

Examining and developing inclusive approaches to introduce digital technologies in voluntary sector social care organisations

ESRC-funded project: 'The Care Necessities: Developing Inclusive Digital Technologies for Scotland's Post Pandemic Social Care'

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Prior observations: Uptake of pre-existing technology in social care

- Lack of staff involvement in the choice of new technology; resistance to using digital devices that increased time and task discipline in daily work
- Engagement with technology was mainly self-organised



Prior observations: Uptake of pre-existing technology in social care

- Reinvigoration of management efforts to persuade workers to adopt the technology with the onset of the pandemic; uptake in usage amongst teams of workers
- **Pandemic context:** changes in the role, introduction and uptake of technology and its consequences for workers?

Prior Research

- Digital technology to standardise care, deliver efficiency, savings and forms of control
- Negative impact of biomechanical devices and work monitoring tools on service and job quality, incl. relational elements of care
- Limited or lack of worker and service user participation in introducing tech in care contributes to implementation failures

Telecontrol (health related measures)

Communication & Entertainment

Bio-mechanical support

Monitoring, Supervision, Control

Prior Research

- Worker agency in response to the introduction of technology (coping strategies; individual and collective resistance)
- Technology acceptance and usage needs to focus on contextual factors (e.g. fit with mode of care delivery, socio-emotional dimensions rather than efficient, task-oriented caring; and interactional engagement and professional skill)
- COVID-19 as a disruption to austerity-driven norms of service provision and a widening of spaces for promising practices in social care workplaces from the introduction of technology?

Aim of the project

- Understand the extent to which social care organisations have introduced or upgraded technology during the pandemic.
- Explore issues of participation around who has choice and voice (including workers and care users) in introducing digital technologies.
- Draw lessons learned from the pandemic about the introduction of technological innovation and identify promising participatory practices towards inclusive digital post pandemic care.

What we did

- Case studies of 4 VSSC providers (adult aged care, multi-provider largely physical disabilities, children's services)
- Data collection: Pandemic context December 2021- ongoing
- Conducted over 45 interviews
 - Senior managers (operations and service managers, Digital/IT, HR and L&D)
 - Digital/IT, HR and L&D staff
 - Line managers
 - Front-line care staff
 - UNISON officials and representatives

Pre-pandemic use of digital technology

- **Variable pre-pandemic investments** in technology aimed at workers and service users
- Role of technology in **record keeping and surveillance, online learning**
- **Management rationales:** increased efficiencies and productivity; labour savings and devolving tasks to front-line; improved quality of care delivery; quality assurance and meeting funder requirements

Technology during the pandemic in VSSC workplaces

Strategic and opportunistic acquisition of hardware and software brought about or accelerated by the pandemic

Legacy of **demands for increased digital skills** among the workforce

Impact of these forces on skills requirements in technology, organisational learning and development policies, recruitment and retention, **...and the workforce?**



Impact of demands for increased digital skills

- **Establishment of new roles** (e.g. Digital Champions)
- **Minimal or limited formal digital training**

“Well I think I became the digital champion because I knew a bit more about IT from using it at home and I wasn’t scared...”(CW)



Impact of demands for increased digital skills

Normalisation of digital skills in social care settings:

- Rationalised through resource constraints and pandemic context
- Digital skills not seen as needing reward, further diminishing their value

“They know how to use their phone at home!” (HR manager)



“Simple” devices for complex work

- **Neglecting the complexity of work:** expectations of dexterity; application of one-size-fits all technology solutions
- **Minimal inclusion** of the workforce
- Technology sometimes **inadequate, dysfunctional, lack of connectivity**



Impacts on the workforce and service delivery

- Ability to maintain contact with difficult to reach groups and family members during the pandemic; ease of communication within teams and with line managers
- Some evidence of service innovations; increased digital inclusion of service users



Impacts on the workforce and service delivery

- Work intensification
- Further undervaluation of skills in care, downgrading of skills; perpetuation of ageist and gendered stereotypes:

“Technology just scares them”
(HR manager)



Post-pandemic

- Implications for recruitment?
 - Caring *and* digital skills in a difficult labour market
 - Prospects of a digitally skilled workforce open to doubt given the aforementioned training & development infrastructure as well as lower status and under-resourcing of IT departments
- Diminishing impetus to digitalisation with a return to face-to-face service delivery?

Organisational and policy implications

- Digital inclusion agenda: not just for service users, but also for the workforce
- Digital skills as a part of recruitment
- Need for increased investment in workforce development in digital skills



Organisational and policy implications

- Government and employer recognition of complexity and context of applying digital tech in the workplace setting
- Reward for additional digital tech skills
- Adopting inclusive approaches that account for workforce participation in the introduction of digital technology in VSSC workplaces



Questions for discussion

- What are the key challenges for your organisation from demands for increased digital skills since the pandemic?
- How might these research findings influence your organisation's approach to using digital technology and supporting a digitally skilled workforce?

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