

Chapter 14

Digitalisation of Social Services: Innovation for COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Digitalisation of social services by government agencies has been one of the core themes for innovation in recent times as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Governments and different agencies involved in the development and delivery of social services are increasingly moving to the digital platform to innovate and reach vast numbers of people spread across vast geographic regions, which have resulted in cost savings and better social services management, and better use of agencies resources. However, it's not clear how the customers perceive digital social services, the level of skills required, and the level of engagement needed for interacting with digital social services, and many other issues that are studied in this chapter. Innovation is a key primary driver to develop digital social services and understanding the process requires a deeper understanding of technical (e.g., digital technologies) and non-technical (e.g., people) issues that have been presented in this study.

INTRODUCTION

Social services have long been offered by government and non-government agencies through face-to-face interaction. In recent times those social services are being digitised and offered as digital social services. Digital adoption in recent times have been accelerated due to covid-19 and its impact on people globally using social services. Many government and social services institution have moved to digital adoption to fast track the delivery of social services to its people. Digitalisation of social services includes technology, people, and the government/ social service agencies providing digital service on a digital platform such as a smart phone, tablet, laptop, and any other computing devices (Duan, Kotey, & Sandhu 2021). In this aspect there has to be a clear understanding of the technologies driving digitalisation of social services, for example hardware/software, internet availability and speed, type of device used such as smart phones, tablets, laptops etc.

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Peláez & Marcuello-Servós (2018) explain that Internet, digital devices, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) have modified many of our traditional daily practices, from leisure habits to business dealings as well as public administrations and public services worldwide. Social services agencies are increasingly using digital services to manage workflow and to reach customers on a digital platform (Saavedra, Kotey, & Sandhu 2020). The digital platform used are users' smartphones, tablets, laptops and other computing devices connected to internet which can access digital data for social services. Wilson (2020) explains that the three key dimensions – access, affordability and abilities – form the basis of the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII). The index generates a more complex picture of personal digital inequality and provides an important insight into who is likely to be most impacted by the digital transformation stimulated by the COVID-19 crisis.

Binder (2020) suggests that during the pandemic, social services agencies have shown incredible resolve and innovation to deliver on their mission in uniquely difficult circumstances. As we emerge, there's a chance to build on the lessons learned and move further and faster ahead to outmanoeuvre future uncertainty. It's an opportunity that all agencies should take.

Digitalisation can be defined as the whole relations, structures and elements involved in the assumption of ICTs in any aspect of life. Digitalisation processes transform interactions with users, as well as their demands and needs (Peláez & Marcuello-Servós 2018; Tanniru, Xi, & Sandhu 2020). These also transform the organisations where social workers engage in professional practice with their clients to communicate and interact. And, finally, digitalisation produces a digital environment that creates its own context in which processes of exclusion are redefined, and where it is necessary to develop new strategies for diagnosis, intervention and assessment (Peláez & Marcuello-Servós 2018) that can lead to digital services delivery.

Ogle (2019) argues that Digital technology can be considered a new frontier of inequality because as government, commerce and culture increasingly go online (and close off access to physical shops, services and free-to-air content), those who are not part of the digital world will be left behind. More and more services and procedures are being digitised that offers convenience and cost effectiveness. A range of new digital procedures has opened up a broader dimension in research, therapies, interventions and social networks in the field. Newer forms of communication interaction such as video conferencing (e.g., zoom, google meet, skype etc) has led to real time interaction which has eliminated physical distance and geographical isolation of remote communities. A new area of specialisation is taking shape: e-social work, which is affecting social intervention as a whole in a transversal manner. We cannot assess the needs of individuals or groups without taking into account their online behaviour, their interaction with others and with institutions, or their digital skills. New processes of inequality and exclusion are emerging in digital social networks on the Internet, while old problems are being redefined (from paedophilia to harassment) (Peláez & Marcuello-Servós 2018).

Digital adoption is deeply penetrating into the different areas of human life. Digital technologies have changed the way we interact with others, giving rise to new areas of specialisation, such as online interventions or diagnoses based on the analysis of user behaviour in social networks. The ability to access, adapt and create new knowledge and new social intervention methods using ICTs is a crucial challenge for the social work profession. The Web 2.0 allows users to create content, thus fostering participation and changing the traditional communication model (while redefining the hierarchical role of the social worker in professional practice). The Internet of things, Big Data, games and mobile phones provide a new window of opportunity and enable us to design social interventions using more sources of informa-

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