



# It's all about People

Impact on skills provision and organisation in health care and social care from increased use of distance spanning solutions



Government Offices of Sweden  
Ministry of Health and Social Affairs



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# 1. What are we about?

'Health care and care through distance-spanning solutions' is a priority project conducted between 2018–2021 and forms part of the Swedish Presidency Programme of the Nordic Council of Ministers 2018. The project has engaged in various activities in Nordic municipalities and regions, where the main three blocks of activities have been:

- ◇ Mapping the applied distance-spanning solutions
- ◇ Identifying tools to support the implementation of distance-spanning solutions
- ◇ Supporting implementation of distance-spanning solutions through open calls

For more detailed information about the 'Healthcare and care through distance-spanning solutions' project, please visit the project website:

[www.healthcareatdistance.com](http://www.healthcareatdistance.com).

In 2020, the 'Healthcare and care through distance-spanning solutions' project, also known as VOPD (In Swedish: *Vård och Omsorg På Distans*) conducted a study to establish whether digital transformation would improve the work environment for healthcare professionals. Both the health and social care sectors are facing multiple challenges due to the lack of capacity to meet the rising service demand, especially in the remote and rural parts of the Nordic region. The healthcare and social care sectors are facing challenges that not only relate to the demographics in sparsely populated areas but also to the complexity of implementing new service models supported by distance-spanning solutions. It has also become more difficult to recruit and retain social care and healthcare professionals in rural and remote municipalities. The overall challenges that must be addressed require radical improvements in terms of skills, as well as how the work is organised.

Thus, the aim of the skills provision study was to investigate how and whether the increased use of digital solutions in health care and social care affects how the work is organised, how organisations work to ensure the provision of skills and how the possibilities to recruit professionals for a career in healthcare and social care have changed.

## 1.2 Why did we do it?

The idea behind the study was to give a voice to healthcare and social care employees' in order to learn about the effect of digital transformation from their daily work. Their view will help provide a description of what it means to work with a service model that is partially supported by digital solutions.

Thus, the objective of the study was to conduct interviews with selected healthcare and social care professionals, as well as engage in data collection and research, in order to ask the following questions:

- ◇ How has skills provision and the organisation of healthcare and social care been affected by the utilization of digital service models in sparsely populated areas?

- ◇ How has skills provision been affected in the application of digital service models in sparsely populated areas?
- ◇ What is the perception of healthcare and social care professionals of the increased use of digital solutions?

### 1.3 What did we expect?

We expected the study to confirm the hypothesis that digital transformation can improve the work situation and environment for healthcare professionals and that employees are capable of providing equal quality health care with distance spanning service solutions.

## 2. The study in brief

The aim of the study was to give selected healthcare and social care professionals in the three regions of Sogn and Fjordane in Norway, North Jutland in Denmark and South Karelia (Eksote) in Finland an opportunity to express their views on the effect of digital transformation on their daily work and skills provision.

It is their views that reflect what it means to work with a service model that is partially supported by digital solutions, and how digital transformation can be an important factor in order to create a good environment for patients and good working environment for employees.

Four main insights in the study highlight how digital transformation can impact skills provision and the organisation of health care and care:

### 2.1 Digital transformation can make healthcare and social care work easier and more flexible

Technology has made the work easier and more flexible and also justifies new ways of working when there is evidence of benefits and added value for the general public and employees.

### 2.2 Digital transformation can give employees more time to focus on what is important

Employees have more time to focus on what is important, thereby allowing them to prioritise and focus on what is really needed. By using digital solutions their daily work, they can spend more time focusing on what really makes a difference for their patients.

### 2.3 Digital transformation can give greater meaning to their work

The increased use of telemedicine has provided greater meaning to the professional's work because the solutions are of great importance to citizens. It represents a win-win situation in which professionals are able to focus more on what they are supposed to be doing and citizens appreciate the greater level of service they receive.

## 2.4 Digital transformation can increase the status of healthcare and social care work

Organisations are putting a lot of faith in digital transformation and the success of new service models often depends on the maturity level of the individual organisations.

The overall conclusions of the study are as follows:

- ◆ Healthcare and social care organisations that have started the process of transformation do not believe that their employees wish to return to the previous system.
- ◆ The interviewees were overall positive about digital transformation. However, there may be a risk of negative consequences associated with employees potentially experiencing increased technological and digital stress, etc.
- ◆ None of the regions have particularly promoted their digitally updated or new service models in their recruitment process, which could increase the potential to recruit new employees.
- ◆ There is a potential in mapping knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of both citizens and employees and using this knowledge in order to ensure that what works can be sustained. There is a risk that healthcare and social care provision will return to use the previous system in a post-COVID-19 situation.
- ◆ Be inspired and learn from the frontrunners – See for example Appendix B “3 Key learnings from Eksotes ongoing digital shift”.

## 3. How we did it?

Based on insights and a network already built up in the VOPD project, a series of interviews were planned in selected Nordic regions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear at a very early stage that online interviews would have to be conducted. However, the interviews went very well.

In order to explore how opportunities for skills provision for regions and municipalities have changed after the introduction of digital services related to health care and social care, the following regions were selected for the interviews:

- ◆ Sogn and Fjordane in Norway
- ◆ North Jutland in Denmark
- ◆ South Karelia (Eksote) in Finland

Regions were selected to build synergy with earlier Nordregio studies and that the regions represent sparsely populated areas in the Nordics.

Within each of these regions, the relevant HR Directors, Operational Managers, Unit Managers, Project Managers etc, including nurses and doctors, at both a municipal and regional level were selected for the interviews.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted, distributed as follows: six in Denmark and Norway; three in Finland.

### 3.1 The interview guide

An interview guide containing 16 questions was developed to be used in the individual interviews in the three Nordic regions. The overall structure of the interview guide was as follows:

- ◇ Introduction and information about anonymity, etc.
- ◇ Information about the interviewee
- ◇ Organisation of healthcare and social care service
- ◇ Recruitment and supply of skills
- ◇ Employees' experiences
- ◇ Closing questions

For further details regarding the interview guide, please see Appendix A – Interview guide.

### 3.2 The interviews

As previously mentioned, 15 interviews were conducted with a selection of healthcare and care professionals and managers in the three focus regions. The interviews were conducted online and recorded for potential future reference. A summary of the interviewees' answers forms the basis for the input to this study.

### 3.3 Eksote example

As a reference case on how to organise healthcare and social care for the study, the South Karelia Social and Health Care District (Eksote) in Finland was used. An interview with the former Director of Eksote, Pentti Itkonen, was conducted in order to gain an insight and background in the way which Eksote's organised its integrated healthcare and social services provision model. Mr. Itkonen was responsible for initiating the digital transformation process in Eksote as early as 2010. Eksote has been a forerunner in Finland and in the Nordics in the digitalisation of healthcare and social care services. Eksote work with the vision of functional ability at home by for example allowing healthcare to move into the citizens homes, and an increasing number of homecare visits in elderly care are performed over distance via video link. Eksote have a fully integrated healthcare and social care service model including dental care, family and social welfare services, as well as services for senior citizens residing in all nine municipalities in the region. For an overview of Eksote's main measures and further studies, see section 7 for more information.

### 3.4 Nordregio studies

In addition, the publication from Nordregio called "Digital Health Care and Social Care – Regional Development Impacts in the Nordic Countries" (see Section 7 for more information) was used as supporting information for this study. A part of the Nordregio publication comprises case descriptions of healthcare and social care using distance- spanning technologies in the same regions in which the interviews in this study were conducted, i.e. Sogn og Fjordane in Norway, South Karelia (Eksote) in Finland and North Jutland in Denmark.

### 3.5 Indicators studied

Finally, data were also collected for indicators on whether the organisations found it easier to recruit and retain their employees when using an increased pro-

portion of distance spanning services. Where data were available, it was collected from 2013–2018. The numbers demonstrated that staff were easier to retain. However, the data cannot be isolated so it only can be connected to digital transformation. Collected data relates to entire organisations, and not only healthcare and social care employees. Thus, it was decided not to perform any further analysis of the data collected in this study.

### **3.6 Recruit and Retain – Making it Work**

Earlier published work by the seven-year international collaboration, Recruit and Retain – Making it Work and their framework, Workforce stability in remote and rural regions, has been used as reference on how to structure and make recruitment and retention work visible in digital transformation of healthcare and social care (see section 7 for more information).

## **4. What did we find?**

From the 15 interviews, the specific findings are outlined below and are structured and presented in line with the interview guide. The reader should note that 14 out of 15 of the interviewees all had very positive experiences of the use of digitally supported service models. The last interviewee was not negative but saw some limitations with regard to their own profession. Thus, it is important to emphasise that there may be more critical voices than what has been identified in this small study. An additional study with a larger sample of respondents or in-depth studies of model regions could investigate this issue further.

### **Organisation of healthcare and social care services**

The questions asked regarding organisation and healthcare and social care services aimed to identify how the provision of skills and the organisation of healthcare and social care has been affected by the application of digital service models.

The common denominator from the interviews was that on a managerial level, it is very important to have digital skill in order to anchor new digital service models. It has also been acknowledged that digital transformation requires a mature organisation that prioritises structured implementation in order to obtain quick effects and added value. If an organisation is not sufficiently mature, it will require more time in order to obtain the benefits of the transformation.

Any new technologies that free up time for the employees, allowing the employees to spend more time for more complex forms of physical treatment are viewed to be helpful. To succeed, there needs to be a focus on the transformation change process, such as establishing new workflows and service models that clearly highlight the added value and benefits (less travel time, remote monitoring opportunities, data mining, etc.)

There is also a common understanding that COVID-19 has accelerated use of digital solutions and that these solutions have gained more acceptance from both citizens and healthcare and social care professional across municipalities and regions. The challenge after Covid is to maintain these new digital activities and solutions and to adjust work processes and update service models to reflect the new reality instead of returning to old practices. This will require a managerial focus on keeping distance spanning solutions and a willingness to accept service models supported by distance spanning solutions among all stakeholders.

#### 4.1 Recruitment and supply of skills

Questions about recruitment and supply of skills aimed at identifying how recruitment opportunities and skills provision has been affected by the application of digital service models in the sparsely populated areas covered by this study.

The key focus of healthcare and social care employees is to help and assist citizens and patients. Thus, any technology should support this work and not be a prerequisite which is a clear message from the interviews. Digital service models have therefore not changed the recruitment and retention potential of staff within healthcare and social care. It is still viewed as very challenging to obtain the right skills for more specialised professions, particularly in sparsely populated areas.

On the other hand, it is expected that employees shall be able to operate and understand different types of technologies. There is therefore a need to include knowledge about digital transformation and technologies in the education. Up to now, it has not been apparent that enhanced digital knowledge is a requirement of the recruitment process. Instead, it is viewed as an add-on skill that will be developed during the period of employment based on work needs.

However, digital transformation has been seen to increase the status of different professions by providing nurses and social workers with, for example, new skills. Organisations that are frontrunners for specific digital solutions has given their employees greater prestige which in many cases, has been good for the professional self-awareness. It is clear from discussions with management within healthcare and social care in the regions covered by this study, that they do not promote their digital service model when recruiting new staff. Interviews even indicate in some cases that new recruits are introduced to the digital service model not until they are contracted to work for the organisation.

#### 4.2 The employees' experience

The aim of these questions was to find out the employees' experience from the increased use of digital solutions.

In general, digital solutions and automation have expanded the range of services and increased the flexibility for nurses. Employees also feel that their self-confidence has been boosted and that digital solutions give their work a greater meaning. Also, having new workflows freed up time for patients which require physical attention and it makes daily tasks much easier.

It is important to keep supporting the collaboration and knowledge sharing and include the employees early in the digital transformation process, to build trust and to ease the change management process.

The implementation of digital solutions becomes easier when motivated managers learn how to involve their employees. This helps to provide the employees with a continuous learning curve and improvement of their skills. Further, improved skills support the employees' interests in for innovation in their work.

Finally, digital solutions can sometimes be troublesome and it is hard to set aside time to receive the necessary training in order to obtain the skills required.



## 5. What did we learn?

Four insights have been identified from the interviews on how digital transformation could impact skills provision and organisation of healthcare and social care.

### 5.1 Digital transformation can make healthcare and social care work easier and more flexible

The first insight gained from the interviewees about working with digital solutions described how some of the tasks that had previously been performed by healthcare and social care professionals have now been automated. Technology has made the work easier and more flexible and also justifies new ways of working when there is evidence of benefits and added value for both citizens and employees.

### 5.2 Digital transformation can give employees more time to focus on what is important

The second insight and knowledge described how when healthcare jobs are made easier and more flexible, more time is freed up to focus on what is important, thereby enabling healthcare workers to prioritise their work and focus on what is really needed. Doctors and nurses improved their super hero status. By making use of digital solutions in their daily work, they can spend more time focusing on what really makes a difference for their patients.

### 5.3 Digital transformation can provide greater meaning to their work

The third insight and knowledge relate to the following: If the employees' work becomes easier and more flexible and they can devote more time to working on the most important activities, it provides a greater meaning to their work. The health and social care professionals across the regions stated that the increased use of eHealth solutions has added greater meaning and value to their work because they see that the solutions are also of great importance to the citizens. It represents a win-win situation in which healthcare and social care professionals are able to do more of what they are supposed to do and citizens appreciate the greater level of service they receive.

### 5.4 Digital transformation can increase the status of healthcare and social care work

The fourth and final insight and learning indicates that the status of healthcare work increases when healthcare professionals start using new digital solutions. This insight is not coming out clear from all regions which we have studied. However, the management which puts a lot of faith in the digital transformation succeeds better at introducing new services and service models. Success often depends on the maturity level of the individual organisation.

### 5.5 Making it work!

A clear message comes out from the four insights above: Digital transformation is a key component for, and contributes to, creating a good working environment for healthcare and social care personnel. But how do you start?

An example on how to include the recruitment and retention perspective in the digital transformation process, is provided through the seven-year international

collaboration, Recruit and Retain – Making it Work. Their published framework, Workforce stability in remote and rural regions, consists of 9 different elements of actions connected to plan, recruit and retain personnel, and 5 conditions for success<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the tool "Recommender" provides you with an overview of activities that has a proven impact on recruitment and retention of personnel according to research. The "Recommender" has organised identified activities in line with the framework. Get inspired, find appropriate activities for your organisation to get started and reference to research by looking into the "Recommender" (see section 7 for more information).

## 6. Conclusions and the way forward

### 6.1 Conclusions

The four insights into what digital transformation means for skills provision and employee skills in the healthcare and care sector, as well as combining these insights with the information from the 15 interviews, underlines the message that digital transformation can make jobs easier and more flexible, give employees more time to focus on what is most important, provide greater meaning to their work and also increase the status of their work when making use of digital solutions.

Thus, digital transformation is a key component, and contributes to creating a good working environment for healthcare and social care personnel.

Organisations that have started their digital journey need to be supported by multiple political fields. Creating a good working environment is not only about digitalisation of healthcare and social care sector, but clearly also about labour market conditions.

### 6.2 The way forward

We can all listen and learn from Eksote.

A digital shift is currently taking place in an organisation for integrated healthcare and social care called Eksote, in the rural region of South Karelia, Finland. Eksote is leading by example and transforming the working environment for hundreds of its employees. The transformation has shown that, with a clear vision and focused execution, that healthcare and social care professionals will greatly benefit from the new service model. Further, it is possible to design a better working environment while also providing equally good or even better healthcare and social care services. An introduction to the digital shift in Eksote can be found in Appendix B "3 Key learnings from Eksotes ongoing digital shift".

Finally, when starting your transformation consider how to organise your work in order to make recruitment and retention activities visible. A specific framework exists which cover recruitment and retention actions: Workforce stability in remote and rural regions. This framework is viewed to be appropriate for use in this context (see section 7 for more information).

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<sup>1</sup> Abelsen, B., Strasser, R., Heaney, D. *et al.* Plan, recruit, retain: a framework for local healthcare organizations to achieve a stable remote rural workforce. *Hum Resour Health* **18**, 63 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-020-00502-x>

## 7. Where to find further information

For further information about the study, please refer to the links below:

- ◇ VOPD project – 'Healthcare and care through distance-spanning solutions 2018-2021' <https://www.healthcareatdistance.com/>
- ◇ Nordregio – <https://nordregio.org/>
  - Find a summary of Nordregios' contributions to Healthcare and care through distance spanning solutions 2018-2021 and link to three published reports, here.
- ◇ Eksote South Karelia, Finland:
  - PowerPoint presentations about Eksote, available [here](#).
  - Film about Eksote – Services to support living at home, available [here](#).
  - 3 Key learnings from Eksotes ongoing digital shift, available here
- ◇ Recruit & Retain – Making it work: [www.rrmakingitwork.eu](http://www.rrmakingitwork.eu)
  - The recommender: [www.miwrecommender.eu](http://www.miwrecommender.eu)

## 8. Appendix

**Page 13**      Appendix A: Interview Guide

**Link**            Appendix B: 3 Key learnings from Eksotes ongoing digital shift  
Can be seen at: <https://youtu.be/1SZXMLFc83o>

## Healthcare and care through distance spanning solutions: Competence provision and organization

**Before the interview, send the information below and repeat this at the beginning of the interview:**

- Present the project and the goal of the interview
- Inform about anonymity
- Inform that the interview is being recorded
- Expected time required for the interview
- Inform about the case study report Nordregio compiled and specify the digital solutions stated in the report. And when questions during the interview are asked about digital solutions and digi-physical service models, these are the ones that are intended

### About the interviewee

**Note the name, role / function in the organization, how long the person worked in the organization and the educational background:**

1. The aim of the project is to investigate how and if increased use of digital solutions in healthcare and the care area affects:

- how the work is organized
- how the organization works to ensure the provision of skills
- recruitment possibilities for careers in healthcare and social care professions

a) Given this and from your perspective, can you describe how you work with digital transformation, digitalization, distance spanning service solutions?

b) How has this affected your work?

### Organization of care and care services

**We aim to find out; How has the provision of skills and organization of care and social care been affected by the application of digital service models in sparsely populated areas?**

2. Digital solutions are on the agenda in many areas right now, not least in healthcare and care.

a) Have digital solutions brought about concrete changes in how you organize your work?

b) Can you give examples?

c) Has this led to changes in your service models?

d) Can you give examples?

e) Have you changed your description when you talk about your way of working in healthcare and social care?

3. Digitization affects organizations in the provision of services.

- a) Is it easier today for the organization you are working to solve their tasks compared to before?
- b) Can you give examples?
- c) Is it more difficult today for the organization you are working to solve their tasks compared to before?
- d) Can you give examples?

4. Introducing new solutions in an organization can be a challenge.

- a) What organizational challenges do you feel you have had for introducing digital solutions?
- b) Do you have examples of success factors?

5. Change can be difficult to implement from both a management perspective and an employee perspective where the culture of the organization can be firmly rooted.

- a) How do you feel that management has reacted to the changes in using digital solutions at work?
- b) How do you feel that staff have reacted to the changes in using digital solutions at work?
- c) Has it become easier / more difficult over time to discuss and possibly introduce changes to service models within the organization?
- d) Who and what factors are driving this transformation?
- e) How committed and driven are the management / staff or others within the municipality/ organization in this transformation?
- f) Who is leading the digital transformation in your organization?
- g) How is it expressed / how is it noticed?

6. It is often emphasized that the public sector has major challenges in the light of an aging population, more chronically ill and fewer people available to work in the public sector, partly because of relocation from sparsely populated areas.

- a) Has the introduction of digital solutions meant that the organization is more robust and sustainable based on the right personnel skills and less staff shortage?
- b) Can you give examples?
- c) Are there concrete examples of changes in the organization of healthcare and care, linked to digital transformation, that have improved the situation?
- d) Are there concrete examples of changes in the organization of care and care, linked to digital transformation, that have worsened the situation?
- e) Are there other triggers in addition to demographic challenges, such as Covid 19 etc., that has affected the digital transformation process in your organization?
- d) Can you give examples?

## Recruitment and supply of skills

(The questions below are mainly addressed to HR managers and operations managers)

### **We aim to find out; How have recruitment opportunities and skills provision been affected in the application of digital service models in sparsely populated areas?**

7. Opportunities to recruit staff today compared to before.

- a) How are the situation and opportunities to recruit staff within your organization today?
- b) If possible, can you compare how it was 2 years ago?
- c) If possible, can you compare with how it was 5 years ago?
- d) what do you expect as a consequence of Covid 19?

8. If digi-physical service models have affected recruitment opportunities.

- Do you feel that the implementation of digi-physical service models has affected the recruitment opportunities within your organization?
- Has it been easier or harder to recruit staff?
- Has it become easier or harder to retain existing staff?
- Do you receive more or fewer applications when you announce a service?
- Do you find that there are examples of people specifically agreeing to an employment in light of the fact that your digi-physical service models allow for a more flexible work situation?
- From a future perspective, do you expect that digi-physical service models will make it easier or harder to recruit staff to the organization?

9. The introduction of digi-physical service models may entail the need for new competences within organizations.

- a) Has the introduction of digital solutions meant that your organization needs new skills?
- b) If so, what competencies?
- c) How do you ensure that the staff has the right skills to work with digital solutions?
- d) Participates e.g. your employees in courses or training?
- e) Are there possible new needs for skills, which is (should) affecting the education system?
- f) Do you collaborate with educational institutions such as vocational colleges, colleges and universities?
- g) Do you use any kind of internship or apprenticeship system to broaden your expertise in the field of digitization?
- h) Have you added new types of positions / services in the organization?
- i) Have you hired new types of professional staff?
- j) If so, which ones?
- k) From a future perspective, do you expect that digi-physical service models will make it easier or harder to retain competent personnel within the organization?

10. How the business works to attract staff with relevant skills to the organization.

a) How does the business work to attract staff with relevant skills to the organization?

b) Do you cooperate, for example? with the municipality to ensure an attractive working, living and living environment?

c) Do you use systems such as "workforce stability" to support cohesion in working groups and / or support families and spouses?

If the company does this, give examples and ask about e.g. activities such as:

- *Mentor program*

- *Alumni activities with former employees*

- *Inform about your context*

- *Create a clarity of what your offer is, what specific / unique can you sell*

- *Survey of employee well-being*

- *Flexible working hours*

- *Welcome activities*

- *Staff exchange program*

- *Flexible station types*

- *Welcome*

- *New summer students / workers*

- *Adapted work for older employees (pensions included)*

- *Adapted educational opportunities, skills development*

- *Opportunity to train new employees and colleagues, or at colleges or higher education institutions*



## The staff's experiences

(The following questions are mainly addressed to employees / healthcare and care staff and possibly business managers)

### **We aim to find out; What are the staff's experiences of increased use of digital solutions?**

11. Implemented digital solutions often affect the work situation of employees in an organization.

- a) How do you feel that digital solutions within the organization have affected your working life?
- b) Can you give examples?
- c) What changes have occurred regarding the way you and your colleagues work?
- d) Has it become easier or harder for you to do your job?
- e) Do you feel that expectations regarding the number of completed tasks have changed?
- f) Do you see increased involvement among users or relatives?
- g) If yes, can you share negative and positive experiences?

12. New ways of working may require skills and continuing education.

- a) Have you needed to develop your skills?
- b) In that case, how did you develop your skills, how did it go?

13. Changed ways of working can affect the work environment and job satisfaction.

- a) Has your sense of well-being and your ability to perform your work been affected by the introduction of digital service models?
- b) If yes, how has it been affected?
- c) Do you feel that the degree of control of your work situation has changed?

14. Changed working methods can also affect the assessment of remaining within the current organization or seeking other jobs.

- a) Have the digital solutions introduced influenced how you think about staying in your current workplace or that you are considering seeking other jobs?
- b) Have the digital solutions that have been introduced influenced you to stay in the current workplace to a greater extent or not?

## Closing questions

15. What do you think has now been successful in the organization? Do you have any recommendations to pass on to others based on your experience?

16. Is there anything I haven't asked you and that you would like to inform about before we finish?