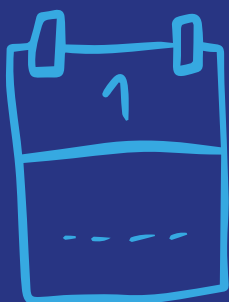# DIGITALISATION OF MUNICIPAL YOUTH WORK IN

2021

SUMMARY

Digitalisation of Municipal Youth Work in 2021 is the fifth report on the digitalisation of municipal youth work and digital youth work. The previous reports were published in 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2019. The report examines the digitalisation of municipal youth work through five themes: 1) attitudes towards digitalisation, 2) the use of digitalisation, 3) digital competence, 4) the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation, and 5) the strategic development of digitalisation. The report also examines how the digitalisation of municipal youth work has evolved between 2019 and 2021, with particular attention paid to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results presented in the report are based on a survey conducted in September and October 2021 in Finnish and Swedish. The target group of the survey comprised all municipal youth workers and youth work managers, who were asked to answer an online questionnaire between 28 September and 12 October 2021. A total of 907 respondents responded to the survey, of whom 784 (86%) were youth workers, and 123 (14%) were managers. Of the responses, 871 (96%) were received in Finnish and 36 (4%) in Swedish, which is the second official language in Finland. The respondents represented 227 of Finland's 309 municipalities.

The results show that municipal youth workers and youth work managers have a positive attitude towards digitalisation. There were no significant changes in the attitudes when compared to the 2019 results. A total of 94% of respondents wanted to stay abreast of developments in digitalisation and technology, and 91% said that they were interested in the digital cultures of young people. Around half of the respondents (51%) considered interacting with young people in digital environments to be just as real as face-to-face encounters. Two out of three (66%) felt that digital media and technology should be used more extensively in youth work in their municipality. In 2019, this percentage was 80.

A total of 84% of managers believed that the digital services available to young people in their municipality had improved over the past year. Similarly, 72% of managers felt that digital youth work activities in their municipality had become more diversified over the past year. On a scale of 4–10, managers gave the state of digitalisation of youth services in their municipality an average score of 7.5.

Municipalities are making active use of digitalisation in their youth work. However, there seems to have been no increase in the use of digital services when compared to 2019. On average, a youth worker regularly uses seven different digital services in their work with young people. The most popular services are Instagram (86%), WhatsApp (82%) and Facebook (62%). Compared to 2019, the most significant growth was seen in the use of photo and video editing apps, Microsoft Teams, Discord and TikTok. The most significant decline was seen in the use of Facebook, email and digital games.

The results show that the amount of online youth work in municipalities has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the use of digital tools in physical services and activities has decreased. Of the youth workers who responded to the survey, 97% said that they had had face-to-face encounters with young people at least once a week in the last three months. The most common uses for digital tools are communication and interaction. A total of 92% of youth workers had interacted with young people

through social media or messaging services in the last three months. Well over half of the respondents (60%) said that they had held counselling discussions with young people online, and just over a quarter (28%) had given young people the opportunity to participate remotely in an event or activities. Only 14% of workers said that they had organised guided group activities online in the last three months. Digital gaming activities, the use of digitalisation in group building and technology education activities seem to have decreased in municipal youth work when compared to 2019.

There has been some progress on digital infrastructure. Just under two out of three (62%) managers felt that the digital infrastructure available for youth work in their municipality had improved over the past year. Virtually all municipal youth workers (99%) have a smartphone provided by their employer. Similarly, 92% of workers reported having access to a laptop computer provided by their employer. Around one in five workers (19%) said that the smartphone provided by their employer does not meet their needs. Just under a fifth (17%) of workers said that the network connections provided by the municipality were not sufficient.

There also seems to have been a positive development in digital competence. A total of 94% of workers and managers rated their digital competence as at least fair. As many as 44% of respondents rated their digital competence as good or excellent, compared to just under a third (30%) in 2019. Media and information literacy was still perceived as the biggest strength and digital content production as the most significant weakness. According to the respondents' own assessments, their skills seem to have improved the most in terms of proficiency in the use of equipment and applications. However, almost three out of four (72%) said that they need training in digital skills.

Youth workers identified insufficient working hours, the lack of skills and the absence of objectives as the main challenges in digital youth work. Managers identified the lack of skills and human and financial resources as the main challenges in the digitalisation of youth work. According to managers, the digitalisation of municipal youth services is most driven by the use of ready-made youth work models and technical solutions that do not require any investment from the organisation.

Just under half of the respondents (44%) believed that their work community has a shared understanding of what digital youth work is. Similarly, around half (49%) felt that one of the main tasks of youth work is to strengthen young people's digital skills. Three out of four managers (72%) said that digitalisation has been taken into account in their municipal youth services' action plan. On the other hand, only one in three managers (33%) said that the work community had set goals for digital youth work. Almost half of all respondents (45%) felt that the lack of goals was a major challenge for the digitalisation of youth work. At the same time, digital youth work is being evaluated more than before. The most common evaluation methods are work community discussions, questionnaires targeted at young people and self- and peer evaluations. Just under a third of managers (31%) said that digital youth work is evaluated through indicators.

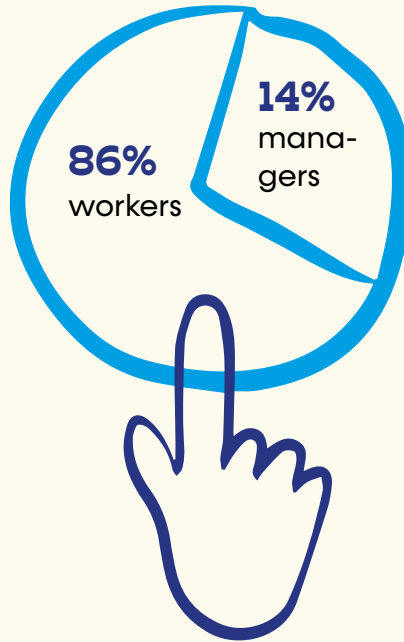# DIGITALISATION OF MUNICIPAL YOUTH WORK IN 2021

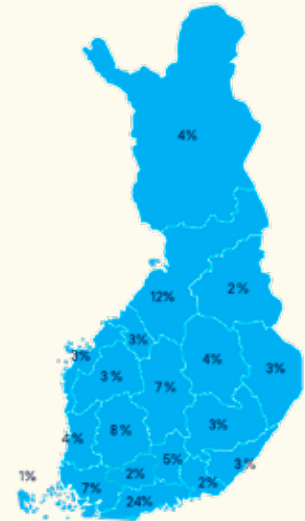**NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS**

907
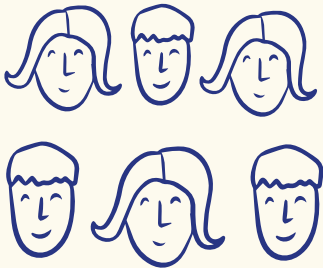
AVERAGE AGE OF RESPONDENTS

39 yr

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

86% workers

14% mana-gers

RESPONDING MUNICIPALITIES
227/309

4%

12% 2%

3%

3% 4% 3%

3% 7%

3%

2% 8% 3%

1% 5% 3%

7% 2% 2%

24%

ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIGITALISATION

94%
want to stay abreast of developments in digitalisation

45%
feel that the lack of goals is a major challenge for the digitalisation of youth work

51%
consider interacting in digital environments to be **as real as face-to-face encounters**
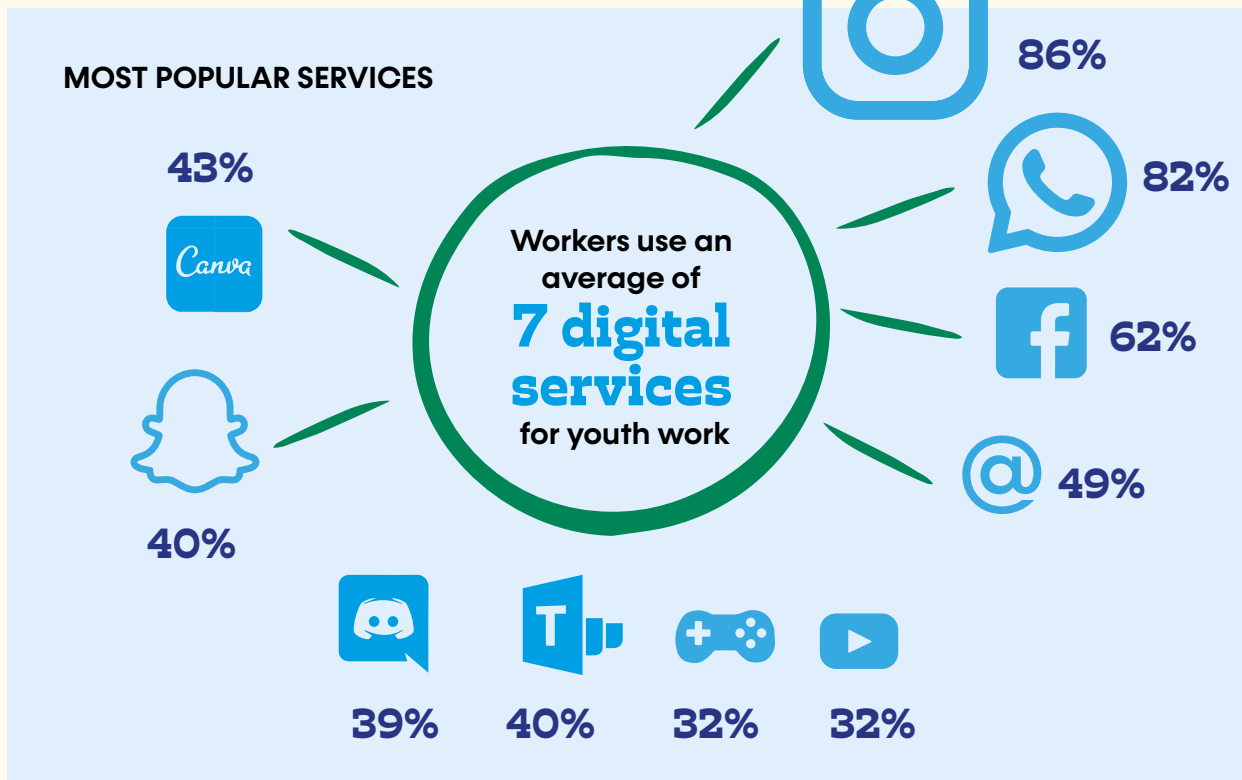
COMPETENCE

94%
rate their digital skills **as at least basic**

72%
need training in digital skills

53%
see the lack of digital skills **as a major challenge**

VERKE

MOST POPULAR SERVICES

Workers use an average of 7 digital services for youth work

Instagram **86%**

WhatsApp **82%**

Facebook **62%**

Email **49%**

Canva **43%**

Snapchat **40%**

Discord **39%**

Teams **40%**

Games **32%**

YouTube **32%**

IN THE LAST 3 MONTHS

Workers

92% have interacted with young people via social media or messaging services

70% have discussed digital phenomena with young people

23% have used digital technologies in group building for young people

14% have organised guided group activities online

6% have offered the opportunity for technological maker activities or coding

Managers

84% municipality's digital services for young people have improved over the year

75% digitalisation is taken into account in job descriptions

72% digitalisation has been taken into account in the youth services' action plan

33% the work community has set goals for digital youth work

31% digital youth work is evaluated through indicators

VERKE

CONCLUSIONS

Digitalisation has been part of the daily routine of municipal youth work for a long time. When the municipal survey of Verke was first conducted eight years ago, digital youth work in municipalities was virtually synonymous with Facebook, and digital youth work was mainly carried out on the computer. The development of mobile technology, the social media revolution, the visualisation of communications and new youth culture phenomena have significantly changed youth work. Today, digitalisation in youth work is not limited to a single service, tool, environment or activity – it is embedded in many ways in the whole field of youth work. Digitalisation is also being better taken into account in organisational structures and youth work management.

Youth work changed during the pandemic

Several studies in the field of youth work have highlighted how youth work had to reorganise its activities in spring 2020. For a while, online youth work and mobile work were the main forms of youth work in municipalities. This can also be clearly seen in the statistics of the electronic documentation form for municipal youth work, Lokikirja. It is maintained by Kanuuna, which coordinates the Centre of Expertise for Municipal Youth Work. After the pandemic hit Finland and society closed down, online youth work accounted for a significant proportion of Lokikirja's statistics: over 80% of all entries. After the first wave of the pandemic, the role of online youth work started to decline significantly. (Kanuuna 2020, Manu et al. 2021.)

Although the proportion of online youth work has clearly decreased in municipalities since the coronavirus spring, the results of this survey show that there has been a permanent increase in the amount of online youth work when compared to 2019. The percentage of respondents indicating online youth work as one of the most used forms of work in their youth work has doubled from 7 per cent to 16 per cent. There has also been an increase in online youth work activities: an increasing number of municipal employees have held one-on-one counselling sessions with young people online, produced online video material for young people and offered opportunities for young people to participate in youth work events or activities remotely.

The lockdown measures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic also had a direct impact on the nature of digital youth work. As physical services and activities had to be temporarily suspended and interaction with young people moved online, digitality in youth work was reduced only to an environment to implement activities. During the pandemic, digital youth work was virtually synonymous with online youth work. In their open responses to the survey, youth workers shared a wide range of experiences of the COVID-19 period and views on their own municipality's ability to respond to the change. Some saw the change as an opportunity to develop both personally and as a work community, others saw the period as something to plough through, and others felt that their organisation had to struggle to survive. In other words, the coronavirus period was perceived very differently by the respondents, depending on the municipality and its circumstances. The results show that the size of the municipality was not found to have any clear correlation with the differences.

Goals matter

The responses to the survey also highlight the importance of goal setting and evaluation. Many youth workers felt that youth work in their municipality reverted as quickly as possible to the old ways of working because the work community and management did not see enough value in online youth work. Several open responses explained this by saying that their municipality lacked a plan and strategy for implementing youth work remotely and did not set out to assess the benefits and development needs of the activities. Similar conclusions were also reached in a study on the effectiveness of online youth work conducted by the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, according to which a key challenge to online youth work is the lack of a definition of needs and goals for the activities (Moisala & Laine 2021).

The importance of goal setting and evaluation is also reflected in the results of the multiple-choice questions in the survey. One in three managers responded that their work community had set goals for digital youth work. At the same time, almost nine out of ten managers responded that the implementation of digital youth work is evaluated in some way, be it through indicators set by the organisation, work community discussions, feedback surveys for young people or self- and peer evaluation. In other words, more than half of managers said that their organisation has not set goals for digital youth work but that they nevertheless evaluate the implementation of these activities.

Even if a municipality has not set goals for digital youth work, this does not necessarily mean that the municipality's digital youth work is not goal-oriented. Many actors consider that since digital youth work cuts across all youth work, its goals are the same as those of other youth work. Consequently, many feel that there is no need to define separate goals for digital youth work. However, the results of the survey show that the municipalities that had set targets for digital youth work had taken digitalisation better into account in the planning and evaluation of their activities and in their organisational structure.

Municipalities that have set goals for digital youth work…

- are more likely to feel that there is a shared understanding of what digital youth work is in the work community.
- more often recognise the benefits of digital youth work.
- are more likely to take digitalisation into account in their employees' job descriptions.
- more often utilise information on the impact of digitalisation to support their youth work planning.
- evaluate digital youth work more extensively and with a wider range of methods.
- pay more attention to the accessibility of digital services.

Did municipalities take a digital leap in youth work?

The answer to the question of whether a digital leap was taken in municipal youth work during the COVID-19 pandemic is not straightforward. The answer also depends a lot on who is asked. The results of this survey do not suggest that there was any widespread digital leap in youth work in municipalities during the pandemic. A comparison with the results of the 2019 municipal survey shows that there appears to have been no substantial change in attitudes, digital services, forms of activities and tools in youth work. The respondents' overall assessment of their own digital skills has somewhat improved, but a closer look at the different competence areas shows that the improvement seems to have mainly taken place in the use of devices and applications. So there does not seem to have been any diversification in the digital skills of youth workers and managers. Overall, the results of the survey do not support the view that there has been a significant change in the operating culture of youth services in municipalities during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the vast majority of managers felt that the digital services offered by the municipality to young people had improved over the past year. In their open responses, several youth workers highlighted the fact that their municipality had taken a digital leap during the pandemic by setting out to experiment with youth work in new environments. The strengthening of skills in the use of devices and applications has also given youth workers and managers more courage and confidence to experiment with new digital environments and forms of activities. Therefore, many municipalities have taken important steps in the digitalisation of youth work, which is why this development should not be underestimated either.

However, instead of a debate on whether there was a digital leap or not, it would be more relevant to look to the future and think about what youth work will look like after the COVID-19 pandemic. Digitalisation will not slow down, so new technological innovations and youth culture phenomena will continue to challenge the field of youth work. Ultimately, the digitalisation of municipal youth work is not a change in equipment but a cultural change that takes place in both practical youth work and the entire organisational culture. In the future, youth work will not be divided according to whether it takes place online or face-to-face, but according to the youth work goals it aims to promote. Therefore, the digitalisation of youth work is not about how online environments can be utilised for youth work, but about how youth work promotes young people's growth, development, inclusion, communality, equality and acquisition of knowledge and skills needed in a digital society.

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