Schwerpunkt: Partizipation verwirklichen - Zur Weiterentwicklung Sozialer Dienste im analogen und digitalen Raum

Birgit Papke
Teilhabe in digitalen Zeiten

Johannes Schädler et al.
Soziale Dienste in digitalen Transformationsprozessen

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Structural Participation through Hybrid and Non-hybrid Social Services in Refugee Social Work

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Caring for Inclusivity

Accessibility as a Determinant Factor for Benefiting from Social Services both in Analogue and Digital Spaces

Introduction
Accessibility is an aspect that transcends the dichotomy between digital and analogue spaces. It refers to removing barriers that may prevent people experiencing certain conditions to access a particular service or resource (‘Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz’ (BGG), 2002; The United Nations, 2006). Manifold examples can be found in people’s everyday lives: from the installation of ramps to allow people sitting in a wheelchair to access buildings, to the preparation of digital texts that can be properly read aloud for visually impaired people. Accessibility is therefore a relevant aspect for inclusivity, as extensively discussed in literature (Mankoff, Hayes and Kasnitz, 2010; Oliver, 2013; Frauenberger, 2015), and arguably a determinant factor for the access of social services.

This article sets out to discuss the role of accessibility in the creation of more effective and stronger communities, mitigating inequalities and enhancing opportunities. In particular, it attempts to answer the question concerning what steps should be taken towards the provision of accessible spaces, so that people with impairments can benefit from social services in hybrid spaces. Based on the results of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) study (Finley, 2008; Holkup et al., 2009), involving people with and without impairments involved in the construction, provision and use of information technology (IT) -based workplaces, we go on to discuss how accessibility is a determinant aspect for social interaction and, therefore, a key aspect of social services. In addition to that, we reflect on the relevance of accessibility to the future of social services, by illustrating the trend towards better including people with impairments in society.

We bring on board views from designers, developers, consultants, employees and employers on the issue of accessibility in realising that the issue is highly relevant to the concept of participation. We will introduce many challenges reported by our co-researchers in discussing the elaboration of an inclusive work environment, through a phenomenological analysis of a case that has been documented across the data collection activities that we have been carrying out for our study, which is part of the project iDESkmu (Inclusive DMS and ECMs in Small and Medium Enterprise - kmu, in the German acronym).

The article also draws attention to the fact that the demographic change affects all of us. In age there is a higher possibility to get ill or to get an impairment. When this happens, it is essential to have accessible services that do not hinder further participation in society. By introducing this discussion, we aim at highlighting future directions on research and developments towards inclusion and participation of people in general in foundational activities of society.

Relevance of Accessibility
We all somehow face digital and analogue barriers in our everyday lives from time to time. However, a variety of barriers pose a greater challenge for people with impairments. This does not only affect people with congenital impairments, but also those people who developed an impairment in the course of their work, due to illnesses or accident. With the demographic change being caused by and increasing aging population, the likelihood of an acquired impairment also increases (WHO, 2011). The need for accessible workplaces can therefore affect all. Therefore, we and many others - e.g., WHO, 2011; Brannham and Kane, 2015; Bennett, 2018; Crabb et al., 2019 - argue that accessibility is becoming more and more relevant in current times. Accessibility, as explained above, remains a barrier that may prevent people to have access to services and resources. It consequently contributes to equal access to these services and resources and hence to mitigate potential inequalities between people with different profiles. In work contexts, removing these barriers means to give more people the possibility to engage in productive activities (Oliver, 2013; Frauenberger, 2015; de Carvalho et al., 2020; Bittenbinder et al., 2021). In particular, it supports people suffering from different types of impairments to be included in economic activities.

There are many reasons for companies to hire people with impairments, especially in times of shortage of skilled workers in order to maintain the company’s skills (Baumgärtner et al., 2015; Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2019). The costs of filling a new position should not be underestimated (Smettan and Kleineidam, 2018). It is therefore advisable to adapt the existing workplaces of the increasingly aging employees to the respective requirements that increase with age, thus to keep them in the company in order to save the substitution costs for hiring new employees. The offer of suitable (accessible) jobs is therefore for both aspects, the acquisition of new skilled workers from the group of people with impairment to maintain the competence of the company and the preservation of jobs for experienced professionals from the aging workforce, thus has the potential to help to counteract the shortage of skilled workers.

Towards Sensitising People about the Relevance of Accessibility
Despite numerous activities, regulations and institutions to promote inclusivity...
The project iDESkmu (www.projekt-ideskmu.de), whose results of ongoing activities have inspired this contribution, set out to contribute to mitigate this gap. The project investigates the challenges faced by people with impairments in work contexts. This concerns not only digital and analogue barriers related to the workplace setup or aids used, but also primarily analogue (social) factors on the part of companies and (possibly future) colleagues. In particular, the project focuses on creating and maintaining accessible IT-based workplaces for blind and visually impaired people. The project concentrates on the development and use of document-management systems (DMS) and enterprise-content-management systems (ECMS), investigating the extent to which existing systems are prepared to be used by blind and visually impaired people in work contexts.

The goal of the project and our research is to provide outcomes for different levels to create a more inclusive work environment. In this article, we set out to present a phenomenological account of accessibility issues experienced by workers with visual impairments.

Physical mobility is a notion that inherently involves motion of bodies across spaces in a given time. In the case of Stephanie, her journey begins at home. She leaves familiar surroundings, where she has no difficulties to find her way around, and enters a world that can be quite unknown at times. For instance, she has no difficulties to move in her apartment or leave the building where she is located. Even the stairs in the building are not a problem, as she knows the location. As will become evident by the theme through critical discussions between the analysts where experiences and thoughts on the findings have been shared and exchanged with our co-researcher as the analysis progressed. We have dwelled on the data by means of a thematic analysis according to the approach introduced by Braun and Clarke (2012) and explicited the phenomenon taking into consideration the lifeworld dimensions that we refer to above and articulated in the language we use across the contribution.

The lack of embodiment of her impairment hence leads to a sociability problem and Stephanie finds herself in a position where she has to continuously explain herself, which is a source of inequality and at times of discrimination. In particular, the excerpt makes transparent that, when she receives an apology from the driver, she has the feeling that she is being blamed because she is not using a cane for blind people. Disability emerges from the view of the environment, which can be avoided if people were educated to know that (legally) blind people do not necessarily have to use a white cane, because they can see enough to move around without stumbling, although they cannot see enough to identify on displays or printed placards. There is a perception that she adds a level of stress to her day which people without her impairment do not have to experience.

Since information about the bus stop is usually only provided via a visual display at the very front of the bus, where one is allowed to stand, she also relies on the bus driver to tell her where to get off. This reinforces sociality as an important aspect of overcoming analogue barriers.
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sion. During her interview, Stephanie re-

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ment and connecting and work-

sub-themes became visible as we worked

as the findings previously presented have

Mobilising Minds

People with visual impairments not only have to overcome challenges concern-

mobilising their bodies across dif-

ferent spaces in specific times, but they also have to work on mobilising minds, as the findings previously presented have already suggested. This aspect of social-

city come out was strongly evidenced in our data, as discussed in the following.

When it comes to the path to work, two sub-themes became visible as we worked

through our TA: going through the man-

agement level and connecting and work-

ing with colleagues.

Going through the Management Level

The analysis of our data suggests that the path to work is not only constrained to the physical or temporal mobility from one’s home to the workplace, but it also concerns the path that they have access to the workplace. Here, the journey starts with people convincing their employers that they are capable of delivering what is required for the position they envi-

sion. During her interview, Stephanie re-

counted the difficulties that she already faced applying for a job. One of the ex-

periences that marked her the most, was her experience of applying for a job in a food market. In that occasion, she almost had to beg to prove herself able to do the job. The manager interviewing her clearly demonstrated serious concerns about her being independent from the beginning.

I'm there to see the boss and to intro-

duced me. And he was totally scepti-

cal. And he did, he told me openly, he doesn't think I can do that. And I per-

suaded him and said, „Please, please, let me do a trial working day here, free of charge. I'll show you that I can do it“. That's how he got too broad-

minded, but super sceptical. So really, offensively sceptical too.

The account above shows how hard peo-

ple with impairments have to fight to show that their impairment will not pre-

vent them to accomplish things. Steph-

anie had to go to a very emotional level in order to have the opportunity to prove on a factual level that she can work just like a normal-sighted person.

I worked there for one day. The people who worked with me in the store were all totally surprised and positive, really pleased that I managed so well and im-

pressed.

Although Stephanie was able to report on a success history, it is sensible to think that many people would not be fierce enough to transpose this initial barrier.

Further analysing her case, we found evi-

dence that this barrier is a common place. In her current job, for instance, there were similar reservations before she was hired, in this case, not at the level of the person who would be supervising her work, but in the company’s level. It is also worth mentioning that there was also a com-

plete lack of knowledge and experience of how to deal with the hiring of an em-

ployee with impairments.

And she has already explained that to us

and also said that she will bring almost everything with her. She has enlargement software, she got the license on her com-

puter from the employment agency, which she brings with her. Then she may need a lamp that hovers over her so that there is light. She has extra glasses. Yes, and

basically described the workplace to us

and said: Okay, I still have a device, like an overhead projector, where you can put something on it, and then you can move it, and then you can be digitized again. That means she would like to have a workplace, which is at least so big that this device still fit on it. Or a side table. So, she had very spe-

cific ideas because she is also working on this project and simply knows when an employer is not familiar with it. They also had the right forms where you can apply for help, integration allowance and so on. So, she was exemplary: „[…] Since, as I said, it hadn't had any contact with

it before, it was of course charging that we had an applicant where we knew she was concerned with the subject of inte-

gration or inclusion. (Manual, IT service company, CEO, sighted)

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case; our findings suggest that there is no knowledge within companies about the specific needs of people with impair-

ment. Stephanie goes on to tell how her employer lacks knowledge and aware-

ness of the individual requirements of the workplace and the aids, despite the fact that she has been working for them for a while now:

[…] he said, „You're visually impaired, yes we might have to put stronger lamps there again...“ And then I also

say, „Yes, but no! That's not my need!“ That's... that's exactly what I mean.

Again, that's not individual. That's just, Okay, somebody has bad vision. Then huh. What are we going to do cliché-

wise? More light, always more light!

Connecting and Working with

Colleagues

Sociability issues concerning the path to the work goes beyond the management level, as already suggested above. Stephanie made her

point, so I guess for, probably even

a bit of time. First of all, of course, until I had the self-confidence to say to them, „Here, please adjust to me.“ […] In the end, however, they also recognized this and said, „Well, you work the way you can work best […] you have to cope with it. Okay, we’ll adjust to it some-

how.”

Through sociability, Stephanie made her colleagues aware of her limitations and the needs stemming from them. Raising awareness in a real-life context is a deci-

sive factor in the quality of sensitisation, because only then one can really under-

stand the consequences of certain things.

There are always a few things that you sometimes only become aware of when you… when you are really confronted with them, where you think to yourself, „Oh, that's right, that's normal for the others. But not necessarily for me.

This finding resonates with findings coming from other participants as well. Timo, a consultant and project manager of an IT service company goes on to re-

port about his perspective from the perspective of a sighted person:

I could imagine that if, for example, a department thinks that they will all move closer together, because you help each other somehow and I could imag-

ine that this simply has a positive effect on productivity, but then it’s also a question of better work performance etc. at some point, so I guess for, probably even over all, for the company.

All the above demonstrate how complex and difficult the path to work for a vis-

ually impaired person can be and how issues of spatiality, temporality, corpo-

reality and sociability emerge from it and help to illuminate relevant matters.
Transferring Accessibility Issues at the Workplace to Social Services

Social services are usually available and accessible in both analogue and digital form. However, they can face barriers for people with impairments, which block the use of the services, the principle is the same. Websites must also be accessible in order to be operable and usable by people with impairments. In the field of software and websites, there are "accessibility guidelines" (W3C Web Accessibility Initiative, 2013; Töllfson and Austen, 2017; ISO, 2018) to ensure accessibility of digital services in general. Although compliance with these guidelines is already binding for websites of public institutions in EU (Richtlinie EU 2016/2106, 2016; Lang, 2018), by far not all websites have been implemented in an accessible manner. In addition, the regulation does not apply to private providers, in whose hands, however, social services are often located (Grunow, 2011).

Another aspect, which is also not directly related to the performance of the social service, but can also be a decisive barrier to the use of social services, is ignorance. We use "ignorance" here in a very specific sense; it is not a matter of pure unawareness, but also because people do not want to deal with the issue at all without concrete pressure. The findings coming from Manuel’s study show that knowledge and understanding of the colleague’s practices, in both directions, emerge. However, this beginning in a real context always requires prior experience, and, as seen in Stephanie’s case, a confident acquaintance and "claiming" understanding through proof. It is quite conceivable that especially in the context of social services exactly this self-confident appearance is usually initially not present. This demonstrates the relevance of participatory approaches as the one used for the research study where the findings introduced here were originated. Involved impairing people is hence extremely important to identify and reduce some of potential barriers, independent if those barriers concern workplaces or social services (Charlton, 1998; Magnusson, Hedwall and Callenho, 2018; Vollenwyder et al., 2020).

In the context of the development of accessible software, the relevance of the integration of people with impairments has already been recognized and is also increasingly used and perceived successes in recent years (Kane et al., 2014; Vollenwyder et al., 2020; Mack et al., 2021). However, these experiences can potentially be transferred to the creation or improvement of "social services". The social barrier to using social services mentioned by Oelerich et al. (2019) refers to the fear of not being properly understood or stigmatized and therefore not using social services. Misunderstanding can occur quickly and unintentionally due to ignorance of the exact situation. The insight into the results in the work context shows how difficult it is for inexperienced persons to (correctly) understand their counterpart. Examples of such learning behaviour can be found in the theory of "social learning" (Gundry, 1992; Reed et al., 2010) and the "symmetry of ignorance" (Fischer, 2000), among others. Only collaboration can ensure that knowledge and understanding of the colleague’s practices, in both directions, emerge. However, this beginning in a real context always requires prior experience, and, as seen in Stephanie’s case, a confident acquaintance and "claiming" understanding through proof. It is quite conceivable that especially in the context of social services exactly this self-confident appearance is usually initially not present. This demonstrates the relevance of participatory approaches as the one used for the research study where the findings introduced here were originated. Involved impairing people is hence extremely important to identify and reduce some of potential barriers, independent if those barriers concern workplaces or social services (Charlton, 1998; Magnusson, Hedwall and Callenho, 2018; Vollenwyder et al., 2020).

In the context of the development of accessible software, the relevance of the integration of people with impairments has already been recognized and is also increasingly used and perceived successes and requirements for social services are not taken into account. The results presented in this article, which are based on a qualitative analysis of the barriers to creating and maintaining accessible IT workplaces and the transfer of these barriers to the use of social services, open up a broader view of real barriers for people with impairments in the context of social service use and participation, as our findings highlight, for example, physical accessibility, electronic accessibility, and knowledge about social services, which can be effectively used by them. Missing knowledge about individual needs of people with specific impairments, which currently often exists in development organisations, could be generated through collaboration. Certain types of barriers could thus be uncovered and eliminated at an early stage. We therefore feel that it makes sense to involve relevant stakeholders in the design of social services in order to raise awareness of the needs and practices of people with impairments by sharing experiences and building on the knowledge of the relevant stakeholders.

Conclusions

The path to work of people with impairments reflects in many areas the barriers to accessing social services. Differentiated from analogue and digital barriers, people with impairments face similar barriers when pursuing work and using social services. Identifying the barriers to accessing social services which can be effectively used by them, Missing knowledge about individual needs of people with specific impairments, which currently often exists in development organisations, could be generated through collaboration. Certain types of barriers could thus be uncovered and eliminated at an early stage. We therefore feel that it makes sense to involve relevant stakeholders in the design of social services in order to raise awareness of the needs and practices of people with impairments by sharing experiences and building on the knowledge of the relevant stakeholders.

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Literature


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