

Case studies on skills sets and social impact #2 - digital and social trends in customer-facing services

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The project consortium, led by [RREUSE](#), is composed of individual social enterprises as well as regional and national networks of social enterprises active in reuse, repair, and recycling from across the European Union, namely:

Partners:

- [Re-Use Austria](#)
- [Ateliere Fără Frontiere](#) (AFF, Romania)
- [Humana Nova](#) (Croatia)
- [Branchevereniging Kringloopbedrijven Nederland](#) (BKN, The Netherlands)
- [Re-Use Deutschland](#) (Germany)
- [Kierrätyskeskus](#) (Finland)

Associate partners:

- [Asociación Española de Recuperadores de Economía Social y Solidaria](#) (AERESS, Spain)
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1. Introduction

Offering digital customer-facing services has become a standard among traditional businesses. For social enterprises active in reuse, introducing digital services to customers presents an opportunity to increase their online presence, amplify visibility for the enterprise's activities and social mission, develop a new brand image and expand its customer base by tapping into new demographics and market niches that otherwise would be difficult to target. In this report, we focus specifically on:

- Online maps and location apps, that allow customers to locate services provided by social enterprises;
- E-commerce platforms for selling second-hand goods.

The rapid growth and demand for e-commerce services and digital services have presented the need to re-evaluate social enterprises' operations. However, social enterprises often lack the resources required to independently develop and sustain their digital solutions, or reach the necessary scale. Hence, collaboration among organisations becomes imperative to collectively address the need for digital services.

Achieving the efficient use and widespread adoption of e-commerce, online maps, and new technologies in the reuse sector requires the involvement and cooperation of a wide range of stakeholders, as evidenced by the case studies presented in this report.

2. Case studies and methodology

The case studies showcase concrete examples of social enterprises that are digitalising sales of second-hand products and offer online location services to find their physical stores and donation points. The case studies highlight the relationship between specific skills or competencies and the resulting social impact of digitalising customer-facing services.

This report features 3 case studies of social enterprises active in the circular economy, from Austria, Germany and Romania. These case studies aim to demonstrate how the implementation of digital tools and platforms, as well as the acquisition and application of certain skills, can have an impact on individuals and communities.

Re-Use Austria is a non-profit umbrella organisation lobbying for social economy enterprises active in the circular economy and a shift towards extending the lifespan of products through reuse and repair. Members of Re-Use Austria, counting nearly 45 organisations, are active in the reuse sector, working with textiles, electronic equipment or other goods such as furniture.

Background

In 2022 Re-Use Austria launched WIDADO - an online marketplace for reuse products from social enterprises in Austria. The idea to develop a joint online shop was discussed for several years within their network. The main reasons behind this were the rapid growth of e-commerce and the lockdown circumstances during the coronavirus pandemic, which posed a challenge to the traditional business models of social enterprises based on in-store second-hand retail.

The creation of WIDADO was motivated by the conviction that social enterprises have to offer online sales as part of their future-proof strategy and to benefit from the immense market opportunity. Because of the high initial investment and lack of expertise at the level of individual organisations, creating a joint platform was the logical solution.

WIDADO is not only an online marketplace, it also embeds other digital functionalities such as an interactive map for finding locations to donate reusable objects to social enterprises, and a system of digital vouchers available to individuals at risk of poverty, allowing them to choose any items they need. Moreover, the platform provides the option to create customer cards, includes a merchandise management system and collects data about amounts of objects reused. Its development was made possible thanks to funding from the Ministry of Social Affairs in Austria for measures to combat poverty following the coronavirus pandemic, as well as cooperation with other successful marketplaces for reuse items, such as Label Emmaüs in France and Thriftify in Ireland. The motivation and willingness of social enterprises to come together and cooperate made the project possible with joint efforts from many different actors.



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Main skills acquired

The WIDADO platform and workflow needed to run it are designed according to the needs and competencies of insertion employees at the social enterprises and as a result, they can play an active role in the majority of the process.

- **Basic digital skills:** Understanding computer use, navigating the internet with search engine knowledge, and utilising photography for online display of reuse items on the marketplace.
- **Specialised digital skills:** Use of digital tools and platforms to publish goods online and use of artificial intelligence (AI) for content creation to categorise the items (title, description, and keywords).
- **Decision-making skills:** Categorisation of goods in the online marketplace or a physical store, pricing scheme of the items. These responsibilities and skill sets vary between individuals and their level of authorisation within the social enterprises.

Approach to training

In the beginning, Re-Use Austria provided weekly online meetings to all members. In these calls, new tools were presented and discussions for new ideas were conducted. The majority of participants in these meetings were trainers and permanent staff of the social enterprises, as well as the occasional presence of insertion employees. Additionally, there were on-site training sessions for each social enterprise. After this initial stage, the frequency of meetings with Re-Use Austria decreased to monthly and the member organisation trained their employees with the tools provided, which are explained in a simple manner that is inclusive for all users.

Social impact

The implementation of WIDADO impacted the entire processes of organisations in the reuse sector. Social enterprises across Austria that used to work by themselves on a regional level are now working together. The marketplace's large offer of products is a result of all the organisation's contributions and their willingness to learn and make the most of the platform. By collaborating, these organisations share the results, successes and failures in the process. These experiences help them learn from each other and amplify the impactful work done by social enterprises.

Moreover, the development of an online marketplace has brought about the opportunity to create a new field of work for social enterprises that is suitable for individuals in work integration with various needs. For instance, traditional work in reuse shops requires sorting items or working in a logistics centre, which may not be suitable for example for people who don't master the local language or people with mental health conditions and disorders. The digitalisation of second-hand commerce thus offers novel work conditions, such as work done behind screens, that may be more attractive and help workers build skills relevant to the current job market.

Key takeaways

“ *Expanding online platforms is a more forward-looking approach to our business models than relying solely on physical reuse shops. Online platforms offer capacity, accessibility, and reach that would have never been possible with normal stores, helping to make a significant leap in delivering regional second-hand products to you.*”

The WIDADO platform has provided individual social enterprises with a completely new form of networking with member organisations of the Re-Use Austria network. In this project, they could pool their capacities without giving up their independence. This can serve as a model for other projects in the reuse sector where solutions need to be developed jointly to reach large capacities.



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“ *Social enterprises should not create an online shop for one or some organisations, but a marketplace for many of them. You can look out for solutions that have already been implemented in your area of reuse and check whether you can adopt the system. When doing this, you will need knowledge and understanding of the reuse sector and organisations involving work integration workers.*

“ *Be patient, it is a long road to success and requires a high level of attention and operational energy.*

Data from the WIDADO platform (October 2022 – January 2024)

25 organisations involved with **30** shops from all regions of Austria
34,500 articles put online
5,500 articles sold
3,400 customers
40 insertion employees equipped with basic digital skills
5,000 free vouchers distributed to people at risk of poverty
Digital map overview of about **180** donation centres and **2,400** collection containers of the social enterprises (being implemented, 2024)

The marketplace landing page:
<https://www.widado.com/>

The donations-in-kind-map:
<https://spenden.widado.com/>

Results of a survey about reuse online shopping (in German):
<https://reuseaustria.at/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20231212-Ergebnisse-der-Befragung.pdf>



Re-Use Deutschland

Germany

Recycling Börsen e.V. is a non-profit association with 166 employees. It is active in the collection and preparation for reuse, managing 8 second-hand department stores. Recycling Börsen has been separating electrical appliances for reuse since 1993 and is in charge of managing the entire waste electrical appliance stream flow of 250,000 residents in Herford, Germany. They are a member of Re-Use Deutschland e.V, an umbrella brand organisation for quality and cooperation through reuse and repair in second-hand stores.

Background

At the beginning of 2024, Recycling Börsen started to develop an application using AI to recognise small electrical appliances. The app is intended to make it easier for individuals who wish to donate unwanted items, and for staff of reuse centres to classify and recognise if small electrical appliances are reusable, improving sorting and pricing of donated items. The app will assist staff in assessing the reparability options available for the items they are working with.

Due to staff shortages and turnover of employees that social enterprises experience, knowledge in this area is insufficient or gets lost with each staff leaving. The app is thus intended to improve the accuracy of sorting by assisting in scanning the electrical appliances that are collected to evaluate if they can be reused or not. This will be done by providing key information on the product's origin and the options available for repair. This process reduces the rate at which electrical appliances are discarded due to lacking expertise and unavailable information on reparability.

The app is being developed in a consortium formed by a university, a software company, a recycling company, a repair company and a reuse enterprise. The German Federal Ministry of Economics funds the initiative.



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Main skills acquired

- **Basic digital skills:** Understanding computer use, navigating the internet with search engine knowledge, and using video communication tools effectively.
- **Digital technical skills:** Ability to use software applications and learn the metrics of the reuse sector.
- **Communication skills:** Active listening and engagement with clients on how to use the app. Team working and cooperation with customers.

Approach to training

The training at the Recycling Börsen centres will be conducted in an informal setting. Explanatory videos will be made available to inform employees how to use the app. The app is designed to be simple and self-explanatory, making the use of the tool inclusive for all users and not requiring an extensive learning phase.

The app will be fed with data by the employees with video material, scanning of barcodes and a verbal description. From the app, the employees will be able to learn to assess the waste electrical appliances and the different paths that it can take after being handed into preparation for reuse or recycling.

The project is in its first stages of development and experimentation. Therefore, the AI tool first needs to be fed with information and a variety of examples to be able to learn. The tool constantly gives feedback on what can be improved or simplified in terms of recognising old appliances and handling the app.

Social impact

The use of the app is expected to increase the ability to identify details about electrical appliances, leading to a higher rate of items correctly assessed and accepted for preparation for reuse and reuse. Gathering rapidly and efficiently information on the year of manufacture, repair options available for each item and the possible price at the second-hand store, is crucial for a smoother selection of appliances that can be further inspected for reuse.

The implementation of the app is expected to result in more products being put back into circulation and capturing more value through reuse, which means a higher financial turnover from sales compared to discarding the appliances. It should also provide sorting staff with considerable support in the process of preparation for reuse. The introduction of this digital tool is thus expected to increase the efficiency and precision of the social enterprise and provide employees with a wide range of skills.

Key takeaways

Recycling Börsen is eager to continue digitalising its customer-facing services with tools like the app. However, this requires substantial funding that is not always available, consequently making the implementation of such projects difficult. Until the development of the application is completed and its implementation widespread among the 250,000 residents in Herford, Germany, the organisation will continue with the current system: citizens can send them photos of electrical equipment that they intend to donate, which allows them to evaluate the reuse potential, while reducing the time and workload needed for arranging appointments to check the appliances state and quality.

“ When introducing new digital technologies you need to ensure that there is sufficient funding and prepare in advance what is required to make the project happen. We are part of a heterogeneous consortium, and to make it work, many aspects need to be communicated including sufficient access to funding, alignment of needs between all stakeholders involved, and clear decision-making processes.



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Ateliere Fără Frontiere (Workshops Without Borders) (AFF) is a work integration social enterprise offering circular services and products in four workshops. AFF won the Sustainability and Environment Award at the British Romania Chambers of Commerce Awards in 2024.

Background

One of AFF's workshops¹, remesh, is a circular economy venture that aims to develop new employment opportunities for disadvantaged women.

The remesh workshop recovers promotional materials, such as banners and meshes from private companies, and upcycles them into sustainable products. Many enterprises that donate meshes to AFF order customised promotional products, such as pencil pouches or file folders, made from their own donated meshes that have been upcycled.

To find an outlet for a surplus of upcycled products after their physical sales, AFF has created a remesh webshop. This is supported by publicity on their social media platforms. The webshop helps to give visibility to the work of the social enterprise and increases its online presence.

More recently, AFF has implemented two new features. The first one is the use of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), which makes improvements to the webshop's structure and content so that it comes up more frequently on search engines when people look up their products. The second one is a separate section with online forms for business-to-business (B2B) orders on the webshop. They have also created a customer satisfaction survey for those who ordered products to review and improve

¹ The other three workshops are educlick (a national platform for collecting and refurbishing electric and electronic waste equipment (WEEE) which are then donated to schools), the bio&co organic farm (a social farm growing organic vegetables that are delivered locally through an annual subscription) and logietic (an innovative service that offers logistics and packaging support to companies seeking social and environmentally friendly services).



© AFF

customers' online experience and plan to have a questionnaire for browsing customers who did not make orders.

AFF liaises with multiple stakeholders, including companies donating meshes and buying upcycled products. For this reason, it is important to maintain professional communication to build sustainable and long-lasting partnerships. Therefore, they keep accurate records of communications with other organisations by incorporating digital technology and online platforms in their day-to-day interactions. For instance, they use online portals to automate tasks like scheduling appointments and submitting documents.

Main skills acquired

- **Basic digital skills:** Understand computer use, navigate the internet and online shop platform, and utilise photography for online listing of upcycled items. These tasks and skill sets vary between individuals, type of employment at the organisation and their level of authorisation.
- **Tailoring skills:** Learn how to prepare promotional materials for sewing, cut according to templates and sew new products.
- **Workplace skills:** Learn to follow a daily work schedule, work in a team and gain confidence in their abilities.

Approach to training

The training at AFF is carried out in an informal setting, where insertion employees receive on-the-job training on how to upcycle products. As these employees often lack literacy skills, they mostly do not play a direct role in the implementation of digital tools.

Nevertheless, some of them received training in basic administrative skills to assist in the maintenance of records, as part of their 2-year work integration programme. These experiences at AFF and the skill sets developed, help their integration into the labour market once their employment has concluded.



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The online shop:
<https://remesh.ro/alege-sa-porti-sustenabilitatea-cu-remes>

Social impact

Currently, there is no quantitative data on the impact of the webshop as it is not yet profitable. Nevertheless, having a webshop increases the sales of surplus mesh products, and boosts AFF's online presence. This can help facilitate new partnerships with other businesses and increase awareness of the social enterprises' mission and impact. These actions can potentially help diversify income streams, which allows AFF to provide more training and employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups distanced from the labour market.

Key takeaways

The remesh webshop and use of social media are effective methods of attracting new partnerships with businesses in the private sector. However, the sales of the items on the webshop remain limited compared to sales through these partnerships and face-to-face business orders. This is partly because every upcycled product is unique, making it challenging to showcase and sell all of them on an online platform, unlike retail of new items, where identical items are sold. Nonetheless, the digital approach improves efficiency in tracking interactions but also strengthens AFF's relationships with clients and sponsors, positioning them as a leader in the field.

“ The recent changes to the website will help us in our marketing campaigns and for prospective customers to find us more easily and for us to be more efficient. Nevertheless, direct contact and customer relations remain important steps for us, taking into consideration that remesh sales are mainly B2B.

“ Since we sell fashionable upcycled products, we have to be aware of what competitors in the sector are doing, in particular with the rapid changes and new trends within e-commerce. We are considering investing in an even nicer and higher-performance website. It will be interesting to find out other opinions from the DigiSocCirc project partners on how to develop our e-commerce.