



## Position Paper

### On the Impact of Digitalisation on Social Services

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#### **1. An Employers' 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 completed by human workforce. Digitalisation in social services means the incorporation of digital technologies in everyday social services provision. Three transformations affect the sector in particular:

- digital documentation systems (e.g. electronic patient files accessible by the care worker via smartphone and tablet),
- intelligent robotics (e.g. lifting aids),
- connected help and monitoring systems (e.g. emergency buttons, fall sensors, etc.).

The transformative impact is only just coming to the fore in social services provision, with digital technologies still often misunderstood and underused. 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 relationship 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 the sector and not vice versa.

The Federation of European Social Employers acknowledges that the use of digital technologies offers a wide range of opportunities for the sector, both in terms of improving the organisation of labour and improving the quality of the services provided. Digitalisation also bears many challenges. The following sections will expand on these aspects.

## 2. Opportunities of Digitalisation

- **Improvement of old and creation of new services:** Digital technologies have the potential to improve old and create new services, better responding to the needs of service beneficiaries.
- **Optimised workflows and work processes:** Digital technologies can make administrative (and other) procedures quicker and more effective.
- **Increasing the attractiveness of the sector:** Offering a workplace with modern, up-to-date equipment can increase the employer's attractiveness, in particular for young professionals.
- **Recruitment:** Online portals can help employers self-promote and get in touch with the right target group. Technologies such as screening software can facilitate the recruitment process.
- **Increasing competitiveness:** Keeping up with technological developments will help maintain and improve the providers' competitiveness.
- **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.
- **Empowering workforce:** Involving workers in the process of implementing digital technologies can ensure their confident and effective usage of such technologies.

## 3. Challenges of Digitalisation

- **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 contractual and working time issues, coverage by social security schemes, and impacts on the financing of social security schemes.
- **Additional training needs:** Dealing with new technologies can require additional training and qualification. When and where needed, learning digital skills should be integrated into relevant education structures and professional training. In the job, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is needed to ensure that employees manage to keep pace with ongoing developments.
- **Funding gap:** Limited financial resources are one of the biggest impediments for the digital transformation of the social services sector. Significant initial investment 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.
- **New partnerships:** To boost innovation in the sector, collaboration with new partners such as start-ups and IT developers is a must. How can this be organised most effectively?

- **Ethical and legal implications:** Concerns about data storage, ownership, security and how to best protect the rights of users/beneficiaries and care workers in the uptake of digital technologies is a complex issue meriting attention. With regard to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), practical interpretation and implementation of the regulation and implications for social services employers should be evaluated and facilitated.
- **Equal access and opportunities:** Universal access to technologies and their opportunities must be ensured. This implies that necessary infrastructure, such as broadband, is made available with no geographical discrimination.
- **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.

#### 4. Topics to address in a joint workplan

To ensure that the social services sector best responds to digitalisation, the Federation of European Social Employers is interested in working with EPSU on the following issues – in the framework of a formal (or test-phase) sectoral social dialogue committee:

- Develop a **Joint Declaration** on how to support the social services sector in responding to the challenges & opportunities posed by digitalisation; detailing much further some of the opportunities and challenges posted above and recommendations for policy makers.
- Develop **Guidelines** for the sector on how to best respond to challenges & opportunities linked to digitalisation. The focus would be on specific examples and practices, relevant for different challenges, to highlight possible solutions. This document is aimed at the sector itself, focusing on the practical implementation and successful take-up of technologies in the social services sector.