EPR Online Annual Conference 2021

Digital transformation –

Learning from COVID 19, looking to the future

30 September 2021, 10:00-17:00 CET and 1 October 2021, 10:00-13:00 CET

Zoom

Report

Day 1

Introduction

Sabina Lobato, **Acting Chairperson of EPR & Director of Training, Employment, Operations and Transformation, Fundación ONCE, Spain**, kicked off the Annual Conference. She highlighting what was to come in the next 1.5 days: a mixture of interactive workshops, keynote speakers, project presentations and time to connect and reflect on what participants have heard and what this means for one's own practice, work environment and organisation.

Marie Dubost, the **moderator**, reminded people that there was interpretation in 4 languages (English, French, German, and Spanish) and that closed captions were available. The participants were encouraged to actively participate in the different sessions and to put questions in the chat, already during the presentations. She referred to the description of the speakers and the description of the five projects to be presented on the morning of 2 day which have been shared with all participants prior to the EPR's Annual Conference 2021 on the event's webpage.

The 81 participants, 56% of which women, were joining from a total of 16 European countries (all EU Members States) and from South Africa. Three quarters, i.e., 60 participants, came from EPR member organisations, 20% were speakers and 5% worked for organisations or institutions not affiliated to EPR. Three fifths (or 60 participants) worked with NGOs and 12 were from a public

body/state organisation; the other 9 participants were freelancers, consultants, researchers or people representing employers' organisations.

A **Mentimeter** survey was used as an icebreaker to ask the participants how many online meetings they already had this week and where they were joining from. They were also asked in an open question what they would like to learn about digital transformation at this conference. Some answers included: "Future developments", "New ideas", "Innovation", "Best/Promising Practices", "Practical innovative and inclusive digital tools", "More about artificial intelligence", "Likely development paths", "How will the digital transformation change our world of working and social service delivery?" and "How to successfully manage the digital transformation?"

Javier Güemes Pedraza, **Director of International Relations, Fundación ONCE, Spain**, the virtual conference co-host, highlighted in his introductory words that we are at a critical moment in the European Union, one and a half year into the COVID-19 pandemic. He pointed to the conference being very timely and offering a "platform" to bring together and facilitate exchange between different experts and approaches to support digital transformation in the social services sector and thus help to work towards a more accessible EU. Javier mentioned one key initiative included in the European Disability Strategy, the elaboration of an EU Framework for Social Services of Excellence for Persons with Disabilities by 2024. Digital transformation impacting on how these services will be delivered in the future would be one of the aspects covered, how it will affect the employment conditions and requirements of people with disabilities (PwD) another. Fundación ONCE has embarked on a strategic reorganisation process for its services and training courses to be able to better handle and shape the digital transformation happening that quickly. He closed by underlining that EPR is considered one of the main allies' of ONCE on this pathway and a great support in tackling all the issues on the Agenda of EPR's Annual Conference 2021.

Keynote 1

Liora Gross, **Global Head "Digital Transformation Practice", Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL)**

The mission and focus of Liora's company is to provide expertise in creating leaders and organisations that provide opportunities for growth, innovation, and digital integration. The work done at CCL is around creating the right environment for organisations and for leaders in those organisations to make digital transformation happen.

In her keynote speech, supported by a [slide set](), Liora pointed us to the concept of digital transformation at two levels. The 1st level being our relationships with technology and the mindset and culture to address it. The 2nd level is our response as leaders to digital transformation. The question was asked, what did we learn from COVID? We learnt that we can adapt very quickly but that it's not sustainable to have zoom meetings all day. Liora concluded that we thus need to find sustainable ways to live and work in what is now called the 5th Industrial Revolution.

Liora quoted [Gartner]() who claims that in 2020 a person has more daily conversations with bots than with her/his partner. By 2020, customers will also manage 85% of their relationship with an enterprise without interacting with a human. [By 2022](), 70% of white-collar workers will interact with conversational platforms on a daily basis. We don't always notice how AI has seeped into our lives; it almost has become like electricity. A graph was presented that showed technologies that have changed the mindset of people (internet, social media, mobile). Another part of the graph showed the coming of the 5th Industrial Revolution with innovations like 3D printing, robotics, and internet of things.

The graphs Liora presented on "Disruption" (cf. slides 5 and 6) illustrate that we our economies and societies are going to be exponentially changing, with disruptive innovations and with an

accelerating pace of change in many fields which in turn will also push companies and organisations to innovate. The final grey line on the right talks about disruptive changes in society and designing new scenarios for the way we live and work and therefore our relationships with technology, e.g., smart cities, driverless car. There is a potential for a crisis of trust in technology. The 5th Industrial Revolution is putting people back in with technology.

David Hanson, the creator of [robot Sophia](#), believes that such robots are a near possibility. Amazon have introduced Astro, a new kind of robot machine with advanced computer software and AI, which has a unique persona. In Japan in certain facilities a dog robot is used to help calm down elderly patients, thereby helping to temporarily plug gaps at a shortfall of staff in the caring industry. There are robotic-lead fitness classes and robots for children with autism helping with early diagnosis and treatment. It's clear our lives will become more integrated with bots and artificial intelligence (AI). Ethics and co-existence are key in the 5th Industrial Revolution which is about bringing machines and humans together.

The question "How do we reset ourselves for a post covid future?" was posed. It was highlighted that we are all at different stages of digital readiness. In this regard, Liora presented 4 stages: discovering, adopting, transforming, and differentiating. She also elaborated in detail about three streams of post-COVID organisational transformation, with a first layer dealing with people, a second with the organisations and the design of professional practice and a third with stakeholders (cf. slides 21 to 24). COVID has accelerated these transitions; what would normally take 3-5 years was done in a few months; and we are now left with processing that.

There was short-term crisis management in the first few months of the COVID pandemic; now we are coming out of this transition. Many experienced layoffs of colleagues. Now we are reconsidering our work moving forward, e.g., by assessing how many consultations to do online with patients versus consultations done face-to-face. We will face different ways of doing things with new partners and stakeholders, with our ecosystems becoming bigger. The importance of data analytics and engaging with startups to use their technology will also increase. We will be looking for different types of talents and may not all be full time employees but will be accessing different employers and partner organisations with new ways of working, new service models and products, making more decisions by using data.

Leadership is the decisive factor to achieve adaptability. Liora underlined that digital leadership must create direction, alignment, and commitment. Direction is how technological change is impacting our industry and what kind of new purpose that gives us. Alignment is about focusing on continued learning, learning agility, trying new things, failing, and learning and moving on. Thirdly, engaging people across organisations to enable effective change is key.

A fundamental question is: "What can you do differently as leader in the context of the digital transformation?" A leader needs to be a change champion, have a positive focus, shape skills, ask what resources are needed on the team and how the team members can instill innovative practices. The leaders need to be inclusive problem solvers, recognising that the more they and we practice different forms of inclusivity and celebrate diversity the better we can address and solve problems. These are key requirements we should focus on as digital leaders.

Ms Liora Gross rounded up her intervention by highlighting the 4 main points (cf. slide 28):

- Digital transformation must embrace people and purpose as well as (social and economic) progress and results.
- Technologies and people must integrate in new ways of working for a common purpose.
- We need to take care of people to build future ways of working, creating a new ecosystem of new partners and stakeholders.
- Leadership is the key moderator in adaptability and change for enterprises and organisations.

Questions and Answer Session

Q. 1-3: How do robots complement human interactions and not replace them? And how do we prevent AI developments creating discrimination due to biased data? How can we ensure this technology works for people with a disability?

A. A Centre at CCL investigates the links between AI and discrimination. Its job is to create awareness about the opportunities and risks of AI and to help understand where we have to be careful when using AI. IBM has ceased to use some of its facial recognition technology because of bias. Liora highlighted that we create the robots and thus have the decision-making power in how we wish to use them.

Q. 4: In social services the human component is so important. How do we make sure that AI doesn't replace this?

A. For the same reason, it's also up to us to educate ourselves. We need to promote compassion and creativity. This helps us to become clearer what we will use technology for, for example, to do routine automated work to free ourselves up for more complex jobs and tasks. The aim is to work in tandem with AI rather than AI taking over.

Q. 5: Personal contact in social services is so important. How can we bring staff and management on board with these innovations?

A. COVID has escalated the use of IT and AI and accelerated our digital transformation journey. The journey won't be successful without creating a purpose and removing the fear. Setting the direction of the digital transformation, also in the field of social services, is key and means on the one hand understanding what technology is going to do and on the other working out what is our purpose and our role. Liora recommended starting with small experimentations and then to scale them up. From on organisational perspective, it's about setting your own transformation roadmap and about accepting that you will be a learning organisation.

Q. 6: Based on your experience, what are some of the most exciting digital innovations in the social services rehabilitation sector could make use of?

A. Both AI and the robots pointed to, including the dog for persons with Alzheimer's and the robot for persons with autism. Now we are seeing baby Sophia robots (for a price of 2,000 USD) that can be used in the home. They can be programmed for education and rehabilitation. The shortage of care givers is leading to more robotics being used in the social services sector, too, including in rehabilitation services.

Keynote 2: Technological developments shaping the digitalisation of learning, teaching and training: Opportunities and challenges for social services

Prof. Dr. Andreas Schleicher, Director at the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD

Due to a short-notice conflicting commitment at an OECD event in Finland which overlapped with the time of his planned intervention at the EPR Annual Conference, Andreas Schleicher intervened by means of a pre-recorded intervention. This set-up did not allow to have a Q&A session after his keynote speech.

Andreas asked how we can educate students based on their future rather than our past. He highlighted how digitalisation has been democratising, homogenising, concentrating, and how technology is empowering, but can also be disempowering. He alluded to the fact that and how we can become slaves to technology and algorithms we don't understand, but which, nevertheless, still group us together. Skills needed to better deal with platforms and tools of digital learning, teaching, and training can be measured by a numeracy test. He also pointed out risks of automation closely related to the skills gaps.

Andreas presented other research results: A group of adolescents were asked "What do you want to do in your life", i.e., in which profession they would like to work? Many aspired to jobs that are unlikely to exist when they will graduate. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 15-year-olds spent 35 hours per week on the internet – with a large chunk of this happening in school – with the majority of them, however, not showing basic navigation skills. The average digital literacy skills score in 2018 for 15-year-olds did not go up compared to 2006. Another challenge is that less than half of them is easily able to distinguish fact from opinion.

Technology can help in the classroom. It can help teachers with children who need extra support, making learning more interactive. AI can help teachers track learning of the children, anticipate their development, and advise on how to advance learning best. It can be used to help detect needs such as dyslexia. The curriculum can be adapted according to the students learning style and behaviour. Engaging online learning can be difficult. There is the need to breakdown the learning components. Machine learning can be used to infer from machine readable signals how interested the student is in the class.

Technology can personalise learning and integrate insights on learning progress and strategies from a lot of students. It can help to set up the whole classroom as a digital system and capture how students interact with devices. Social robots can be useful tools to promote language learning through interaction. Digital assessment can integrate formative and summative assessments. A precondition for using all IT platforms, tools and devices is to have legislation which provides a safe and supportive overarching framework.

Andreas also highlighted that we are as a rule not good at integrating technology with education, the lacking ecosystem approach being one of the reasons for this disconnection. Schools often offer partial, no systematic solutions; a teacher, e.g., often has to navigate 5 to 6 software systems. One solution is for governments to push to increase compatibility between different technologies. We need better connected digital tools. We need to promote and adopt more holistic development of smart systems that blend human knowledge and experience with AI.

Presentation 3: Fundación's ONCE's Digital Transformation Strategy

Virginia Carcedo Illera, **Expert in diversity management, equality of opportunities, Fundación ONCE, Spain**

Virginia presented Fundación ONCE's Strategic Digital Transformation Plan, identifying people as key component and actors for digital transformation. For an organisation as Fundación ONCE, this transformation only makes sense if it allows to continue with offering services to all people. Lacking a comprehensive transformation plan would be counter-productive, too, because obsolete and ineffective processes would be continued. As one lesson learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of IT platforms, tools and material has been integrated in all pillars and actions of their transformation plan.

The Strategic Digital Transformation Plan of Fundación ONCE aims at addressing 4 key ideas and pursues 4 main objectives:

- Create new opportunities to improve the lives of PwDs.
- Carry out clear action with visible results and based on measurable indicators.
- Increase teamwork and at the same time enable the sharing of knowledge and the joint work towards the same objectives.
- Review the plan by paying attention to new opportunities and the creation of alliances and their benefits.

It has been internally discussed and agreed and is thematically linked to the 30 strategic actions of the Digital Transformation Programme of the Spanish government. They include areas like training and employment, accessibility, management, and alliances.

Fundación ONCE has various projects in a range of thematic areas, including human resources, which are ranked by order of priority. It reviews their effectiveness and efficiency every 6 months. Virginia underlined the need for and the various benefits of teamwork to successfully implement the digital transformation of an organisation such as Fundación ONCE

Questions and Answer Session

Q. 1: What would be your top recommendations for organisations in the field of disability when they decide to embark on such a digital transformation reflection and reorganisation process?

A. Virginia focused on 3 points: 1) Setting up a committee including a range of staff members; 2) Thinking about the importance of partnerships, including with employers, public funders, and the Public Employment Service; 3) Creating alliances and identifying indicators to measure progress, outcomes and impacts.

Q. 2: What recommendations would you have to policy makers to support the digital transformation possible for social service providers?

A. After the pandemic the relationship with the public administration as key funder of Fundación ONCE has become more relevant and has also improved. The investments needed for a successful digital transformation in line with the needs of the service users and professionals must be explained to the decision makers in the administration. Fundación ONCE also made the experience how important it is to find and have partners in administration, other NGOs or industry for concrete transformation digital projects.

Q.3: How did you convince management to go ahead with this project?

A. We needed investment for the project of organisation-wide digital transformation. Disability in Spain is "in fashion" and in the political sphere rather high on the agenda. Having a good reputation was helpful to convince the management of Fundación ONCE to fund the project.

Break-out groups to discuss the participants' practical experiences with the digital transformation in their services

After the Q&A session with Virginia, the participants were divided into 4 break-out groups, one Spanish-speaking and the other 3 run in English to breakout rooms to discuss about their experiences with digitalisation.

Closing words

Laura Jones, **Secretary General, EPR**, recalled that one of the main themes of the first plenary session was how do we harness digital developments for the good of our organisations. EPR will continue to bring in experts to share insights and innovations with its members. It will continue to look at good practices with the aim of balancing technology with human interactions. EPR looks forward to supporting members on their digital transformation path. EPR will continue with existing working groups and develop project proposals according to the member's needs. The Taskforce Teaching and Learning Online will continue to exchange promising practices. EPR hopes to have both online, but also again in-person meetings next year.

Laura announced that EPR Annual Conference 2022 will be held in Ireland, hosted by RehabGroup.

Workshops

The time in the afternoon of day 1 was dedicated to three workshops. The first workshop looked into mental well-being in a digital world of work and was run by Natalie Schürmann. The second workshop dealt with the theme "Technological transformation", with Lieven Bossuyt, Lichtwerk, as speaker. Workshop 3 dealt with the topic of "Digital skills transformation", building on two presentations by Alina Pavičevać, Social Employers, and Mathieu de Poorter, UNIPSO.

In order to allow the active involvement in two of the three parallel workshops for all participants, the three workshop sessions of 90 minutes were repeated.

Day 2

Welcome and Introduction

Marie Dubost, the **moderator**, kicked off the second day of the conference by making participants aware that translation (into French, German and Spanish) and live captioning are again available for the plenary sessions. Participants were encouraged to use twitter for live updates from the event and to partake in the **Mentimeter** survey. This was used to find out what fields of digital transformation participants are active, including in vocational education and training, employment services, independent living, assistive technology and medical rehabilitation and other.

In the Mentimeter survey, participants were asked two questions:

Q.1 What does digital transformation mean to you?

Answers included better service quality, more funding to support it, new way of working/a new structure of work and service provision, more choice for staff and service users, accessibility, the possibility to reach out to more people, ensuring social inclusion, the need for extra skills, the need to eliminate structural inequalities that are amplified by digital exclusion, and the task of digitalising learning and training materials.

Q.2 What's one thing you heard on day 1 of the conference that surprised you and why?

Answers included replacement of humans by robots, new advances in AI technology, the fact that we are teaching our children based on the past not for their future, new advances and the use of technology in employment support, technology to support the more vulnerable, hybrid mode is here to stay as a work style/we won't go back to 100% face-to-face and technology to support the more vulnerable.

Project presentations

Next there followed a session with the presentation of five digitalisation projects being carried out. Once a short presentation was given by all project leaders, the participants then chose a project they wanted to hear and learn more about and went into one of the five breakout rooms.

A brief written description of the five projects had been shared with the participants prior to EPR's Annual Conference 2021.

An outline of the projects can be found below including a more detailed account on Project 3 "accessjobs" presented by Jessica Rivero Espinosa, Fundación ONCE, Spain.

Project 1. Michael Backhaus, Manager of apprenticeship, vocational education and training & Coordinator of European Projects, Mariaberg, Germany

Michael shared a poster of the project which is about digital innovation in vocational education and training. He highlighted the positive idea of using digital tools in education and training especially in the field of social services. They have 10 partners from 8 countries in Europe. The project is an Erasmus project key action 2 based on exchange of good practices and discussions and comparing practices. The content includes communication hardware, a learning platform, generation management, health management, gamification. There is a holistic focus on digital tools, but the project also considers the impact of how to deal with it in the organisation. The project has started but had to suffer from a longer break regarding the meetings and workshops due to COVID. It meant more difficulties, but also helped illustrate the opportunities of digitalised vocational education and training services.

Project 2. Simon Brown, Global Technical Lead for Economic Empowerment, Kenya: Sight savers

The project is an IT programme in Nairobi. Before the COVID pandemic it was predicted that the world would be short of a significant number of people with IT skills and a gap in cyber security experts. Forecasts for labour market evolution 2020-2025 showed a clear acceleration in the adoption of new technologies among the companies surveyed – as outlined by the world economic forum "Future of Jobs Report 2020". It showed a clear growing demand for IT skills, e.g., robotics, cloud computing, encryption, cyber security, artificial intelligence, and bitcoin technologies. There is a growing demand for IT skills, people with disabilities, however, have struggled to acquire those skills in order to compete equally in the job market. CISCO is a company that specialises in interconnectivity. It set up a not-for-profit programme in 1997 and since then has trained 18 million people (until 2018). Only 3,000 have been students with disabilities, clearly indicating their strong underrepresentation. Taking the CISCO model and adapting it for people with disabilities in Nairobi in an academy is an opportunity to effectively support PwD to compete equally in the job market for IT skills for the future.

Project 3. Jessica Rivero Espinosa (Project Manager, Fundación ONCE and Inserta): Accessjobs

This project looks at making meetings accessible to everyone. People with hearing impairments, visual, cognition and motor difficulties have encountered multiple difficulties in using video conferencing tools including difficulties with using functions and finding them. Often the user is not involved in the design of these tools. For example, there are problems with the person with hearing impairment seeing the captions due the screen being too small, or subtitles lagging behind what a presented/speaker is saying. The main idea behind the project is to create a web video conference platform incorporating end users and accessibilities experts at the design phase.

How does Fundación ONCE do this? When the user enters the platform, they can see all pending meetings and can configure accessibilities options for all the meetings. For example, subtitles will be from minute zero, so they won't miss out on anything from the meeting. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is used for text simplification so that people with cognition difficulty can follow the meeting. You can have an image reader so that the text content in the presentations as well as descriptions of images and graphics are well communicated.

The aim has been working on a platform to break barriers that PwD have in accessing meetings. If you have been in a meeting with a PwD you have seen these problems, e.g., when sharing the screen, information goes missing, the person only sees an image if the presenter doesn't describe it. The solution can be a screen reader which reads everything for people with visual impairment. In Zoom, e.g., when a screen is share, people with visual impairment are unable to see anything. If the presenter/speaker does not explain what they are sharing in the screen, the person with visual impairments loses all the information.

What Fundación ONCE is are doing is incorporating optical character recognition which is an algorithm based on AI which divides the screen into different areas. Every word on the screen

which is accessible to the screen reader is then read. In the case of images, alternative descriptions are added to images, a description is given about the image, statistical graphs are explained. A blind person will thus know more about the graph.

Translation is done in real time, not beforehand. Before the meeting a document is sent for guidelines to the presenters who have to ensure their presentation meets certain criteria so the presentation can be interpreted by the algorithm.

Through pilot projects users were asked what they wanted in this platform. They requested simplification of the text for those with cognitive difficulties. AI was applied to simplify text, e.g., some words are repeated, some long sentences are made shorter.

After the meeting a person can see what others have said which can be good for those who are hard of hearing. Summaries and simplified minutes are also available after the meeting.

Users are involved from beginning and testing is done with users every 3 months with feedback sought. The aim is to have the final product ready by 2022 December.

Project 4. Dr Joe Cullen, Tavistock Institute and Arcola Research: Medici

This project involved mapping digital inclusion and was funded by the European Parliament. It deals with the issue of dual exclusion. Social inequalities and exclusion are amplified by digital exclusion including access to technologies. If you are disabled or have a low income you are much less likely to have the skills to engage in a digital society. For example, 14% of people in the EU have never used the internet in their lives. Digital exclusion includes a difficulty with access, e.g., to broadband, another aspect are users not having the skills to use the technology. Now we are in a situation of triple exclusion due to COVID as people who missed out were those with limited access and knowledge of digital tools. Over 1.5 billion learners were unable to continue their education due to the pandemic. Those who suffered the most were those unable to afford the digital educational tools needed for home schooling. The project partners were asked to share information and recommendations on tools which can effectively support the inclusion of people who were vulnerable in social and digital economic life. The project developed a catalogue of good practices in digital interventions throughout Europe and an interactive map that enables you to look at different practices and to use different filters, such as specific target groups.

Project 5. Henrietta Hansen (South Denmark European Office). Digital & Innovation Skills Helix in Health (DISH)

This is an ERASMUS + Project and a Sector Skills Alliance Project. It deals with the healthcare sector and involves 19 partners from 6 countries and 2 pan-European partners. The main aim was the sustainable development of the healthcare sector. It was recognised that for this to happen it was necessary to look into the quality of care, working methods and working environment, and also to work on improved efficiency in the healthcare sector. The aim would be to develop digital solutions for all kinds of services. One of the key project outcomes is that the staff in the health and social services need the skills in order for digital solutions to be used in a good way and to their full potential. The project partner work with both digital skills, innovation readiness and also implementation and management skills. A needs analysis was completed; and it was discovered that there are a lot of digital solutions out there already but not yet used to their full potential. It was clear that staff needed hands on skills in order to use and implement these solutions in their daily work. Contextualised training is seldom provided as it seems complex and time consuming to plan. The DISH project's aim thus is to try and make it manageable by developing three different kinds of concepts: 1. Setting up of learning and innovation units which is to ensure better development and uptake of eHealth solutions. 2. Provision of on-the-job training which involves providing staff in the healthcare sector with better eHealth competencies. 3. Implementation of a skills and competency assessment which is to ensure recognition of the digital qualifications acquired and mobility of healthcare staff.

Panel discussion "How can the digitalisation/digital transformation support quality social services?"

Next followed a panel debate on the theme "How can digitalisation/digital transformation support quality social services?", moderated by **Laura Jones**, **Secretary General, EPR**.

The four panelists were: 1) **Pablo Gómez**, **Executive Manager, Fundación INTRAS**; 2) **Alfonso Lara-Montero**, **Chief Executive, European Social Network** (ESN); 3) **Alejandro Moledo**, **Head of Policy** and Policy Coordinator on accessibility for persons with disabilities in ICT and assistive technologies, **European Disability Forum** (EDF); and 4) **Inmaculada Placencia Porrero**, **Senior Social Policy Expert, Unit D.3 "Disability and Inclusion, DG EMPL, European Commission**.

Q1. What does digialisation mean in your field of work? And what challenges and opportunities do you see?

All four panellists were asked this first question, contrary to the other questions addressed to one.

Inmaculada Placencia, Senior Social Policy Expert, Unit "Disability and Inclusion", DG EMPL, EC

Digitalisation, the transition to a digital society and economy, is at the heart of what is being done in relation to the participation of PwD. At the European Commission the issue of participation by PwD and older persons in the digital society and use of technology for social inclusion of PwD has been on the agenda since 1990's. It was recognised, that there was a need to work on inclusion in the digital society and the use of technology for the better inclusion in the real physical world. The European Disability Strategy 2021-2030 for the rights of people with disabilities has been adopted recently. The importance of digitalisation is reflected there. The transition to digital systems is included in the mainstreaming of disability issues, whether it is in the area of justice, health, education or VET. The European Disability Strategy 2021-2030 puts an emphasis on how PwD can get access on equal terms with others as well as on their participation in policy making. For the EC it is key that digital action plans also cater for disability and accessibility issues. The European Disability Strategy has a focus on the implementation of accessibility. It will also support professionals to deliver more services online which respect the rights and needs of PwD.

Pablo Gómez, Fundación INTRAS

At INTRAS, there is a strong focus on research and development and on innovation. Both the user and professional have to be at the heart of the process of digitalisation and co-design it. Pablo emphasised that we have moved from technologies where no users were involved to technologies where users were included to some extent; now we need to move to the point where the user is involved from the beginning, i.e., towards the co-production of digital tools, materials, and services. This is also a human resources issue and a question of skills and training. Another part of the strategic goals of INTRAS when it comes to the digital transformation is to look at influencing the politicians and policy makers at various levels to foster policies that support real digital inclusion.

Alejandro Moledo, Head of Policy, European Disability Forum (EDF)

Alejandro highlighted that EDF is very active on digitalisation. They see technologies for people with disabilities opening up a wide range of opportunities for them. This aim is also well reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPPD) which is the first human rights treaty that recognises access to ICT as fundamental right which has to be ensured to PwD. To address the risk of social and economic exclusion, services need to be available, affordable and accessible ("triple A"). There is the need to make lots of robust legislation on accessibility in the EU using the EU Accessibility Act, including to guarantee an effective digital inclusion. Alejandro also pointed to the challenge of implementing legislation to live up to the existing standards for ICT accessibility. He finally underlined the need, but in particular also the benefits, of involving PwD as of the development phase for digital tools, materials and services.

Alfonso Lara-Montero, Chief Executive, European Social Network (ESN)

The European Social Network has 155 member associations from 35 countries. ESN has been working on technology already for a number of years. Digitalisation is one of the crucial areas and is key for the transformation of social services. A working group was launched on digitalisation in 2019 with the aim to reflect on how the increasing role of technology impacts social services management. An initial questionnaire was done which identified a series of emerging technologies already having a profound impact on a number of services, on service planning and their evaluation. Some of this is related to socially cognitive assistive robots, AI, case management systems, use of big data and care aids. In ESN's working group it became clear that social services were ready to invest in digitalisation. The COVID-19 pandemic has further encouraged social services to explore digitalisation, especially, in case data management and service improvement.

The findings also involved several recommendations. The first one is to ensure that the needs of the populations receiving social services are integrated in data and case management. The second is to ensure that digital tools and case management systems are co-developed with a mixed team of developers, practitioners and the service users. The third is to ensure that such systems are ethical and in line with data protection requirements, especially when big data is involved. The disruption that COVID-19 has created also brought about those transformations we have been speaking about for years and now are finally being implemented. This also brings a new dimension to the work ESN is doing. In the next years ESN will be looking are the legal structures that need to be in place to support data sharing, at user innovation and how to move beyond prototypes and also at new technical improvements to support people's independence.

Q2. The fact that approximately 51.6 million disabled people risk being digitally excluded would suggest that policies are not working too well in the disability field. Is this in line with your findings in general? What recommendations or what initiatives would you like to see to deal with this issue?

A. Alejandro answered to this question: One important condition is the availability of the right technology. This impacts on the uptake and use of technology by PwD. This includes mainstream technology and technology specifically developed for PwD. Key variables are the support provided for PwD when choosing technologies and digital tools and if they are maintaining and updated. There is also the issue of the complexity of some of the digital solutions. A permanent challenge for the technology sector in view of specific needs of PwD is to make their solutions easier to understand, easy to use, and also accessible.

Q3. How can the digitalisation process be implemented as part of the organisational culture? What would be the process?

A. Pablo took up this question: The focus an organisation must have, is to think about the opportunities. For example, to think about the quality of life of the person, asking them what type of support they want to help them live and work and how the digital resources can provide this support. INTRAS is working on better integrating the user's needs. And this also implies lobbying work with policymakers and those working in local and regional administrations as digital transformations cost money. During COVID 19 collaboration was promoted between services, competent administrations, and decision makers.

Q4. Which digital tools for service improvement do you see/know about?

A. Alfonso answered to this question by highlighting that a key element of digitalisation is to focus on the end result. Many different providers, including the members of ESN, need to support the citizens in a coordinated way. It isn't necessary to digitalise everything, but where it is easier and safer for citizens and social services professionals to use digital services, in particular during a pandemic, this adds big value. AI can help addressing social problems or professionals making decisions about the type of support that a beneficiary may be entitled to. One example is an AI

project being implemented by the Social Services Department in Barcelona which uses the information on interventions with people supported by them and included in 300,000 files to create a model with machine learning which helps detecting problems and then makes a proposal. In Riga, the elderly care institutions have implemented alerting systems in case elderly people don't move or react after a given time. Local authorities in the UK use collaborative robots (cobots) to help care professionals with getting a frail person who has fallen and is lying on the ground to get up again. Afonso finally underlined the crucial need to have professionals involved in the technical development process of digital tools, remote services, digital material, AI, etc. they use.

Q5. How can we improve cyber hygiene which also tracks with digital skills? Would you be in a position to let us know it little bit what your unit or the commission in general is planning in this field or would like to focus on any kind of initiatives or things that are coming up that will hopefully also address some of these concerns around digital skills.

A. Inmaculada answered to this question: Digital skills training goes hand in hand with training of digital experts and training end users of the technology. There is the need, too, for training around accessibility, including for professionals for them to be able to use the assistive technology making it work seamlessly with mainstream technology. At a national level, training of persons with disabilities but also of older persons and disadvantage groups on digital skills can be organised with the financial support from the European Social Fund (ESF). Some of the main needs are good internet connectivity, the training around the use of accessibility functions within mainstream technology and the training on the assistive technology for PwD. It's important, however, also to keep in mind that some PwD, but also other service users, e.g., elderly people, don't want technology but prefer a phone or personal contact.

Q6. Will the digital dimension be taken into account in the Framework for Social Services of Excellence for Persons with Disability announced for 2024 in the European Disability Strategy?

A. Inmaculada commented that the European Commission has indeed committed there to elaborate by 2024 such a specific framework on the basis of the European Voluntary Quality Framework for Social Services (2010). It would also have a digital transformation angle.

Q7. Is there anything pertaining to the topic of digital transformation that has not been addressed in this particular panel, something that you would like to also bring to attention?

A. Alejandro pointed out that key principles of the universal design approach are flexibility, choice and the preferences of a person. He highlighted that people should not be pushed into just one way of accessing social or administrative services. The more convenient option for many PwD may not be their preferred option. AI brings opportunities but also the risk of discrimination, e.g., in the sphere of recruitment. Machine learning can eventually also discriminate PwD because the data sets used are, as a rule, biased as they don't include the realities and needs of PwD. It is therefore important to make sure that the algorithms are transparent and the IT companies using them are accountable of the decisions of these algorithms when working on machine learning.

In their closing words, the four panelists mentioned a number of issues:

- Having 5G band width to remote places was noted as a challenge, but also a need, not to exacerbate the digital exclusion of PwD in rural or socially more disadvantaged areas, e.g.
- The options to increasingly use AI for activities of daily living were noted a a positive point. AI can provide support for PwD with finding a job and for professionals to make decisions about the appropriate services and interventions.
- However, the biases stemming from machine learning and impacting on PwD need to be addressed. This can, e.g., be well done by the involvement of users in the process of digital tool development from the beginning.

- Databases to support decision-makers to take the right decisions on digital transformations and transfer resources across services need to be improved. There are some examples of these during COVID-19, e.g., applications that combine analytics with social inclusion.
- It was highlighted that public administrations should be asked to use public procurement processes as many of the services needed to support the digital transformation are not available in the market and thus still need to be developed for the sector of vocational rehabilitation and services for PwD.
- Finally, the need for services to support people remaining in their own home through the use of technology as a choice was highlighted. When technology is introduced, it is essential to monitor any invasive use of technology to secure a human-based approach.

Poem/Spoken Word Artist

Following the panelist discussion, Jessy James LaFleur, spoken word artist, performed the poem "Everybody Welcome", impressing and moving the participants as became clear for their reactions to the chat. It can be accessed here on the event's webpage.

Conference Quiz

Following the poetry, the conference quiz was launched, again using **Mentimeter**. The six questions and the correct answers (or in case of Q2 a selection of answers) are reproduced below.

Q1. From how many countries did the speakers and participants come from?

A. 16 countries

Q2. I would like you to comment on some of the things, some of the learnings that you have taken out of this conference and share your thoughts, may be some of the main lessons that you learned about digital transformation, both the opportunities, the challenges and context of COVID and the pandemic and also how digital transformation can benefit your organization.

A. One participant commented that it was very interesting to hear about what Fundación ONCE is doing about their digital transformation strategy; that you adapt to the changing environment; that there will be no transformation if you don't have a strategy behind how to actually use that or integrate that change systematically. Other participants commented on how it was very interesting to see the different AI solutions that are already used on the market for vocational education and training. Others mentioned the interesting speakers and project presentations, including the one by Henriette Hansen on how to train people and how to make people participate in skills training. Another participant mentioned that we have to raise our hands for people with disabilities that they can take part in the digital transformation in society and that we give them a voice on what they need and thus can better create a future.

Q3. How many speakers in the plenary sessions and workshops do we have?

A. 17

Q4. which period did the European commission announces new disability strategy?

A. 2021-2030

Q5. In which year and which city where the European pillar of action rights action plan presented?

A. 2021 Brussels

Q6. So which one of these names is not one of the robots shown in the video yesterday?

A. Nimbo

Closing words

After the conference quiz, Laura Jones, **Secretary General, EPR**, first thanked all speakers for their contributions, the participants for their active engagement over the 1.5 day, the moderator for having led competently through the event and the EPR team for the preparation and organisation of the Annual Conference.

She then gave the floor to Veronika Kaska, **Vice-Chairperson of EPR and Deputy Director of Astangu, Estonia**. Veronika highlighted that she got quite a lot of information and "food for thought" which should also inspire the strategical discussions and decisions on the digital transformation in EPR's membership. The conference covered both the human and the technical/technological aspect of the digital transformation – which cannot be done if the people that need to implement and/or use digital solutions don't come along with you on that pathway. Veronika referred to the 3 AAAs for technology solutions, i.e., accessible, affordable, and available services, but also underlined that for PwD the safety and security of the technology used is key. She thanked Jessy JamesLaFleur for her eloquent and beautiful poetry performance and invited everybody to think again about her words. Veronika also thanked the EPR teams for the fabulous work done in preparing and organising another digital Annual Conference, after 2020.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed below were not presented to the participants and discussed at a specific moment of EPR's Annual Conference as this was not foreseen in the programme. They thus are taken from the interventions of the speakers in the plenary sessions or emerged from the exchanges – in the different formats offered during the one and a half days – with the participants.

Taken from the presentation by Liora Gross

- Digital transformation must embrace people and purpose as well as (social and economic) progress and results.
- Technologies and people must integrate in new ways of working for a common purpose.
- We need to take care of people to build future ways of working, creating a new ecosystem of new partners and stakeholders.
- Leadership is the key moderator in adaptability and change for enterprises and organisations.
- In order to bring staff and management on board with digital innovations and the digital transformation of an organisation they are working in, it's about setting your own transformation roadmap and about accepting that you will be a learning organisation.

Taken from the pre-recorded speech of Prof. Dr. Andreas Schleicher

- Use technology in a way to personalise learning and integrate insights on learning progress and strategies from a lot of students
- When using IT platforms, tools and devices, including in the social services sector, there is a need to have legislation which provides a safe and supportive overarching framework.
- Governments should push to increase compatibility between different technologies. The education and VET systems need better connected digital tools.
- There is also the need to promote and adopt more holistic development of smart systems that blend human knowledge and experience with AI.

Taken from the Policy Panel

- There is a need to move towards the co-production of digital tools, materials, and services.

- There is the need to make lots of robust legislation on accessibility in the EU using the EU Accessibility Act, including to guarantee an effective digital inclusion.
- There is a need – and there are many benefits to come with it – to involve PwD in all phases for the development of digital tools, materials and services.
- The users receiving social services need to be integrated in data and case management.
- There is a need that data and case management systems in social services are ethical and in line with data protection requirements, especially when big data is involved.

Evaluation

The evaluation was generally very positive, with an overall rating of 4.7/5, however, only builds on 9 evaluation forms filled in, all of them by EPR members. For two thirds of the respondents the expectations were fully matched (5 out of 5), for one third to a large extent (4 out of 5). 7 out of 9 respondents were fully satisfied with the speakers, 2 out of 9 considered the speakers inspired them to a large extent.

Asked if they gained relevant knowledge and information in the different sessions, with one exception – and rating 3 "it was OK" – all other feedback given either were "good" or "very good". The 5 projects presented on day 2 were all rated 4 ("good") or 5 ("very good"). No feedback was given on the moderator (performance; points to be improved). Most appreciated were the project presentations, the workshops (here particularly mentioning Lieven Bossuyt, WS 2), the spoken word artist Jessy James LaFleur and the broad range of perspectives, aspects and projects shared. Asked for what change the most frequent answer was the wish to move back to an interactive face-to-face setup or at least a hybrid setup of the Annual Conference, 4 of our 9 respondents also wrote "Nothing" and/or "It was perfect".

All respondents have heard about the event either from their Centre Coordinator, another colleague in their organisation or from the EPR newsletter. Asked if any topic, subject or idea emerged at the Annual Conference that participants would like to work on (more) in the future, answers were "How to improve IT solutions in my organisation", "Impact of technology on those using it directly" and "Learning more on augmented reality technology".

We finally got a broad range of answers to the open question "Which ideas, comments or reflections will you remember the most from the Annual Conference?" The participants who had filled in the evaluation form, more generally, saw the need 1) to address digitalisation as an opportunity while ensuring accessibility, usability, sufficient funding and data security and privacy, 2) to have a (comprehensive and integrated) strategy, underpinned by the "3 AAAs for technology solutions", namely availability, accessibility, and affordability, also entailing the right to say no to using technology and 3) to learn from already working solutions in the sector. More specifically, they highlighted the need 1) to reorganise work processes to support the digital inclusion for people with disability, inspired by the guiding idea to put people first and to have services enabling inclusion, equality and independence, 2) to improve the accessibility of digital services, 3) to create authentic and good contact also in remote/online arrangements and 4) to find ways to best use artificial intelligence in teaching and training services.