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*eFacilitators: teaching digital skills for an inclusive Europe.*

**eFacilitators are key actors in providing digital competences for vulnerable people. Getting this profession officially recognised will multiply further formal training and mobility opportunities.**

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The European digital single market strategy is largely dependent on the ability and interest of citizens to behave as online consumers. In this regard, a complex issue policy-makers should pay more attention to is the fact that still an 18% of EU population aged 16-74 has never used the internet (EUROSTAT 2015).

Despite the role informal intermediaries like family and friends can play to help the latter profiting from the online market, still a large group of adult citizens are excluded from it – not to say from online education, eHealth, wide parts of the labour market or eGovernment.

**The European digital single market needs more digitally competent citizens to succeed.**

A comparative analysis of figures across countries shows an unbalanced distribution between Northern/Western and Southern/Eastern countries, evidencing the relevance of regional and national differences.

Indeed, digital exclusion seems to depend socio demographic factors: correlations with socio demographic background of internet users and “offliners” indicate that vulnerable people not only are less active on the web but do also draw less profit from their activities if they are online.

This group of “digitally excluded” persons is largely made up of people aged 65 to 74 years old, people on low incomes, the unemployed and the less educated. On the other hand, the European economy is concerned about the increasing shortage of ICT practitioner skills.

The Digital Agenda Scoreboard (2014) alerts that while “39% of the EU workforce has insufficient digital skills, 14% has no digital skills at all”. This competence gap results in a growing deficit of ICT professional skills, with an estimate of around half million unfilled ICT vacancies today, which could grow to 900,000 by 2020 (Empirica 2015), challenging the EU’s development targets related not only to inclusiveness, but also to innovativeness.

While policy on digital inclusion in the past decade focussed on providing ICT access, remarkable success can be seen in the spread of ICT access throughout Europe.

Cheap digital devices (like smartphones, TV and tablets) and sinking connectivity costs lead to an increasing percentage of Europeans having access to digital means.

The Digital Agenda Scoreboard indicates that those targets related to internet access (broadband subscriptions, regular internet use) will be mostly met by 2015, while targets related to the competence of use (using e-government, using returning forms, buying online) are in danger to be missed.

This raises the question of adequate means to mediate and multiply digital skills.

**Accelerating population’s digital skilling requires targeted strategies to multiply and develop the capacities of intermediaries enabling digital learning and empowerment opportunities for all.**

A [survey study](#) prepared by Telecentre Europe for the European Commission (2014) demonstrated that there are “almost **250,000 eInclusion organizations** in the EU27, or an average of one eInclusion organization for every 2,000 inhabitants”.

These institutions, predominantly publicly funded, operate with few employees and small budget – meaning that while the “physical” eInclusion support structure in Europe is widely spread, it consists of small institutions.

These are telecentres and other forms of ICT community centres, public libraries, municipal centres or local NGOs, who are providing digital literacy to excluded groups as well as using ICT to support social inclusion of groups at risk of exclusion.

Among the targeted categories of the population are disengaged youth (e.g. NEETs), long-term unemployed people, domiciliary carers, migrants, or housewives – making the telecentre a space of eInclusion for a broad variety of vulnerable or marginalised groups at risk of digital exclusion.

Telecentres cover the intersection of ICT based learning (for any purpose, such as employability or leisure, lifelong learning or personal development), ICT competences (learning how to use applications, how to surf the web or how to handle a tablet) and community building (local based communities or groups of interest like senior internet cafes or telecentres for migrants).

Half of the surveyed organisations provide employability and a quarter entrepreneurship related services.

They can be categorized by the type of support they offer and the proximity to their target groups. In this respect, a four-level pattern developed for Telecentres in 2010 (but applicable to every eInclusion actor) includes the following categories:

Level 1: On demand assistance	Passive role; the telecentre only reacts to user's demand of help.
Level 2: Level 1 + Training	Provider of digital literacy training, the telecentre can also look for/attract the users and give a social orientation to his/her intervention.
Level 3: Level 2+ User empowerment	Provider of social inclusion services, the telecentre promotes the digital autonomy of the users and their achievement of personal goals taking advantage of the many resources available at the Information Society
Level 4: Level 3 + Active participation in community	Provider of community service-learning, the telecentre promotes the critical use of ICT and the engagement of the users with their local communities/social belonging groups through their active participation of community/social projects.

Their local base and pedagogy are aiming at providing a **low-threshold environment**, empowering vulnerable people to access the digital world. This institutional setting seems a perfect match for targeting the socio economic dimension of the digital gap.

However, there is a constant need for further professionalization of eInclusion actors, as this is a quite new branch of social welfare. Existing institutions, networks, organisations and approaches need further reflection, improvement and recognition in order to expand their impact.

The actual low-threshold **space** of the telecentre can be regarded as one key ingredient in providing ICT access and competences; the other one is the **person** that interacts with those seeking ICT access, competences or social activities – such as connecting and collaborating with peers.

People who are disconnected from the digital world today show a multitude of disadvantage features: this group has little option to access the formal education system, so non-formal adult education becomes their unique option (apart from family and friends, i.e. informal learning) to get acquainted with e-skills and digital opportunities.

This makes this target group a multi-faceted disadvantaged group that will need special support on their way to the digital society. Education staff with abilities in dealing with this target group plays key role in providing digital competences.

**eFacilitators are key for providing digital competences for vulnerable people, but they are in need of further professionalization.**

Recent years have seen a constant rise in requirements for the educational staff working in telecentres. Telecentre staff meets challenges like reduced public funding, new labour market demands for employability concerning ICT qualifications and changing technological systems (tablets, cloud applications, apps).

On the other side, end users are requesting new services (mobile devices, online job searching, certification of competences) and new target groups are entering the digital world and face competence gaps.

These developments lead to an increasing demand in professional training for the educational staff of telecentres. Telecentre Europe (directly or through its members) has been involved in a strand of four EU financed development projects (Lifelong learning programme, 2011-2014) aiming at supporting the professionalization of telecentres, their services and staff.

One of the outcomes was the branding of the profile of the “eFacilitator” as a vocational profile of educational staff for ICT competences in telecentres. But more work has to be done: professionalization has to reach other countries, all levels of staff in telecentres and other welfare organisations that do not understand themselves right now as “telecentres”.

It is difficult to estimate the number of persons working with end users in the field of eInclusion, but taking 250,000 organisations as a basis, it seems safe to argue that around **250,000-375,000 persons in the EU are working on digital competences of disadvantaged persons.**

Only tentative research has been done on the socio-demographic characteristics of this field of employment, but it seems to prevail a young, female and highly educated workforce with a high diversity of educational profiles.

This staff can be regarded as persons with high interest in social innovation and strong links between this group and social innovators could be traced through different social entrepreneurship organisations.

This staff is in need of constant training and issues such as means to initiate and sustain fundraising, certification of competences and a regular crew change rate have all to be tackled.

Recent research and development activities are aiming at these issues by developing customized and certifiable curricula for telecentres’ staff.

The aim of this on-going research and development activities is to support and secure professionalization within this new arising working field in order to make it more efficient for end users and more attractive for staff working on Inclusion issue.

Getting the profession officially recognised – either as a stand-alone profile or as specialization of an existing one – tends to multiply further formal training and mobility opportunities.

Employment prospects for e-facilitators stretch beyond telecentres, ranging from advising schools or libraries on digital training to supporting collaboration inside co-working spaces or providing ICT guidance to small business.

While one of the main issues faced by the e-skills mismatch in the IT industry is the limited interest shown by females on IT careers, the eInclusion sector is attracting women on a much higher degree (2 women every 1 man on average).

**A window to increase the number of women in IT can be opened if they can experiment the social dimension of IT by acting as e-Facilitator.**

The situation described above is calling for a constant development of telecentres as low-threshold specialised providers of ICT competences as a permanent jigsaw piece in providing employment and welfare support in the digital society – either for personal wellbeing or for employability.

With requirements both on the demand side (which competences are needed?) and on the individual side (which restrictions and options do users have?) telecentres are requested to constantly develop their efforts and approaches.

This process calls for a constant professionalization process that cannot be afforded without an extended formal recognition of the eFacilitator professional profile and the engagement of formal education in their preparation.

European and national/regional policy initiatives in this direction would help building a more sustainable, flexible and high quality ICT competence supporting infrastructure, ultimately redounding to the benefit of the Digital Single Market.

**References:**

[Eurostat \(2015\): Individuals who have never used the internet](#)

[European Commission \(2014\): Digital Inclusion and Skills. Digital Agenda Scoreboard 2014](#)

[Empirica \(Ed.\) 2014: ESkills for jobs in Europe: Measuring progress and moving ahead. Final report](#)