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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and objective of the report

This report aims to identify the key digital skills that, in the immediate future, will be fundamental to operate in the ICT sector (digital and communication skills) with specific application to the Third Sector. The analysis is aimed at vulnerable young NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) women, to design a training course that fills existing gaps and responds to the real needs of non-profit organizations, from NGOs to social cooperatives, which increasingly require figures able to manage digital tools for communication, fundraising and data management (European Commission, 2021; ESCO, 2022; TechSoup & NetHope, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023).

2. Methodology

2.1 European reports and frameworks

For this preliminary phase, institutional and scientific sources were analysed including the DigComp 2.2 framework for citizens' digital skills (European Commission, 2021), the ESCO portal for mapping skills and occupations (ESCO, 2022), the Digital Economy and Society Index 2024 for digitalisation indicators and gender gaps (European Commission, 2024), the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2023 for global trends in digital skills (World Economic Forum, 2023) and the OECD report "Skills for a Digital World" for the digital inclusion of vulnerable groups (OECD, 2024).

2.2 Pilot consultation with industry experts

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with Third Sector operators through cascading recruitment: digital training managers, digital volunteer coordinators and ICT officers, to collect pilot data of direct perceptions of training needs.

3. The ICT market in the Third Sector

3.1 The trend

The acceleration of digital transformation is profoundly changing the way we operate even within the Third Sector. The adoption of digital tools has become essential for communication, asset management, fundraising, and social impact. The WEF Future of Jobs Report (World Economic Forum, 2023) points out that the demand for digital skills will increase by 40% by 2027 in all sectors with a high relational and social component, including the Third Sector.

However, according to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021), many non-profit organisations are struggling to adapt to digitalisation, due to a scarcity of resources, specific expertise and structured strategies. With this in mind, the European framework DigComp 2.2 (European Commission, 2021) represents a useful tool for structuring training courses. It divides digital skills into five main areas, of which digital communication and collaboration, IT security and content creation are particularly relevant.

A European Skill Gap Analysis (CEDEFOP, 2023) finds that emerging roles in the non-profit sector will require transversal digital skills, not necessarily of a high technical level, but essential to operate in digitized environments. These include functional digital literacy; data management and visualization; digital communication skills; basic knowledge of cybersecurity and data protection; familiarity with digital fundraising tools and online donation platforms.

3.2 The gap

Within the Third Sector, digitization is often slowed down by systemic obstacles. According to an analysis by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021), 45% of non-profit organisations in Europe report a "lack of trained staff" as the main barrier to digital innovation. The TechSoup report (TechSoup & NetHope, 2023) shows that more than 50% of European NGOs use outdated or non-integrated digital tools. In addition, only 12% have a strategic digital transition plan. This indicates an urgent need for continuous training, adapted to the specificities of the Third Sector: limited budgets, small teams, strong staff turnover and collaborative work culture.

Although not the primary focus of this section, it is useful to highlight that digital gaps are particularly acute in vulnerable groups. Young NEET women are a particularly exposed target. According to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2023), the NEET rate among European women aged 15-29 is higher than that of men (13.1% vs. 10.5%), with peaks in southern European countries.

However, disaggregated data are not available for the specific target of this project, i.e. for the 23–29 age group or for vulnerable mothers, nor are there currently systematic surveys on their level of digital skills.

This highlights a need for targeted data collection, to better understand the barriers to digital access experienced by the specific project group, especially in the context of the Third Sector, which could represent a channel for re-entry into the labour market.

The exploratory interviews carried out in the preliminary phase with Third Sector entities (active in the field of inclusion, informal education and parenting support) confirm a growing interest in hybrid profiles, capable of combining social sensitivity and digital skills. In particular, entities report difficulties in finding resources capable of: using collaborative tools (e.g. Google Workspace, Notion, Trello); create accessible digital content (newsletters, posts, infographics); manage communication with digital stakeholders (donors, institutions, volunteers). Overall, the picture that emerges suggests that the European Third Sector needs a new generation of digital professionals, capable of integrating technologies into the core processes of the organization, without losing sight of the values and practices of social and community work.

4. Essential digital skills

4.1 Skills

In the context of the digital transformation of the Third Sector, the skills required to operate effectively in the ICT field are articulated along lines clearly outlined in the main European frameworks, including DigComp 2.2 and the ESCO portal (European Commission, 2021; ESCO, 2022). According to DigComp 2.2, three areas are particularly relevant: digital communication and collaboration, IT security and content creation. The first includes the ability to use tools such as Google Workspace or Microsoft Teams to collaborate remotely, organize meetings, share files and coordinate tasks efficiently even in distributed work environments. The second concerns the awareness and implementation of IT security practices, from data protection to credential management, up to knowledge of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union) and the adoption of good practices of digital hygiene, i.e. device security. Finally, the ability to create digital content

— from graphic to video materials — is crucial for communicating with stakeholders, volunteers and beneficiaries; intuitive tools such as Canva allow even those without specific training to develop effective visual communication, provided that there is a minimum basic digital literacy.

These competence trajectories are further confirmed by the World Economic Forum, which in its "Future of Jobs 2023" report highlights how increasing digitization is generating a transversal demand for digital skills, not only in technological sectors but also in the nonprofit world, where the ability to adapt to technological changes and communicate effectively in digital environments becomes a key prerequisite. Although the report does not specifically focus on the Third Sector, the trends outlined are fully transferable, especially for organizations that operate on a local scale and have to compete for attention, funds and participation in an increasingly digital environment.

The topic of IT security deserves special attention. According to the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), even non-specialist roles must acquire fundamental notions of data protection, threat identification and secure management of digital tools (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), 2022). At the organizational level, these skills must be distributed across the board, so that each professional figure knows how to recognize potential risks and act responsibly in the management of sensitive information.

4.2 The figures required

These skills are reflected in the professional profiles identified by ESCO, which outlines emerging figures specifically relevant to the Third Sector. These include the Digital Fundraiser, who must know how to use nonprofit-oriented stakeholder management platforms (such as Salesforce Nonprofit Cloud), manage digital campaigns and monitor their results through analytics tools, and the Community Manager, whose strategic function is to cultivate relationships with the online community, moderate digital spaces and analyze the effectiveness of communications through engagement metrics. Equally relevant is the figure of the Data Steward, a role that, although not technical in the strict sense, requires familiarity with data processing, the generation of reports based on key performance indicators (KPIs) and, in some cases, basic skills in the use of languages such as Python or R for simple exploratory analysis (ESCO, 2022).

4.3 Difficulties encountered

In addition to the analysis of the European frameworks, exploratory interviews conducted with operators of small and medium-sized Third Sector companies have highlighted a further critical element: the distance between the digital skills required and those actually present in the staff. The interviewees underlined how traditionally non-technological roles (educators, social workers, fundraisers) are now having to face new digital challenges, often without adequate training. Some interlocutors pointed out in particular the difficulty in building a coherent editorial plan for online communication, in managing files shared in the cloud in a structured and secure way, and in interpreting the data collected by

awareness campaigns or fundraising.

Finally, as reported by the OECD (2021), a systemic obstacle hindering the spread of these skills is related to the lack of time, economic resources and access to structured training courses. In the absence of an upskilling strategy supported by public funding or territorial networks, many organizations rely on self-taught solutions or particularly motivated internal figures, generating a further gap between those who manage to update and those who fall behind.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The analysis clearly showed that the Third Sector is experiencing a digital transformation that requires new skills, especially in roles such as digital fundraiser, community manager and data steward. However, significant barriers persist: there is a lack of resources for training, digital skills are often fragmented and not always formally recognised. The problem is even more evident among NEETs, especially young women with family responsibilities, who struggle to enter structured professional development paths.

On the other hand, it emerged that the skills required in the Third Sector are often of a general nature and not necessarily advanced. Basic digital skills can also have a significant impact in improving the working environment and facilitating the employment of young women and vulnerable mothers, the target of the project.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to invest in agile, practical and accessible training courses, designed for those who work in the sector and for those who are temporarily excluded from the labor market. It is equally important to create tools for the recognition of acquired skills, even in non-formal contexts. Finally, stable coordination between Third Sector entities, institutions and digital actors is needed to align strategies and needs. Only in this way can the digital transition be inclusive, effective and truly useful for improving the social impact of the Third Sector.

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