

Opportunities and challenges in digital social work with people re-entering society from prison: Qualitative analysis of Finnish social workers' views

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Abstract: This article explores Finnish social workers' views on using digital technologies to support individuals transitioning from prison to society. A study based on the Fit Between Individuals, Tasks, Technology, and Environment (FITTE) framework, digital divide research and a relationship-based approach, with interviews with 19 social workers, reveals that digitalisation improves resource allocation, service availability and communication within collaborative networks. Challenges include underdeveloped digital tools, limited client access and skills, and difficulties in conducting assessments and building trust online. The question of whether a confidential relationship can be formed digitally remains contested. Hybrid practices are highlighted as essential for ensuring a smooth reintegration process.

Keywords: digital social work; digitalisation; incarcerated people; re-entry; social work

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Introduction

The European Union and several individual European countries have adopted strong policy lines and have even exerted pressure to increase the digitalisation of welfare services, including the use of various self-service and information and communication technologies (ICT) (Nordesjö et al., 2022; European Commission, 2020). The digitalisation of welfare services has intensified in recent years, a process expedited by the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital realm has become an indispensable part of contemporary life, with digital services being key reforms that enhance work efficiency, resource allocation and cost savings. The divide between online and offline is losing its relevance in many ways, as these realms are irrevocably intertwined with one another (Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Pyykönen, 2020). Granholm (2016) remarks that, as people live simultaneously in both the real and the virtual worlds, social work also needs to be present in both.

Social work has undergone changes due to the increased use of digital services and various forms of online interaction (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019), which has contributed to the emergence of the concept of digital social work (Pink et al., 2022; López Peláez & Kirwan, 2023). Digitalisation has accelerated many client processes and made them more efficient while improving service quality (Silvennoinen & Rantanen, 2023). Digital services are also thought to expand the range of services, reduce staff workloads and free professionals' time for face-to-face multidisciplinary work (Paatela et al., 2024). According to the perceptions of social welfare professionals, the positive effects of digitalisation are particularly evident in service processes, accessible client information, and the more active role of clients (Saukkonen et al., 2024). Most social workers rely on ICT applications for work management, including collaborating with partners, accessing professional information and managing client data (Pyykönen, 2020). Although the benefits of digitalisation are indisputable, remarkably little attention has been paid to the significant risks associated with managerialisation or with the loss of clients' context in digitalisation (Steiner 2021).

However, the adoption of ICT in social work practice has been slower than in society in general, and the potential of technology has not been fully exploited (Romakkaniemi et al., 2024). One explanation for the slow progress is that digitalisation is transforming the relationship between clients and social workers, which is particularly challenging due to the relationship-based nature of social work. The reduction in face-to-face interactions may hinder effective communication and complicate the development of a comprehensive understanding of the client's situation (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Pascoe, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to assess how well digital social work can sustain the core practices of client work (Hämäläinen & Lindh, 2025).

Another significant challenge relates to the digital divide, namely the lack of digital skills among some social workers (Wolf & Goldkind, 2016), but particularly

the lack of digital inclusion among individuals in vulnerable positions. Helsper and Reisdorf (2017) argue that people facing challenges in economic, social and personal wellbeing are often among the least likely to participate in the use of ICTs. Additionally, people facing homelessness, substance abuse or mental health problems are less likely to have digital devices, sufficient digital skills or abilities to access and use digital services effectively (e.g. Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021; Williams et al., 2024).

This study focuses on social work with individuals released from prison. When working with this group, sufficient financial support, multi-agency support, and meaningful personal interaction are essential, as these elements collectively promote effective reintegration and support desistance from crime (Järveläinen, 2022). Kenemore (2013) emphasizes relational practice, integrating active listening and intersubjective engagement with an anti-oppressive perspective. Digitalisation offers significant opportunities in this context, particularly in facilitating communication between social workers and incarcerated individuals, which traditionally has often been hindered by long distances, required permits, and restrictions on telephone use. While previous research has examined the role of prison digitalisation and digital rehabilitation in supporting reintegration and reducing recidivism (e.g. McDougall et al., 2017; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022) as well as gaps in digital inclusion among incarcerated individuals (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021), there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the use of ICTs in social work with incarcerated individuals.

The study examines how Finnish social workers perceive the adoption of ICTs in adult social work with individuals re-entering society, focusing on the opportunities and challenges they identify. Social work with adults often functions as a final safety net for the most disadvantaged groups in society (Kivipelto & Elovainio, 2024). The services provided in adult social work are voluntary and targeted at working-age individuals who are facing life management and economic challenges, limited access to the labour market, housing instability, health issues, substance abuse, and migration (Kivipelto & Matthies, 2024). Social work with adults aims to promote inclusion and emphasises client-centred goals through multidisciplinary cooperation (Karjalainen et al., 2019). The Finnish context is particularly noteworthy, as Finland is regarded as one of the most advanced countries in Europe in terms of digital development and citizens' digital skills (European Commission, 2022). In addition, the digitalisation of prisons has progressed in Finland in the 2020s with the introduction of the first smart prisons, where all cells are equipped with in-cell laptops, providing incarcerated individuals with (limited) access to digital services and the ability to communicate with authorities and loved ones (Puolakka, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Relationship-based social work

A relationship-based approach, rooted in a client-worker partnership, is essential in adult social work to address practical needs while supporting clients whose emotional lives may have been impacted by past experiences (Hollinrake, 2019). Ruch et al. (2018) highlight the significance of empathy and collaborative relationships in fostering the psychological well-being of clients during social work encounters. Establishing relationships that are based on mutual respect and trust cannot be hastened and they rarely proceed in a linear manner (Julkunen et al., 2023). Alas, the large volume of work tasks, along with administrative pressures and significant structural changes in the service system, have complicated the advancement of relationship-based social work practice (Romakkaniemi et al., 2024; Järveläinen, 2022).

Ranta et al. (2024) mention that relationship-based practice is not only influenced by individual-level interaction, but also by service system-, spatial-, societal- and time relations. People with a history of crime are clients who need holistic support to reform and to sustain the reform (Järveläinen et al., 2023) at all the above-mentioned levels. This especially concerns individuals who are in a demanding period of re-entry into society, which may have changed in many ways during their incarceration. For example, people who are entering a widely digitalised society often feel unprepared, as their lack of digital skills makes it difficult for them to cope with everyday life outside prison (Mahlangu & Zivanai, 2023).

Digital inclusion of incarcerated people and digital divide

Digital inclusion is a complex concept, and various factors may contribute to a reluctance to engage with digital services among incarcerated individuals. However, incarcerated individuals are not a homogeneous group, and digital skills and attitudes towards digital services vary greatly. The importance of inadequate skills is particularly emphasised among older and repeat offenders (Rantanen et al. 2022). As suggested by Helsper (2021), digital and social inclusion are closely linked to each other in different areas of life and have, for example, personal, social and economic dimensions. Lack of inclusion, in turn, can lead to digital and social exclusion. Factors related to access, digital skills and attitudes in particular moderate this (Helsper, 2021).

However, the use of digital services is also associated with the concept of the digital divide. This concept is multidimensional and involves different levels. The first level is related to barriers to access to the internet and digital services, the second level is mainly related to the lack of digital skills and motivation to use

digital services, and the third level is related to the benefits that an individual perceives they receive from digital services (Helsper, 2021). Barriers to access, insufficient skills and lack of digital training are particularly emphasised among incarcerated people (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). We can also talk about the intraprofessional digital divide, which means that some social workers are well-versed in modern technology and more likely to recognise its benefits than others (Wolf & Goldkind, 2016). López Peláez and Kirwan (2023) even argue that the digital competencies of both social workers and service users have emerged as essential skills for contemporary social work.

FITTE framework

The adoption of new technologies in social and healthcare services has been extensively studied using various theoretical models (e.g. Holden & Karsh, 2010). These models emphasise the significance of social and psychological factors (e.g., Ajzen, 2001), ease of use and the perceived usefulness of technology (Davis et al., 1989), as well as the task–technology fit (Goodhue et al., 2000). The FITTE framework, on the other hand, posits that adaptation is not solely about technology and people, or the suitability of technology for a specific task, but rather that multiple interrelated factors must be considered simultaneously (Coomans et al., 2024; Prgomet et al., 2019). The framework focuses specifically on analysing the mutual fit of factors related to individuals, tasks and technology, considering the environment. Previous research on the FITTE framework has mainly focused on specific professions such as nurses and physicians; while research on the experiences of social workers remains quite limited (Partanen et al., 2025).

In the context of the present study, the FITTE framework focuses on four *fits*, which in the context of this study mean the following: *The individual-task fit* refers to the availability of the social work services or other support services that people re-entering society from prison need. *The individual-technology fit* refers to the suitability of the technology used for clients who have been released from prison, as well as the challenges of digital inclusion. *The task-technology fit*, in turn, relates to the opportunities and challenges of utilising digital tools in social work.

Prgomet et al. (2019) argue that, in addition to the fit between users, tasks, and technology, the environment also influences technology use. Partanen et al. (2025) emphasise that both the interactive sociotechnical environment and the broader organisational and sociopolitical context are essential for the successful adoption of technology. When examining social work with individuals released from prison, the environment becomes even more complex, as prison conditions, alongside the context of social work, also influence the possibilities for utilising digital services in practice. The environment fit covers a wide range of contextual factors related to social work, the criminal justice system and technological developments which

determine the suitability of digital social work for people re-entering society in the Finnish context.

This study examines how Finnish social workers perceive the adoption of ICT in social work with individuals released from prison, focusing on the opportunities and challenges they identify in the interrelationships (fits) between individuals, tasks, technology, and the environment.

Materials and methods

Study design and approach

The present study follows a qualitative attitude approach (Peltola & Vesala 2013; Pyysiäinen & Vesala, 2013). The qualitative attitude approach uses qualitative data and, consistent with Billig's (1987) social psychological approach, assumes that expressions of attitudes in speech should be understood not as individual traits but as part of an discursive context. This means that the views expressed by social workers in interviews about the adoption of digital technology in social work reflect the current discourse on the opportunities and challenges that digitalisation presents for social work. Therefore, instead of focusing on individuals' attitudes, the research is interested in what positions people take on certain contested issues and how people justify their opinions. It also assumes that a person can adopt different stances on the same issue depending on the perspective from which they view it. This also means that ICT can simultaneously appear to a social worker both as an opportunity and as a challenge.

Sample and data collection

In Finland, 21 administrative regions called wellbeing services counties are responsible for organising social and healthcare services (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2024). Research permits were applied for in 10 wellbeing services counties across Finland. They constituted a broad geographical representation, comprising both densely populated urban regions – characterised by extensive service infrastructures and cultural diversity – and sparsely populated rural areas, where services are limited and geographically dispersed. Following the granting of the research permits, regional contact persons were asked to distribute interview invitations to adult social workers experienced in working with individuals transitioning from prison back into society. With this purposive sampling, a total of 19 social workers from the 10 wellbeing services counties volunteered to participate in individual interviews.

Two of the article's authors conducted the interviews between April and September 2024. Most interviews were held online, while one was conducted face-to-face in the interviewee's office. The interviews lasted between 46 and 84 minutes, with an average duration of 67 minutes. All the interviewees were licenced social workers. One interviewee had 2.5 years of experience, five more than 20 years and the others between 4 and 19 years of experience. Of the interviewees, 16 were female and three were male and their ages ranged from 28 to 68 years.

Following a qualitative attitude approach (Peltola & Vesala 2013; Pyysiäinen & Vesala, 2013), the research data was collected using ready-made statements, which were based on prior research and reflected controversial matters related to the topic in question. The statements were displayed similarly in the interviews, and the interviewees were asked to comment on them freely: to take a stance, argue and justify their opinions. The interviewers could also ask probing questions. Unlike a typical quantitative attitude survey, the qualitative attitude approach does not use Likert scales or other predefined response options. Instead, the statements are designed to elicit talk that is substantiated by argument.

The interviews focused on social work with clients being released from prison, particularly on the following themes: the processes of social work, the challenges and opportunities of multi-agency collaboration, the significance of digitalisation in social work, and issues related to societal integration in supporting individuals released from prison. The focus of this study is on comments in response to two statements related to the theme of the significance of digitalisation:

1. Digital services can at their best only complement the confidential client-worker relationship, which is built through face-to-face interaction, and
2. Digital preparation for release from prison can offer new opportunities to support people re-entering society and improve the availability and efficiency of services'

The first statement focused specifically on the challenges of using ICT in social work from a relationship-based perspective, while the second aimed to stimulate discussion from the viewpoint of the clients under study.

Analysis

The data (comprising 356 transcribed pages) was analysed in line with the framework of the qualitative attitude approach (Peltola & Vesala, 2013; Pyysiäinen & Vesala, 2013). The analysis consisted of two main phases: classification and interpretation. In the classification phase attention was paid to the interviewees' positions and the justifications presented. The positions were divided into those which fully or with some reservations supported the statement, and those which opposed the statement. The justifications for the positions were analysed using content theming.

The FITTE framework (Prgomet et al., 2019; Coomans et al., 2024) was used to guide the interpretative analysis. This supported the systematic structuring of the justifications provided by participants, with a particular focus on the opportunities and challenges related to technology adaptation. Based on the model, four dimensions were established: individual–task fit, individual–technology fit, task–technology fit, and environment fit. It should be noted that the fits partially overlap and allow for some interpretive flexibility. Each text segment included in the part of the data under examination (comments on two statements) was assigned to one of these dimensions. The dimensions were then further divided into data-driven subcategories according to their content. A total of 16 subcategories were formed.

Interpretive analysis combined theory-based deductive reasoning with data-driven inductive logic, following the principles of abductive analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). The analysis progressed in phases. First, a preliminary codebook was developed by examining the data through the dimensions of the FITTE framework. After this, a systematic reduction of the data was conducted while simultaneously refining the set of subcategories used. In this qualitative analysis phase, the number of text segments included in each subcategory was also calculated (see Table 1). In practice, the two phases were carried out collaboratively by three researchers. The analysis of each text segment within the FITTE framework dimensions and subcategories, along with the formulation of these subcategories, was followed by reflective discussion among the researchers.

In the third phase of the abductive analysis, or the in-depth abductive qualitative analysis phase (see Vila-Henninger et al., 2024), the final interpretive perspectives were formed through a dialogue between theoretical examination and data analysis. Here, the theoretical lens expanded beyond FITTE to include current research discussions on relationship-based social work and the use of digital tools in social work practices. Through this process, the key concepts that emerged included the benefits of digital social work, digital inclusion, trust-building, and blended social work.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). Participation in the study was voluntary, based on informed consent. The participants were informed of their rights during the research process and assured of their anonymity when presenting the research findings.

Results

Overall, the interviewees had rather positive attitudes towards the possibilities of digital social work. All interviewees agreed either fully or with reservations that

digital preparation for release from prison can offer new opportunities to support individuals re-entering society, as well as improving the availability and efficiency of services (Statement 2). In contrast, the first statement elicited mixed comments. Some of the interviewees (n=8) agreed that the significance of digital services can at best be only complementary to face-to-face interaction, while almost as many (n=7) disagreed with the statement. Four interviewees agreed with the statement, albeit with reservations.

The justifications for positions fully supporting Statement 1 emphasised the efficiency and accessibility of digital systems, noting their role in facilitating relationships with incarcerated individuals. However, some justifications deemed face-to-face interaction essential for fostering trust and conveying empathy. Justifications for the reserved position suggested that digital services currently serve only as a complement to the confidential relationships established through direct interaction, while acknowledging their potential for future development. In contrast, opposing views argued that trust and empathy can be conveyed without face-to-face interaction.

The views on Statement 2 were categorised into two supporting positions: fully supportive and reservedly supportive, with no opposing views. Fully supportive arguments emphasised that digitalisation enhances multidisciplinary social work and facilitates smooth transitions from imprisonment to release, provided that digital services are used effectively and at appropriate times. Reservedly supportive arguments highlighted the technical limitations and accessibility challenges, alongside the importance of face-to-face interactions as a complement to digital services.

Next, utilising the FITTE framework, we will examine the perspectives that surfaced in the justifications for the positions taken on the statements.

Individual-task fit

Several interviewees argued that ICT had significantly improved the availability of social services during incarceration and facilitated prompt service delivery. However, there were disputes about how to ensure the availability of services after release. The interviewees spoke about digital services as an opportunity to start preparations for re-entry. Moreover, they pointed out that digital services were often the only means of contacting clients during their incarceration. Video conferencing tools were singled out as a technology that had made it easier to interact and build rapport despite long distances and to collaborate with other service providers.

However, a few interviewees mentioned that preparations for re-entry did not always occur. They further emphasised the importance of being contacted in a timely manner to ensure adequate time for the necessary preparations, as the extract from the data below exemplifies:

'If we are contacted in enough time, for example if the client is still in prison for a month or so, we have the chance to build the client relationship while the client is still in this safe environment, while the big change has not yet happened. Because of course it is a big change in the client's life when they are released. I think it is good to at least establish the client relationship beforehand and explain what possibilities exist and what services are available.' (15)

This excerpt demonstrates the profound transformation involved in the re-entry process into society. Digital preparations work well but they depend upon the prison staff contacting the social services in sufficient time.

The availability of social services was also discussed from the perspective of efficiency. The interviewees mentioned that digital services had made it easier for clients to reach the social services. This had increased the frequency of communication but also made problem-solving more efficient as matters could be solved when problems appeared. Online meetings thereby stood in contrast to face-to-face meetings, which were generally arranged over longer intervals. The interviewees stressed how significant this was for clients who were now able to get in touch with social services when they needed help:

'When using Teams, it is possible to meet the client sooner. Usually, clients have acute needs and concerns on a faster schedule, so usually, this digital approach is sufficient.' (16)

The excerpt illustrates how ICT offers a quick way to arrange meetings with clients who are re-entering society. Online meetings are sufficient when the client needs help with an acute problem.

The interviewees also reflected on the modes of service delivery. Many stated that digital services offer a convenient way for clients to reach social services during incarceration. Video conferencing tools work well when they are the only option. However, many interviewees preferred face-to-face meetings which they felt were the better option after a client's release. One interviewee explained this aspect:

'Well, face to face is just better come to the office. I'll come visit you. We'll meet at a café; we'll meet in the park. I do a lot of that, meeting them wherever. I'll come to the substitution treatment unit where you are... Yes. Digital works best when they are in prison. That's how it is.' (9)

This excerpt illuminates many interviewees' attitudes towards digital service provision. Online meetings ensure availability while the client is incarcerated. Following release, face-to-face meetings were viewed as a more suitable approach. The social workers also emphasised the significance of the meeting location, noting that encounters may take place not only in office settings but also in various environments embedded within the client's everyday life.

Nonetheless, some interviewees argued that digital services improved the availability of services throughout the re-entry process. They mentioned, for

example, that digital services had made it quicker and easier to share information. Some interviewees were in favour of choosing the mode of interaction on a case-by-case basis.

Individual-technology fit

The interviewees discussed the applicability of ICT for clients who are re-entering society, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges associated with it. Firstly, the suitability of online interactions for clients in general or for specific groups was addressed. A challenge identified was that individuals re-entering society are not always 'digitally minded people' who are accustomed to online interaction. Conversely, it was emphasised that some clients specifically desired this mode of interaction and found it highly suitable.

Secondly, it was pointed out that online interaction is particularly well-suited for certain client groups, such as individuals suffering from social anxieties. For these clients, face-to-face encounters are challenging, and writing is often easier. One social worker described the situation as follows:

'I also have clients with really challenging social anxiety or autism spectrum disorder, so it's really hard to have those meetings physically in the same place. It is quite obvious that digital communication not only complements face-to-face communication, but in fact it brings a lot of added value and opportunities for working together.' (113)

This excerpt clearly stresses the significance of digitalisation for social work with certain client groups. Young people and young adults were considered such a client group. However, several interviewees mentioned challenges related to skills and access. Not all clients have smartphones or other digital devices. Additionally, during imprisonment the use of ICT is also restricted. Furthermore, the strong authentication required for the use of digital services poses challenges, especially during imprisonment, when the necessary ID credentials are held by prison staff. After release, some clients also lack the skills to operate in an online environment, and they cannot be contacted unless one sits down with them face to face with them. The interviewees also emphasized the challenges related to acting on behalf of clients. This practice may pose a risk that individuals re-entering society do not acquire the essential skills required for independent functioning in a digital society, as the following excerpt explains:

'But then again, not everyone necessarily has strong digital skills... So, do they really understand what's going on, if things have been done on their behalf? And when a person is released from prison, they might genuinely be lost. In the worst case, we assume a person is much more capable and functional than they actually are.' (118)

The interviewees emphasised that clients re-entering society should be provided with devices and digital training, as well as living conditions that enable the acquisition of new skills.

Task-technology fit

According to the interviewees, ICT is largely advantageous across multiple dimensions of social work. These include improving client interaction, managing client-related matters efficiently and sustaining connections within collaborative networks. The facilitation of communication with incarcerated individuals was regarded as especially important. According to the social workers interviewed in this study, the adoption of digital tools has improved the efficiency of time management in social work and enhanced its overall effectiveness. On the other hand, there is a risk that client meetings become reduced to brief encounters, as one of the interviewees described:

'When there is an effort to be efficient, it may appear negative, like, 'Okay, let's just do what needs to be done, thank you and goodbye.' Perhaps it has become a bit like that because there is so much going on, so meetings are held quickly and remotely without anything extra. (16)

Social workers also linked increased work efficiency to occupational well-being, as they perceived it to either support or undermine it. Furthermore, the technology currently in use within social services was still in a developmental phase. For instance, technical challenges were mentioned as factors that could complicate client encounters.

According to the social workers interviewed, digital tools were appropriate for a range of tasks to support clients reintegrating into society, for example, when applying for financial benefits and disseminating information about services to incarcerated clients. Furthermore, establishing client relationships, assessing service needs, developing client plans and initiating the digital coordination of services during incarceration were identified as measures that facilitated the release process and, optimally, would strengthen post-release communication with social workers. The following quotation illustrates some of these aspects:

'I often reflect on the release process, for instance, without digitalisation—how it is involved in assessing service needs and housing services—and how much it saves in every aspect... it enhances the overall preparation for release. Without this possibility, the process could be significantly prolonged, or it might more likely remain incomplete.' (110)

The interviewees pointed out that the process of release represents a challenging transitional phase. Digital cooperation with a social worker during incarceration,

combined with opportunities to build familiarity, can significantly enhance commitment and reduce barriers to sustained engagement with services after release.

Social workers expressed differing views on interaction and trust-building online. One view supported the possibility of building trust digitally, while the other emphasised face-to-face encounters as a prerequisite for establishing trust. Social workers identified advantages of online interactions in terms of fostering trust, including improved scheduling of client meetings and enhanced accessibility to the worker. Online interaction facilitates more frequent and expedited interactions in comparison to the scheduling of face-to-face meetings. The collaborative relationship with individuals re-entering into society is often initiated and/or sustained through video calls, as the following excerpt from the interview data illustrates:

‘I believe that the relationship can indeed begin... The foundation can already be established through online meetings. Of course, the person will become more familiar face-to-face after release... but I believe that a trusting relationship can already start forming through online meetings facilitated by digital services. And I feel that the video connection is the most important thing here. It’s not just hearing the voice, but the fact that the client sees the worker.’ (I19)

From the interviewees’ perspective, the most significant challenge of digital social work became apparent when compared to face-to-face encounters. The interviewees emphasized that online interactions limit the ability to comprehensively assess a client’s condition—including indicators such as intoxication or mental state—and constrain the observation of non-verbal cues, such as gestures and facial expressions. Furthermore, online interaction was perceived as inadequate for the comprehensive assessment of a client’s living environment, especially when compared to home visits and on-site work. Some social workers even expressed concerns regarding the overall suitability for client interaction.

Environmental fit

In the interviews, *environmental fit* emerged particularly from the perspective of digital development. The interviewees characterized the digitalisation of society and public services as an inevitable development, which social workers must accept. It has created numerous opportunities that are now considered essential for functioning in contemporary society. This development requires employees to acquire proficiency in new tools and to adapt to the challenges typically associated with the adoption of new technologies. One interviewee described these challenges as follows:

‘And I also always feel a bit nervous about these things, wondering how it will come

to us, as a digital platform rarely arrives without any technical issues. If it causes a lot of trouble, and since I don’t have that many clients to begin with, if it’s always very complicated to access some complex platform that comes up only once every six months, I can never figure out how to use it. And every time, my passwords are lost.’ (I14)

The interviewees also discussed the impact of digitalisation on communication within the workplace. While the advantages of face-to-face interaction were acknowledged, the interviewees also emphasised that digital collaboration platforms have facilitated workplace communication and contributed to workload reduction.

In the interviews, reference was also made to the digitalisation of the criminal justice system. This has enabled the introduction of new criminal sentences, such as electronic monitoring. However, a notable challenge is that restricted Internet access during imprisonment hinders effective social work with incarcerated individuals.

From the perspective of the service system, the interviewees reflected on the challenges of multiagency cooperation. In this context, new digital solutions were seen as advancements, as the following excerpt illustrates:

‘The exchange of information becomes easier. On the other hand, at present, the exchange of information does not occur frequently, or at least in my opinion, not sufficiently. If this provides an opportunity for systematic utilisation, it will undoubtedly represent a remarkable improvement and progress compared to the current situation. The current system has not been particularly functional, so all new initiatives and solutions represent steps forward.’ (I12)

The data specifically underscores the challenges inherent in prison operational practices and in the cooperation between social work and prison systems. Several interviewees spoke about new solutions utilising ICT in a rather realistic tone, as improvements compared to the current situation. On the other hand, some interviewees had unrealistic perceptions of how technology could enable real-time access to collaborators. Additionally, the interviewees stressed the challenge of geographical distances, as prisons are located in different parts of Finland, and post-release rehabilitation units might also be outside the client’s municipality of residence. Within wellbeing services counties, distances can span hundreds of kilometres, further complicating access to essential services. Finland’s large geographical distances emphasise the importance of online interaction: it can significantly improve the accessibility of social services.

Table 1 presents the subcategories identified from the data, along with their classification into opportunities and challenges.

Table 1
Dimensions and subcategories (the number of text segments in the interview data)

Dimension and subcategories	Opportunities	Challenges
Individual-task fit	18	4
Availability of services: during incarceration	10	2
Availability of services: swift handling of matters	6	-
Availability of services: modes of service delivery	2	2
Individual-technology fit	14	14
Suitability of digital services for general use or for some clients.	9	3
Suitability of digital services for a specific client group	5	-
Access to Internet, digital devices and services	-	6
Digital skills	-	5
Task-technology fit	45	25
Technology and digital devices	24	3
Suitability of digital services for social work	15	12
Trust-building online	6	1
The challenges of digital social work	-	9
Environmental fit	16	4
Digitalisation of society and public services	6	1
The transformation of workplace communication	3	1
Digitalisation of prisons	1	1
Cross-sectoral cooperation between authorities	4	1
Geographical distances	2	-

Discussion and conclusions

As a result of the rapid digitalisation of society and the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion on digital social work and the use of digital tools in social work has intensified (e.g. Nordesjö, et al., 2022; Pascoe, 2022; Pink et al., 2022; Romakkaniemi et al., 2024; Saukkonen et al., 2024). At the same time, digital competencies have become fundamental for both social workers and clients (López Peláez and Kirwan, 2023). On a more general level, the question is how ICTs can be implemented in ways that support clients' needs, promote social justice and societal inclusion, and enhance individual well-being and empowerment (Pascoe, 2022). This study focuses on the opportunities and challenges identified by Finnish social workers concerning the digitalisation of adult social work in the context of individuals reintegrating into society. The

findings highlight the benefits that the adoption of ICT offers for social work, as well as the challenges related to digital inclusion and trust-building in digital environments. The results also underline blended social work, which integrates digital practices with face-to-face encounters.

Benefits of digital social work and challenges of digital inclusion

The interviewed social workers expressed a moderately positive attitude towards the use of ICT in social work, which is also consistent with findings from previous research (Pyykönen, 2020; Saukkonen et al., 2024). The findings of this study illustrate that the advantages of digitalisation primarily pertain to the more efficient allocation of social work resources, as well as enhanced accessibility and increased frequency of services. The digitalisation of social work was recognised as facilitating the maintenance of connections within collaborative networks, as well as enabling more efficient sharing of information. Online interaction was considered particularly appropriate for young people and individuals experiencing social anxiety or difficulties with face-to-face communication. Furthermore, social workers emphasised that the adoption of ICT is crucial to ensuring a smooth transition from prison into society. When implemented effectively and in a timely manner, it can also enhance engagement with services after the incarceration period. These observations are significant. Although previous studies have recognised the importance of ICT in rehabilitation during imprisonment (e.g. McDougall et al., 2017; Reisdorf & Rikard, 2018; Zivanai & Mahlangu, 2022), the potential of digital social work with incarcerated individuals has received limited scholarly attention.

However, in line with previous studies (Nordesjö et al., 2022, Pink et al., 2022; Saukkonen et al., 2024), some interviewees expressed critical opinions concerning digital social work. They argued that ICT is not applicable to all clients or in all encounters. The challenges were firstly tied to the perception that the technology currently utilised in social services remains in a developmental phase, although the social workers who participated in this study believed that digital services would undoubtedly continue to evolve.

Secondly, the challenges pertained to the level of digital development within prisons and the opportunities available for incarcerated people to access and utilise ICT. Helsper (2021) stresses digital inclusion and points out that besides the lack of access to digital services or the Internet, digital inclusion includes digital skills and attitudes towards digital services. Among incarcerated people, these aspects of digital inclusion may prove to be insufficient, which also complicates integration into digital society post-incarceration (Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022). Considering the findings of this study, the challenges of digital inclusion appear to be linked both to the capacity of individuals to use ICT (individual-technology fit) and to

the inherent control structures of the prisons (environmental fit). Consequently, promoting digital inclusion requires not only training of digital skills, supporting individuals in online interactions and improving the usability of technology, but also implementing changes in prison practices (see Jewkes & Reisdorf, 2016; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Järveläinen & Rantanen, 2021).

Trust-building and blended social work

In the research literature concerning the digitalisation of social work, a central concern is how it will affect relationship-based practices (Romakkaniemi et al., 2024), and whether the quality of the client–worker relationship may deteriorate because of increased digitalisation (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023). Kirwan (2023) asks the critical question of how ICT can foster trust between social workers and clients, facilitate a holistic understanding of clients' circumstances, and promote sustained engagement with support services. On the other hand, Pink et al. (2022) argue that a trusting relationship with the client can be built by combining different modes of interaction, including video calls, WhatsApp messaging, texting, and email. This study indicates that the topic remains a contested issue among social workers. While some interviewees recognised the potential for building trust through digital tools, others emphasised the importance of face-to-face encounters as essential for establishing a meaningful client–social worker relationship.

From the perspective of trust-building, prisons represent a distinct context. A culture of distrust prevails within prison environments (Liebling & Arnold, 2012; Crewe et al., 2023), and many incarcerated individuals express scepticism towards both the Internet and social services (Rantanen et al., 2025). On the other hand, the adoption of digital tools such as video calls presents new opportunities for establishing trust-based relationships with incarcerated individuals. In this study, some interviewees mentioned that the collaborative relationship with clients was already initiated or sustained online during imprisonment, which contributed to the building of a trusting client – social worker relationship.

The findings of the present study align with previous research (Hansen et al., 2018; Pink et al., 2022), which suggests that digital interaction cannot fully substitute face-to-face and personal encounters. Blended social work, a hybrid practice integrating virtual and face-to-face approaches (Granhölm, 2016; Pink et al., 2022), frequently emerged in the interviews as the preferred method for implementing social work. However, it is not always self-evident in which cases, and for which clients, each mode of interaction should be used. Thus, the transition to blended social work underscores the necessity of developing assessment instruments for evaluating the appropriateness of digitally delivered social work for diverse client groups. However, in this regard, progress within the field of social

work has been markedly slower than in healthcare (Kaihlainen et al., 2023), which also highlights the need for client-specific and context-sensitive assessments when choosing the appropriate mode of social work delivery.

According to Pink et al. (2022), social workers have expressed concern that relying solely on video calls may hinder their ability to detect risks related to a client's family situation. A similar challenge emerged in our data. Some interviewees considered ICT to be poorly suited for conducting client assessments, as evaluating factors such as the state of intoxication and social functioning is more accurate in face-to-face encounters. This aspect further underscores the need to develop blended working methods rather than relying solely on fully digital social work.

Limitations

This study focuses exclusively on Finland, with the participants comprising a limited subset of the nation's social workers, necessitating caution when attempting to generalise the findings. On the other hand, the interviewees were selected quite comprehensively from various regions of Finland, considering both the geographic distribution and the population size of different areas. In addition, the data was limited to interviews and reflects the perspectives and experiences of social workers. No attempt has been made to examine specific practices of digital social work. It is important to recognise that the research on digital social work and the technologies implemented in it are advancing at a rapid pace. This data reflects the situation as of 2024.

The abductive analysis approach used in interpretive analysis involves generally recognized risks when compared with purely data-driven approaches, including the potential narrowing of the analytic focus to predefined dimensions (see Vila-Henninger et al., 2024). Accordingly, in this study, commitment to the FITTE framework may have guided the analysis toward a focus on the adoption of new technology and its specific dimensions, while other perspectives, such as a more critical examination of the significance of digitalisation for social work, may have received less emphasis. Efforts were made to reduce this potential bias through peer reflection and by broadening the theoretical foundation of the study to include research on relationship-based social work and digital inclusion.

Concluding remarks

Digitalisation has introduced both opportunities and challenges for relationship-based social work, particularly in the context of client engagement and trust-building. While digital services may improve accessibility and reduce barriers to

contact, they risk diminishing the depth of interaction and emotional presence that are central to effective practice. Given that the relational dimension, defined by reciprocal trust and meaningful interaction between the client and the social worker, is essential for fostering sustainable change, it is crucial to develop approaches that preserve and strengthen this foundation within digital environments. This calls for a critical examination of how digital tools can be implemented to support, rather than undermine, the core values of relationship-based social work. Furthermore, access to digital services during incarceration contributes to the realisation of human rights and successful re-entry to society.

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