

DIGITALISATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

The uptake of AI and digital tools amongst Eurodiaconia Members



17 December 2024

Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice.

ORGANISATION VALUES



OUR MISSION AND VISION

Inspired by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where social injustice is eradicated and each person is valued, included, and empowered to realize their fullest potential, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe.

WHO WE ARE

Eurodiaconia is a growing European network of churches and Christian NGOs with 61 national and regional organisations providing social and healthcare services, as well as advocating for social justice.

Eurodiaconia members provide diverse services to persons in need, working to see everyone live in dignity and their human rights are respected and protected. Services offered range from health care, childcare, elderly care, hospice and palliative care, youth inclusion programmes, employment and inclusion services to vulnerable groups such as migrants and Roma, housing services for persons experiencing homelessness and services to persons with disabilities. Eurodiaconia represents over 33.000 service centres, with approximately 1.000.000 staff and over a million volunteers are involved in providing diaconal services. For example one of our members Diakonie Deutschland is one of the largest providers of facilities for the care, support and persons in need in Germany. It offers 33.374 services and has a capacity of 1.18 million beds/spaces, it employs approximately 627.349 qualified staff and has over 700.000 volunteers. Similarly, one of our members in Czechia, Slezska Diakonie, is one of the largest non-profit organisations providing quality social services in Český Těšín region. It offers more than 100 social services in more than 60 centres and has over 1200 employees. In France, our member Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante (FEP) represents approximately 370 member associations and foundations and provides more than 1000 services, with 24.000 employees and over 15.000 volunteers. These three organisations are just examples of the breadth of the delivery of the mission and vision of Eurodiaconia.

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WHY THIS REPORT?

Digitalisation of social services refers to the integration of digital technologies and processes into the delivery of social welfare services. This transformation aims to improve efficiency, accessibility, and effectiveness of social services through various digital tools and strategies.

Digitalisation is emerging as a transformative force in enhancing the planning, delivery, and evaluation of care and support in social services across Europe. This process involves integrating digital technologies into social service operations of social services, aiming to improve efficiency, accessibility, and the quality of care for persons and communities in need. By incorporating digital tools, social services are becoming more responsive to the needs of diverse populations, offering new opportunities for connection, empowerment, and inclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital solutions in social services, highlighting both the potential and the necessity of these innovations. During lockdowns and periods of social distancing, virtual tools became indispensable for maintaining continuity in care, counselling and communication. For instance, in long-term care (LTC) settings, digital platforms enabled residents to connect with family members through video calls, participate in group activities such as online church services, and engage in remote therapies like music sessions. These innovations helped mitigate isolation and maintain emotional well-being during a time of substantial disruption to normal life.

Among Eurodiaconia members, the pandemic highlighted the importance of digital literacy, particularly for older adults who were often unfamiliar with new technologies. Some Eurodiaconia members introduced targeted programs to empower elderly individuals to navigate digital platforms, enabling them to access services, stay connected with loved ones, and participate more fully in community life. This shift not only addressed immediate needs but also laid the foundation for long-term engagement with digital tools in social services.

Also, the pandemic prompted a broader reconsideration of how social services are delivered. With education, counselling, and many other essential services moving online, digital platforms proved to be both a practical and acceptable alternative means of reaching people. For some, the transition to virtual services opened up new opportunities, breaking down geographical and physical barriers that had previously limited access. For example, virtual counselling services allowed individuals in remote areas to connect with support systems, while online learning platforms provided continuity in education during school closures, howbeit for persons who could afford a laptop and had access to the internet.

In parallel, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into social services is beginning to reshape the sector. AI-powered tools, such as predictive analytics for care planning, voice apps for recording reports, virtual assistants for client support, and systems for monitoring health indicators, are offering innovative ways to enhance service delivery. These technologies have the potential to improve decision-making, personalised care, and optimise resource allocation, ensuring that services are better tailored to the needs of individuals and communities. Howbeit, given that people are at the centre of social services the use of AI in organisation and delivery of services should always be human-centric. Beyond the pandemic's immediate effects, technological advancements

are continuing to shape the future of social services in innovative ways. For instance, care robots and assistive technologies are increasingly being explored and implemented to enhance the quality of life for care recipients. These tools, ranging from robotic companions to smart home devices, have demonstrated their ability to provide both practical support and emotional comfort.

In countries such as Japan, Germany, and the United States, care robots are gradually being introduced in LTC settings¹. While some scholars claim that care robots can offer valid solutions to deal with workforce shortages and demographic changes², the reality is far from supporting the added value of care robots in long-term care workforce. On the contrary, workers tend to report additional workload with the introduction care robots- they need to be cleaned, charged and monitored.

This report explores the opportunities of digitalisation and the use of AI and the challenges while highlighting best practices within Eurodiaconia membership and offers recommendations to policy makers. The information presented in this report was received through workshops organised on digitalisation and AI within the framework of Eurodiaconia Annual General Meeting 2024 and through a survey to member organisations.

1 Technological risks and ethical implications of using robots in long-term care
2 [On ethical, legal and social Issues of Care Robots.](#)

EU POLICY CONTEXT

The European Union's policy framework for digital transformation is deeply intertwined with its vision for the twin transitions-green and digital transitions, which aim at ensuring Europe's sustainability and competitiveness in a rapidly changing global landscape. This comprehensive strategy acknowledges the transformative potential of digital technologies, not only as tools for economic growth but also as enablers of environmental sustainability and societal resilience.

In its 2022 communication, *towards a green, digital and resilient economy: our European Growth Model*,³ the European Commission emphasised the need to scale up investments in critical digital technologies. These include cybersecurity, cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), data spaces, blockchain, quantum computing, and semiconductors. Such investments are seen as foundational to driving innovation, enhancing Europe's strategic autonomy, and equipping industries and governments with the tools to navigate the twin transitions successfully. Additionally, the communication highlighted the importance of digital skills, ensuring the workforce is prepared to engage with and maximise the benefits of these technologies.

A key milestone in the EU's digital strategy is the adoption of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act⁴ in August 2024. This legislation represents the world's first comprehensive regulation framework on AI, designed to regulate its development and deployment across the EU. The Act is structured around a risk-based classification system, categorising AI systems into four levels of risk: minimal, limited, high, and unacceptable.

- **Unacceptable Risk:** Certain uses of AI deemed incompatible with EU values- systems considered a clear threat the fundamental rights of people, and systems for government social scoring or manipulative practices that exploit vulnerabilities, will be banned.
- **Specific transparency risk:** AI technologies, such as chatbots, must clearly indicate to users that they are communicating with a machine. Certain AI-generated content, including deep fakes, must be clearly labelled, and consumers must be notified when biometric classification or emotion detection technologies are utilised. Furthermore, providers will have to develop systems such that synthetic audio, video, text, and image information is identified in a machine-readable format and recognisable as artificially generated or modified.
- **High Risk:** AI systems with significant implications for safety or fundamental rights, such as those used in critical infrastructure, law enforcement, or healthcare, are subject to stringent requirements. These include mandatory risk assessments, transparency measures, and human oversight.
- **Limited and Minimal Risk:** Applications in these categories are subject to lighter regulatory obligations, primarily focusing on transparency and compliance with general ethical principles.⁵

The Act also establishes a framework for accountability and oversight, including a mandatory AI risk management system for high-risk applications, detailed documentation and record-keeping

³ [Towards a green, digital and resilient economy: our European Growth Model.](#)

⁴ [Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

⁵ [European Artificial intelligence Act comes into force](#)

requirements, and obligations for continuous monitoring and updating of AI systems post-deployment. To support compliance, the Act introduces a centralised governance model through the European Artificial Intelligence Board, which will coordinate enforcement across member states.

Importantly, the EU AI Act underscores the bloc's commitment to fostering innovation alongside regulation. It includes provisions to support research, testing, and the development of AI technologies that align with European values. For example, regulatory sandboxes will enable businesses and researchers to experiment with AI applications in controlled environments, facilitating innovation while ensuring compliance with legal and ethical standards.

The adoption of the EU AI Act demonstrates the European Union's ambition to set global standards for trustworthy AI, to balance technological advancement with ethical considerations and individual rights. This approach aims to achieve both: position Europe at the forefront of the global AI landscape while safeguarding people's fundamental rights.

The majority of the rules in the AI Act will only be enforced in 2026 while rules pertaining to unacceptable risk will already apply six months from its adoption.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL SERVICES IN DIGITALISATION

Digitalisation of social services is an ongoing process not merely a response to a crisis; it represents a profound shift in how social services are conceived and delivered. The integration of advanced technologies offers significant opportunities to enhance the delivery, accessibility, and effectiveness of social services. From improving efficiency and productivity to enabling data-driven policy formulation, digitalisation is changing the way social services are designed and implemented.

Some of the key opportunities digitalisation presents for social services include:

- improved efficiency and productivity
- enhanced accessibility
- better identification and support for vulnerable individuals

Improved Efficiency and Productivity in Service Delivery

One of the most profound impacts of digitalisation is its ability to streamline processes and improve productivity in service delivery. Automation technologies, including advanced robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning, are reducing the administrative burden on social service staff. Routine tasks such as data entry, resource allocation, and application processing can now be handled with minimal human intervention, allowing service providers to focus on more personalised care.⁶ For example, telepresence technologies facilitate remote access to services, reducing the need for physical presence and speeding up interventions.

6 [Artificial intelligence, machine learning and deep learning in advanced robotics](#)

Cost efficiency is another benefit of digitalisation. Technologies like wearable devices and the Internet of Things (IoT) provide real-time data that allows for more effective resource allocation. For instance, automated systems monitor health conditions or home safety, enabling early interventions that prevent costly emergencies. Additionally, virtual and augmented reality tools are being used to train social service workers, equipping them with the skills needed to address complex scenarios effectively. These advancements ensure that service delivery is not only faster but also more impactful.⁷

Enhanced Accessibility of Services for Persons in Need

Digitalisation has the potential to make social services more inclusive by breaking down geographical and logistical barriers. Platforms such as telecare and mobile applications bring services directly to individuals in need, particularly those living in remote or underserved areas. However, this is only possible for persons who can access the internet and own a laptop or similar device.

For individuals with disabilities and older adults, Internet of things (IoT)-enabled smart home technologies support independent living. Devices such as automated medication reminders and fall-detection sensors enhance safety and self-sufficiency, reducing the reliance on institutional care.

Better Identification and Support for Vulnerable Individuals

Digital technologies are revolutionizing the identification and support of vulnerable populations through predictive analytics and real-time monitoring. AI-driven tools analyse data patterns to detect individuals at risk of unemployment, homelessness, or health crises. For example, Poland's unemployment profiling system uses algorithms to categorize job seekers by employability, enabling targeted interventions that improve their chances of finding work.

IoT sensors and wearable devices also play a critical role in monitoring vulnerable individuals. These tools collect real-time health and environmental data, allowing service providers to identify potential risks before they escalate.

However, to fully realize these benefits, it is crucial to address challenges such as digital literacy gaps, data privacy concerns, and resistance to technological change. Investments in training, infrastructure, and ethical frameworks will be crucial to ensuring that digitalisation serves all members of society equally and no one is left behind.

⁷ [Eurofound \(2020\), Impact of digitalisation on social services, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg](#)

CHALLENGES OF DIGITALISATION AND AI IN SOCIAL SERVICES

While digitalisation and AI offers opportunities and possess the potential to ease the organisation and delivery of social services, there are significant challenges as well - particularly in the ethical, operational, and practical dimensions. Some of the key challenges of digitalisation and AI in social services, include algorithmic bias, transparency, human rights concerns, the digital divide, data privacy, workload management, cost implications, and the risk of dehumanization of care

Algorithmic Bias and Fairness

One of the most pressing challenges in implementing AI in social services is algorithmic bias. AI systems often rely on historical data to make decisions, which can reflect and perpetuate existing inequalities. For example, an algorithm designed to prioritize social benefits might inadvertently favor certain demographics over others if the training data are skewed. This bias can lead to unfair resource allocation, exacerbating inequalities rather than mitigating them.

Addressing this issue requires deliberate efforts to identify and eliminate bias in AI systems. Techniques such as regular audits, diverse training datasets, and the inclusion of interdisciplinary teams in the development process can help reduce the risk of bias. Ensuring fairness in algorithmic decisions is not merely a technical issue but also an ethical imperative to maintain trust in digital systems.

Attempting to correct algorithmic bias, however, also presents its own risks. Efforts to “de-bias” algorithms often involve adjusting data inputs, modifying decision thresholds, or applying fairness criteria that may prioritize one group over another. While well-intentioned, these interventions can inadvertently create new forms of bias or discrimination. For instance, overcompensating for historical disadvantages in one demographic may result in unfair disadvantages for another group, leading to what is sometimes called “fairness trade-offs.” These trade-offs highlight the difficulty of achieving perfect neutrality in decision-making, particularly when diverse and often competing definitions of fairness exist. This complexity underscores the importance of human oversight in AI applications. Human verification remains essential to contextualize AI outputs, identify unintended consequences, and ensure decisions align with ethical and social justice principles. By combining the efficiency of AI with human judgment, we can strive for systems that are not only technically sound but also socially equitable.

Transparency and Explainability

AI systems often function as “black boxes,” where their decision-making processes are not easily understandable. This lack of transparency raises concerns in the context of social services, where decisions have direct and significant impacts on individuals' lives. For instance, an AI-driven eligibility system for unemployment benefits may deny assistance without providing a clear rationale.

Transparency and explainability are critical to ensuring accountability. Service providers and end-users must understand how decisions are made to challenge or appeal them if necessary. Building AI systems with inherent explainability and instituting policies that demand transparency in algorithmic decision-making are essential steps to address this challenge.

Human Rights and Dignity

The integration of digital tools in social services raises concerns about preserving human rights and dignity. AI tools like robots, while efficient, lack the emotional intelligence and empathy required in caregiving. For example, care robots can assist with physical tasks but cannot replicate the emotional support provided by human caregivers. Over-reliance on such technologies risks dehumanizing care, reducing essential face-to-face interactions between carers and recipients.

To mitigate this, human oversight must remain central in the use of AI and robots in caregiving. Maintaining the indispensable “human touch” ensures that empathy and dignity are not sacrificed for efficiency. Technology should be viewed as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, human caregiving.

This issue is particularly important to diaconal organizations, as we believe that the human being encompasses a spiritual dimension. Support cannot be reduced to practical assistance or robotic care alone—it represents only one aspect of holistic care. True caregiving requires acknowledging and addressing the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of individuals. Adequate funding for service provision must be ensured to maintain high-quality care that respects and preserves the human dimension, which technology can never fully replace.

The Digital Divide and Accessibility

Digital tools can exacerbate existing inequalities if not implemented inclusively. Vulnerable groups, such as older adults or individuals in low-income households, may lack access to the necessary technology or digital literacy skills. This digital divide not only limits their participation in a rapidly digitizing society but also deepens social and economic disparities.

To address this issue, governments and service providers must invest in digital literacy programs and ensure equitable access to digital tools. Policies should prioritize marginalized groups, providing them with affordable devices, reliable internet connectivity, and targeted training programs that empower individuals to navigate and leverage digital systems effectively. Such measures can help bridge the digital divide and create a more inclusive digital landscape. In addition, there should always be the possibility to call on a human support when AI and digital systems fail to meet individuals’ needs or prove inaccessible.

Data Privacy and Protection

Data privacy and protection are paramount in the digitalization of social services, where sensitive personal information is often involved. Unauthorized access to health records or other personal data can lead to significant ethical and legal breaches. For example, movement-sensitive cameras in care homes, while beneficial for monitoring safety, pose risks of privacy infringement for both residents and staff.

Anonymizing sensitive data, employing robust encryption methods, and implementing stringent access controls are critical to safeguarding privacy. Service providers must also establish clear policies to prevent misuse and ensure compliance with data protection regulations.

Increased Workload for Staff

While AI and digital tools can streamline processes, they can also introduce additional workloads for staff. Research indicates that robots in care homes require constant supervision, maintenance, and repair, adding to caregivers' responsibilities. Older staff, in particular, may find adapting to new technologies challenging, further complicating the transition.

Providing comprehensive training programs and designing user-friendly systems are essential to easing the burden on staff. Additionally, involving employees in the design and implementation phases of digital tools can increase acceptance and reduce resistance.

High Costs

The high cost of implementing digital tools, such as social robots, poses a significant barrier to their adoption. For instance, the initial investment in care robots, coupled with ongoing maintenance and upgrades, can be prohibitive for many institutions. In some cases, employing qualified human staff may be more cost-effective and yield better results.

Cost-benefit analyses are crucial to determine when and where digital tools are appropriate. Policymakers must balance investments in technology with other priorities, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently.

Risk of Job Replacement

Automation and AI are often seen as threats to jobs, particularly those involving repetitive tasks. In social services, this raises concerns about the displacement of workers and the potential loss of personal connections between caregivers and recipients.

While automation can handle routine tasks, it should not replace the human element essential in social care. Policies should focus on reskilling workers to take on roles that require emotional intelligence and decision-making, ensuring that technology complements human labor rather than replacing it.

Dehumanisation of Care

The efficiency-driven nature of digital tools risks shifting the focus from empathy to productivity. People remain the centre of social services as such, reduced face-to-face interactions and increased reliance on surveillance technologies, such as cameras and sensors, can make care recipients feel like subjects of observation rather than participants in a relationship-based care system.

Service providers must prioritise designs and practices that preserve human connections. Incorporating regular in-person interactions and fostering environments of trust and respect are essential to counteract the dehumanising potential of digitalisation.

ShapeFake Information and Misinformation

AI systems are susceptible to generating or amplifying fake information, which can undermine trust in social services. For example, chatbots may provide inaccurate responses, potentially harming users who rely on them for critical information.

To address this, AI systems must be rigorously tested and monitored to ensure accuracy. Building mechanisms for correcting misinformation and maintaining a human oversight layer are essential safeguards.

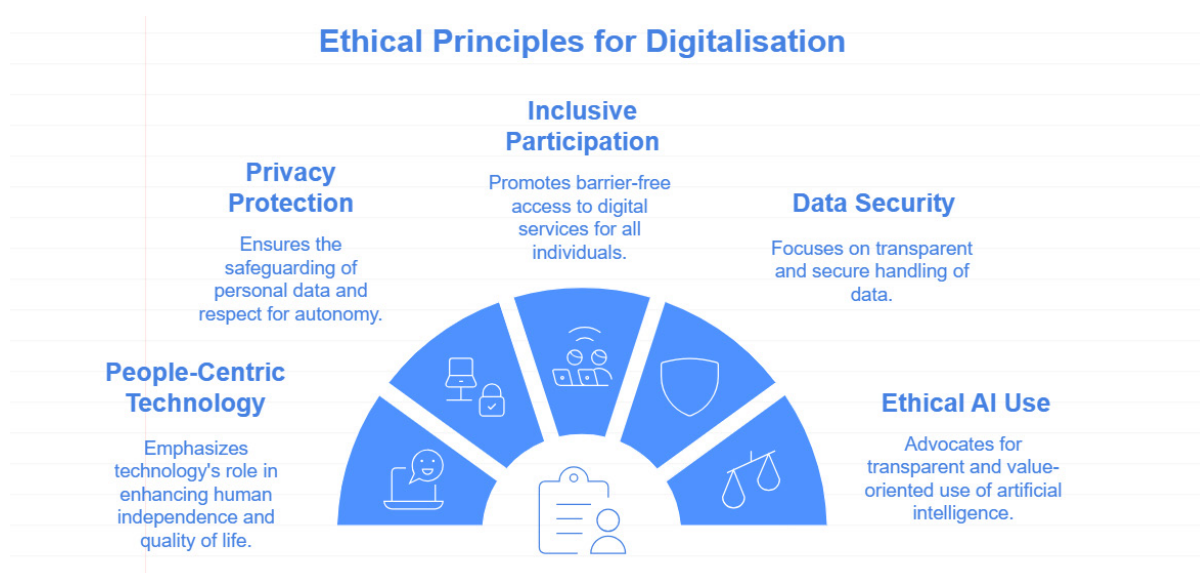


DIACONIA AND DIGITALISATION: CASE STUDY OF TWO EURODIACONIA MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH, Germany

Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH, one of the largest diaconal and non-profit care companies in Southern Germany providing care to 14.780 people in need of care has embraced digital tools to enhance its operations and service delivery. The organization’s commitment to innovation and digitalisation is evident in its strategic application of technology across multiple domains, including human resources, staff training, elderly care, and logistics. By integrating specific tools tailored to the needs of elderly and long-term care (LTC), Evangelische Heimstiftung demonstrates the potential of digitalisation to improve efficiency, care quality, and organizational effectiveness.

In the process of implementing digitalisation, Evangelische Heimstiftung has adopted guiding principles in their use of digitalisation as seen below:



Human Resources: Streamlining Workforce Management

One of the critical areas where Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH utilises digital tools is human resources. The organization employs digital platforms to streamline recruitment, onboarding, performance management, and employee engagement. Automated systems simplify administrative tasks, allowing HR personnel to focus on strategic initiatives such as talent development and workforce planning. For instance, digital tools can match candidates with job roles based on skills and experience, ensuring the right fit for care-specific positions. Additionally, real-time data on employee performance and satisfaction provides actionable insights for creating a supportive and productive work environment.

Staff Training: Empowering Employees with Digital Literacy

The organisation recognises that staff training is essential to maintaining high standards of care and operational excellence. Digital tools play a pivotal role in this area by offering accessible and interactive learning modules. Online training platforms provide caregivers and administrative staff with opportunities to enhance their skills, stay updated on regulatory requirements, and learn to

use emerging technologies effectively. Simulations and virtual reality (VR) tools are increasingly being adopted to train caregivers in handling complex scenarios, such as managing dementia patients or responding to medical emergencies. This focus on continuous education not only improves service quality but also empowers employees to navigate the challenges of a digitalized workplace confidently.

Elderly Care: Transforming Service Delivery

Quality elderly care is at the heart of Evangelische Heimstiftung’s mission, and digital tools have become indispensable in delivering personalised and effective care. The organisation uses advanced monitoring systems, such as Senso and Pflegeresultat, to track the health and well-being of residents in real time. These tools collect and analyse data on vital signs, mobility, and other health indicators, enabling caregivers to detect and address potential issues early. Additionally, electronic health records (EHRs) facilitate seamless communication among care teams, ensuring that residents receive coordinated and holistic care. The integration of Ambient Assisted Living (AAL) systems further enhances the quality of elderly care. These systems include smart sensors and Internet of things devices that monitor residents’ environments, providing alerts for falls, unusual activity, or emergencies. By combining human expertise with technological precision, Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH ensures that its elderly clients receive attentive, dignified, and responsive care.

Also, since December 2023, Evangelische Heimstiftung has been running a pilot project: advancing social robotics in care. The social robot Navel(see below) has been tested in two nursing homes of the Evangelische Heimstiftung. Findings reveal mixed reactions both from the staff and residents- some accept while other experience fear or scepticism. However, Navel’s added value lies in entertainment and activation of residents, less in staff support or relief.



The Social Robot Navel



Image source: Navel Robotics

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www.ev-heimstiftung.de

Features:

- 2 cameras, 7 microphones, 3D sensors
- ChatGPT-based communication
- Detects sound sources and nonverbal signals like gaze, body orientation, and responds with expressive facial expressions (eyes with 3D optics, eye contact, head movements)
- Empathy through generative AI – aims to emotionally and cognitively engage individuals in need of care

Use Cases:

- Personalized interaction, checking on residents' well-being
- Activating questions and communication
- Information & entertainment: games, jokes, poems

Logistics: Optimising Resource Management

Efficient logistics management is crucial for maintaining the organization's operations, and digital tools have revolutionized this aspect of their work. Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH uses digital logistics systems to manage supply chains, track inventory, and optimize resource allocation. For example, software solutions can predict and prevent shortages of essential supplies, ensuring that care facilities are always well-equipped. Real-time tracking systems for equipment and consumables also reduce waste and improve cost efficiency.

In addition to supply chain management, digital tools enhance the scheduling and coordination of staff and resources across multiple care facilities. By automating routine tasks and providing data-driven insights, these systems enable the organization to focus on delivering high-quality care to its clients.

Specialised Applications in Long-Term Care (LTC)

The organisation's commitment to innovation is particularly evident in its approach to long-term care (LTC). Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH employs tools that cater specifically to the needs of LTC clients, many of whom require consistent and personalized support. Monitoring systems like Senso provide caregivers with detailed insights into each resident's condition, allowing for tailored care plans. Similarly, communication tools ensure that families remain informed and involved in their loved ones' care, fostering trust and transparency.

By integrating these specialised applications, Evangelische Heimstiftung GmbH not only meets the complex demands of LTC but also sets a benchmark for excellence in the field.

Diaconia ECCB, Czech Republic

Diaconia ECCB, one of the leading social service organizations in the Czech Republic, has embraced digital tools to enhance the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of its services. The organization's digital transformation spans various operational and service delivery areas, including social service provision, human resources, staff training, and communication. By leveraging technology, Diaconia ECCB demonstrates its commitment to modernising traditional practices, empowering its workforce, and meeting the diverse needs of the communities it serves.

Also, at the core of Diaconia ECCB's mission is the provision of social services, and digital tools have become central to achieving this goal. The organisation employs case management software and digital platforms to streamline service delivery. These tools facilitate better coordination among caregivers, social workers, and administrative staff, ensuring that clients receive timely and effective support.

Digital solutions enable Diaconia ECCB to collect, store, and analyse client data securely, providing insights that inform care strategies and decision-making. For example, monitoring tools can track client progress, helping social workers adapt interventions to individual needs. Additionally, digital case management systems improve transparency and accountability, allowing stakeholders to collaborate more effectively. This technology-driven approach not only enhances the efficiency of service provision but also ensures that clients receive personalised and dignified care.

Human Resources: Optimizing Workforce Management

Human resources management is a critical function for any organization, and Diaconia ECCB has leveraged digital tools to optimise this area. The organisation utilises HR management software to streamline processes such as recruitment, onboarding, performance tracking, and employee engagement. These tools reduce the administrative burden on HR staff, allowing them to focus on strategic initiatives like workforce planning and employee well-being.

Digital platforms also enable real-time data tracking and analytics, providing insights into workforce trends, such as turnover rates and training needs. This data-driven approach allows Diaconia ECCB to make informed decisions about staffing, ensuring that the organization remains agile and responsive to changing demands in the social service sector.

Staff Training: Building Competence Through Technology

To maintain high standards of service, Diaconia ECCB prioritizes staff training, with digital tools playing a pivotal role in this process. The organization offers online training modules and e-learning platforms to equip employees with the skills needed to excel in their roles. These tools make training accessible and flexible, allowing staff to learn at their own pace and revisit materials as needed.

In addition to standard training programs, Diaconia ECCB integrates digital simulations and role-playing tools to prepare employees for complex scenarios. For instance, virtual simulations can train caregivers to handle challenging situations such as conflict resolution or managing individuals with special needs. By investing in digital training tools, the organization not only enhances the competence of its workforce but also fosters a culture of continuous learning and development.

Communication: Strengthening Connections Internally and Externally

Effective communication is essential for the smooth functioning of any organization, and Diaconia ECCB has adopted digital tools to strengthen both internal and external communication. Internally, the organization uses platforms like team collaboration software and video conferencing tools to facilitate seamless interactions among staff members across various locations. These tools enhance teamwork, reduce response times, and ensure that all employees are aligned with organizational goals.

Externally, digital communication tools allow Diaconia ECCB to engage with clients, partners, and stakeholders more effectively. Social media platforms and dedicated client portals serve as vital channels for sharing information, addressing queries, and building relationships. Additionally, these tools enable the organization to reach a broader audience, raising awareness about its services and advocacy efforts.



OTHER EXAMPLES FROM OUR MEMBERSHIP

Virtual Reality in Palliative Care, Deaconess Foundation, Finland

At the Deaconess Foundation's Hospice, a pioneering research project is exploring the use of virtual reality (VR) glasses as a supplement to alleviate pain and anxiety in palliative care patients. Led by Professor Hanne Konradsen, the project aims to uncover the profound effects of VR in mitigating suffering. With a significant percentage of patients experiencing pain, alternative methods like VR offer promising relief without unwanted side effects. The Deaconess Foundation's Hospice leads this exploration, pushing the boundaries of compassion and innovation in palliative care.

The DigiHelper Project "Improving Elderly Persons Participation and Reduction of Loneliness by means of digital skills", Caritas Saatio18 Finland

Digi Helper is a project developed by Caritas Saatio Finland. The project has four main objectives: To improve elderly persons participation in society, to alleviate loneliness by offering interesting volunteering activities to people of different ages and to help curb loneliness. The project established a digital café on Teams during COVID pandemic in 2021. They have continuous digital sessions where elderly people get digital guidance outside the home. Some of the activities include teaching the participants how to use a tablet, a smartphone or how to independently initiate a video call. Results of the project:

The guidance has increased the elderly person's participation and strengthened their independence, enabling them to manage their own affairs online.

It has increased their confidence as they have been able to learn about digital issues in a calm and trustworthy environment, and also in the comfort of their homes.

Also, the skills learnt in digital guidance have alleviated loneliness, helped them to connect with different social media groups and given them different options to participate remotely in activities that interest them. Using the WhatsApp app has also helped to alleviate loneliness, video calls have increased the feeling of safety. The project has seen progress in the number of participants from 62 persons in 2019 to 290 participants in 2022.

Digital Inclusion programmes implemented across Diakonie Romania

The Transylvanian Reformed Church has introduced digital aid programmes tailored to empower people, especially the elderly, with vital digital skills. For example, in Cluj-Napoca, participants receive smartphones and laptops if they lack devices, alongside weekly sessions to learn about online banking, health, and transport apps. They also gain cybersecurity knowledge to manage passwords and detect fraud. The program encourages community interaction via an online portal and casual social activities. In Oradea, elderly residents at a nursing home practice skills like using WhatsApp, applying for health cards, and managing emails on their own devices, with 72 participants benefiting from this training. Meanwhile, in Târgu Mureş, seniors are taught to perform basic digital tasks such as making video calls, paying bills online, and uploading photos on Facebook.

In Sfântu Gheorghe, collaboration with Vodafone Foundation and Fundatia Regala Margareta a Romaniei has brought smartphone training to pensioners, teaching them safe and effective app use. Similarly, in Odorheiu Secuiesc, laptops funded by HEKS and supported by Vodafone are used in group sessions to develop digital competencies in municipalities like Székelykeresztúr and Bögöz, reaching over 60 people. These examples showcase Romania's focus on not just improving digital literacy but also fostering inclusion, safety, and social connectivity.

Hungarian Interchurch Aid's Digital Empowerment Programmes

Hungarian Interchurch Aid (HIA) has been a pioneer in combating digital poverty through its Digital Empowerment Programme, targeting marginalised groups with innovative and inclusive initiatives. For instance, the "Kapaszkodó 2.0" (initially a child development and catching-up programme of HIA), as part of its inclusion work, has focused on tackling digital disadvantages for disadvantaged children for almost a decade. The sudden need for digital education in the wake of the Covid19 pandemic has drawn attention to the digital literacy gap at national level, with a growing number of initiatives and projects at national level. The "Kapaszkodó 2.0" project aims to play a role in developing children's digital competences through innovative programmes, thus widening their labour market opportunities and giving them a chance to escape poverty. With E.ON as one of the main strategic partners of HIA, the „Kapaszkodó 2.0” programme provides opportunities for more and more disadvantaged children through digital skills development, with an expanding content every year until 2026. The core value of the Kapaszkodó 2.0 programme is to develop a broad range of digital competences: to develop children's digital literacy through experiential learning and to use innovative tools to simultaneously enhance their subject knowledge, develop their skills and shape their attitudes in different areas.

Similarly, the Digipilot Project provided in 2023 digital literacy training for disadvantaged adults in Hungary's most underserved regions through experiential learning and thematic workshops. Another notable initiative is the national Digital Project Week, involving over 800 schools to promote innovative digital pedagogy supported by corporate partners like Huawei and Vodafone.

Additionally, the Robolimpics Camp 2024 introduced robotics, artificial intelligence, and sports to children in a fun, interactive environment, fostering algorithmic thinking and problem solving skills. These programs exemplify HIA's commitment to digital inclusion, leveraging technology to transform education and community engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO EU

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital technology in social services has enormous potential to transform care delivery, increase efficiency, and improve accessibility. However, these improvements present serious ethical, operational, and social concerns, particularly about equity, privacy, and human dignity. To guarantee that digitalisation helps everyone, particularly the most vulnerable, the European Union (EU) must take a balanced approach that protects rights, encourages inclusion, and links technological innovation with ethical considerations. These policy recommendations lay out practical and strategic steps to ensure the ethical and effective use of AI and digital tools in social services across the EU.

1. ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR AI USE IN SOCIAL SERVICES

The EU, in partnership with social service providers, should establish robust ethical guidelines for AI implementation in social services, ensuring that the rights, dignity, and autonomy of individuals are prioritized. These guidelines should:

- **Promote Transparency and Accountability:** Mandate that all AI-driven decisions are explainable and transparent, allowing service users and providers to understand and challenge outcomes and contribute to innovations that affect them.
- **Ensure Equity:** Require that algorithms are designed to prevent biases that could disadvantage vulnerable populations.
- **Incorporate Human Oversight:** AI tools must complement human care rather than replace it. Eurodiaconia recommends a legal obligation to maintain a “human-in-the-loop” approach to preserve empathy and personal connections in caregiving.

2. STRATEGIES FOR ETHICAL DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT

The ethical use of data is critical in building trust and ensuring privacy. The EU should implement a framework for data collection and management that includes:

- **Data Minimisation and Anonymisation:** Limit data collection to what is strictly necessary and anonymise sensitive information to protect individual privacy.
- **Robust Security Protocols:** Enforce strong encryption standards and secure storage solutions to prevent unauthorised access to sensitive data.
- **Consent and Transparency:** Ensure that service users are informed about how their data will be used and obtain explicit consent before collection.

3. BALANCING INNOVATION WITH ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Innovation in AI and digital tools must be pursued with a clear understanding of potential risks and harms. The EU should:

- **Encourage Impact Assessments:** Require regular evaluations of AI tools to measure their social, economic, and ethical impacts on vulnerable populations.
- **Promote Ethical Design Practices:** Support research and development of AI systems that align with human rights and social justice values.
- **Provide Funding for Ethical Innovation:** Allocate resources for projects that prioritize fairness, accessibility, and inclusivity in social services.

4. PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY AND INCLUSION

To bridge the digital divide and ensure that all individuals can benefit from digitalisation, the EU should:

- **Invest in Digital Literacy Programs:** Equip care providers, recipients, and communities with the skills needed to use digital tools effectively.
- **Provide Affordable Access to Technology:** Partner with Member States to make digital devices and internet connectivity accessible to underserved populations.
- **Target Marginalised Groups:** Develop specific initiatives for groups disproportionately affected by the digital divide, such as older adults, low-income individuals, and rural communities.

5. CO-CREATION IN THE USE AND ADOPTION OF AI

Engaging stakeholders in the design and implementation of AI systems ensures that technologies address real-world needs ethically and effectively. The EU should:

- **Foster Stakeholder Collaboration:** Promote partnerships among care workers, service users, technology developers, and policymakers to co-create AI solutions.
- **Respect Rights in the Design Process:** Ensure that AI tools respect the rights and preferences of both care workers and recipients, embedding their input in every stage of development.
- **Weigh Benefits and Harms:** Develop practical strategies to evaluate AI tools, considering potential benefits and risks, and prioritize equitable decision-making.