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KEY STRATEGIES AND CONTENTS ON DIGITAL SKILLS FOR HYBRIDIZATION OF JOBS IN THE SOCIAL CARE SECTOR

Findings at European level



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even though digital skills are not part of the core skills requested into the social care sector (see ESCO classification), the desk research, survey and workshops conducted into ACSOL project revealed that Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated digitalisation of the sector and therefore the need of digital skills for social care workers.

This report explores the key strategies and contents on digital skills for hybridization of jobs in the social care sector. It is based on the results of workshops conducted with triple helix stakeholder from Social Care Sector in Spain, Italy, Romania, and United Kingdom. The countries analysed cover different social and economic models, and very different welfare systems: Italy and Spain in the Southern Europe, United Kingdom in the Western Europe and Romania in the Eastern Europe.

The aims of the workshops were to find out the digital skills demanded, identify barriers to digitalisation, analyse the potential for digitalisation and opportunities on digital skills, desirable digital skills for social care workers, and assess the training provision for digital skills in order to make recommendations in the eLearning strategies in the Social Care Sector. The main directions of this research were set up at the Annual Conference of European Network on Regional Labour Market Monitoring in 2021 during the workshop “New Digital Skills Needs in the Care Sector”.

The results show that **digital skills demanded in the Social Care Sector** are mainly related to basic digital skills with a focus on usage of office software such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint and communication tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom etc. From the point of view of users, on the one hand they appreciate the use of digital tools (particularly during the Covid-19 restrictions), on the other hand, the lack of digital skills of the beneficiaries hampers the use of digital technologies.

Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the **use of digital tools in the Social Care Sector** but no specific tools were introduced. Most of the tools used are common tools such as PC, table of smartphone.

The level of digital skills is different from country to country. Regional economic differences and socio-demographic specificities still have a strong impact on the level of digital skills.

Bureaucracy, lack of national strategy and customized training offers represent the **main barriers to digitalisation** in the Social Care Sector.

There is a good **potential for digitalisation and opportunities in digital skills** mainly due to the emergence of new types of services such as remote monitoring.



INTRODUCTION

Digital skills are not part of the core skills required in the social care sector. A simple look into the ESCO classification reveals that among the essential skills and competences needed for social care worker digital skills are almost inexistent. However, the use e-health and mobile health technologies is nominalized as an optional skill needed for a social care worker.

Despite this, recent studies (Antonio, Raquel, and Victoria 2018; Goldkind, Wolf, and Freddolino 2018; Zhu and Andersen 2021) found out that digital competences are often required for social workers in Europe, particularly due to the increase of digitalisation and the use of ICT. Therefore, the social workers must improve their digital skills to be able to deliver qualitative services and match the expectations of the beneficiaries.

Improving digital skills is one of the priorities for the European Commission. Since 2006, digital competence has been considered one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning for all European citizens (European Commission, 2006).

This report explores the key strategies and contents on digital skills for hybridization of jobs in the social care sector. It was developed within ACSOL project. ACSOL project aims to help low-skilled workers to train themselves in essential digital skills in order for them to gain access to further digital training and to be better prepared in their job. The ACSOL project looks to expand adult digital skills training provision through online learning which would have significant advantages for workers in social care.

This research, based on the results of workshops conducted with triple helix stakeholder from Social Care Sector in Spain, Italy, Romania, and United Kingdom complement the study conducted in the previous stage of the ACSOL project based on a survey. The survey showed that the most used digital skills needed to perform the organisation's daily operations are basic digital skills such as sending/receive e-mails, inputting information on the PC, and using search engines to find information. The workshops developed with Triple Helix Groups established within ACSOL project allowed exploring more in depth the digital skills demanded into the Social Care Sector with a particular focus on digital skills demanded, barriers to digitalisation, the potential for digitalisation and opportunities on digital skills, desirable digital skills for social care workers, and the training provision for digital skills.

The results are presented individually, for every country analysed. The last part contains some recommendations for supporting the development of digital skills in the Social Care Sector.



Digital skills demanded in the Social Care Sector

Demand for digital skills in the Social Care Sector was analysed both from the point of view of employers and users. Additionally, the use of digital tools and new digital tools introduced in the sector due to the Covid-19 pandemic was also explored. Finally, the current existing gap of digital skills in the Social Care Sector was assessed.

Discussion with the representatives of Triple Helix Groups revealed a wide spectrum of types and level of digital skills demanded but a general opinion was that Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital technologies. Moreover, even though the pandemic situation from the beginning of 2022 allowed resuming of the most in-person activities, the digital technologies adopted previously continued to be used.

From the point of view of employers

Triple Helix groups from all countries involved in the study reported the need for digital skills for workers in the Social Care Sector. However, significant differences from country to country were noticed.

For instance, in Romania it was highlighted that the digital skills are not mentioned at all in the job description of workers in Social Care Sector. Despite this, digital skills are sometimes indicated in job advertisements, particularly in the case of private employers. The digital skills usually required are related to the usage of Office software such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint.

Similarly, in Italy, the research also revealed the importance of skills necessary to use the office software such as Word, Excel, Power Point. In addition, it was pointed out the importance of being able to use search engines / search engine optimization; use online communication tools (send/receive emails); use ICT hardware/digital devices (computer, tablet, smartphone etc.)

In Spain, the most often mentioned digital skills were those regarding the “basic” use of Internet and smartphones, e-mail, searching for information, enter data on tablets, phones, computers, and making audio and video calls (e.g. using WhatsApp audios). As for the use of some devices for professional purposes, applications for health monitoring, for communication with the supervisor and for the entertainment of the clients/patients were highlighted.

In United Kingdom, the main digital skills that are demanded in the sector, from the point of view of companies were: the use of specific applications to control client health, do online purchases, carry out procedures related to client’s life, talk to friends and family by chat, video calls, input information on a tablet/phone/laptop/computer, using social media, using email: send/ receive, use search engines and knowledge of office software (word, Excel, Power Point).



From the point of view of users

From the point of view of beneficiaries, the using of digital technologies, particularly in the context of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions was generally appreciated but the acceptance of using digital technologies is strongly dependent on the demographic factors, development of the ICT infrastructure or tradition in using ICT in the sector.

In Romania, the representatives of employers reported difficulties in using digital technologies due to the lack of digital skills of the beneficiaries or appropriate infrastructure (computers, internet connections etc.). Moreover, as the restrictions prolonged and many services were provided exclusively online a sort of burnout occurred among both social care workers and beneficiaries. A positive aspect mentioned by the representatives of NGO's was that the digital technologies were allowed a better connection with volunteers, particularly because they usually have a good level of digital skills.

Both, in Italy and Spain, beneficiaries strongly appreciated the use of digital technologies. For instance, in Italy, it was found out an increasing need of users to be monitored remotely and for their families the need to be in contact with assistants. The most valued digital skills include the use of web-based communication tools (i.e. chat, video) WhatsApp, Skype, Messenger, Google-talk etc.; the usage of ICT hardware/digital devices (computer, tablet, smartphone etc.); know how to work with applications and devices to perform care assistance tasks. With reference to the two latter skills, attendants from Policy making and Education sectors highlighted the importance for social care and medical sectors to train workers on the usage of applications (a) to perform "telemedicine" (remote assistance) and (b) to consult online digital archive with the entire anamnesis of their patients.

In Spain, the beneficiaries are generally appreciating the social care companies that have digital know-how. The importance of easy and convenient communication was especially emphasized (e.g. making video calls, sending of registrations, cancellations, daily reports from the auxiliary). Clients - even if not all - expect the providers to work with digital technologies, mainly because the use of these tools means saving a lot of precious time.

In United Kingdom, the study revealed, at the user level, that the skills necessary to use a mobile telephone, a Tablet iPad or a computer are the most demanded skills.

Digital skills of workers in the sector and use of digital tools in the workplace

In a report published by European Commission in 2017 (European Commission, 2017) found out that "the digital technologies are widely used in all types of jobs, also in economic sectors not traditionally related to digitisation (e.g. farming, health care, vocational training and construction)". Actually, the use of ICT has increased in the last five years in more than 90 percent of workplaces and the Health and Social Work



is among of the sectors with the highest incidents of the use of computers. For instance, about 97 percent of the respondents from this sector indicated that they use the computer in their activity¹ (idem).

However, usually only basic digital skills are required to perform daily activities in the Social Work sector. In the countries where ACSOL workshops were conducted these basic digital skills included: create and edit digital documents (Microsoft Word was explicitly indicated in Romania), using email and social media, searching for information (using Google), sending documents (WhatsApp in Romania), store documents.

In some countries (e.g., Romania) digital skills were forced developed due to the emergence of digital technologies at the workplace. Sometimes the colleagues who already owned digital skills provided learning support for those who were forced to use digital technologies, rather than training courses. Even though the work with the beneficiaries do not directly involve the use of digital technologies, the administrative activities consistently require the use of different tools and skills, particularly for preparing documents, reporting, sending, storing etc. As a result, more and more often digital skills are part of the job description and are tested in the hiring process.

In Italy, the majority of companies in the sector are still not demanding their employers to use specific applications for patients' monitoring. Nevertheless, participants from the Education "helix" argued that field operators (home workers, nurses, social care assistants) are those actors more willing to acquire digital skills and adopt digital devices that can support them in their daily tasks. One can say it is a "bottom up" trend that we initially detected from the surveys. This refers to the higher level of awareness that employees achieve compared to employers. In fact, the first are more aware about their need to acquire digital skills and are "pushing" their employers to provide them with the opportunity to learn those skills.

In Spain, based on the observations of a company for a very long time working in the social care services, one can say there are many carers with low qualification. That means they know how to use mobile phones, but not the full potential of these devices.

In United Kingdom over 80% use a mobile phone, 75% use a computer and around 35% use iPad. Therefore, the skills related to the use of these tools are the most demanded skills in the sector and at the workplace.

¹ This aspect should be treated with caution because most of participants to the survey were privately-owned (82.5% of the total), while in most countries this sector is mainly state-owned.



New digital tools introduced in the sector (due to COVID-19) and their impact and associated training

Covid-19 pandemic accelerated uses of digital technologies in Social Care sector. The CEDEFOP Report Digital skills: challenges and opportunities during the pandemic (Cedefop, 2021) suggest that “the use of digital skills has proven to be a driver of resilience, helping workers and entire organisations adapt to the new realities shaped by the pandemic”. Due to the pandemic restrictions, communication between social care workers and beneficiaries became critical and both parts had to adapt.

For instance, in Romania WhatsApp became a useful tool for quick communication that allowed to the personal assistants of disabled people to receive real-time information from the social workers. In addition, video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Google meet were commonly used. Google drive became the most collaborative tool used by clerical staff. Moreover, the social workers were involved in mediating the “online visits” between persons held in prisons and their relatives. In order to improve/develop the level of digital skills of social workers, customized training courses were organized. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced the term "online social services". However, they are not legally recognised and therefore not remunerated. Currently, the NGOs are demanding the introduction of the concept of online social services.

In case of Italy, the most mentioned tool during the triple helix workshop was the “Electronic Health Record” which is an online tool designed to improve the social and health care service at national level. EHR includes a set of digital health and social-health data and documents generated by present and past clinical events concerning the patient. Its main objectives are: facilitating patients care; offer them a service that can facilitate the integration of different professional skills while providing a consistent information base. The EHR represents an initiative that has the aim of an overall improvement of the quality of services such as prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation; health planning, evaluation of the quality of provided care.

As for Spain, there has been reported a significant development in the sector of the digital tools. There were mentioned the meetings by videoconference (Skype, Zoom), online interviews, tutorials, and guides, training (training and evaluation apps) through digital platforms (to avoid physical meetings), accessing Google calendar or applications for remote work monitoring. Specifically, in the relationship with patients were used: video and audio cameras for elderly people who were alone at home; recording of client data by digital messaging and use of sensors to monitor users (pilot testing).

In United Kingdom, the Covid-19 pandemic brought new ways of working including, blogs, social media, etc. Some staff had undergone digital training.



Current existing gap of digital skills in the sector

Digital skills play an important role in improving the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of social care at the European level. Therefore, digital skills should be ensured in all countries. The European Union assumed the role in closing the skills-gap providing a substantial budget for digitalization within recovery and resilience program.

It is a welcome step as ACSOL project pointed out the existing gap in digital skills within Social Care sector. Regional economic differences and socio-demographic specificities still have a strong impact on the level of digital skills.

In Romania, for example, most of the workers (home caregivers, foster carers) have secondary education and, therefore, no digital skills or an appropriate background to get them rapidly. Another aspect that explains the low level of digital skills is the average age of social care workers, that is currently over 40 years old. On the other hand, it should be added that social services are working with vulnerable groups (usually with a very low level of education) that are not very open to technology.

However, there are different levels of awareness regarding the necessity of acquiring digital skills. In Italy, employees have a perspective on their needs grounded on their fieldwork while employers still lag behind their workers. As a result, field operators can be a great resource to structure and schedule training processes on digital skills based on their actual needs to learn, in particular those specific applications useful to monitor their patients. To overcome the gap described, it requires a dialogue between employees and employers in order to find synergies and common paths of learning and training processes.

In Spain, list of digital skills required currently in the social care sector also represents the list of those digital abilities that need to be trained and enhanced for home care workers. The following can be listed: checking e-mail, organizing video calls, searching for information on the Internet, using apps for communication with supervisors or relatives (or even for entertaining the user), introducing data on tablets, phones, computers. Last but not least, acquiring “Netiqueta” that stands for the correct or acceptable way of using the Internet.

Similarly, in United Kingdom, using email to send and receive, knowledge of office software (word, Excel, Power Point) and use of video calls, skype, Teams were identified as current existing GAP of digital skills in the sector.



Barriers to digitalisation of the Social Care Sector

Even though the digitalisation is universally considered a key factor that could improve the quality of services provided in any sector, including Social Care, a lot of barriers still exist.

For instance, In Romania, the digital skills are not mentioned at all in the job description for social care workers. The stakeholders consulted within Triple Helix claimed that the lack of mentioning of the need of digital skills for some positions in Social Care sector strongly affects the quality of services that social workers can provide. As a result, at the moment there is a strongly imbalanced distribution of digital skills among the social care workers at the national level. Development of digital skills depends on the involvement of the local managers as there is not any national strategy available. On the other hand, there is an acute need for training also for beneficiaries of social care. For example, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the beneficiaries did not have basic skills in order to use the video-conferencing platform. Moreover, in many cases, most of them did not have an appropriate infrastructure (internet connection or a computer). Therefore, before pandemic there was no pressure from the beneficiaries to use digital tools and only Covid-19 pandemic generated a such pressure.

Participants in workshops conducted in Italy, indicated three categories of barriers: 1) Those derived by the Italian Public Health system that is too slow in embracing digital changes and unable to innovate accordingly with the demands rising from the health care sector; 2) Those derived by the lack of action or vocational training in the social care sector. Surprisingly also students from university face difficulties in performing the training required to complete their career in nursing and social care assistance; 3) Gap between fieldwork operators' expectations, needs, and their employers' perspectives.

Spain also reported difficulties regarding a proper training offer in digital competences. Besides obtaining a professional certificate in the social home and institutional care it was strongly recommended the ICT (Information Communication Technology) course. A convenient timetable is mandatory to be settled because it is very difficult for a worker to combine courses and work or almost impossible. One way to achieve this flexibility is to promote "singular projects" to involve more carers in this complementary course in the use of ICTs.

Participants in workshops conducted in United Kingdom also indicated a list of possible barriers to digitalisation: cost of training, paid time off to train, no previous training and lack of access to internet and digital devices.



Potential for digitalisation and opportunities on digital skills

According to European Commission “the health and social care sectors make up about 21 million, i.e. around 10 percent of total employment in the EU, estimates forecast 12 percent more jobs in the sectors by 2030, which together with replacement needs means 10 million job openings in the next 10 years in health and social care”. At the same time, “the Health Tech in the EU is a fast-growing sector and highly skilled health workforce can support and accompany its innovation. The demand for basic and advanced digital skills will grow significantly by 2030 according to forecasts”.

Qualitative research conducted within ACSOL project identified different levels and potential for digitalisation and opportunities on digital skills in Social Care sector.

In Romania it was pointed out the importance of developing of a unique national database with information concerning the social care services. Even though the Covid-19 pandemic forced the use of some digital technologies, in many cases practices proved to be very useful. Therefore, the possibility to use the online platform/tools in order to conduct specific evaluations (e.g., in order to assess the of disability) or provide certain information should be keep and regulated. Some stakeholders suggested the development of a (social) e-store to facilitate the access of beneficiaries to appropriate safe products, (e.g., based on a social card). Some policymakers highlighted the importance of new applications for home care or recovery services, (in case of disabled, elderly, chronically ill) – for these beneficiaries, "assistive technologies are more useful than a smartphone or a computer.”

In addition, remote monitoring was identified in Italy as an activity with strong potential for development in the future. It refers to the possibility for carers to provide assistance using digital devices able to deploy the following functions and support assistants in performing the related tasks. Remote monitoring could cover aspects such as reporting patients' daily condition; reporting patients historical medical record or networking. It could help to administer daily treatment; rapidly survey of patients' anamnesis, compare and predict previous and upcoming conditions and consequent treatments; leave notes and comments useful to others (e.g. inform medical referent, familiars, to contact other actors whether needed in case of emergency - ambulance etc.)

Related also to the idea of remote monitoring, In Spain it was pointed out the importance of communication solutions and modalities for caring for the elderly could be especially. All the communication ways (telephone, e-mail or through internet platforms or social media) aim to mitigate the emotional isolation and loneliness of the elderly, based on voice, text and video, audio/video solutions etc. There is a great potential for developing leisure and entertainment digital solutions that aim to meet the social needs of the elderly or those unable to care for themselves.

In United Kingdom, the use of specific applications to control client's health, use of application to coordinate tasks with supervisors or carry out online purchases and procedures related to the Treasury



and other public administrations, do banking procedures such as check the balance and carry out operations represent future opportunities for digitalisation in the Social Care Sector.

Desirable digital skills for Social Care workers

As the *ICT for work: digital skills in the workplace* report published by the European Commission (2017) shows, basic digital skills are most required in the Social Care sector. They are usually including the ability to communicate via email, to create, edit and storing documents, search for information etc.

Because in many situations the activity involves collecting information from beneficiaries, the capacity to develop online questionnaires was indicated as an important skill by the representatives of the Romanian public social services.

In Italy it was mentioned the mid-high level of digital literacy with specific attention to knowledge of usage of devices and application for remote telecare; usage of digital tools for communication and networking; basic knowledge of demotics; high skills of create solutions to problems applied also to digital environment.

The most desirable digital capacities required to social workers identified in Spain includes the usage of tools related to the user safety (e.g. falls, taking medication); knowing how to use communication and management tools (both for the organisation of business activities and for providing information to clients); Microsoft Office skills: knowing how to make records, creating files, folders; use of “Smart Homes” tools: security aspects, comfort and convenience, temperature control etc.; knowing how to shop online, make online appointments; use of BetiON (the Basque Public Telecare Service).

In United Kingdom, the knowledge of office software (word, Excel, Power Point) was highlighted as very important for social care workers in order to exploit appropriate digitalisation potential. In addition, using a laptop or iPad, and sending and receiving emails are also necessary digital skills for social care workers.

Training provision for digital skills in Social Care Sector

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the enormous role of digital skills for Social Care sector. Therefore, access to continuous professional training is one of the most important factors that allow the workforce to get necessary skills for their job. The European Commission accepts that now there is an important digital skills-gap in the health and social care workforce. As a result, it recently launched an initiative to support the digital transformation of health and care systems in order to develop the digital competencies of the health workforce through education and training (European Commission, 2022).



The ACSOL project supports this initiative aiming to expand adult digital skills training provision through online learning with a particular focus on workers in social care. Workshops conducted within national triple helix set up by each partner involved in ACSOL project found out that, at the national level the situation concerning the training provision for digital skill in Social Care Sector is different but a lot of improvement is needed.

In Romania, at the beginning of pandemic, many social workers reported difficulties to convert their work to online format, “but they would like to participate in training courses, in order to have their digital skills developed”. During Covid-19 lockdown and after, the training was organized internally by each employer and in many cases, it functioned a peer-to-peer learning. For many small employers, the participation of employees in digital training is problematic since they have to give up some tasks in order to have time to attend the courses.

Workshops conducted in Italy revealed the importance of considering both perspectives of carers and employers. While care workers, home care workers, nurses etc. are aware of necessity to be trained and achieve new digital skills/higher levels of their current knowledge, employers do not act correspondingly because of their weak awareness on employers’ need for digital skills. Overcome this gap requires to structure future learning and training actions based on field workers’ current needs and demand for training, to guide employees in implementing effective training strategies. Workers from the field aim at be trained on: remote and telecare applications; web search for information applications; be aware on usage of health records, usage of digital tools for communication and networking for job purposes; knowledge of smart home app useful for job purposes.

In Spain, the Basque employment service (Lanbide) offers through its associated training centres a training for workers in the sector (The Application of Information and Communication Technologies in the Home Care Service). The course is the only one for this sector and of these characteristics registered in their training data register. It consists of 120 hours with several training modules. In order to access these lessons, the students must be in possession of the certificate of professionalism of socio-health care for people at home and in social institutions. One of the training entities (KZGunea) indicates that they are available to work in parallel in the development of tailor-made training initiatives. It is also emphasised that there is a lack of digital skills pathways and that there are significant barriers to attending training actions due to lack of time.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of technology for the continuation of the activity in the context of measures that imposed physical and social distance. In particular, in the fields like social care or entertainment, arts and culture where communication and face-to-face contact is important, the continuation of activity required a lot of creativity but also improvisation.

Research activity employed within ACSOL project was critical to understand this context. On the one hand it revealed the specificities of the situation and how services were provided in some European countries, and on the other hand allowed identifying the possible ways to develop further and improve digital skills, and support digitalisation in the sector.

Some key points were identified, and they are summarised below:

- The main focus of future training courses should be on the development of basic digital skills:
 - Data literacy skills (search for information online);
 - Communication and collaboration skills (sending and receiving emails and using social media, including WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype, Messenger, Google-talk, remote and telecare applications);
 - Digital content creation skills (Microsoft Office software, Google Workspace);
 - Problem solving skills (installing software or apps used in the sector).
- Training of basic digital skills should be realized taking into account the country specific: In Romania the lack of digital skills is higher than other countries analysed (at national level, in 2021, the share of basic overall digital skills was 28%); while in Italy was 70% and in Spain 64% (DigitalEU, 2021);
- Training courses must be adapted to different contexts: for example, in some countries such as UK, Spain or Italy there are available specific tools designated to social care service, in other countries (e.g., Romania) there are used common application (Microsoft, Google Workspace etc.);
- In addition to training courses for social care workers, an awareness campaign to beneficiaries should be considered concerning the importance of using digital tools and developing customized training courses to increase their level of digital skills.



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