



Policy recommendations

Social Care Sector

Key strategies and contents on digital skills for hybridization of jobs in the Social Care Sector

CONTEXT

This policy paper contains a set of recommendations based on the workshops carried out in the framework of the ACSOL Erasmus+ project by the respective working group in the field of Social Care in the region of the UK, Italy, Romania and the Basque Country (Spain).

Our considerations assume that the development and training of digital skills will prove crucial for job retention in the face of technological change and the impact of the COVID 19 crisis on jobs and labour market conditions.

The workshops were conducted with different "triple helix stakeholders". These included (employers, representatives of educational organisations, trade unions and cultural institutions, associations, policy makers/local governments). The common objective was to identify opportunities, needs and risks of the digital transformation as well as key digital competences and proposals to promote training within our target group.

Based on the data collected in the regions under consideration, recommendations and strategies are derived at sectoral level for the EU to better meet both the digital skills need of employees and the needs of employers in the Care Sector in Europe.

CHALLENGES

The outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic has fundamentally changed Europe and the world in a very short time. The Care Sector have been among the most negatively affected sectors. Addressing the challenges associated with this has increasingly brought into focus the importance of digital transformation and its design in this sector.

The analyses have clearly shown that the social care sector is not currently one of the most digitised sectors. Obstacles to digitisation include low levels of digital skills among staff, a lack of understanding of the importance of digital technologies and how they can be used in the sector, and a lack of training opportunities.

Like many other sectors and industries the Care Sector is also influenced by the growing impact of digital technologies. Digital technology has been developed and introduced to communicate, store and

exchange information, but also to create new frameworks for learning processes. For the Care Sector, this creates new opportunities in the future to

- make social care more efficient,
- enable people in need of care and support to gain greater control,
- design entirely new and alternative forms of support,
- create new types of services or the diversification of services.

The pandemic will have a lasting impact on the way we live and work together, and it comes at a time when Europe is undergoing profound demographic and societal change. In the coming decades, the proportion and number of older people in the EU will increase. Today, 20% of the population is older than 65 and by 2070 this will be 30%. The proportion of people over 80 is expected to more than double to 13% by 2070. The number of people potentially in need of long-term care in the EU is expected to increase from 19.5 million in 2016 to 23.6 million in 2030 and 30.5 million in 2050.

The ageing population and increasing life expectancy will increase the overall demand for health and long-term care services¹. This is linked to further challenges that will change the current system of social services and care. This include

- a growing proportion of home care,
- advancement of active ageing; changes in consumption patterns and full life,
- increased demand for health, wellness and healthy ageing. Transformation of the health and wellness offer,
- changes in professional patient interactions e.g. increase in non-face-to-face care, preventive medicine, telemedicine, smartphones and biosensors for diagnosis and monitoring,
- an increase in the demand for qualified care professionals.

Digital technologies are increasingly seen as important in supporting these changes. In the future, digital assistance will become an element of prevention, care, support and rehabilitation. Already today, a large part of the documentation activities is done digitally. Thus also change the professional role of care personnel. The rapid development towards the digitalisation of the professions in social care requires a deepening of the support measures needed for the innovation of processes and services in personal care, both in inpatient facilities and in home care.

Digital skills are needed to ensure that the digital possibilities are used confidently and safely by people in need of care, their carers and professional carers, and that they have a noticeable added value. This includes, above all, the acquisition of new professional competences through continuous training processes.

It is precisely these activities that should help to reduce current problem areas and gaps. Among other things, the development of digital competences is often not yet an explicit part of professional qualification and vocational training or even part of job descriptions. There is also a need to build a digital mindset among employees and managers within the organisations. The need for a digital literacy education programme includes the need to train nursing and social care staff in the use of digital devices and data on patients' conditions. The corresponding framework conditions must be defined and designed for this purpose.

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/impact-demographic-change-europe_en

DIGITAL SKILLS IN THE SECTOR

In the various workshops, one focus was to obtain information on which digital skills the participants considered to be important for professionals in the care sector in the future and which gaps currently exist. On this basis, recommendations can be developed on how future support measures can be designed to systematically promote the development of digital skills.

Overall, it becomes clear that basic digital skills are required first in everyday work. These can be summarised such as data literacy skills, communication and collaboration skills or digital content creation skills. These include among others

- Computer use,
- Use of e-mail,
- Use of the Microsoft Office suite or programs,
- Use of the main internet search engines,
- Use social media (including WhatsApp),
- Use online communication tools (Zoom, Google Meet),
- Input information on a tablet/ computer,
- Use specific applications to control client's health.

From a process perspective, these basic digital skills are primarily aimed at supporting typical everyday care activities. For example:

- skills valued in home care activities
- coordination with supervisors and work colleagues,
- communications between clients and families,
- daily monitoring of the patient's health conditions.

Also to be included are future developments that are associated with advancing digitalisation in the care sector and thus also have an influence on the necessary digital competences. These can potentially be manifold and should therefore serve as a suggestion as to how this can also be incorporated into training programmes and curricula. Examples are:

- use tools related to user safety,
- use communication and management tools,
- knowledge of usage of devices and application for remote telecare,
- use "Smart Homes" tools,
- make online purchases, make online appointments, etc.,
- Computer literacy at user level: know how to make registers, know computer systems,
- High skills in creating solutions to problems are also applied to the digital environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the regional challenges and needs identified, recommendations can indeed be derived to support both the digital transformation of the Care Sector and the development of individual digital competences and skills at European level.

Professionalisation of the sector

Access to training in health care and nursing differs considerably in Europe. Luxembourg, Austria and Germany, for example, have the lowest entry requirements for training in health care and nursing. The other 24 EU members require twelve years of schooling as a condition for nursing training. Care professionals also complete academic training courses there.

Whether in academic education or vocational training, it will be important to integrate the acquisition of digital competences into the curricula of the training of people who take on professional care tasks.

A central necessity is the explicit description of profession-specific information and communication competences (ICT competences) with regard to innovative care technologies. The increasing fusion of technology and nursing care will permanently change professional nursing. The profession must face these developments in order to adequately meet the future challenges at various levels. The foundations must already be laid in nursing training and continue throughout the entire professional (further) development. For this to succeed, the topics of technology and digitalisation must be given much greater consideration in different areas of competence in training. Furthermore, a binding implementation of the explicitly anchored technology content in teaching is indispensable in order to create a uniform knowledge base among all graduates.

Another field of action to improve the professionalisation of the care sector is the consideration of care workers with insecure and fragile employment relationships, who are often only poorly qualified or work part-time or often also have a migration background. It is precisely here that ways must be found to improve working conditions, including through digital qualification. Proposals for home care assistants from the Triple Helix Group in the Basque Country were described as examples of this topic:

If this group, due to their workload or family responsibilities, often have particular difficulty in accessing the formal training necessary to obtain the qualification that allows them to work as carers, the same will be true for any complementary training action that focuses on digital skills. It is therefore necessary to acquire digital skills in the care sector:

- To review in a general and exhaustive way the current training offer in digital competences offered
- to the group of care assistants, improving and updating contents.
- Create training itineraries that address particular situations in the form of "Singular Projects", ad-hoc projects with flexible timetables and a methodology that differs from the standard one.
- Promote this complementary training in digital competences by strongly recommending the completion of these courses.
- Raise awareness among users and their relatives to allow the care assistant to attend the training courses.

Creating training opportunities in the workplace - Need for a competence-oriented Learning architecture

Qualifications are also subject to the current processes of change in the context of digitalisation and should support self-organised learning and enable the development of competences to help shape the digital transformation. They should also take into account the increased need for digital communication and collaboration processes in everyday working life in their concepts. Such contemporary learning processes can be found in current vocational qualification concepts and in other company learning contexts often still receive too little consideration.

Workplace learning is replacing classic training and courses that were the norm for a long time in more and more organisations. Care activities are very time-intensive and tightly packed. Likewise, in many inpatient facilities as well as in home care, staffing is often very critical. Classical training formats are therefore often not the appropriate way for care staff. Especially with regard to building digital competences, learning through work offers more opportunities to react quickly and effectively to new developments or technological innovations. Training must be planned to provide experience and guidance on the digital skills actually needed in the workplace. Currently, most employees lack basic digital skills. Therefore, the core of training should focus on these categories of skills first.

It is possible to take a low-threshold approach and base the development of training formats on the digital tools that care professionals already use. Discussions in the UK showed that 80% of Over half of respondents use mobile phones, 75% use computers and about 35% use iPads.

Other options may be to set up a space at workplaces (e.g. residential areas, hospitals, etc.) for learning stations that are active during certain time windows so that workers can plan their activities accordingly. Another way can be via social blended learning, for example. Scenarios show different ways of interweaving face-to-face and online phases, which, depending on the learning needs and target group, make sense for achieving the intended learning goals. Social blended learning takes the important aspect of (collegial) exchange and cooperation within the framework of learning processes and thus also ensures the connection to the working practice of the learners.

Development of programmes for additional qualification

Digitalisation is advancing in all areas of work, including the nursing professions. Increasingly, robotics, robotic systems, assistive technologies, e-health tools and telemedicine products are being integrated more and more into healthcare and nursing. Digitalisation in the care sector, with its new technologies, can offer added value for care professionals and those in need of care, but it also requires additional competences, which are not yet sufficiently taken into account in care education and further training.

Continuing education and training should be an integral part of care facilities in order to maintain and expand the professional qualifications of staff and to ensure compliance with current guidelines and standards.

The development of qualification programmes can also take place through regional cooperation, which can also accompany the process in the longer term. Establish a working group involving public authorities, training institutions and companies to constantly review the evolution of the digital world in the care sector in order to keep the e-skills courses up to date.

Measures to promote change management and a culture of innovation

During the analyses, it was also argued in many cases that there is a need to open up and sensitise different target groups within the sector to the topic and the importance of developing digital skills.

The results have made it clear that overall there is a lack of training opportunities for the care staff and that this lack and the need for self-development is recognised by them. However, many employers do not recognise the need to promote digital skills. Often this can be seen especially in smaller private institutions. There are potential starting points for activities here:

- Building a bottom-up approach: structure future learning and training activities based on the current needs and training needs of the care staff
- Collegial learning (e.g. intergenerational)
- Development of state- or association-based courses to sensitise executives to the digital transformation and the resulting qualification needs and to develop an internal and external network of exchange of knowledge and practices.

About the Acsol project

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Project Partnership

