



Getting non-profit organizations fit for the digital transformation

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Fraunhofer IAO develops and tests digital solutions for NPOs in its digital laboratory

Most non-profit organizations (NPOs), such as associations, foundations and trade unions, have limited resources and scope for innovation that would allow them to exploit the potential of the digital transformation. In the “Digital laboratory for non-profit organizations 4.0” project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), Fraunhofer IAO is collaborating with additional partners to support NPOs in trying out and implementing digital applications and cooperative forms of organization.

The digital transformation has a far-reaching impact on the work and organizational processes of the future. Digital technologies must also be used in non-profit organizations to simplify processes and facilitate smoother workflows. To date, little research has been done regarding NPO-specific needs with regard to the design and implementation of digital applications. But digital technologies can help NPOs introduce new cooperative forms of organization, make volunteer work attractive and boost their social effectiveness. That’s why the Fraunhofer Institute for Industrial Engineering IAO is supporting non-profit organizations in their digital transformation. To this end, it first identifies areas for action relating to the use of digital technologies for transformation to a non-profit organization 4.0. In doing so, it focuses on three use cases: virtual volunteering, digital organizational work and digital learning. For these three areas, the project team designs approaches for introducing digital solutions and tools that facilitate, for instance, participative innovation management, better design of processes between full-time staff, volunteers and members, and NPO-specific course offerings.

Software development through design thinking and service engineering

“The pandemic is now making it clear that companies are not the only ones in urgent need of systematic support for the digital transformation – so are non-profit organizations, most of which have fewer resources and less money for this topic,” says Dr. Mike Freitag from Fraunhofer IAO. To provide the best possible support for NPOs, the Fraunhofer IAO researchers first identify what degree of digitalization their partners in the field have achieved, what kind and level of support they need, and what challenges the non-profit organizations face when going digital. With these findings as a basis, their next step is to develop suitable prototypes – in the form of software solutions and digital course offerings – using design thinking methods and service engineering. To test their effectiveness, the pilot applications are subsequently tested, evaluated and optimized in real operation.

In collaboration with all the partners in the project, Fraunhofer IAO is developing the core transfer tool, the “NPO digital laboratory.” A pop-up workshop, this transfer tool enables them to present the approaches and digital tools developed in the project and to let others experience them. In the digital laboratory, the prototypes the team developed can be customized for different target groups, making it possible to transfer these solutions to additional non-profit organizations. Aside from Fraunhofer IAO, the project partners include the Stiftung Evangelische Altenheimat (evangelical nursing home foundation), VDI Württembergischer Ingenieurverein (Württemberg engineers association of the German Association of Engineers (VDI)), ver.di and ver.di b+b (trade unions), the University of Stuttgart and Input Consulting and additional transfer and value partners.