilities of the computer program
- Use unique passwords for every account. If an attacker gets hold

of a username and a password (for example through a data breach), they will try and use it for as many other accounts as possible

- Come up with a sentence (not a common one!), then take the first letter from each word and turn it into a password (e.g. I need to have very strong passwords for protection = In2hvsp4p)

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