



EPSU Position Paper on Smart Public Services for a Digital Age



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Digitalisation of public services: risks and potential

Digitalisation is the “adoption or increase in use of digital or computer technology by an organization, industry, or country”. It is the “economic and social transformation triggered by the massive adoption of digital technologies to generate, process and transact information”. This transformative process has started to impact public services. Digital processes are increasingly being integrated into public services in Europe.

New technologies, if implemented in a way that strengthens the ethos of delivering public services for the common good, could have the potential to promote more citizen and worker participation in the design and delivery of public services. Digitalisation in public services could improve health and safety by reducing the strain and repetitiveness of work. It could improve democratic accountability and strengthen quality public services.

However, the process of digitalisation is often used as a cover to erode the public-service ethos and reorientate the public sector towards a model of providing services that more closely resembles the private sector. This transformation can lead to a further marketisation of public services. For example, Commission proposals to ‘open up’ data held by public administrations raises concerns of handing sensitive public resources to the private sector so that it can cherry-pick the delivery of profitable services.

All EPSU sectors will be fundamentally affected by the digital transformation of public services, but in different ways. Currently, little is known about how digitalisation is impacting the public sector in terms of working conditions and service delivery. This is a challenge that needs a local, national and European trade union response in order to protect and to improve the quality of public services, as well as to ensure quality employment and protect health and safety.

When digitalisation of public services is discussed at European level the focus is on rationalisation, increased productivity, efficiency and cost savings. As part of the European Economic Governance, EU countries are targets of this ‘efficiency drive’ through the introduction of e-government, e-procurement, e-health, e-energy, e-transport.

Digitalisation must not be a mere byword for outsourcing, privatisation and public-private partnerships (PPPs), which undermine the viability of our public services. There is no evidence that the digitalisation or automation of public services will lead to more cost-efficient public services, or will reduce any administrative burden in and of itself. When new ICTs or digital services are implemented without adequate funding or staffing the end results are not only worse services, but greater costs in the long-run as further expenditure is needed to tackle new problems.¹

¹ For example, see the National Programme for IT in the UK NHS or the new system for tax records in Denmark (Kirov, p. 24; HK presentation).

Cutting staff coupled with an over-reliance on digital systems can erode the ability of public services to effectively react during emergencies or continue to function when there are technical problems. The expansion of digital public services must not mean the removal of back-up systems or reduction in staffing levels that allow services to function in all circumstances.

Digitalisation presents new challenges for the promotion of gender equality in public services. Evidence shows that the introduction of new ICT affects men and women differently due to perceptions of managers about the lack of IT skills amongst older women.² There are fewer women working in the IT sector and the increased demand for more IT workers in public services could harm women's employment.

- In order to see improvement in services from digitalisation more investment is needed, not cuts in resources. Effective staffing and adequate IT-infrastructure is essential to independently assess quality of digital public services and to ensure that digitalisation raises and not lowers quality.
- Digitalisation must not be a cover for public-private partnerships and outsourcing. Insourcing and public-public partnerships are instead viable alternatives that defend the quality of public services.
- Gender equality must be mainstreamed into every aspect of digitalisation. Negative attitudes towards women's ICT skills must be challenged and training must be adapted for different groups within the workforce. Systems must be designed as to make use of the less visible 'soft skills' that workers have.

Impact on workforce

Digitalisation of public services leads to changes in organisational structures, operations and working practices. Digitalisation brings about changes in job content and skills and creates a new relationship between service providers and users. More debate is required on the impact of digitalisation and work quality, in particular:

- Exploring the changes to the work processes caused by digitalisation
- Considering the information and training needs for workers at different stages of the implementation process and for different groups within the workforce
- Identifying how workers feel about the loss of personal/telephone contact with clients after the introduction of digital systems
- Identifying good practice and facilitate its dissemination across Europe

The proliferation of mobile technology at work and, with it, the rise of an 'always-on' culture also leads to greater psycho-social risks (PSRs) and the blurring, or even disappearance, of

² Nyrgen K. G. 'Narratives of ICT and Organisational Change in Public Administration', *Gender, Work and Participation*, (2012) pp. 615-630.

the line between work and personal life. This has serious implications for occupational health and safety.

Digitalisation changes the way workers are evaluated on their performance which can impact on remuneration. Close electronic monitoring of work, algorithm or narrow outcome-orientated assessment and even electronic feedback from service users can increase pressure and stress at work. It can lead to remuneration systems that 'rewards' completion of narrow, short-term goals. Digital ways of working can end the interpersonal relationships that give many public service workers job satisfaction. All these factors can lead to a rise in PSRs and further damage work-life balance.

Teleworking can of course bring huge benefits to workers, allowing them to meet care obligations, cut down on travel time and lead a more varied work life. But new possibilities for telework should not be abused by employers to extend working time and encroach on personal life. A distinction should be made between flexible working arrangements for employees through telework and utilising 'crowd-working' platforms to outsource tasks to precarious workers for low pay.

The proliferation of the gig economy, facilitated through crowd-working platforms, also raises the prospect of further outsourcing of tasks previously performed in-house, coupled with the accompanying erosion of wages and working conditions.

There are already examples of mobile applications being used to direct and track homecare workers in the UK. The use of this technology could be of benefit to workers, for example by allowing them to optimise their routes and thus spend more time caring for patients. However, if the technology and the data generated is controlled solely by the employer, it can be used to increase the pace of work and limit pay only to time spent with service users and exclude travel time.

Healthy working with IT means enforcing quality standards for software and hardware ergonomics. The public sector should be a role model and only use products that match the current ergonomic standards.

Digitalisation increases the possibility of breaches in data protection or infringements of rights that should be exposed. It puts more public service workers in contact with a larger volume of documents, increasing the possibility that they may see evidence of illegal or unethical activity. EPSU calls for the legal protection of whistle blowers covering public service workers (including civil servants).

Collective bargaining and European Social Dialogue must address the impact of digitalisation on work organisation and information and training as well as to disseminate best practice.

- EPSU supports the 'right to disconnect' for public service workers.
- The Working Time Directive must be respected and any future revision must improve worker protection in the context of the proliferation of mobile technology and teleworking arrangements. The impact of digitalisation must be included in the European discussions on work-life balance.
- Telework should improve, not worsen, employee's work-life balance. EPSU is against the atomisation of tasks in public services and their farming-out to crowd-working

platforms.

- The health and safety environment has to be adapted to new work processes brought about by digitalisation. This also means providing safe, regular and secure employment conditions as a way of combatting the increased PSRs.
- Public service workers must not be penalised for whistleblowing.

Participation, consultation and training

The workforce and their trade union representatives must be listened to, and their needs and concerns responded to from the initial stages of any process of digitalisation. The first step should be to demonstrate that digitalisation will be of benefit to both workers and service-users.

Follow-up, technical support and ongoing training must be central to the post-implementation planning. Digital training should be an integrated part of continuous professional development and not viewed as a one-off event in response to a new system. In Estonia, for example, despite a focus on training during the implementation of a nationwide health information system in 2008, there has been little attention paid to training needs since, causing problems for this eHealth system.

Strengthening and extending information and consultation rights for staff and works councils is fundamental to meeting the challenges of digitalisation. Quality working conditions for employees and quality public services for citizens also depend on the ability of employees and their representatives to be active in the design process.

Innovation is not confined to the private sector. As public service trade unions we must challenge the assumption that new innovations can only be brought into the public sector from outside. Digitalisation should be an inclusive process that creates an environment where public services workers can innovate.

Ideally, collective agreements at local, regional or national level and agreements between European social partners should take account of digitalisation, protect against the threats to working time and health and safety and promote best practice in training and digital learning.

Social dialogue structures, at whichever level, will need to tackle the issue of digitalisation head on. Common standards, agreed by social partners, that protect health and safety, involve workers and provide for quality training, are the surest way of achieving an inclusive digitalisation, both for public service workers and for citizens that use the services.

- Employers must consult trade unions and workers' representatives on the introduction and use of new technology in the workplace.
- Training must be dynamic, taking into account the different levels of digital literacy in

the workforce and, although starting from different levels, aim to bring all workers to the same high standard.

- Training must be at least as good as in the private sector. This is necessary to maintain the attractiveness of public sector employment and to safeguard the viability of public services in an increasingly digital world. The focus must always be on users and delivering the best possible service.

Open infrastructure and accessible services

Technical barriers to free access and exchange of information are barriers to social, economic and democratic participation. Open access to the Internet- in the private, public and working domain- is essential and should be guaranteed to all citizens and workers. Every citizen should have access to the Internet as a basic right to information and knowledge.

Proposals to deliver services digitally 'by default' risk further isolating vulnerable groups, who have less internet access or lack the necessary digital skills, from services they need. The move away from face-to-face services can exclude the most vulnerable who are less likely to have easy access to the internet or the necessary IT skills. In some cases they have to rely on costly telephone lines or be forced into using third-parties to access services.

The concept of 'digital commons' should become a part of a modern public service ethos, where virtual infrastructure is seen as a common resource as much as a library is. Furthermore, the physical public infrastructure that enables digital engagement must be extended. This not only means affordable, wide-spread access to home broadband but also services like free municipal Wi-Fi and internet-enabled libraries. Libraries and other public institutions providing internet access should have enough staff with ample training to assist service-users with fewer digital skills to access online services.

Open-source licences such as creative commons and general public licence can ensure that public digital resources are safeguarded against private interests. Public goods held in cyberspace such as public records and digital content in libraries and museums must not be privatised.

Improved access is of no use without better digital skills. Not only must public service workers receive relevant, ongoing training in new technologies but more must be done by the public sector to improve citizens' digital skills, particularly the elderly and most vulnerable. 18% of the EU's population has still never used the internet.³ There can be no digital exclusion from public services.

This 'digital divide' not only exists within countries due to age, skills and socio-economic conditions but also between different countries. The increased use of ICTs in developed

³ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Information_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals#Internet_usage

countries is not always matched in less-economically developed countries. This can pose real problems, particularly where digital systems are used for cross-border data exchange, such as with the sharing of tax or social security information.

Building interoperability of systems should not allow a small number of private software or hardware providers gain a monopolistic position. Here, open source software may be a cost effective solution to problems of interoperability that avoids this risk. Public-public partnerships, where public administrations pool skills and knowledge to develop interoperable cross-border systems, would build IT capacity across the public sector in Europe, ensure public data is used for the public good and maintain the public service ethos.

Digital public services should always be an option for those who prefer them, not an obligation that widens the digital divide. If public services are to be delivered digitally 'by default' then non-digital options must also be available.

- The Digital Agenda for Europe must include resources to ensure full connectivity both in private homes and public spaces.
- Projects developing Open Source Software in Public Administration, which have disappeared since the start of the crisis, must be relaunched.⁴

Data protection⁵

Every citizen must know who has access to his or her personal data. In order that citizens trust eGovernment, more investment is needed into data protection infrastructure and to ensure effective staffing levels and well-trained staff. Public administrations have a privileged position in data collection as part of the state. It would be an abuse of that position and harmful to data protection and the right to privacy to allow the private sector to manage or use parts of this data.

Workers should know what data their employer holds on them and what data is generated through their work. There must be clear guidelines on what rights and restrictions workers have to internet use at work (for example personal email usage) and if and how employers monitor their internet use.

Further threats to data protection may be posed by trade deals such as TTIP, CETA and TiSA which could force public bodies to give up data or tender data management out to private firms. It could be possible for multinationals to sue governments through investor-state dispute resolution mechanisms if tightening data protection laws were to negatively impact on their profits. This presents a genuine threat to the right to regulate for better data protection.

⁴ See Lethbridge, §2

⁵ A more extensive discussion of data protection and public services can be found in the Annex – Data protection, public services and workers' rights' <http://www.epsu.org/article/epsu-position-paper-smart-public-services-digital-age>

As more administrative services are taken online through the move to eGovernment, transparent processes and clarity about what information is collected and how it is used are needed so that citizens trust digital public services.

eGovernment opens up opportunities to improve some of the key revenue generating functions of public administration, such as improving compliance with tax and social security. However, this will only happen when matched with sufficient staff. Cutting staff in favour of IT has been shown time and again to be a false economy.

EPSU is against trade agreements that compromise European citizens' right to privacy and that limit or undermine data protection.

- Public data should be used for the public good with the strongest levels of protection for individuals. Private companies should not be allowed to mine data collected by public authorities.
- Potential sanctions for misuse of the internet at work should be clear and proportionate. Workers' must be informed if and what employers monitor about their internet activity.
- EPSU supports the creation of worker data protection legislation at EU level, to ensure minimum standards for all workers.

**EPSU Position Paper on Smart Public Services for a Digital Age,
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EPSU is the European Federation of Public Service Unions. It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 250 trade unions across Europe. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services and local, regional and central government, in all European countries including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. It is the recognised regional organisation of Public Services International (PSI).

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