Rewards and Challenges in the Digitalization of Family Social Services: A Look at the Big Picture

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OUR SCIENCE **TRANSFORMS THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE** AND INSPIRES LEADERS

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Outline of the presentation

- How we got where we are today with digitalization?
- Role of multiple factors
  - Social service professionals
  - Market forces
  - Covid, wars, and natural disasters
- Great examples of digitalization and some horror stories
- If funding was not a problem?
- The challenges
- The role of education
- Areas for future focus

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Survey question: Professional background

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In which field have you received **the most extensive** professional education?

- Psychology, social work. Counseling, another clinical field
- Medicine, nursing, another heath care field
- Management, business administration
- Computer science, engineering, another technical field
- Something else

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Survey question: Audience perspective

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Question from the e-therapy attitudes scale.
Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Virtual counseling (e-therapy) is as effective as in-person counseling.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

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How did we get where we are today?

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How did we get where we are today?

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How did we get where we are today?

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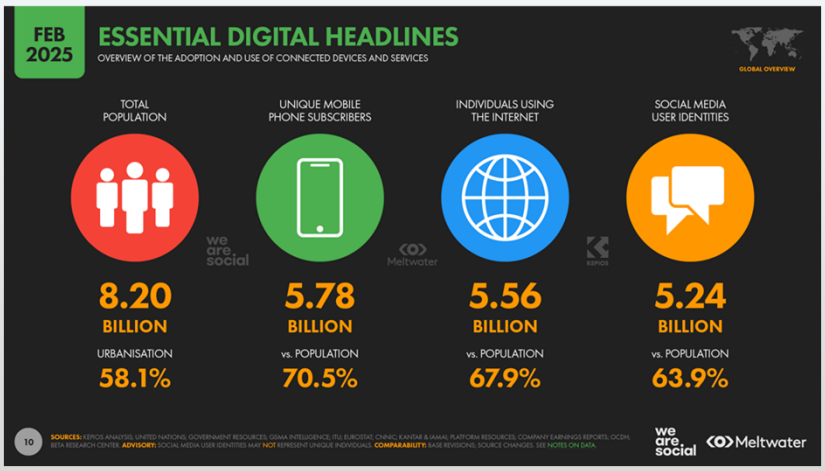
Increasing digitalization of society



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Some impacts of digitalization

- The United Nations reports that “digital technologies have advanced more rapidly than any innovation in our history – reaching around 50% of the developing world’s population in only two decades.”
- Virtual learning and telehealth have expanded access to education and health care, especially in hard-to-reach areas.
- But there are challenges (like the digital divide) and risks (like privacy and security) to be discussed today.

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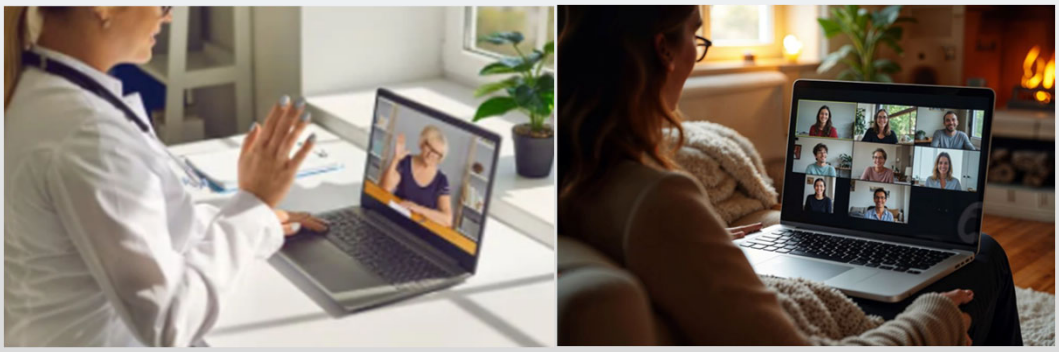
Increased use of digital tools in social services



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Some impacts of increased use in social services

- Remote access to services –
  - The challenge: virtual service versus no service
- Real-time data from wearables and remote patient monitoring tools support rapid, individualized care
- Enhanced opportunities for community engagement through public access and digital literacy programs
- Predictive analytics – AI and agency data can forecast agency needs

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Markets and profit motive drive innovation

- In 2015, the World Economic Forum declared digital transformation one of the hottest trends of the year.
- Digital transformation was seen as creating opportunities for developing new markets.
- Governments sponsored prize competitions to incentivize innovation for the public good.
- Major digital technology corporations around the world saw the opportunities and entered the market.
  - Differences across countries and regions.

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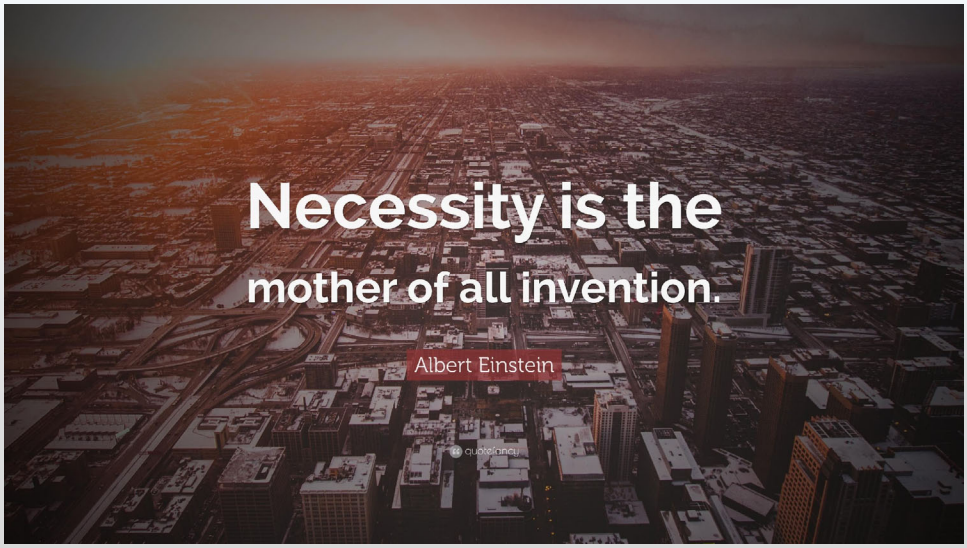

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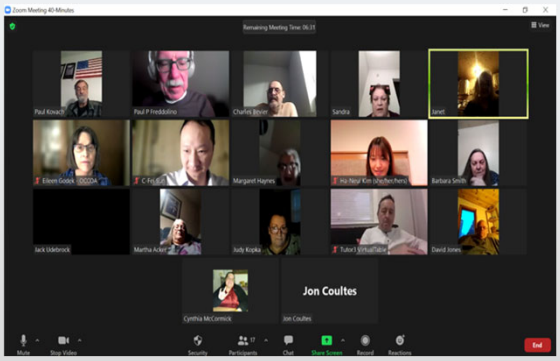
The COVID-19 pandemic



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Impact of COVID-19

- Agencies have developed hybrid models of digital and in-person services (e.g., video calls + in-person visits) to maintain family support and child protection.
  - Several SMART project agencies have these models
- In some countries, government to people (G2P) social transfer programs have expanded, using digital ID, mobile access, and e-payments - efficient and reduced fraud.
- Robots, wearables, and the Internet of Things have played greater roles in family social services.

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International conflict and civil unrest

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Impact of wars and civil unrest

Examples from Ukraine:

- DIIA – An online government portal that facilitates interactions between citizens and the state; digital documents have legal force (deeds for lost homes).
- The Social Education Platform has links to social services as well as professional development resources for social workers and other civil servants
- UNICEF and the Ukraine government launched a platform to search for humanitarian help and volunteer assistance

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Increased natural disasters

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Impact of disasters

- Digitizing public services and platforms to remain engaged before disasters and offer services after.
- Focus on preparedness and risk reduction (e.g., Digital Disaster Documents System).
- Increased role of AI and the Internet of Things to predict needs and allocate resources.
- Increased demand for mental health services has led to increased virtual care opportunities.
- Trauma-informed care can be delivered by mobile platforms and social media.

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賽馬會智家樂計劃
Jockey Club SMART Family-Link Project

These projects illustrate how digital tools can be used in

- Services for children, families
- Mental health services
- Data analysis and predictive analytics
- Education for professionals

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A few other examples

- Mobile apps for multiple purposes –
  - Enhancing couple relationships – the PAIRED App
  - Positive parenting, mindfulness, mental health apps
- Digital housing tools to integrate rent collection, maintenance, housing stability, and social support
- Risk scoring systems that signpost high-risk situations like potential child abuse
- Cloud-based case management platforms
- AI tools – from companion chatbots to address isolation to AI avatars to resurrect deceased loved one.

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Some horror stories

- Mobile mental health apps (e.g. depression self-management) trigger serious emotional responses
- AI chatbots – 'loved one' guides toward self-harm
- Database errors can lead to erroneous predictions of child abuse
- Financial fraud and scams using digital devices, particularly targeting older adults and low-income people.

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If funding was not a problem…..

- A cloud-based integrated platform connecting social services, health, education, housing, etc., to address multiple needs.
- Using drones – which are digital tools – to deliver food, important medications and health supplies.
- Humanoid robots as personal assistants that can be companion, valet, therapist, entertainer, and comforter. Addresses staff shortages.
- AI interpreters to support multilingual communication.
- Telepresence and virtual home visits using AR (augmented reality) and virtual reality (VR).

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The Challenges

- Funding
  - Overall budget cuts for family social services
  - Finding the right balance between human staff and technology
- Sustainability of innovative models in 'ordinary' agencies
- Staff and client/patient digital literacy
- Desire for human contact – is virtual care better than no care?
- Technology Acceptance: perceived ease of use and usefulness
- Ethics

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Survey question: Ethics

To what extent do you agree that the duty to inform clients of the limitations and risks of services can be appropriately met using a virtual platform for digitally assisted therapy?

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

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The role of professional education

- Key question: How do we prepare family social service professionals for a practice arena impacted by digitalization?
- Students are optimistic and yet they see the challenges and the importance of ethics.
- Use general language in accreditation standards and then encourage programs to develop appropriate content for courses and field practica.

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Basic guidance from CSWE

- CSWE competency language – “Social workers understand digital technology and the ethical use of technology in social work practice.” Competency 1
- “Social workers use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes.
- What does this mean? How does it get implemented?

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Where do we go from here?

Collaboration is essential

YES ……..
……AND

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ACCESS & SKILLS

USER EXPERIENCE

POLICY & LEGISLATION

ETHICS

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ACCESS AND SKILLS

Ensuring both clients and staff have the devices, internet connectivity, and *digital literacy* to use them effectively is foundational.

YES - - This is crucial to overcoming the first two levels of the digital divide.
AND - - It is going to take significant resources and *cross-sector collaboration*.

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ACCESS AND SKILLS

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Access and Skills

1. What limits or barriers impact access and digital skills for our populations?
2. How will this effort expand access to devices and the internet? How can the effort improve digital literacy? What specifically are the goals?
3. How are underrepresented groups (e.g., minorities, people with disabilities) included in the effort?
4. How will the effort encourage and advocate for sustainability and resource expansion?

User Experience

1. Who are the anticipated users of the solution or delivery effort?
2. What have users defined as their needs and how have these been addressed in the effort?
3. (To address recruitment challenges…) What triggers interest, engagement and involvement for our populations?
4. How representative is the group of users involved in design? Who needs to be added moving forward?

Policy and Legislation

1. Who are the policy stakeholders related to our populations and this effort? Who is missing or in opposition? What is needed to engage their support?
2. What channels or access do we have to cross-sector stakeholder groups?
3. What inertia or stakeholder opposition to existing policies exists that can be impacted through the effort?
4. Where policies have been implemented through legislation and programs, what do we know of their impact? Are they effective? Are they thought to be cost effective for the outcomes achieved?

Ethics

1. What regulations and compliance requirements must be addressed, and specifically how will the effort ensure individual staff and clients control their own information?
2. How will the effort ensure that staff and clients understand the technology content referenced in consent documents?
3. Who can serve as an objective and neutral resource to review the plans and monitor results?
4. Are staff and funding available to support continuous quality improvement and assessment of program outcomes?

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USER EXPERIENCE

We must incorporate user experience into the development of digitized tools and processes.

YES - - We absolutely must involve the intended users, staff and clients alike.
AND - - It takes time, effort, and intentional outreach to engage participants who genuinely represent these end users.

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POLICY AND LEGISLATION

Policy and legislation are essential to gain traction.

YES - - These two must work hand in hand if we want meaningful change.
AND - - We most stakeholders are not trained to advocate for policy change—or even feel comfortable attempting this.

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ETHICS

Four ethical issues stand out: privacy, security, informed consent, and evaluation.

YES - - Everyone here would likely agree that addressing these concerns is essential.
AND - - We must also acknowledge that truly meeting these expectations is extremely difficult. It takes collaboration.

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Next steps

- Clear need for open conversation among multiple stakeholders about the issues and realistic assessments of the advantages and challenges.
- Importance of policy and legislation
- Well done evaluation is essential
- It is a moving target

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The way forward….

In a time marked by both rapid technological change and tightening budgets, our conclusion is clear: *no single individual, organization, or sector can do this alone.*

YES - - the future of our field depends on collaboration.

AND - - together, we *can* shape that future.

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Contact Information

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THANK YOU!

Comments/Questions?

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