



**Joint Position Paper on Digitalisation in the Social Services Sector –  
Assessment of Opportunities and Challenges (Final Version, 6 June 2019)**

**A shared Definition of Digitalisation in Social Services**

In a general sense, digitalisation can be defined as the massive adoption of digital technologies to generate, process and share information and implement specific tasks via digital devices. This may include tasks which were formerly carried out by human workforce. Digitalisation in social services means the incorporation of digital technologies in everyday social services provision.

The transformative impact of digitalisation is only just coming to the fore in social services provision but developments are increasingly gaining pace. Some of the effects of digitalisation are already visible, in particular:

- **Automation of tasks and occupations**: the replacement of (human) labour input by machine input, including advanced robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning.
- **Digitalisation of processes**: use of sensors and the digital processing, storage and communication of information as well as person-related data, including through the Internet of Things<sup>1</sup>, 3d printing, virtual reality, augmented reality and telecare.
- **Emergence of platforms and use of blockchain**: offering of services on online platforms.
- **Digital documentation systems**: e.g. electronic patient files accessible by the care worker via smartphone and tablet.
- **Artificial intelligence and introduction of robotics**: e.g. lifting aids, household and care robots.
- **Connected help and monitoring systems**: e.g. emergency buttons, fall sensors, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Internet of thing (IoT) is a network of connected physical devices that collect and exchange data with minimal human intervention. Applied to social care, it allows users to monitor themselves and their environment in real-time - for example, heart rate, temperature, blood sugar, the list is endless - enabling professionals to decide if any next steps or intervention is needed.



- The use of big data to foster personalised services.

Digital technologies are still often misunderstood and underused by the different actors involved. This can partly be explained by the fact that social services are by definition person-focused services. Yet, the take-up of digital technologies in social services provision is inevitably expanding, even though with diverse geographical, sub-sectoral or even organisational differences. Despite digital developments, it is important to note that social contact and human relationships in the provision of services are and will remain a fundamental dimension of the social services sector. Put simply, digitalisation must be at the service of reaching a better service quality for beneficiaries and professionals and not vice versa.

### **The Effects of Digitalisation on the Social Services Sector and Employment**

Technological innovation has a considerable impact on labour market and work organisation in the social services sector. Indeed, the use of digital technologies offers a wide range of opportunities, both in terms of improving the organisation of labour and improving the quality of the services provided. Digitalisation may also give rise to many challenges such as greater income disparities and reduced access to social security systems, which can have negative effects for service beneficiaries, workers and society as a whole if not properly addressed.

The effects of social service digitalisation on employment therefore warrant social and political attention and management. Digital technologies can help provide high quality social services that are designed to improve the life for service beneficiaries. However, digital transformations should be implemented safely and responsibly with the information and consultation of workers in driving and shaping such a transition. The acceptance of technical innovations depends on the capacity to integrate the new technologies into the work organisation and the care process while pursuing a holistic approach for the care and support of the users. This includes measures to reduce the risks stemming from the use of digital technologies, including the IT-based formalisation of work processes.

The digital transition is not employment neutral or neutral to different professions, formal qualifications of professions and the distribution of tasks and responsibilities. Many professionals in the social services sector remain wary of digital solutions as they worry that they increase their workload, create more reporting and bureaucratic obligations or trigger mistakes or even worse, have strong impacts on the organisation of their work and their working time, risk undermining the quality of their employment as well as user safety and trust.

Making best use of digital innovation also means supporting social services' professionals to become competent guides to new technologies for service beneficiaries and their families,



recognising their role in the digital transition and thereby helping users of social services gain more knowledge and control over their quality of life, health and/or social conditions.

### **Opportunities Connected to the Introduction of New Digital Technologies in Social Services**

The digital transition in social services can bring many opportunities such as:

- Improvement of current and creation of new social services: Digital technologies have the potential to improve old and create new services, better responding to the needs of service beneficiaries. The re-design of social services, around the needs of individuals, provides the best opportunity to improve people’s health, wellbeing and social inclusion. Many areas across Europe are moving towards new forms of delivering care – whether through integrated or personalised care.
- Promoting independence, quality of life and wellbeing: The use of digital technologies in social services can enable beneficiaries to maintain their independence and wellbeing and can reduce social exclusion. The use of digital channels can also bring reassurance to carers and families, who may not always live close to those they are supporting, thus reducing potential feelings of social isolation.
- Enabling social service professionals to work from any base at any time: Technology can enable care and support professionals to work seamlessly from multiple locations and in multi-disciplinary teams, optimising workflows and work processes. The use of mobile technology and improved connection speeds will enable quick access to information across the care system. This means that care and support professionals will be able to deliver services more efficiently and effectively, working collaboratively across organisations and sectors.
- Increasing the attractiveness of the sector: Offering a workplace with modern, up-to-date equipment can increase the employer’s attractiveness, also for young professionals.
- Recruitment: Online portals can help employers self-promote and get in touch with a specific target group. Technologies such as screening software can facilitate the recruitment process.
- Better managed workload: Digital working methods such as electronic patient files have the potential to save time. The physical strain of care work can be reduced with the aid of robotics.
- Protecting and empowering workforce: Involving workers in the process of implementing digital technologies can ensure the confident and effective use of such technologies. Digital devices can improve occupational health and safety, especially for lone workers. Equipping workers with protection devices to use in case of an emergency can also ensure their safety at work.
- Use of simulators for education programmes: New methods of training, including the use of simulators, can help to develop practical and technical competences, also with regard to the



scarcity of traineeships. Digitalisation also promotes new forms of advanced training, for instance blended learning, e-learning, MOOCs and free online courses. Concerning the efficiency of these methods, it might be useful to collect employers' and workers' evaluations.

### **Challenges Connected to the Introduction of new Digital Technologies in Social Services**

The digital transition also comes with many challenges, such as:

- **New ways of work**: The emergence of digital ways of organising work, for instance, through online platforms providing for a range of care services, raises new questions for quality standards and the organisation and regulation of work. This includes an increase in the use of non-standard forms of employment and work, such as casual work, on-call work, temporary agency work, informal work and dependent self-contractual employment. The spreading of such atypical work arrangements in the social services sector also puts at stake workers' coverage by social security schemes and impacts on the financing of those schemes.
- **Data management**: The social services ecosystem is complex and structured with many public and private actors. Health and social data is very sensitive and does not only contain medical but also financial information about one's social protection situation or medical expenses. Yet, e-health apps are not regulated, and the data generally ends up within the remit of the GAFAs<sup>2</sup>. It is a priority to make sure that the introduction of new technologies and use of big data in social services is agreed and regulated through social dialogue and collective bargaining at different levels as well as through legislation that protects and regulates the use of such data by social services, including by its workforce. The use of technologies generates person-related data, including on tracking movement of workers, that need to be dealt with in conformity with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data collection and use need to be regulated in cooperation with social partners in ways that cannot be used to arbitrarily monitor performance or potentially sanction workers. Cross-country harmonisation of interfacing and documentation systems requires further discussion in order to maximize its potential. With regard to the GDPR, practical interpretation and implementation of the regulation and implications for social services employers should be evaluated and facilitated.
- **Digital skills**: Dealing with new technologies can require additional training and qualification, equipping workforce with an adequate set of skills and competences. One priority should be to holistically integrate digital skills into relevant education structures and professional training. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) throughout the worker's career can help to address the digital divide that prevents the workforce in social care (not least in the context of an ageing workforce) to fully take advantage of new technologies. This enables them to be adequately informed and consulted about related restructuring and – where they wish to do

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<sup>2</sup> GAFA is an acronym for Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon — the four most powerful American technology companies.



so – gives them the possibility to be the co-developers of digital solutions on the basis of structured consultations at different levels (from workplace to sectoral to national level).

- **Funding gap**: Limited financial resources are one of the biggest impediments for the digital transformation of the social services sector. Significant investments may be required to support the effective digital transformation and cover the full additional costs which can occur, such as the purchase of products, the recruitment and training of staff, and other important matters. This also calls for an assessment of the added value of specific measures.
- **Uneven and unequal spread of new technologies**: Social services users, especially from below average economic and social backgrounds as well as the management and workers in the social services sector are currently largely excluded from a full participation in the digital opportunities that remain concentrated in the hands of a few powerful corporations. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that European and national authorities give priority to the needs of the social services users, workers & providers to benefit from full access to technologies and their opportunities, thus supporting the right to the best possible care, education and training, social support and empowerment and therefore contributing to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This implies that necessary infrastructure, such as broadband, is made available with no geographical discrimination. It is important that the accruing costs linked to the use of digital devices and technologies by social services users can also be covered and reimbursed by existing long-term care allowances and/or insurances or by general social support/assistance systems.
- **New partnerships**: To boost innovation in the sector, collaboration with new partners such as start-ups and IT developers is a must. Additional effort is required to help organise this more effectively.
- **Lack of research**: There is still little scientific data on how digitalisation is changing the social services sector, therefore it is hard to assess its actual impact. Gathering reliable data is a first crucial step for developing effective strategies and activities.

### **The role of Collective Bargaining and Social Dialogue:**

Social dialogue and collective bargaining at different levels are fundamental tools to regulate the introduction and use of new technologies. Social Dialogue helps to ensure the active involvement and participation of both management (and employers' organisations) and workers (and their representatives, including trade unions). By jointly assessing the impact of new technologies on the social services sector, social partners can mitigate possible adverse impacts. Those include:

- Transfer of timesheets and other documents from paper to mobile applications
- GPS tracking, in some cases at all times
- Verifying arrival and departure for each visit
- 'Optimising' routes and cutting out 'deadtime'



- Use of sanctions for lateness
- Provision of safety for lone workers
- Real-time assignment, reassignment and cancellation of visits
- Prohibition of ratings systems by the users of social services

Digital transformation brings about far-reaching changes for workers, employers and their relations as social partners, challenging established practices of social dialogue and collective bargaining. A constructive dialogue between the social partners is now more important than ever to steer digital transformations into a sustainable and fair direction. Maintaining and expanding information, consultation and participation rights of social partners in social services and creating an adapted legal framework for crowd-workers and other atypical workers can ensure that digitalisation improves rather than deteriorates job quality and service provision in the sector.

The European Union can be instrumental in encouraging and supporting such dialogue by providing funding for related social partner projects and joint initiatives.

### **Topics to be addressed on the basis of a joint workplan**

To ensure that the social services sector best responds to digitalisation, the Federation of European Social Employers and the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) are interested in working together on the following issues – in the framework of a sectoral social dialogue or possible test phase:

- Develop a Joint Declaration detailing much further some of the opportunities and challenges elaborated above; identifying recommendations for policy makers and clarifying concrete projects and topics where social partners commit to engage in this regard in the next few years.
- Develop guidelines and a collection of promising practices for the sector on how social services and their representative social partners can best respond to challenges and opportunities linked to digitalisation. The focus will be on specific examples and practices, relevant for different challenges, to highlight possible solutions on issues such as collective bargaining, data protection and Continuous Professional Development (CPD). This document is aimed at the sector itself, focusing on the practical implementation and successful take-up of new technologies in the social services sector.

