

Visibility and communication of small NGOs in the context of digital transformation

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Abstract. In the current context generated by the ubiquity of digital technologies in all aspects of socio-economic life, the NGOs that succeed in integrating smart tools into their development strategies are those that have a high chance of adapting, transforming and being resilient to digital transformation. The digital strategy is an integral part of the NGO's strategic development plan, continuously adapting and developing with the changes brought by new technologies in society. The article explains how NGOs, with a cohesive plan for adapting and integrating smart technologies into development strategies, can successfully achieve their cause. In the elaboration of the digital strategy, the management will have as a starting point the finding of answers to the questions: Why is this wanted? and How will this vision be achieved? The author believes that the paper can serve as a guide for the adoption of digital technology by other NGOs at the beginning of the road in order to promote the cause for which it advocates, but also to reduce costs.

Keywords: *visibility, digital strategy, NGOs, stakeholders*

1. Introduction

The dependence on technology can be easily observed in our daily tasks: socialization, communication, governance, learning, work, research, etc.. Technology has left its mark on most socio-human activities. Obviously, the environment in which NGOs operate is not immune to technology either. In this sense, regardless of the size of the NGO, it is vital that it adapts to digital reality, especially since all its stakeholders are in this reality subjected to the process of digital transformation.

The digital strategy of the NGO is a tool through which the NGO can fulfill its mission faster and easier, to save and use resources as rationally as possible, to increase the interaction with stakeholders. The lack of digital strategy leads to the loss of opportunities for community development, for exploring new ways of community development, involvement and cooperation.

The pace of innovation and ICT penetration is accelerating, given the connections of households to the Internet. In 2020, 89.4% of households across the EU-27 had access to the internet. (Eurostat, 2021). In this context, NGOs need to find new solutions and tools to promote their cause and attract volunteers and donors. On the other hand, by using digital solutions the costs are reduced, from both the perspective of the staff directly involved in the activity of the NGO and its activists.

In the digital environment, the community can meet at any time, regardless of geographical location, without the need for specially designed offices. At the same time, the information is provided in real time, a total and real transparency of the actions to be undertaken is ensured, in addition stakeholders can be directly and timely involved in the decision-making process, practically the whole community will be able to monitor the NGO's actions. In reality, this would have been difficult to achieve and the cost-effectiveness ratio would have been unsatisfactory. For example, if the volunteers' files are in

digital format, it will be possible to track who accessed the data and identify how the NGO can help, and this can only be done by automatically connecting these sets of data. If the volunteers' files are on paper, it is almost impossible to identify the necessary information about all the volunteers and to be able to contact them at the right time. On the other hand, any attempt to do this manually is costly and subjected to human error.

There are many determinant factors for an NGO in order to focus on the digitalization of processes, but most of the time they are capped by the limiting resources. However, this approach can be overcome through a constant planning of actions which includes a process of evaluation, analysis and participation of stakeholders and a process of constant monitoring of results. The challenge of accelerating the digital transformation process must be addressed pro-actively, participatively, intelligently and flexibly, because we are talking about an area where the rate of change and innovation is very fast and where only programmatic and substantial cooperation can bring positive results. The more digital solutions are implemented, the greater the value created for the organization's mission.

This paper emphasizes the importance of digital identity for a non-governmental organization and is a foray into the main managerial tools which can be used in developing the digital strategy of an NGO at the beginning of the road. The existence of a correctly developed and implemented digital strategy leads to notable results for the development of the NGO.

In view of the proposed objectives, this paper has been structured in five sections. After the Introduction, the next section describes the review of the literature, Section 3 explains the approach to creating and developing a digital strategy for an NGO, Section 4 presents the conclusions and sets the direction of future research, and the last section was dedicated to references.

2. Review of the specialized literature

Digital transformation is a complex process, widely debated in the literature due on the one hand to the major impact it has on competitiveness, and on the other hand to the many variables which must be taken into account at the same time with the implementation and use of new digital technologies, respectively stakeholder involvement, iterative development and an increased orientation towards new approaches and methods.

It can be considered that (Răboșu & Babucea, 2020) digitalization is an irreversible process, all economic activities must adapt to this trend and the faster and more efficient the adaptation, the higher the performance which will be achieved.

The NGOs are important actors in society, often being a link between the community and the Government. The implementation of new technologies, innovative solutions and progressive public policies which reflect the vision of a more prosperous and sustainable future can be achieved through cooperation between businesses, local public administrations, governments and NGOs. (Bednarčíková & Repiská, 2021)

At the forefront of the process of digital transformation in Europe are the Nordic countries that can serve as role models for other states in developing and implementing digital strategies, otherwise the use of inadequate policy instruments will increase social inequalities. (Bălăcescu & al., 2021)

The development of digital communication channels offers huge opportunities for transmitting messages, information and can become effective tools in connecting with the community, in the efficient mobilization of the members of civil activity (Sokolov & Verevkin, 2016).

The digital transformation process is a complex one which begins with a strategic leadership and a digital organization strategy that is based on a deep understanding of customer needs and technological possibilities and that can create a virtuous cycle of data-based feedback, which in turn leads to the adoption of more innovative and transformative digital solutions. (Heavin & Power, 2018).

On the other hand, although they consider information and communication technology as an important driving force for organizational missions, the results of an empirical study (Umapathy & Huang, 2015) conducted on a representative sample of US nonprofit regional organizations show that most of them do not have a strategic plan for the adoption of digital technology due to insufficient funds and a lack of trained staff. These shortcomings related to financial and human resources can be covered

through the use of digital channels of communication with volunteers, clients and donors. (Brink et al., 2020).

In addition to the adoption of technology, according to Ivančić et al. (2019), important factors for successful digital transformation are the ability of an organization to change and operational excellence in integrating external digital services with internal IT support.

In the opinion of Tabrizi et al. (2019) digital transformation is not about technology but about the right mindset to change, and adapt, as well as organizational culture and processes before deciding what digital tools to use and how to use them. The same idea is supported by Ulas (2019) who emphasizes that digital transformation should not be seen as a technological leap, but as an adaptation of the ecosystems of any entity to new business methods and thinking benefiting from digital factors.

For an efficient implementation of the digital transformation process, the NGOs that are at the beginning of the road are important to formulate a staged strategy, to understand where they position themselves on the trajectory of this process and what is the degree of digitization desired.

3. The digital strategy of an NGO - a systematic overview

A strong presence in the digital environment can only be achieved through a competitive and essential approach that can be translated by constantly monitoring the trends in this environment and adapting the NGO's communication strategy according to the dynamics of digital tools and promotion channels.

It is not only effective to create a profile on social networks and post messages occasionally. To ensure that we obtain the best results by leveraging online social media, it is important to know what our goals are and how we intend to achieve them (Mitan, 2019). With that being said, a strategy must be applied in order to capitalize on resources and achieve positive results.

Underlying the development and implementation of a digital strategy for an NGO is the vision in the digital field, namely the transformation of the NGO into a digital organization which has the ability to withstand unpredictable shocks and the flexibility to continue to innovate.

In the development of decision-making processes, a key factor is the information available to the decision-maker at the time of the decision. The quantity and the quality of the information regarding the future evolution of the events is decisive, strongly and directly influencing the quality of the decision and implicitly the obtained performances. (Zaharia & Bălăcescu, 2019).

In this sense, in the case of an NGO, the analysis can follow the finding of answers to questions such as:

- *Why is this wanted?*
- *How will this vision be achieved?*

The answers to these questions can be a set of elements from which to identify and characterize the strategy and objectives, to know the environment in which it operates and, depending on them, to substantiate the digital strategy of the non-governmental organization.

In order to answer the first question, we start from the situational analysis to identify the current situation of the organization and the actions to be taken for its development, considering that the conditions in which one activity or another takes place bear the imprint of the environment and time.

In this sense, the following aspects are analyzed:

- A1. The context of the problem**
- A2. Identifying problems, generating causes and evaluating effects**
- A3. The SWOT analysis**
- A4. Stakeholder analysis**

A1. The context of the problem

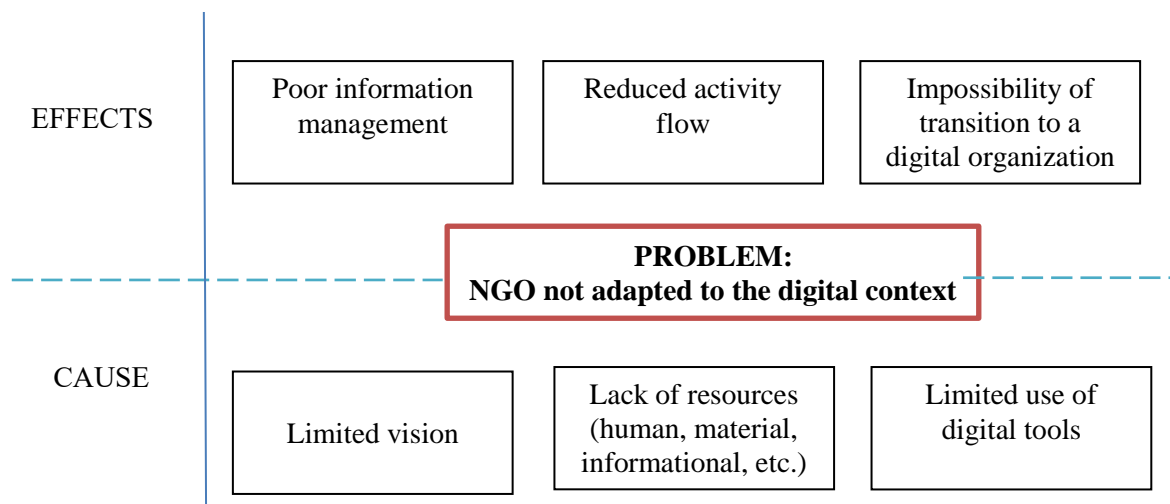
The environment in which the non-governmental organization, its volunteers, funders and stakeholders operate is constantly changing, and digital technologies are evolving rapidly. Adapting the organization to these changes generated by the digital environment will allow the NGO to ensure the optimal framework for fulfilling the mission they support for its community.

Digitalization is more than ever needed to better serve the community and the non-governmental sector, to reduce costs, improve data fidelity, increase flexibility and mobility of human resources, and facilitate rapid communication between NGOs and stakeholders in both directions.

A2. Identifying problems, generating causes and evaluating effects

One of the most commonly used methods of identifying the real problem to be solved by developing a strategy is the problem tree. This method describes the causes and evaluates the effects, which allows the visualization of the directions in which the actions can evolve.

The problem tree can also be used to identify possible objectives, to solve certain components of a problem, and to assign responsibilities for appropriate actions. The figure below shows an example of a problem tree for the topic.



Problem tree diagram

It should be noted that there is a causal relationship between elements that is often bidirectional. These interactions need to be identified, but at the same time we must avoid loading the chart so that the discussions can focus on the most important links.

A3. The SWOT analysis

Another starting point in substantiating the strategies, policies and last but not least of the digital strategy of an NGO, is, on the one hand - identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, and on the other hand - highlighting existing opportunities and threats in the external environment of the organization, but with an impact on it.

The SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) allows the evaluation of the internal and external key factors important for achieving a goal and identifying the strategies to be followed in order to obtain the best results.

The SWOT matrix (figure 1) can be used to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, respectively the opportunities and constraints of the environment.

		HELPFUL To achieving the objective	HARMFUL To achieving the objective
Internal origin (attributes of the organization)	STRENGTHS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Correlation of smart specialization strategies with other strategies; - Involvement of stakeholders (beneficiaries, financiers, volunteers, etc.) in the elaboration and implementation of strategies; - Highlighting the NGO's mission in a vast digital universe - Reduced development costs - using voluntary human resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of awareness of the NGO regarding the benefits of digitalization; - The beneficiaries of the NGO's activities are difficult or almost impossible to quantify; - The image of the NGO is associated with the image of the staff working inside it; - Lack of time for project implementation. - Reduced budget for innovation and technology transfer
	OPPORTUNITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expanding the activities of NGOs; - Creating partnerships between NGOs; - Increasing the degree of communication with stakeholders; - Stakeholder behavior analysis will lead to better adaptation of measures to support the mission; - Reducing administrative and marketing costs; - Innovative way of identifying funding sources, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increasingly sophisticated information requirements from stakeholders; - Limiting the NGO-stakeholder dialogue; - Improper use of funding sources; - Delays in project implementation; - Decreasing the volunteer recruitment base; - Lack of participatory attitudes and practices - Increasing the development gap between NGOs
External origin (attributes of the environment)			

Figure 1. SWOT Matrix

The SWOT analysis leads to the construction of a set of elements from which to start in identifying and characterizing the strategy and objectives allowing the anticipation of certain problems that may arise along the way and the improvements that need to be made. The factors in the SWOT matrix need to be periodically reviewed and adapted to changes.

A4. Stakeholder analysis

Stakeholder analysis is a management method which can be used in the implementation and development of any strategy based on a process of systematic collection and analysis of information on stakeholders.

The main stages in stakeholder analysis are:

- a) identification of stakeholders for a project;
- b) grouping stakeholders according to their level of influence, what is important to them and / or what could contribute.
- c) description of how stakeholders can be involved.

a) Stakeholder identification

Depending on the mission, each non-governmental organization has different stakeholders from other NGOs. The main categories of stakeholders are shown in the figure below:



b) Grouping stakeholders according to their level of influence

STAKEHOLDER	INTEREST
Key stakeholders (The people/organizations without whose support and participation the targeted results of a project/strategy normally cannot be achieved)	
Employees	Production processes become more efficient due to better data availability. Digital skills are gaining considerable value in the development of the strategy.
Primary stakeholders (The people/organizations who are directly affected by the project/strategy)	
Beneficiaries/clients	Knowing the needs of the beneficiaries of a large number of potential donors and volunteers
Donors	Maximum transparency of the use of funds obtained from donations. The impact that donation can have. Fundraising opportunities Access to information about the NGO, its mission, its activities
Volunteers	A framework for guidance and action
Public administration	Development and implementation of social responsibility projects
Secondary stakeholders (The people/organizations who whose involvement in the project is only indirect or temp)	
Organizational partners	The basic principles of NGOs are to promote the mission and facilitate access to information.
Academia	Involvement in the construction and development of the company Opportunity for researchers to study factors which can help improve technology adoption
Media	Free access to the most urgent social needs. Source of news.

c) description of how you will involve the stakeholders

STAKEHOLDER	CONTRIBUTION
Employees	Their creativity and experience stimulate innovation.
Beneficiaries/ Clients	Provides feedback needed to improve activity. It helps to quickly identify the needs and behaviors of the beneficiaries,
Donors	They can fully / partially fund the NGO's digitization project,
Volunteers	Contribute with their own ideas to the optimization and innovation of new ways of interaction with the beneficiaries, to the optimization of the activity.
Public Administration	Influencing public policies in favor of a certain group of beneficiaries.
Organizational Partners	Identifying and relating directly to new potential partners.
Academia	Academic communities are innovative intervention mechanisms to support the right and sustainable path of progress. They can conduct alternative studies on the impact of the project on the community.
Media	To a certain extent they can promote the project / NGO.

Stakeholder analysis provides a framework for debate and evaluation in which stakeholders integrate their resources and capabilities to implement and develop innovative products and services.

Conclusions

The widespread use of information and communication technology requires NGOs to adapt to the new digital reality in order to take advantage of these technologies.

The digital environment offers opportunities to NGOs from several perspectives: community development, fundraising, work efficiency, faster achievement of goals. The founders, managers of non-profit organizations seek to implement information and communication technology (ICT) not only to help organizational effectiveness, but also to incorporate new methods of mobilization and development which offer the flexibility to continue innovating.

A strong presence in the digital environment can only be achieved through a competitive and essential approach which can be translated by constantly monitoring trends in this environment and adapting the NGO's communication strategy according to the dynamics of digital tools and promotion channels.

This paper has some limitations which could be addressed in future research. Firstly, the study focused on the presentation of several managerial tools used in developing a strategy, requiring clarifications of the digital strategy which include strategic and tactical approaches. Secondly, the negative factors which could prevent the successful implementation of the digital strategy must be analyzed.

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