Presence and Future of Work in Social Services

Opportunities and Risks of Digitalization in Social Work, Care and Education

Against the background of an ageing society, accompanied with its social problems and a rising rate of female employment, fewer senior citizens are attended at home by relatives. Hence, the request for social services in care, education and social work rises. In many places, the increasing demand for employees cannot be covered. In addition to the shortage of skilled workers, the social economy is currently facing a second central challenge – digital transformation.

Technologies such as computers, smartphones, robots and software virtually revolutionize everyday life and work. Grandparents videochat with their grandchildren on their smartphones thus overcoming large distances, and navigation systems enable outpatient nurses to move unerringly to their new patients even in unknown areas.
With the advancing digital development, not only digital products or forms of economy are changing, but also, for example, the cultural communication habits of clients and the framework conditions for working in the social economy.

Services in the field of social work, care and education are characterized by intensive relationship building and direct interaction with their addressees. How does this social service work change due to the digital transformation?

In contrast to industrial production, digital systems have penetrated the everyday working practice of social services far less intensively. Nevertheless, digital technologies are finding their way more and more into the workplace: sensors used in nursing care, for example, register when someone falls, and voice-controlled documentation systems and driverless transport systems are already in operation. In social work, too, the topic of digitalization is attracting increasing scientific attention. Social and digital media, online counselling, mobile learning, digital games and geocaching are tested and discussed in terms of their opportunities and risks when working with clients. Media pedagogical concepts are already being used, from day-care centers to child and youth welfare services.

While digital technologies are currently used primarily as documentation and billing systems, further use in the future is conceivable. For example, Big Data is used to assess the risk consequences of abuse and neglect of children in the USA and Australia, and in some federal states programs are used to forecast the perpetrators and risks in the area of probation services. Furthermore, therapy robots have already been developed which, as supporting or autonomous machines, exercise with paralyzed patients, or challenge dementia sufferers and autistic people with questions: A well-known example is the seal-shaped Paro, which is caressed by dementia patients, understands its name and expresses its feelings through sounds and movements. However, questions of data protection, civil rights and informational self-determination are associated with the use of such digital systems. Intelligent systems such as therapy robots and information technologies collect personal data, which hardware and software companies combine into personal profiles without disclosing the data and calculation bases.

Already established or imminent technological developments can change the practices of social work, generate decision-making aids or benchmarks and change advisory situations. In addition, digital change can lead to changes in social work practices, such as computer and online gaming addiction, cyberbullying or indebtedness due to in-app purchases.

The aim of the conference is to analyze the practice of social service work in the context of digital change. It should provide an opportunity to compare the use of digital technologies in everyday professional practices in various social fields and to reflect on the influence of digital change on professional practice, the profession itself and the work with clients.

Representatives of social work science, pedagogy, sociology, psychology, nursing, social welfare, economics and history are invited to present their perspectives on past, present and future digital practices in social service work. Students who report on the results of their qualification theses (Bachelor, Master) are also welcome. We are especially pleased about empirical (e. g. cross-country) and theoretical contributions.

Presentations can, for example, relate to the following questions:

1. **Digital fields of action of social services**: What opportunities and limits do digital technologies offer, for example, in media education, child welfare and youth work or working with senior citizens? In which digital fields of action are there experiences of use and how do digital media in turn change the forms of knowledge acquisition or consultation?

2. **Digitalization and profession**: How do professional decisions of employees in social services interact with the use of digital technologies in work processes? How does technology-subject-client-interaction take place? What values or algorithms determine the orientation of professional action, what room for maneuvre do employees have, and what criteria are used to evaluate the value of work?

3. **Digitalization, social participation and autonomy**: which accesses and which barriers do digital technologies contain for people with health impairments, a disability or who live in a structurally weak region? To what extent do digital systems enable or hinder autonomy for employees in social services and for their clients?

4. **Labor demand, digitalization and power**: what social service work (by studied experts, professionals, helpers) is in demand? Does the increased demand for labor change the power constellations on the labor market? Do the digital transformation and the shortage of skilled workers offer the opportunity to break down social inequality structures according to gender, social and ethnic origin or do they cement existing patterns?

5. **Digitalization and ethics**: Which are the ideas of man of clients and employees that guide the developed digital technologies? What values do they convey? What is the ethical responsibility of employees in and institutions providing social services?

6 **Digital economy and social services**: What role does work in social services play in the digital economy? What are the interactions and dynamics between the changes in the digitalized work society as a whole and social services?

In addition to the conference, which will take place in Nuremberg on March 12 and 13, 2020, you can register for the research workshop the day before, where techniques for conducting interviews will be learned and practiced.

Please send your presentation proposal as an abstract with a word limit of maximum 300 words to Carolin Freier (Carolin.Freier@evhn.de) by December 10, 2019.