

# From resistance to acceptance. How the digitalisation imposed by COVID-19 is changing the relationship between the social service and digital technologies

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## *Abstract*

*The article reflects on the opportunities that digitalisation offers to rethink and innovate the role of the social service and the function of the social worker. It is based on the results of a qualitative research carried out by interviewing social service managers in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region about changes introduced in their service by the digitalisation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article focuses in particular on the changes that have occurred in the relationship between social workers and ICTs. The results show that much of the resistance that social workers showed towards ICTs before the pandemic has been overcome. They however still seem to be passive and executive rather than active and creative towards them. In this regard, however, further in-depth studies are needed to highlight the actual processes of appropriation of ICT by social workers. The results confirm that ICTs are able to trigger organisational learning processes that can change the way practitioners work and the way services are organised. They also offer interesting insights into how to exploit the positive aspects of the digitalisation imposed by COVID-19 and how to rethink the training of social workers in order to develop and enhance their digital skills.*

## *Keywords*

*Digitalisation, social service, innovation, learning.*

## **Digitalisation as a tool for social service innovation**

Throughout the world the COVID-19 pandemic boosted the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) in social services (Mishna et al., 2021) and Italy was no exception. The rapid enforced roll-out of ICTs required to ensure the continuity of services also helped speed up their uptake by the Italian social service, which

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until the pandemic was beset by the limitations and backwardness typical of the level of digitalisation in the country as a whole. Their diffusion in social services has been a recent phenomenon, mainly driven by certain professional associations that have begun to exploit web resources (Di Rosa et al., 2018) or to experiment with innovative forms of responding to emerging needs (Di Rosa et al., 2019).

Prior to the pandemic, social workers were far from being «DigiComp 2.0 professionals' (in line with the Digital Competence Framework for EU Citizens) who know, exploit and apply ICT in support of their professional activities (Di Rosa et al., 2018). Instead their attitude to ICTs was ambivalent. Some perceived them as tools for facilitating contact and relations with users, while others, especially those lacking digital skills, regarded them as instruments of mere entertainment, or possibly even harmful. These attitudes confirm the fear and resistance that has long been highlighted by a large body of international literature, which reports that many practitioners see ICTs as something that has no place in social services. They believe that the standardisation of communication methods inherent to ICTs threatens the direct relationship between practitioner and user as well as the values and relational nature of social work (Garrett, 2004; Parton, 2008; Reamer, 2013, 2023).

The Diffusion of Innovation theory (Rogers, 2010) argues that the acceptance of a technology and its diffusion within organisations depends on the intrinsic characteristics of the innovation itself. This includes the compatibility between a product/service and the norms and values of a social context, practices in use and users' needs, as well as the relative advantage it grants, i.e. the greater or lesser potential that a product/service has for offering a particular benefit to its user compared to a previous product/service, the complexity, i.e. the difficulty of use perceived by the user, the trialability, i.e. the possibility of trying out a product/service before buying and adopting it, and observability, i.e. the possibility of grasping and observing the innovative scope of the product/service. Bullock and Colvin (2015) also found that the integration of ICTs in social work is closely linked to the perception of their usefulness and ease of use by practitioners.

Reflecting the fear and resistance noted before the pandemic, the reactions of Italian social workers to the forced use of ICTs during the pandemic ranged from the scepticism of those who felt constrained to use a technology that only allowed relationships stripped of messages conveyed by personal communication, to the amazement of others who discovered for the first time the potential that these tools offer for interacting with service users as well as practitioners (Sanfelici et al., 2020). The social workers who made this discovery emphasised the positive contribution of ICTs: they helped people to stay in touch, reducing the sense of anxiety and stress linked to isolation and the uncertainty of the situation; they made it possible to continue the care pathways of the most vulnerable and to maintain communication between family members and guests of residential services through remote meetings and video calls; they made it possible to continue many activities between practitioners and with particular groups of service users through the platforms; they succeeded in fostering the development of self-help groups. Work-

ers also acknowledged advantages in terms of saving time, creating connections even at significant distances, and sharing information, but also understood the risks such as those associated with particularly vulnerable users and the exclusion of people who do not have these tools and the skills to use them.

The study by Mishna et al. (2021), however, highlights how in other contexts the pandemic has marked a paradigm shift in the use of ICTs, leading many practitioners to realise that the relationship with the user is not diminished by ICTs. Instead, by giving access to people's private sphere, ICTs allow them to develop an intimacy and a level of trust that reinforces the relationship. The authors describe this outcome as «paradoxical» in that it overcomes much of the resistance and fear still widespread regarding their use in social services. The evidence gathered by the authors, however, confirms persisting concerns about a possible increase in users who would be excluded from the use of services because they did not have access to ICTs, and about difficulties experienced by practitioners when setting boundaries in ICT-mediated relationships with users.

The impetus that COVID-19 gave to digitalisation and the benefits it has brought about lead to the conclusion that digitalisation represents a challenge for the Italian social services that we cannot ignore. This means reconceptualising approaches, practices and technologies (López Peláez & Marcuello-Servòs, 2018; López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023), defining guidelines and ethical standards (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017; Byrne & Kyrwan, 2019; Hill & Ferguson, 2014; Reamer, 2023) introducing specific training pathways in social service curricula (Aparicio & Sanchez, 2023; Zhu & Andersen, 2021; Byrne, 2023; Jewell et al., 2021; Di Rosa & Sanfelici, 2023) and encouraging studies that look under the bonnet, i.e. reverse-engineering the process by examining how successful interventions work so that they can be reproduced (Chan & Holosko, 2016).

## Research objectives, method and tools

A qualitative research was conducted among the social services of municipalities in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region in order to understand whether the digitalisation imposed by the pandemic represented an innovation opportunity for the Italian social services. The aim of the study was exploratory and descriptive in that it was conducted in order to make an initial survey of events in order to draw an overall picture that could be used as a launchpad for subsequent in-depth studies into the substance of the emerging issues. The tool used was a semi-structured interview designed to explore the following: which ICTs had been introduced in their organisation during the pandemic and for which types of users; how they had been received by practitioners and users; whether and which training and/or support initiatives had been organised and for whom; whether and which organisational adaptations had been made to accompany the introduction of ICTs; what the outcomes of their use had been — and whether they

were still being used after the pandemic. The target group of respondents was identified as people responsible for social services in the municipalities. The interviews were preceded by an e-mail and telephone contact to explain the aims of the research and ask people if they were willing to be interviewed. Fifteen managers agreed to take part in the survey, while three did not respond to repeated telephone and e-mail requests. The interviews were conducted between the end of May and the end of July 2023, face-to-face in 5 cases and online in 11 cases. They were recorded and lasted an average of 40 minutes. The recordings were transcribed and analysed using the content analysis method (Losito, 1993).

Each interview was analysed individually in order to identify and codify core topics regarding the survey questions. Individual core topics were then grouped by topic and analysed as a whole. In order to analyse technology-related changes, which can be observed in the organizational field as well as in the individual organizations it has been adopted the Science and Technology Studies (STS) approach, which focus on the relationship between technology and society (Hackett et al., 2008), drawing attention to the part played by users as relevant social groups and as agents of technological change (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2008), as well as to the role of non-human agents among the determinants of power relations (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

This approach makes it possible to overcome the dualistic and deterministic perspective that polarizes the debate about the digitization into two opposing positions, one optimistic and one pessimistic about the impact of ICT on human relationships and organizations (Bruni et al., 2020; Bruni et al., 2021). Moreover, it allows to overcome the juxtaposition between acceptance and refusal, highlighting how actors can appropriate ICTs and use them in unexpected ways, contributing to the realization of some interests of powerful actors while finding creative ways to affirm and reaffirm their own identity and freedom at the same time (Miele & Tirabeni 2021). The following section presents results concerning the acceptance of ICTs by practitioners, how they were introduced in social services and some of the impact they had on practitioners.

## Results

### *From resistance to acceptance*

An analysis of the interviews revealed that the introduction of ICTs during the pandemic found most of the social services in the region unprepared. This was because they had not used them up to that point and, in some cases, had looked at them «with prejudice» and had not «given them much consideration» (AS3) or had even «dismissed» them (AS6). In one particular setting it was reported that the tools introduced during

the pandemic were already being used so there was nothing new (AS15). However, in another it was reported that:

We'd never made such massive use of phone calls and so on. We had never used WhatsApp before, although we had held workshops on the use of smartphones for old people. It seemed that they could be powerful tools for our senior clients [...]. We can say that certain things we had previously only used at embryonic level really took off. (AS13)

As we can see, these perceptions are influenced by the level of ICTs infrastructure and equipment available as well as the level of previous ICTs adoption and implementation.

Although in most cases it was the first time ICTs had been used, and by some they had been given little consideration or even «*dismissed*» (AS6), the cases of «*resistance*» (AS11) and «*reluctance*» (AS4) were very few and limited to contexts in which there was a tendency to resist any kind of change and above all typified by a greater presence of middle-aged social workers, who are not used to using digital technologies even in their private lives. The presence of young social workers favoured the introduction of these new tools, even though some findings suggest that it cannot be taken for granted that the young are naturally predisposed to their use. What led even the most resistant and reluctant to adapt was the absence of other ways in which they could provide minimum service continuity and the nationwide obligation to use ICTs that came with the introduction of remote working.

We are always very resistant to change, and that goes for everything. [...] People are resistant to change but when it was the only way to work and to interact with clients they got themselves organised, [...]. (AS11)

The practitioners were initially a little reluctant, not so much because they looked down on it, but more because they were not really that skilled in using it. Some practitioners took things in their stride, they were already computer literate, so clicking a couple of buttons and going online was easy. We had and still have a few colleagues who struggled a bit, partly because of their age but probably also because they did not take too kindly to using IT tools. In any case, during COVID-19, it was the only way to work so they got help from colleagues. They had no alternative. In the end, people accepted it because it was the only possible way to make contact. (AS4)

The practitioners welcomed it because it ensured continuity of service to the users [...] it was more an obligatory step than an adaptation. (AS12)

For the most part, however, as can be seen from the observations below, social workers welcomed ICT. This was particularly true of the younger ones who were more familiar with their use.

At first during the pandemic, the new technologies were greeted with curiosity and also with a certain amount of relief because people realized they could do their jobs even under difficult conditions. (AS1)

The younger ones took to them very well. They saw it as a way to try out a series of activities and to try to think of activities in the future beyond COVID-19. People who have been working for longer and are not computer literate or very familiar with technology have had a bit more trouble. However, we did our best to overcome this and in the end we held a lot of online meetings between colleagues. Holding business meetings, especially in the early days, was a bit strange because we were not used to it. (AS3)

Some managers were unsurprised at the favourable reception by practitioners. They believed it reflected a latent wish that had not yet had a chance to be put into practice. This suggests that the idea that the social services are backward and resistant to ICTs is stereotypical and outdated.

We were forced to bring out tools that we continue to use. I think the pandemic simply facilitated the move. I found it surprising that people thought something exceptional had happened. Perhaps those ideas stemmed from a prejudice against social services? They were perceived as working in an old-fashioned way. But I believe that this is a prejudice because actually all the practitioners know how to access the platforms. I was amazed that people thought this was unusual. I wasn't surprised that the elderly people in our villages took to ICTs because where there's a will there's a way. If using a tool makes you realise that you can maintain a relationship despite... it is clear that you're going to do your best and in the end you work it out and it becomes a sensible option. (AS13)

In most settings, this has led to a «discovery» of the other side of digital technologies, i.e. as working tools that enable business meetings, contributions, data and document sharing.

It was a discovery in some respects because people couldn't imagine doing social work without meeting people, being with colleagues. Some people thought «let's shut everything down until the pandemic is over». Actually, this was not the way things turned out and it was also a discovery, so there was also a certain amount of enthusiasm. (AS1)

It was, however, a «discovery» that some managers called «blindingly obvious» (AS2), suggesting that they could have done it sooner and supporting the idea that the Italian social services were backward in using them:

If you look at it from the viewpoint of social and health organisation and integration, many multidisciplinary assessment units (UVMs) worked online. This led to the revelation that ICTs worked well in less complex cases, where there is no need to have a face-to-face discussion. Professionals who would normally find it difficult to attend meetings could be involved. It was a lightbulb moment. So, we stuck to this method. It allows more meetings to take place because it saves travel time. (AS6)

However, the discovery of the usefulness of digital technologies, only concerned their application to organisational activities and standard interventions that do not require any particular interaction and relationship with users. Professional social service activities conducted directly with users, such as interviews and home visits, were limited

to using mobile phones and in some cases platforms to see the person as well as speak to them, thus exploiting the communicative opportunities offered by non-verbal facial expressions. At the end of the pandemic, however, face-to-face operations resumed and these tools were only used in exceptional circumstances. Conversely, the use of platforms for videoconferences and video calls for meetings between practitioners has now become established and part of standard practice. They are routinely used and often preferred over face-to-face meetings, mainly because of their advantages in terms of time and travel savings, as well as the planning and scheduling of meetings. The following testimony is typical of this transition in all settings:

We often hold meetings online because it helps everyone. Organisationally it is much easier. [...] So we continue to use it on a day-to-day basis, e.g. for monitoring meetings on the home care service's socio-educational interventions: when we have meetings to review the reports, we don't do them in person anymore. [...] The easiest thing is to do it online so as not to waste time, because you can talk just the same, and it's easier because it is more immediate. Online meetings and online organisation are consistently the first choice among practitioners. [...] Sometimes they even ask us: «We're doing it online, aren't we?». (AS4)

### *Spontaneous peer-to-peer learning*

In all settings, the urgency of the moment when the pandemic hit did not allow for training, let alone training in the use of ICTs. So workers learned informally, through a process of self-learning whereby more computer-literate practitioners helped those who were less able to overcome difficulties and become familiar with the new technology.

More computer-literate colleagues who regularly used technology would help their colleagues, saying: «I'll help you; I'll get you online», helping people weren't trained in the technology [...]. (AS11)

We offered some in-house support, we identified more experienced and skilled practitioners among our staff and asked them to supervise the others. The strategies allowed us to work remotely in a proactive way. (AS5)

It ultimately came down to self-training and self-help. So, in the various districts, more skilled colleagues helped less skilled ones and that was how it started. Younger family members mainly helped users. I think the elderly were helped by their children or grandchildren. (AS9)

Responses gathered clearly showed that a process of self-learning spontaneously developed in all settings considered. The most skilled practitioners made themselves available to transfer their knowledge and skills to those who lacked them, thus giving rise to many small communities of practice (Wenger, 2000, 2006). In all social services, in

fact, social workers shared a common commitment to the same goal characterised by the acquisition of new ICT-mediated skills and working practices. Thus, our finding confirmed the viewpoint of practice-based studies (Gherardi, 2000a, 2000b; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000), which assume that organisational knowledge cannot be reduced to an exclusively cognitive dimension, or treated as a commodity, with more or less measurable objective characteristics (Gherardi, 2000b). Instead, it is shaped and manifested in everyday practices through a series of relational dynamics and is mediated by a set of artefacts. Such knowledge is therefore always rooted in a relational context. It is acquired through participation in the activities promoted by a community of practice. It is continuously reproduced and negotiated and therefore always dynamic and transient.

This way of working was certainly made possible by the ease of the activities required and thus the simplicity of the skills needed to carry them out.

Online training courses were carried out in groups, using self-learning methods. Those who were more adept taught others how to do it. It was not very complicated, so it wasn't too hard for practitioners to grasp it. (AS4)

(Well-received) Yes, because it didn't require much expertise really. [...] because all you really had to do was push a button, you knew you had to click on a link, and that was practically all it entailed. [...]. (AS2)

### *From digital devices to digital advancement*

In addition to discovering another opportunity to use digital technologies, several interviewees also reported having discovered another side to users. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, it was widely believed that users were computer-illiterate people who were unwilling to use digital technologies. The prevalence among social service users of elderly people, adults in distress, foreigners and children led to the assumption that the preferred mode of communication and interaction with them was direct face-to-face meetings or at least a telephone call for first contact.

Findings from the interviews show that this is no longer true, or at least not true for all social service users, but only for a part, and not true for all activities, but only for some. Many interviewees reported that users were willing to use digital technologies and possessed unexpected skills in this area. Users in general and also a significant proportion of the elderly were very familiar with various technologies, particularly those needed to use various services, such as postal services and banking services. This meant they could use the applications made available to them and were also able to appreciate the benefits in terms of saving time and travel.

The world of accessing services online has opened up for everyone, so that means online applications, sending documents online and so on. It has been significant because it has completely transformed educational services. All access is now online, whereas



before it was mixed. We have to start from the assumption that there was a hard core of people who were not competent: foreigners who do not know the language and had difficulty entering their tax codes, others who do not have the cultural tools. We made the earth-shattering discovery that people get by [...] You have to consider that the whole world went online at that time [...] This opened the floodgates of older people starting to ask to be taught computer literacy. (AS6)

This situation also prompted users to digitalise. It used to seem harsh to require people to use the public digital identity system (SPID). But now if you don't use the SPID [...] it used to seem impossible but now you have to use it to enrol children in state schools. So its obligatory for parents to have it as well, and it's also compulsory in order to apply for social security benefits, [...] People manage to use it [...]. (AS8)

These findings are in line with the findings of other researchers, such as Simpson (2017), who reported that adult and young service users expect a relationship with service providers that can make use of ICTs and exploit their potential for remote use. Hodge et al. (2017) found that the elderly population living in rural areas makes extensive use of digital technologies to access and use various services. They are very invested in doing this and willing to acquire the necessary skills.

The pandemic therefore seems to have «*prompted a need for the use of new communication methods [...]»*. (AS6) which drives the social service to find new forms of communication with users. This opens up new spaces for the social services to explore different ways to relate to its users, taking into account people who are unable to use ICTs but also those who have the skills to do so and are happy and willing to take advantage of the resulting benefits.

Perhaps the elderly make up the target group that most needs assistance in using online methods, but use by this target group has been given little consideration [...]. We certainly need to do some thinking around this target. They are using smartphones and getting to grips with the digital public identity system (SPID). Conducting an analysis focussing on this target could bring some interesting insights. [...] there is room for development. (AS5)

## *Ethical Issues*

Practitioners' acceptance of ICTs and the discovery of their potential did not make them blind to their limitations and risks. The survey revealed the persistence of some of the fears and resistance that were widespread before the pandemic and, conversely, the presence of a reflective and critical approach to their professional actions (Schön, 1993; Sicora, 2005). The first dilemma grasped by interviewees concerns the boundary of the relationship between practitioner and user, which ICTs tend to expand and blur. This often led to an overlapping of spheres, such as family, social and work, which were previously clearly separated, and of roles and information that previously remained

hidden. In some cases, this can help the relationship and the person's path to help, offering further opportunities for intervention. In other cases, however, it may hinder or harm them, becoming, or being perceived as, an instrument of control both by the social worker towards the user and by the user towards the social worker. Interviewees faced concerns about where to place the boundary of the relationship between operator and user to ensure it remains personalised, while respecting the institutional nature of the setting within which the relationship unfolds and the confidentiality of the information that is transmitted.

There was a dilemma that made us ask: do practitioners who use remote connections use the social worker's personal e-mail, which is more immediate and recognisable, or an institutional e-mail that can be seen by several people? It is true that forwarding a personal e-mail greatly facilitates the relationship because the person is a recognisable individual from the institutions and therefore it is easier for them to ask questions and communicate. However, this begs the question: if the operator is not present, who reads the e-mails? If the operator is not present or for any other reason no longer comes to work, his or her e-mail is no longer active and there is a risk that the information will not be tracked. The other issue is the over-personalisation of communications because the institution behind the practitioner must not be forgotten. (AS6)

A second ethical issue that emerged from the interviews concerns the need to gauge the use of ICTs in relation to the actual capabilities of the user to use the services and understand the content being transmitted. Just because content is swiftly transmitted, we should not assume that users assimilate it equally quickly. This may take longer than the technology allows. Interviewees identified a need to be able to diversify the use of technological tools according to the type of users and their circumstances.

From the perspective of the future of social work, it is good not to take things for granted, to put great stress on listening and respecting the other person's time. With new technologies, there is a risk that people who use them all the time will take for granted certain steps that are not taken for granted by the other person. [...] As professionals we must have the ability, when it comes to diversifying our tools, to always gauge their use in relation to the users, otherwise there is a risk of standardisation and this is not an option for a social service [...]. (AS5)

This issue is linked to the problem of unequal opportunities for users to access ICTs and the consequent risk that some of them will be excluded from access to services if they are only delivered digitally. The interviews reflected a concern that services are being digitalised so quickly that eventually more and more will be unable to keep up and will consequently be excluded from access to services.

[...] protection of access to services: the social worker and the organisation should create forms of support that make things easier for those who have the tools and do not want to physically attend a public office to make an application, enabling them to do so online. Conversely, there must be a guarantee that those who cannot do so are not

penalised. This in my opinion will be an issue that we must take seriously as a profession because there will be more and more digitalised services and therefore people should be helped to implement digital skills and also create services that still allow these people to access online applications. (AS7)

Lastly, interviewees stressed the need to pay attention to the protection of users' data privacy. This aspect concerns the security systems adopted by organisations and the pressing need to make users aware that organisations are increasingly sharing their information with outside organisations.

Another issue is that of data security, [...] we logged on using our private networks and it was not always easy to access the data we had at headquarters. [...] The issue of security is very important because if there is no filter to ensure security, we could be hacked through our personal devices. (AS7)

## Discussion

The above findings allow us to reflect on certain aspects and identify some operational approaches that we can use to build on the experience of digitalisation imposed by COVID-19 to ensure that the positive changes fostered among organisations, practices, practitioners and users can be implemented to bring about effective innovation in social services.

The positive reception of ICTs by practitioners means that the idea of a social service that is hostile and refractory to their use is now outdated. Although social workers' adherence to ICT was affected by differences related to their age and their previous familiarity with them, everyone was willing to use them and appreciated their usefulness. This confirms what was also found in the school context, which was also forced during the pandemic to use ICT in order to guarantee the continuity of teaching activities.

In their exploration on how the emergency transition to online education was coped by Italian school during the first lockdown, Dagnes et colleagues (2021) found that individual level features (digital skills, age, education, career) count as much as some structural dimensions (e.g. the type of school) and are mediated by relevant organizational dimensions, such as pre-existing and ongoing digital transformation, internal coordination between the technical staff and the teaching staff and the leaders' ability to motivate and encourage teachers to adapt their teaching methods according to the new technologies available.

The fact that social workers have discovered its usefulness for their work and have been able to learn how to use it with relative ease are two key elements in the diffusion of technology (Rogers, 2010; Bullock & Colvin, 2015) and lead to the belief that much of the initial resistance social workers showed towards its use has now gone away. This makes it plausible to further enhance the use of ICTs, which has already happened in some settings.

Nevertheless, as Bruni and colleagues (2021) highlighted, it is important to remember that «digital technologies should not only be efficient to use and easy to learn, but also provide a richer user experience, otherwise the engagement of organizational actors will remain partial, and in most cases controversial». The next challenge, however, seems to be to ensure that ICTs are implemented in a way that is more geared to the specific needs and characteristics of the social service than was the case during the pandemic, and thus with a more active and proactive attitude on the part of practitioners.

The survey revealed that during the pandemic, social workers were willing to get involved and learn how to use ICTs as they were presented and provided to them. They did not try to adapt them to their own needs and those of users and showed a more executive than proactive attitude, being more inclined to adapt to their functionalities than to adapt them to their own needs. The urgency of the moment and the unprecedented situation justified this reaction, but if it persists, we run the risk of technology shaping the social services instead of the other way around. Fears of this risk are nothing new (Bradt et al., 2011; Devlieghere et al., 2020; Devlieghere & Roose, 2018; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham, 2018; Parton, 2008).

To make sure this does not happen, social workers must show leadership and adopt a creative attitude towards the introduction of ICTs, playing an active role in the definition, construction and implementation of digital tools to be used in their work (Aasback, 2022; Gillingham, 2014; Lagsten & Andersson, 2018; Phillips & Berman, 1995). To do this, they must acquire a greater awareness and knowledge of what ICTs can actually offer to the social services. Hence the importance of investing in their training so that they learn the necessary skills to make a conscious, critical and reflective use of digital technologies. They must be capable of grasping their limitations but also of exploiting their unprecedented potential in an ethical and professional manner.

The survey results showed that practitioners were able to use digital technologies without specific training. They either taught themselves or asked their more experienced colleagues for help. While this realisation may have taken away some of their fear of learning and made them more likely to use other technologies or progress to a higher level in the ones they know, it could also lead them to believe that no training is necessary in the use of ICTs, reinforcing the perception of their inferiority and causing them to be seen as an add-on compared to other types of know-how (Cabiati, 2022). However, many studies show the opposite, pointing out that skills in this field are crucial to ensure that technology does not remain something external to which social service must adapt but can be integrated into social service practice making it more effective and efficient (Bullock & Colvin, 2015).

Byrne and Kyrwan (2019), for example, analysed the use of ICTs by young, computer-literate social workers. This led them to argue that relationship building between social workers and users can be strengthened and enhanced if ICTs are used by practitioners who are trained to be aware how and why these new forms of communication can sup-

port the development and maintenance of the relationship. Nowadays, when the media and technologies are part and parcel of everyday life, it becomes essential to reconceptualise the practice of social service to incorporate an awareness that technology is an indispensable component. This idea was put forward by Pink et al. (2022), who envisage digital social services as a hybrid practice, incorporating online practice and face-to-face practice. They see online practice as paving the way for face-to-face practice i.e. online practice is used to engage the experience, possibility, potential or imagination of conducting a face-to-face home visit, which remains the benchmark around which the various opportunities offered by digital technologies can be woven.

It seems clear that implementing e-social work, i.e. a social service that is developed in a social and technical setting using ICTs and new conceptual approaches, practices and technologies (López Pelàez & Marcuello-Servòs, 2018), cannot solely rely on self-learning by practitioners or peer learning, but requires specific and structured training. It is a matter of rethinking the entire training of social workers in the use of ICTs within a general framework incorporating informal and situated learning (Gherardi, 2000 a, b; Gherardi & Nicolini 2004) as well as curricular and permanent training, and opportunities to use the new technologies. Researchers have long emphasised the importance of reconfiguring curricular training courses by providing specific modules dedicated to ICTs and also using them in teaching in order to train students to interact with users using such tools (Cosner Berzin et al., 2015). Several studies were conducted (Zhu & Andersen, 2021; Aparicio & Sánchez, 2023; Byrne, 2023; Pillay, 2023), some in Italy, especially during the pandemic (Marcello & Licursi, 2022; Fargion et al., 2020; Sanfelici & Bilotti, 2022). Some interesting, albeit limited, studies involved social workers in building their own IT tools (Zenarolla, 2013). Further investment is urgently required in this area to ensure that any digitalisation undertaken as part of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan involves their active participation. The time has also come for continuing education to be organised in Italy. Professional bodies and universities must join forces to define further education modules or seminars that can be tested and become part of future educational curricula (Campanini, 2023).

The second matter raised by the results described above concerns the new role that ICTs open up for social workers. As Cosner Berzin et al. (2015) point out, «social workers can serve in traditional roles in a therapist-patient relationship, or may see enhanced roles as facilitator, organiser, or support-builder. No longer is the activity confined to the office or the designated therapeutic environment. Social work roles may also shift as access to more readily available information leads practitioners to play the role of aggregator and legitimiser of information sources». The scenarios outlined above suggest that new spaces are opening up in which the social service can take on a proactive, promotional and preventive role with users already accustomed to or trained in the use of ICTs. Many issues such as healthy lifestyles, wellbeing and health, active ageing, addictions, gender and domestic violence could be addressed from the viewpoint of information and training delivered by ICTs. This would make it possible to reach out at an early stage to

a larger number of potential users than those contacted through traditional channels and to reach even more difficult target groups, such as teenagers. One of the issues that social services could address proactively and with a preventive role is that of education regarding the risks of ICTs for the general population and teenagers in particular (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). The key role played by dedicated social service networks as activators and connectors in community work could also certainly benefit from using ICTs. However, the most pressing need is for the social service to support people who do not have the skills or equipment to use technology.

The service must act as a stand-in or support by maintaining the traditional channel of direct access, but also play an advocacy role. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the wide digital divide in the population, prompting many interventions to bridge the gap by providing or facilitating the use of the Internet and digital technologies. However, now there is a strong risk that these efforts will wane and not progress any further. This could increase rather than decrease the existing digital divide. The social service can play an important role in ensuring that this does not happen, by playing an advocacy role with groups at risk of exclusion, partly by using the new technologies to disseminate information through social media.

In this regard, Hill and Ferguson (2014) outlined the key functions of electronic advocacy: conducting policy research and information gathering, creating public awareness and education, building cyber communities and activism, organising online and offline communities, raising funds, and placing pressure and influence on policy makers. Social service digitalisation must always be thought of at system level, bearing in mind the target population it addresses using the tools and skills at its disposal (Cabiati, 2022). The dissemination and implementation of ICTs must proceed in parallel and hopefully at the same pace.

## Conclusions

Our survey was conducted for exploratory and descriptive purposes with a view to conducting further investigation. Our findings did not allow us to go into the merits of some of the issues that emerged or explore certain connections identified between the elements. The findings are therefore still incomplete. The survey also only gathered the views of social service managers without considering the views of practitioners, and this represents a further limitation that we intend to address in a forthcoming study aimed to highlight the actual processes of appropriation of ICTs by social workers.

In spite of these limitations, our findings are interesting because they have given us a new picture, particularly in Italy, of the relationship between social workers and digital technologies. They suggest that much of the prejudice and resistance that hindered the use of ICTs in social work has been overcome, or could easily be overcome. The survey gives

us a picture of social workers who are more skilled in using certain digital technologies and more aware of the great opportunities that ICTs offer to their work. They approach ICTs with curiosity rather than fear and have become able to choose when and how to use them in order to ensure they are more effective and efficient working tools. Their skills and know-how are still incomplete and limited to certain technologies. In particular, there is a lack of awareness that ICTs can also be effectively used in the helping relationship and in specific professional social service interventions such as interviews and home visits. ICTs were hardly used for these purposes during the pandemic and when it was over they were abandoned in favour of face-to-face work. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and usefulness of ICTs identified during the pandemic suggests that their use can also be understood, appreciated and practised in this area.

For this to happen, however, the introduction of ICTs must be accompanied by a process of reflection on practice (Schön, 1993). Practice can potentially be used for organisational learning. The spontaneous emergence of communities of practice that fostered learning about the use of ICTs in social services highlighted the effectiveness of this tool and showed how social service practice can change not merely by adapting to technology, but also by adapting technology to itself and integrating technology in its practices. To this end, it is important to accompany the introduction of ICTs by situational and structured learning programmes as part of specific refresher and curricular courses.

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