EASPD

European Association of Service providers
for Persons with Disabilities

GOING ONLINE: SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND BEYOND

2020

Going Online: Services for people with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond

Executive Summary

Silke Georgi

Acknowledgements

This is an Executive Summary of a report by the European Association of Service Providers for persons with Disabilities (EASPD) subcontracted to Silke Georgi, Social Heroes

Author: Silke Georgi

The full report will be released in late 2021.

EASPD would like to thank all those who contributed to the development of this report.

Brussels, 2021

Executive Summary

The past one and a half years have been defined by the COVID-19 pandemic and the far-reaching restrictions that were imposed throughout Europe to contain the new virus. When nearly all forms of face-to-face interaction were cancelled in the beginning of 2020, people turned to the internet for ways to continue working, learning and interacting socially. EASPD member organisations too found a myriad of ways to stay in touch with their users and to continue providing services online. There were many challenges involved in creating and implementing these services, as most service providers had little or no experience in working online with their users.

However, the EASPD community rose to the occasion in many different ways. From training staff and users in the most basic internet competences, to creating completely new materials and methods from scratch, the EASPD member organisations were very resourceful and tireless in creating good online solutions for their users. And although service providers and users found that there are limitations to online services, there is no doubt that they also have enough important benefits that make it worthwhile to continue providing them - especially in combination with face-to-face services.

In order to learn from the experiences of the last one and a half years and to use the lessons learned for the further development and implementation of online services, the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) commissioned a study in the summer of 2021 to research the experiences of EASPD member organisations in implementing online solutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study considered the whole of Europe while examining 10 countries more closely. Extensive online research was first conducted on the online activities of EASPD member organisations and other service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 service providers and questionnaires were disseminated to all EASPD member organisations. 58 service providers and 95 users responded to this online survey.

The findings of the study are brought together in this report that takes the reader through the service providers' responses to the lockdowns, issues concerning internet connectivity, data protection and online security, a method for evaluating and building the competences of staff and users in using the internet and digital devices, considerations regarding the accessibility of video conferencing tools and the contents of online services, observations on the empowering effect of digital competence and on the role of users' parents, and finally, suggestions for procuring funding for digital projects.

The report brings forth the following recommendations for steps that should be taken by EASPD, its member organisations and policy makers in order to ensure that safe, accessible, empowering and sustainable online services of a high quality can be offered by EASPD member organisations in the future:

For EASPD:

1. Create an open, curated database for collecting EASPD member organisations' online materials.

2. Create a database of funding opportunities (grants, subsidies, calls for tenders and proposals for digital projects)

3. Create consortiums within the EASPD community to apply for funding for EU-projects.

4. Provide training for staff of EASPD member organisations in

    1. Data protection, ethics and privacy

    2. Creating online content

    3. Digital accessibility

    4. Training users in digital competence

5. Create online formats for staff to collaborate with colleagues in other countries.

6. Create online formats for users to interact with users in other countries.

7. Collaborate with relevant EU-projects such as EU Digital Education Plan or Corona Virus: Online learning resources

For EASPD member organisations

1. Collect and evaluate the organisation's online materials and methods.

    1. Delegate this task to a person or team with the necessary competence.

    2. Involve interns, research students or volunteers to save costs and staff time.

2. Translate and adapt online materials created by EASPD member organisations in other countries.

3. Collect feedback from users regarding their online experiences and needs.

    1. Include users with different disabilities, digital skills and from various age groups.

    2. Include users who have not yet taken advantage of the organisation's online services.

4. Provide users with opportunities to create their own online content.

5. Collect feedback from the parents of users on their experiences with the online services provided for their children.

6. Evaluate the digital competence of staff and users.

7. Train staff and users (and parents / caretakers) in digital competence accordingly.

    1. Take their concerns and insecurity about using the new technologies seriously.

    2. Create a format that is user-friendly, hands-on, based on practical, real-life examples.

    3. Avoid purely theoretical instruction.

8. Train a person to be the organisation's expert in online accessibility.

9. Assess (and improve, if necessary) the data protection and privacy of the organisation's online presence.

10. Designate (and train, if necessary) a person to be organisation's expert on data protection, ethics and privacy.

11. Fundraise for the organisation's development of online services.

1. Ask local companies to donate money, software or hardware.

2. Create project partnerships with EASPD member organisations in other countries.

12. Make technological devices available to users.

For policy makers

1. Create EU funding opportunities that are less bureaucratic.

2. Make internet access available to everyone.

3. Create sustainable funding opportunities for projects that are already in existence.

4. Create a solid, comprehensive and understandable legal framework for online services.

EASPD is the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities. We are a European not-for-profit organisation representing over 20,000 social services and disability organisations across Europe. The main objective of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.