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Digital Skills in Finnish Public Libraries to Engage in the National Operating Model for Digital Support for Citizens

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Abstract:

During the last four years, government actions have required Finnish public libraries to take a more concrete role in citizens' digital support. Although Finland is doing well in digitalisation, and libraries have been providing digital support since the mid-1990s, there are large groups of citizens who have a wide range of challenges in the digital world. There is a dire need to equally engage citizens to use digital services and devices. However, the digital skills of library employees have diverged during the last decades. This calls for wider further education activities for library employees. Turku City Library studied the digital competencies of 405 public library employees in South-West Finland. However, significant variation was found in digital competencies. National-level digital competence requirements have been created by the Council of Public Libraries, and further education activities have been launched all over Finland, organised by the nine regional development libraries with extra finance from the Parliament Finance Committee's Digital Libraries Initiative, to enhance digital competency in public libraries and create collaborative networks to help citizens take part in digital society.

Keywords: digitalisation, Finland, public libraries, further education, librarians

Digitalisation has set new requirements for everyday learning. The library work environment has become ever more digitalised, and this situation has at some level caught us off-guard. Certain skills have been learnt as new tools emerge at work, and some skills have developed wholly dependent on personal interests and hobbies. For many, digital skills have not developed at the same rate as the technology. However, Finnish libraries were at the dawn of the

Internet seen as the technological vanguard in society. Helsinki City Library received the first Bill Gates Foundation Award Access to Learning in 2000, owing to the fact that they had offered Internet access since 1994. In 2000, Internet access was available in 785 out of 1147 libraries. This service was born from the need for creating e-mail accounts. The first tablet computers in 2010 created a new wave in digital support as libraries in Finland organised events to teach people how to use tablets. Little by little, digital skills started to diverge, and some library employees had versatile skills while others remained content with the skills necessary to perform daily work tasks.

Digital literacy as a concept has been discussed since the 1990s. Gilster wrote *Digital Literacy* in 1997, and, against expectation, did not define digital literacy as a set of skills but as a mere digital age literacy. Bawden (2008), referring to Gilster, stated that “digital literacy must be more than the ability to use digital sources effectively; it is a special kind of mind-set or thinking”. Martin (2006) also drew from Gilster in defining digital literacy as “the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesise digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process.” In addition to digital literacy, digital competence is a term used to describe digital skills. The European Commission used this term when digital competency standards for citizens were originally created (European Commission, 2013).

Digitalised Finland

A government programme set a goal in 2015 to digitalise all public services in Finland (Sipilä Government Programme, 2015). From 1 April 2019, a law requires all public services to be provided digitally, and the digital service should, furthermore, be the primary channel of service. According to law, the digital service provider has the legal obligation to provide guidance to use the services. Thus, there is a need for a wide and stable support network.

The European Commission study, the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), shows that currently Finland is the leader in European digitalisation (European Commission, 2019). Five areas of digital development were measured: connectivity (infrastructure and quality), human capital (skills), use of Internet services (entertainment and leisure time), integration of digital technology to business (e-commerce) and digital public services (digital solutions by government, administration and health). Finland was the top country in human capital and in digital public services. In spite of this, half the Finnish population faces different kinds of obstacles to participate in digital society (SOSTE, 2019). Genuine digital inclusion has raised a lot of worries amongst citizens. The government has therefore established a committee to consider equality and inclusion and how to engage all citizens in different age groups as well as in different socioeconomic situations.

Finland has had a renewed Library Act since 2017 (Finlex, 2016). Finnish libraries are a free-of-charge basic service and an open space for all citizens. The responsibilities of libraries include, among others, to support equal possibilities for all, promote life-long learning and versatile literacy skills and engage citizens in social and cultural dialogue. Libraries serve users increasingly on the Internet and on different digital platforms. A wide range of digital skills is required from users and most certainly from library professionals. Libraries need to possess preparedness and the ability to guide library users.

These government-level actions have led to libraries being one of the actors in the National Operating Model for Digital Support (Ministry of Finance, 2018), together with government officials and voluntary organisations. Since the final report was published at the start of 2018, libraries have worked to understand what this formal role means for public libraries in Finland. Libraries have more or less helped customers with digital challenges for several years, but these activities have been sporadic and, moreover, have depended heavily on the particular librarian's own digital skills level. After the final report was published, there was an urgent need to understand what the actual digital skills of library professionals are. Libraries also had to start building collaborative networks of all the actors involved in digital support.

Digital skills survey

The 2017 Library Act divided Finland into nine regional and one national development libraries. The South-West Finland development area consists of 43 municipalities. Among these 43 are 12 municipalities with only 1–2 library employees. Turku City Library is the largest library in the area with 150 employees. In 2018, Turku City Library studied the digital skills of library employees in South-West Finland. Respondents (N=405) covered the whole range of public library employees—from library assistants and attendants to library directors.

Age was one of the most important variables in the survey results. The results show that the younger the employee, the more secure they were in digital skills. This trend was visible throughout the results. The largest difference between the decades in which the respondents were born was in the use of social media. Another notable result related to educational differences, which furthermore had an effect on skills. A total of 46% of the respondents were library assistants with a vocational degree and 32% were librarians with a master's or bachelor's degree. The difference was clear; the library assistants used fewer digital tools and, additionally, estimated their digital skills to be lower. Worryingly, this also applied to the digital tools and materials provided by their own libraries. The best skills were in the service managers group, who in most cases do not work in customer service.

Furthermore, the survey indicated that most interactions of digital support take place in every-day service situations, even if a variety of digital support events are available. Therefore, it is important to secure the digital skills of all employees working in customer service in public libraries. Isto Huvila (2012) examined the division between digital users and non-users, noting that even if the Internet has brought a lot of equality to the world, it has still remained as a separating force. Participation can depend on several factors and, furthermore, on severe socioeconomic issues. The level of engagement in digital activities can depend on personal interests and opinions as well as on world views.

Actions to enhance digital literacy skills in public libraries

Because of this evident disparity in skills levels, several measures have been taken all over Finland to improve public library employees' digital skills. The Council of Public Libraries gathered an expert group to draw up recommendations for minimum digital skills for public library employees in Finland. The frame for composing the recommendations was the 2017 Library Act and the European Union Digital Competency Framework (EU DigComp 2.0). These digital literacy recommendations were discussed in the council during spring 2019.

These recommendations will have considerable impact on library work from the point of view of continued learning, library and information science education at all educational levels, and daily customer service in all public libraries. The goal is that all public libraries can commit to a service promise that libraries will provide digital assistance when it comes to skills needed to use libraries' own services: e-materials, digital services, using devices, information seeking, online security, and digital problem solving.

In December 2018, the Ministry of Finance allocated an additional €860,000 to develop digital support activities in Finnish public libraries. This Digital Library Initiative financing will, during 2019–2020, be divided between the Helsinki City Library with national development responsibility and the nine regional development libraries. All regional development libraries have the same responsibility, which means that similar actions to enhance digital skills are being developed in all nine regional development libraries. Turku City Library has taken three measures to enhance digital skills. Firstly, a digital learning environment will be launched in September 2019 for the South-West region in Finland. This learning environment will, for the first time, bring a pedagogically planned e-learning platform available for further education.

Secondly, a group of digital tutors from existing library employees has been educated to provide help for local colleagues and even plan digital support events for local customers. Since there are several smaller municipalities, these are the areas which require most resources. This is also the wish presented by the Ministry of Education and Culture as one of the conditions for financing in the Digital Library Initiative. Thirdly, a Digital Tour 2019 that began in the spring will continue during autumn 2019. The purpose is to bring digital learning close to librarians and give them the freedom to try and fail and to learn in a friendly environment. These hands-on workshops for library employees support the launch of the e-learning platform.

Digital Library Initiative activities are being planned during summer 2019, and the launch will take place from September 2019 onwards. The first goal is that by the end of 2020 the digital literacy skills of Finnish public library employees have reached the digital skills requirements. The second goal is to create local service networks where public libraries would work as one of the digital support producers and also a provider of space for other actors in the field, namely businesses (for instance banks), the public sector (tax administration and the social insurance institution among others) and voluntary organisations.

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