

# Human Services and Information Technology: an International Perspective

reviewed by Ignace Snellen

Steyaert J, Colombi D & Rafferty J, (1996) *Human Services and Information Technology: an International Perspective*, Arena, Aldershot p 262, ISBN 1-85742-365-8

This publication is the third in a sequence of collections of descriptions on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) applications in the social service sector. The three successive volumes cover an expanding range of countries and topics: from Western, Southern and Eastern European countries to finally a variety of social service regimes on four continents.

This is one of the attractions of the enterprise the editors of the volume have undertaken. It makes it possible to develop a longitudinal overview of the achievements and non-achievements in informatisation. In the last chapter of the book, the editors relate the hopes and expectations expressed in both former volumes to the sobering impressions the actual descriptions leave behind.

Another attraction is that the authors keep to a common format. Each starts with a general introduction on the main issues which are dominating the scene in the country concerned. Every author gives a practical description of the use of ICT to inform citizens about their entitlements and obligations, and the ways in which they can be realised, and also to educate and train social service professionals, and to provide the services themselves. Practitioners will use this as a handbook, for academicians it is a valuable source book.

A third attraction of the volume is its accessibility. The medium is the message in the sense that WWW addresses are, as much as possible, made available. The more interesting ICT developments in the social service sector of a country are, the greater the chance that the reader is enabled to approach the relevant sources of information directly. So, this volume may support the diffusion of the state of the art of ICT-applications. Countries which are still lagging behind are not forced to traverse the learning trajectories of the advanced countries but may profit directly from their learning experiences.

During the years covered by the three volumes fundamental background changes have occurred in the social service sector. In terms of demography, a further 'de-greening' and 'greying' of the population is taking place. In terms of economy, mass unemployment and a global competition of social security systems is affecting the viability of the social service sector. In terms of the relationship between state and society, a growing disenchantment with the performance of public bureaucracies and a wide spread predilection for market-arrangements instead of public financing are manifesting themselves.

Against these background changes ICT applications are an opportunity as well as a threat. The main opportunity is that ICTs enable social service organisations and their individual professionals to improve the quality of their service. Speed of case handling, exactness, neutrality and equality before the law are enhanced. Possibilities to empower clients are there, but are not widely used. The main threats from ICTs are a tipping of the balance between privacy and fraud detection to the detriment of privacy, and a loss of autonomy of social service organisations and professionals. ICT research itself may provide 'privacy

*Ignace Snellen is professor of public policy at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. He has published extensively on the influence of information technology on policy processes. He has also been chairman of an inter-university research programme on new technologies and public policy.*

Contact him at:

Faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen  
Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam  
PO Box 1738  
3000 DR Rotterdam  
The Netherlands

Tel: +31 10 408 2133  
Fax: +31 10 452 7842  
Email: [snellen@bsk.fsw.eur.nl](mailto:snellen@bsk.fsw.eur.nl)

enhancing technologies' which could protect privacy to a certain extent. The probable loss of autonomy, as a consequence of economising as well as growing transparency created by ICT, may also hamper the empowerment of the client.

A general impression one gets from this volume is that institutional conditions mainly determine the way in which and the extent to which ICTs are used in the different national social service environments. It may be the institutional structure conditioned by geographical distances as in Australia, or by societal rifts such as in Belgium. Standardisation may be hampered by the institutional structure of public administration, in which local autonomy is a central value, or by the institutional position of private organisations which fear loss of their autonomy. There is a fair chance that the globalisation of the national economies will lead to a roundabout route to

standardisation of the social service sectors in the different countries. The use of ICT applications may be injurious to the social and psychological dimensions of social services when administrators or clerks instead of social workers dominate their deployment (as in Germany).

The last chapter of the book takes the threads of the description per country together and presents a 'multi-layered' analysis. The editors establish a development from a technology efficiency paradigm (word processing and calculations), via an effectiveness paradigm (accountability and service support) to an innovative re-design paradigm (allocations on the basis of competition).

By this approach they open up a valuable entry to further analytical and empirical searches. A challenging invitation to practitioners and academics alike through an excellent publication.

## Information Management in Social Services

*Reviewed by Jan Steyaert*

Kerslake A & Gould N, (Eds.), (1996), *Information Management in Social Services*, Avebury, Aldershot, 99 p., ISBN 1 85972 293 8

This book offers readers 10 different papers, originally presented at the SSRADU conference, in March 1995, in Bath. The authors come from different backgrounds such as academia, social policy and management, representing a mirror of the myriad of stakeholders involved in information management. Only the practitioners are missing, although several of the authors have their roots in professional practice. All of the authors are currently part of what we could safely label as the core group of persons that have a strong influence on the way information management in English social service departments is currently shaped. Knowing the drastic changes currently taking place in these organisations with the implementation of the community care policy, makes this an inviting book.

After the introduction by *Gould*, *Kerslake* sets the scene by sketching the brief history of information management and its roots in the unstructured information abundance in social service departments. *Kerslake* points out that information management wrongly started in many organisations with the introduction of technology, resulting in the question which software or hardware to purchase. He argues, as so often done in this journal, that the starting point should be the information needs of decision process on all levels of the organisation.

*Jan Steyaert is senior lecturer and consultant at Causa, Faculty of Health Care and Social Work in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. He is also co-editor of this journal.*

*He can be contacted at the editorial address, which can be found on the inside front cover of this journal issue.*

*Bamford* replies to that conclusion by wondering whether it is not an illusion to think decision making is driven by information. So many other aspects seem to influence the way decisions emerge in an organisation. Looking upon decision processes solely from an analytical point of view is grossly naive and discounts the 'barriers to rationality'.

*Oppenheim* confronts the reality of communication within and between social service departments with the booming technology of the Internet. He outlines