

When the meeting goes digital

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(Translation by Andreas Lindahl)

How are social services affected by meetings with their clients becoming digital? In the latest edition of the magazine Nio-Fem [Nio-Fem nr-1-23 webb.pdf \(tam-arkiv.se\)](#) there is a text by Kristofer Hansson - senior lecturer in social work - about how the covid-19 pandemic came to affect the work of social services.



Digital emotions. Image from Pixabay.

The digitization of working life is changing the way people convene. The screen, camera, digital microphone and new software enable working life to become less location-bound. For social services, this development is evident. The digitization of recent years has been seen as an opportunity among many municipalities in Sweden to enable other types of meetings with the clients who come into contact with social services. Of course, it has also been a way to rationalize work and make it more efficient. With technology, doing social work means something else, and work is fundamentally changing.

During the covid-19 pandemic, digital technology became a solution for many to be able to quickly adapt their work in relation to the Swedish Public Health Agency's infection control restrictions. Thus, social work changed from one day to the next, and

it was no longer possible, for example, to meet clients as before. The processes of change of Digital social work, which previously might have been slow, was now moving at breakneck speed and it was not really that strange. The need to protect themselves from the coronavirus and to reduce the risks of spreading infection in society was great, while trained social workers retained their task of keeping in touch with their clients. Digital technology quickly became a possible solution.

By studying more closely the social workers' experiences of digitization of working life during the pandemic, it is possible to get a very condensed picture of a development process that otherwise would probably have been much slower. Difficulties vis-a-vis change and vis-a-vis technology that might otherwise be present in a workplace were trumped by the risks and dangers that the pandemic brought. This did not mean, however, that the adaptation and problems with new technology disappeared; but nonetheless they could still be present and something for the trained social workers to duly reflect upon. Now the pandemic has subsided, but these experiences can be instrumental to capture in order to better understand the challenges social services face when it comes to digitizing this and similar work.

In interviews during the pandemic with social workers at various municipal social services offices in Sweden, it emerged that internet-based communication was seen as an opportunity to meet digitally and thus reduce the risk of infection. It was software that some social secretaries had not used before, but during the interviews they told us that they had now become accustomed and found other routines for meetings and that they had come into this new way of working. One official pointed out that, "then we have gotten into working digitally quite quickly and everyone has gotten used to having meetings via Teams or Skype."

But there was a difference between having digital meetings with clients and with other colleagues. The meetings with colleagues worked well to have digitally according to most, although some thought it felt strange at first. Suddenly, theme meetings and workplace meetings became digital, and some workplaces tried to carry out luncheons and coffee digitally. It was pointed out by one social worker that it was something that they had become accustomed to, "and that it actually works very well, to have meetings in that way."

At the same time, it became more difficult for the work in social services to handle some cases with certain clients. In the interviews, this became clear and social workers were worried that they could not carry out their work in a professional

manner. One of the interviewees pointed out that "some cases that may be extra sensitive, that there are still some things that may be lost if you are not sitting in a physical room." In this way, this person highlights an important difference in the different meetings that exist in a workplace and how some meetings are almost impossible to carry out digitally. The screen, the camera and the digitally transmitted sound become a barrier: important parts of the client's social situation are lost. The sensitive information that the social worker has learned over the years to interpret and code in the client's body language or in his or her living environment, ran the risk of suddenly disappearing and not being possible to relate to at all at that. Digital technology did not allow for a constructive meeting for the social worker, but rather technology created obstacles that filtered out important fragments of information about the client and his or her situation.

During the pandemic, it became of poised-central importance to make the assessment of which clients it was actually possible to meet digitally and which required a physical meeting. In one of the interviews, it was pointed out that it was not possible to meet the younger children digitally in, for example, a child welfare investigation. It was not only that the younger children were not used to meeting custodians digitally, but also that they wanted to meet with the children alone in a calm atmosphere. In a digital meeting, there was an imminent risk that parents could linger outside the digital frame and sound, but still be present in the child's world. Teenage adolescents, the social workers said, were easier to meet with digitally, probably because they had already gotten so used to the digital environment and more obviously could find places to talk undisturbedly.

In many jobs, meeting other people is a central and recurring part of everyday life. In a digitalization of working life, we can imagine that some of these meetings can take place digitally to make it easier for those who are to meet, but also to streamline the work. The pandemic gave us an opportunity to study more closely which parts of working life these digital meetings can work and in which parts they do not work. An important lesson in conjunction herewith: digital meetings risk withholding important information from the social secretary. The contextual universe created when people meet physically can simply be so vernacular that it is difficult to use digital tools.

But there is also a dimension to digital meetings where the context rather is seen to collapse into the meeting and adding knowledge that professionals are not in need of. In research, we speak of "context collapse" and how private and very informal knowledge comes to the attention of the professional by mixing boundaries between

private and public in the digital world. For example, the trained social worker might be looking inquisitively for information about her or his clients on digital platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, but at the same time the trained social worker may stumble across information that is both unwanted and unsolicited.

In this way, the digital meetings are about understanding the complexity between which knowledge is made visible and which is kept hidden, just as it is about which knowledge should actually be kept private, but which risks becoming public. Digitized work life can be said to loosen more traditional boundaries that previously existed between welfare officers and their clients. By focusing on the digital meetings during the pandemic, the experiences and practices of these negotiations on borders can be made visible and we can learn lessons for the future development of a more digitized working life.

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