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Country report for EU-COST Action CA21107 “Work inequalities in later life redefined by digitalization” (DIGI-net)

Employer policies and practices concerning older workers
and the use of digital technology in Norway

Dorothy Sutherland Olsen

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Preface

This working paper is part of a compendium of country reports to be published by the EU-COST action *CA21107 Work inequalities in later life redefined by digitalization* (DIGI-net) This country report is the result of work carried out in workgroup 2, focused on employees and organisations. COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. COST Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research and innovation.

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Oslo, December 2023

Michael S. Mark
Head of Research

Vibeke Opheim
Director

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1 Digitalization in Norway

The aim of this paper is to summarise the current situation in Norway for seniors and digitalisation with a focus on working life and business. The paper will be part of a larger study with many comparative country reports. The report is a result of work carried out by the EU COST action CA21107 (Digi-net). The report is organised in four chapters, firstly we look at digitalisation in Norway in general, then we summarise the impact of digitalisation on business. We then look specifically at the impact on ageing workforces and how employers and unions have reacted to the challenges. Finally, we provide a short summary of the implications for Norway.

Various studies give us an overview of use of digital tools in Norway. A study by Statistics Norway (2020) found that 92 percent of the population aged 9 to 79 use the internet daily, however in the 67 to 79 age group the number was lower at 67 percent. In the same group (67 to 79) 79 percent stated that they owned their own smartphone. Those over 75 use the internet largely to read newspapers and watch television, while those between 65 and 75 are more actively accessing health information, messaging and shopping. A government survey of digital competence (KDD 2020) found that only 3 percent of 130 000 people state that they do not use internet, the proportion who do not use digital tools is highest in the 80-plus age group. Despite these high numbers, 89 percent feel that they need to improve their digital skills and 10 percent state that there is inadequate training for those with impairments. These findings are echoed in a survey carried out by a large retailer of electronic goods (Elkjøp 2021) where 15 percent found it challenging to keep up with technological developments due to functional impairments and 49 percent state that they know elderly people whose quality of life would improve if they knew more about technology. A population survey carried out in 2019 (Difi) found that those with a low level of digital competence had difficulties performing tasks on web pages of local authorities, health trusts, the labour and welfare administration and online tax reporting as well as private services like shopping and banking. The population survey concluded that those with low digital competence had a reduced consumption of news, participation in the public debate and society and that this represents a threat to freedom of speech and participation in

democratic processes. Several groups were identified as vulnerable to digital exclusion and those over 65 were a prominent group alongside immigrants, those with functional impairments, those with low education (Digihjelp 2018¹). A 2019 study on digital exclusion found 4 main barriers to digital technology: physical access, digital competence, bureaucratic competence and health related challenges (Sintef 2019). (Bureaucratic competence is defined as the ability to read, understand and use information to achieve personal goals; for example, which forms are relevant, how they should be filled in and who to contact when you need help).

¹ <https://www.ks.no/fagomrader/digitalisering/kompetanse-og-verktoy/digihjelpen/hva-er-digihjelpen-/om-digihjelpen-prosjektet-og-digihjelpen-tilbudet/>

2 Impact of digitalization on businesses

Most businesses and public sector organisations have a high degree of digitalisation and the high labour costs in Norway may have accelerated the digitisation of previously manual tasks. Over 70% of public services have now been digitised (Norstella 2022), there have however been complaints from seniors who for example still want to send in tax returns on paper.

The banking and finance sector has been involved in development of digital technologies for many years and is aware of the challenges of user interfaces and good support for users. 95 percent of those between 16 and 70 use internet banking. Most retailers have webpages and since the pandemic many (77 percent of retail chains) have developed online shopping. The current trend is for omnichannel ie. multiple ways to shop, both in shop, online, or klik-and-collect (Virke 2022). Like most western countries, Norwegian industry has experienced a rapid and ongoing digitalisation of all stages of the value chain, these changes are frequently referred to as Industry 4.0. Robotics, increased use of RFID, algorithms, workflow and new uses of artificial intelligence in production processes. In industry, banking and retailing everyone is asking for a high level of basic digital competence for all employees, a smaller number of experts with sector competence and people with the ability to see opportunities and new ways of using and further developing technologies to maintain high levels of productivity and continuous innovation (Olsen et al. 2020).

3 Impact on ageing workforces

Like many European countries the number of elderly people (over 55) is rising, while the number of younger people is falling. Both the problem of elderly care and the challenge of financing pensions have been identified as major national issues in Norway. This has led to financing of research aimed at keeping older employees in the workforce as long as possible. Although the pension age is 67 for men and women, many employees have the opportunity to retire at 62, but the Centre for senior policy (see chapter 4) and more recently employers themselves have become more involved in finding ways to retain employees and to ensure that their competence is being utilised.

A Norwegian firm worked with researchers to develop a best practice model called The Golden Link (Hilsen & Ennals 2009). The idea was to use digital technology to share knowledge between older and younger employees. The aim of this project was to ensure that all the knowledge and years of experience of senior employees did not get lost when they retired. The model promotes the development of digital flow models for selected processes at work. The researchers suggest that this model provides a good supplement to reading literature on how to carry out certain tasks. They believe the system encapsulates tacit knowledge and reduces learning time.

Government funding is available to municipalities wanting to establish digital training [digihelp.no](https://www.digihelp.no)². Many municipalities have developed learning programs, however most struggle to maintain longterm offers of training. A network, partly voluntary, but with state support has stepped up, Seniornett offers training, support and access to information on basic ICT and use of more specific digital tools for those over 60.

² <https://www.ks.no/fagomrader/digitalisering/kompetanse-og-verktoy/digihjelpen/>

4 Employer and union responses

Most companies in Norway offer training in digital technology to their employees, however this varies between 20% in the hospitality sector and 66% in the ICT sector. The level of digital skills in society is generally good with only 3% not using smartphone, internet, computer or tablet. However, the 3% were largely seniors (KDD 2020).

Several studies of the situation for seniors at work have looked at what they call “senior policy” eg. (Solomon & Hilsen 2011). Senior policy usually consists of ways to compensate employees who continue after the minimum retirement age. Compensation is usually in the form of reduced workload, more paid leave and the opportunity for more flexible working and competence development. Little mention is made of digital competence or digital tools for seniors.

The Centre for senior policy is a publicly financed organisation aimed at promoting active engagement of seniors in the workforce. The centre finances research carries out an annual survey and provides support for organisations wanting to promote good working conditions for seniors. The board of directors for the centre includes representatives from public and private sector organisations as well as trade unions. The centre has also been active in publicising positive activities and sharing best practice, including articles on successful seniors and entrepreneurs. In cooperation with trade unions, the centre has financed studies of different industrial sectors and found that in general seniors are content with the work situation, however many are anxious about change, including technological change (Midtsundstad et al. 2022). Most say they have good access to training, however they sometimes feel discriminated against with regard to new technology. Some of the positive activities found in organisations are good opportunities for training, support for planning for the period before retirement, working closely with younger colleagues and better involvement in change, for example participating in projects developing new technologies.

Trade unions are all in favour of an inclusive working environment, where seniors and others are actively involved. Concrete initiatives have been carried out in cooperation with the Centre for senior policy. Despite interest in seniors, few trade unions or employers’ organisations have focused on digitalisation and seniors.

However, there is one example where employers working with the Centre Senior Policy commissioned a report on senior and digitalisation.³ They suggested, that in order to gain the full benefit of digital tools and systems, users needed “digital self-confidence” and “digital optimism”, something which might be lacking among seniors. They found that a combination of courses, practice and time for informal learning worked best for seniors and recommended digital activists or super-users to support and stimulate (InFuture 2023).

<https://www.ks.no/fagomrader/digitalisering/kompetanse-og-verktoy/digihjelpen/>

5 Conclusion

Like other European countries public and private organisations are trying to keep up with the rapid developments in digital technology and like other countries, seniors, while perhaps not excluded, are less active in using this technology. The main motivation for employers to retain older employees is the general low unemployment in Norway and the challenge finding experienced people to take on tasks. This has resulted in training and other initiatives aimed at seniors. The creation of the Centre for senior policy is regarded as a success and this organisation has successfully linked public policy to business and research. Although unions and employers' organisations are interested in seniors, there has been less interest in how seniors are tackling digitalisation and little emphasis on using digital technologies to help seniors at work.

As mentioned earlier this paper is a summary of the current situation in Norway for seniors and digitalisation with a focus on working life and business. The paper will be part of a larger study with many comparative country reports. The report is a result of work carried out by the EU-COST action CA21107 (Digi-net). More information about the Digi-net action is available on the webpage: <https://digi-neteu.eu/> and information on EU-COST can be found at <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA21107/>

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