

Digital media in social enterprises – an Erasmus+ partnership

“The use of digital media in social enterprises” is the title of an European cooperation project that has been coordinated by the Diocesan-Caritas Association for the Archdiocese of Cologne since the beginning of 2019. When the project leaders decided to deal with this issue, it was not foreseeable that the Corona pandemic would accelerate digitalization worldwide at such high speed – nobody ever thought before that this would be possible. At a breathtaking pace, we are forced to learn and to put into action what is possible concerning digitalization. Video and telephone conferences have become a natural part of communication. The partnership supported by the European education programme Erasmus+ also had to adapt ways of communication towards telephone, e-mail and videoconferencing, although a total of six multi-day attendance workshops originally had been planned in the partner countries involved; three out of the six workshops have taken place so far.

The aim of the partnership is to exchange professionals across borders and to get to know good practice examples for the use of digital media in companies that employ and qualify people with disabilities or with health problems. European funding will support the transfer of knowledge in vocational education and training across national borders. The partners also have the opportunity to jointly develop ideas to be put into practice that they would never have come across on their own. In addition to Caritas social enterprises from Romania, Greece and Lithuania, as well as the European umbrella organisation CEFEC based in Belgium, which represents the interests of social enterprises in Europe at the political level, are involved in the project.

The first partner meeting took place at the beginning of last year in Cologne. Speakers from the Technical University of Dortmund presented various pilot projects developed at the Institute of Rehabilitation located in Dortmund. Within the framework of the model project “EJO Electronic Job Coach” work processes from gastronomy, home economy, horticulture or the metal industry are broken down into partial steps and are represented in digital ways through images or pictograms. They are then available for employees on a smartphone or tablet at the workplace. Thus, people with cognitive disorders due to an accident or illness can call up the respective work steps whenever they need to have another look at the respective action steps. In addition, the two projects “VIA4all” and “LernBAR” were presented which offer starting points for new ideas on so-called “Augmented Reality”. Both projects use special spectacles to improve the professional training of people with disabilities or health restrictions with the help of “virtual reality”. Equipped with computers, sensors and display, the glasses allow direct access to a variety of information, videos or other support services while working in operation.

The fact that a cross-border transfer of ideas into the practice of employment promotion and rehabilitation is also possible was demonstrated by the following example: The Romanian partner Diakonia Sfantu Gheorghe is the responsible organization of the “Irisz House” (Rainbow House), a

daycare centre for people with disabilities, which offers, in addition to therapeutic and social space-oriented work, various fields of employment, such as the production of candles for parishes. The exchange in Cologne gave the impetus to initiate a computer course for people with disabilities there. At the meeting in Sfantu Gheorghe in May 2019, the project partners were able to take a close look at the progress and results which had been achieved so far. Eight to ten people take part in the two-hour course once a week under professional guidance and are focused and excited to learn how to deal with hardware and software. One of the participants had attended a school for people with disabilities for eight years and was still unable to write. Within a short time frame the woman learned the alphabet here in the computer course. She can now write her name and put together first short sentences. In the course of the workshop, the participants also informed themselves about the possibilities of using 3D printers in social enterprises.

At the third meeting in Kaunas in Lithuania in autumn 2019, the two restaurants “Mano Guru” and “First Pancake” were on the agenda. Here, people with disabilities learn to gain a foothold at the labor market, seeking people with illness or mental illness. Qualification in the areas of kitchen and service is supported by the use of digital devices such as computer cash boxes and electronic handheld device. During the visit of Caritas there, it became clear to the project group that poor and disadvantaged groups in Lithuania often do not have access to the Internet because they cannot afford a smartphone or a computer. They are completely excluded from digital communication.

As an interim review of the partnership, it can be noted that digital literacy is also one of the key competences of the future for disadvantaged people. The Erasmus+ Partnership therefore wishes to continue to contribute to the digital and social exclusion of disadvantaged groups in Europe. Digitalization in social enterprises is still at the beginning and experts are also controversial as to whether it will bring more opportunities or disadvantages. Digitalization can increase the quality of work and job satisfaction, but it can also endanger jobs, especially in the area of low-skilled jobs. Social enterprises in Europe must therefore face the digital challenge and closely monitor the development.

Three more transnational meetings are still planned to be put into action. They can only be carried out if the current situation improves, when travelling will be possible again. In the meantime, the partnership will consider further opportunities for digitalization: for example, to organize a “European webinar” in order to share information concerning the use of digital teaching and learning methods.

Further information on the project: www.digi4se.eu