WORKING GROUP 5

DIGITALISATION, MEDIA AND OLDER WORKERS IN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

Executive Summary

Across eight European countries (Albania, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Romania, Türkiye and the United Kingdom), digitalisation is reshaping labour markets, media systems and opportunities for participation in later life. While the countries differ substantially in their levels of economic development, digital maturity and welfare provision, the findings reveal striking commonalities. Older workers increasingly face dual challenges: adapting to rapidly changing digital environments and overcoming ageist media narratives that portray them as technologically incompetent, economically dependent or resistant to change. At the same time, the evidence consistently challenges these representations. Older workers are increasingly participating in digital societies, engaging in lifelong learning, remaining in employment for longer, and contributing valuable skills, experience and organisational knowledge. However, substantial digital divides remain, particularly among those aged 65 and over and among individuals with lower levels of education, less access to training and weaker institutional support.

The synthesis identifies three overarching themes. First, digital exclusion is primarily a social and structural issue rather than a consequence of age itself. Second, media representations often reinforce ageist stereotypes that undermine employment opportunities. Third, policy responses remain fragmented, with digitalisation, ageing, employment and media policy frequently treated as separate domains. More integrated approaches are needed to support active ageing and inclusive digital transformation.

1. Introduction

Population ageing and digitalisation are among the most significant transformations affecting contemporary European societies. Across all participating countries, ageing populations are increasing pressure on labour markets, pension systems and social welfare structures. Simultaneously, employers increasingly expect workers to possess digital competencies, creating new opportunities but also new forms of exclusion for those lacking relevant skills (Komp-Leukkunen, 2023; König and Seifert, 2022). The countries included in this synthesis represent diverse national contexts. Ireland and the United Kingdom demonstrate relatively high digital maturity and strong labour market participation among older adults. The Czech Republic and Latvia occupy intermediate positions, combining relatively strong digital infrastructures with continuing age-related inequalities. Romania, Albania and Türkiye face more significant digital inclusion challenges, while Hungary illustrates both increasing digitalisation and persistent concerns about workplace ageism. Despite these differences, similar patterns emerge regarding digital skills, media representation and labour market participation.

2. Digitalisation and the Digital Divide

A central finding across all reports is the persistence of an age-related digital divide. While internet use among older adults has increased substantially, important inequalities remain in digital skills, confidence and access. The scale of digital exclusion varies considerably. Ireland and the Czech Republic repot relatively high levels of digital competence, with almost 70% of adults possessing at least basic digital skills. However, both countries still report substantial declines in digital competence among those aged 65 years and over. Romania, Albania and Türkiye face more significant challenges. Albania reports particularly low levels of basic digital

skills among adults aged 55-74, while Romania continues to rank among the lowest-performing EU countries in digital skills. In Türkiye, use of digital public services declines sharply among older age groups.

Importantly, the findings indicate that digital exclusion should not be interpreted simply as an age effect. Access to training, educational attainment, workplace support and confidence significantly influence digital engagement. Older adults frequently demonstrate willingness to learn new technologies when opportunities and support are available. This finding aligns with broader research suggesting that digital inequalities are shaped more by social circumstances than chronological age (Xie et al., 2023; Rosales and Fernández-Ardèvol, 2020). The reports also highlight changing patterns of media consumption. While television and traditional media remain highly influential among older adults, digital participation is increasing across all countries. Older adults are engaging with online news, social media, communication platforms and digital services, although often in different ways from younger users. Rather than being absent from digital spaces, older adults frequently prioritise practical uses such as communication, information seeking and service access.

3. Media Representation and Ageism

Perhaps the strongest theme emerging across all reports concerns the persistence of ageist media narratives. Media representations frequently portray older adults through deficit-oriented frames that emphasise dependency, vulnerability, technological incompetence and social decline. In Romania, ageing is often framed as an economic burden associated with pension pressures and demographic decline. Czech tabloid reporting portrays older workers as less employable and less adaptable to technological change. Irish media have frequently represented older adults as vulnerable and dependent, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar patterns emerge in Albania, Hungary and the UK, where older adults are often portrayed as barriers to innovation or labour market renewal. In Türkiye, research shows that older adults are often absent from media altogether or represented through passive and marginalised roles.

These findings reflect wider international evidence demonstrating that media narratives influence societal attitudes towards ageing and can reinforce workplace discrimination (Ng, 2021; Kroon et al., 2018). Media representations may shape employer expectations, recruitment decisions and older workers' own self-perceptions. Latvian research is particularly instructive in demonstrating how repeated exposure to deficit-based narratives may contribute to older adults underestimating their own digital capabilities.

Across countries, several recurring stereotypes emerge:

- Older workers are resistant to change.
- Older workers possess weaker technological skills.
- Older workers are less productive than younger workers.
- Older workers block opportunities for younger generations.
- Older adults represent economic dependency rather than contribution.

Gendered forms of ageism also emerge strongly. The Turkish report highlights the double disadvantage experienced by older women, who face both age-based and gender-based marginalisation. Similar patterns are visible in other contexts where older women are less visible than men in professional or leadership roles.

4. Employment, Employability and Digital Transformation

Digitalisation is transforming labour markets across all participating countries. Employers increasingly expect workers to possess digital competencies, online communication skills and familiarity with technology-supported work processes. As a result, digital literacy has become a prerequisite for continuing labour market participation. The reports show that many older workers have successfully adapted to technological change. However, adaptation is often uneven and influenced by access to learning opportunities. Albanian case studies reveal both successful adaptation and significant experiences of workplace stress and professional downgrading. Hungarian evidence highlights difficulties associated with digital transition but simultaneously emphasises the continued value of older workers' experience and institutional knowledge. Similarly, UK and Irish reports demonstrate that many older workers continue extending their careers and actively participate in digital workplaces.

A recurring finding across countries is that experience remains undervalued relative to technical skills. Yet numerous examples demonstrate the importance of combining experience and digital knowledge within multigenerational workplaces. Studies increasingly show that intergenerational teams can promote learning, innovation and organisational resilience (Moen et al., 2020; Parry and Urwin, 2021).

5. Positive Narratives and Emerging Good Practice

Although negative representations remain prevalent, all reports identify examples of more positive narratives that challenge ageist stereotypes. In Ireland and the UK, media coverage increasingly highlights the benefits of multigenerational workplaces, knowledge transfer and later-life employment. In Latvia and Hungary, programmes promoting digital literacy and age-inclusive participation illustrate the potential for positive change. Romanian public broadcasting initiatives have showcased older adults as active contributors and community leaders. In Türkiye, documentaries and cultural heritage programmes portray older adults as custodians of knowledge and expertise. Collectively, these examples demonstrate that media can play a valuable role in promoting more balanced understandings of ageing, highlighting adaptability, resilience and contribution rather than decline.

Several common good practices emerge across the reports:

- Intergenerational mentoring initiatives.
- Age-sensitive digital skills programmes.
- Positive public broadcasting and storytelling projects.
- Campaigns addressing ageism and stereotypes.
- Lifelong learning programmes supporting employability.
- Media guidelines promoting age-inclusive representation.

6. Policy Implications

Every country included in this synthesis has introduced policy measures addressing digitalisation, ageing or employment. However, policy responses remain fragmented. Digital skills strategies, active ageing policies, media regulation and employment initiatives are frequently developed independently rather than through integrated frameworks. Several policy priorities emerge from the evidence.

1. Digital inclusion policies should explicitly **recognise the diversity of older adults** and provide learning opportunities tailored to different educational backgrounds, confidence levels and employment situations.

2. Media regulators, journalists and broadcasters should be encouraged to **challenge ageist stereotypes and increase the visibility of older workers** in professional and leadership contexts.
3. Employers should **invest in age-inclusive recruitment, retention and development strategies** that recognise the value of experience while supporting digital upskilling.
4. **Stronger collaboration** is needed between policymakers, employers, media organisations and civil society groups to address ageism across multiple domains.

Conclusion

Across all eight countries, digitalisation, media representation and labour market participation are closely interconnected. While national contexts vary considerably, common challenges emerge regarding digital exclusion, ageist stereotypes and barriers to employment. The evidence consistently demonstrates that older workers are neither passive recipients of technological change nor inherently resistant to innovation. Rather, they represent an increasingly important source of knowledge, skills and experience that can contribute to organisational effectiveness and societal resilience.

The central lesson from these country reports is that the future of digitalisation cannot be understood solely through technological development. It also depends on how societies represent, value and support older adults. Creating age-inclusive digital societies therefore requires not only investment in digital skills but also fundamental shifts in media narratives, workplace practices and public policy.

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Source reports: Albania, Hungary, Latvia, Czech Republic, Ireland, Romania, Türkiye and United Kingdom country reports.

Countries

Albania

Czech Republic

Hungary

Ireland

Latvia

Romania

Turkije

UK