

Switching to digital TV

A study for the DTI into the human aspects of the switchover

SAGENTIA



For analogue television transmissions to be phased out and switched to digital by 2012 some 40 million TVs in the UK will need to be adapted or replaced. Widely regarded as the most ambitious technology transition ever, the Government was faced with a set of 'human' challenges: will digital equipment be too complicated for some people to use? how will people react when they have to adapt TVs they are perfectly happy with? who will need help installing and using set top boxes?

Sagentia* was commissioned by the DTI in 2002 to undertake an integrated programme of inclusive design, consumer research and predictive modelling which would help support the Government and industry get the process underway.

The first part of our work concerned usability. We ran trials of commonly available set top boxes with a panel of elderly and disabled people. The results showed that the controls were often difficult to understand and operate. The main problem was the use of menus, which elderly people and people with dexterity or visual impairment found difficult or impossible to use. Using population data, we were able to calculate that a quarter of people over 75 would be prevented by dexterity, vision or other disabilities from being able to use the set top boxes that were being sold at the time. As well as suggesting improvements ranging from point of sale displays to the navigation of interactive content, we identified the types of support that elderly and disabled people were likely to need. Over half the over 75s would need help to install the new equipment.

The second part of our work concerned consumer uptake. For switchover to succeed, the vast majority of people would need to see the benefits of digital TV and choose to switch voluntarily. In explaining the advantages of digital TV, government ministers had emphasised the increase in choice of TV channels. We ran a programme of focus groups and found that many of the people least likely to voluntarily switch to digital were 'turned off' by the prospect of a proliferation of channels. We therefore suggested that the message shift from 'more channels' to 'better television'.

Successive surveys had previously found a substantial proportion of people who claimed not to be interested in digital TV, and were therefore not keen to switch. We ran a large scale CAPI (computer assisted personal interview) survey to better understand people's reactions to digital television and to analogue being discontinued. This enabled us to build up a model of the transition process over the switchover period. We found that there would be a continued steady uptake of digital TV and, although some people were not immediately attracted by the

new technology, most would nonetheless switch if there was a national timetable to do so.

A small residual of poor or elderly people felt unable to switch, however. This was often because they feared that cost would be a barrier or they thought that the transition from a television they knew to a 'digital receiver' would be too complicated.

By reframing the switchover challenges we were able to help the Government move ahead with its digital action plan. For instance, our research showed that a 'help scheme' would be required. In subsequent work we also suggested realistic ways in which manufacturers could make their products more usable.

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* To undertake the programme Sagentia formed a team including market research company Ipsos-MORI and inclusive design experts from Cambridge University's Engineering Design Centre



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