



Reconnect – Cloud Solidarity: Giving Digital Technology a Human Face

“Reconnect - Cloud Solidarity” solves vulnerability caused by administrative problems through digitally competent social work that speeds up people’s journey to independence.

By: The Reconnect Team

“We believe and we hope that a digital tool like Reconnect can contribute to helping vulnerable people gain independence.”

People often think of the ‘digital revolution’ as an unavoidable, global shift, one that affects our ways of working, how we produce things, how we consume products, our means of exchange, how we present ourselves or even how we conceive our identities. In the field this article is about, social work, the move towards increasingly virtual contacts with public administration is coming on thick and fast. And this process is set to speed up even further in the coming years. This move can be seen as progress (saving time and money, increasing efficiency) but also independence – the passive ‘recipient’ becomes an active ‘user’ or a step backwards (the human contact person is replaced by a digital interface that very vulnerable people are not able to use). This is the famous ‘digital divide’.¹

We are not going to promote either point of view here. Instead, we want to turn the standard view of digitalisation as a ‘revolution’ on its head. We should stop thinking about it as an uncontrollable force, both frightening and wonderful, which will inescapably turn our way of life upside down. We should think about it instead as a tool with the potential to respond to clear needs and provide solutions to specific problems. Here at ‘Reconnect – Cloud Solidarity’, we are convinced that digital technology can be a tool. We try to work out how digital technology can contribute to solving the recurrent problems social service providers face.

We have identified one of these problems, which is familiar to social workers, that people living unsettled lives invariably lose their identity documents. This affects homeless people, migrants, unaccompanied minors, hospital patients experiencing poverty, women survivors of violence who have to leave their homes, street children, etc. We know that for these people, losing their identity papers or having them stolen effectively means losing their access to their rights and, eventually, not even being recognised by social services anymore. When vulnerable people lose their identity papers and official documents, it is also a problem for social workers. We know that social workers spend around 30% of their time helping users reapply for identity documents, that will often be lost or stolen again somewhere down the line.

What we can offer to solve this problem is the expertise of a digital start-up company. We have leveraged the powerful technology and specialist methods that a company like this can use (which sometimes generates new needs too) to respond as accurately and as efficiently as possible to the problem pointed out to us by social workers, that of *vulnerable people routinely losing their identity documents and social workers having to deal with this issue*. We have deliberately used the term ‘deal with’ here, as it implies a certain passivity on the part of service users in the way the problem is handled now. We want to find out how to deal with this specific issue. How can digital technology be a driver for vulnerable people to gain greater independence? Can digital technology as a tool, if it is used to solve a specific problem, help transform the relationship between social workers and service users?

Our project, which is empirical in essence, started off by listening to the people it concerned – potential users. A number of social workers from various bodies were also willing to give us their time regularly. We took a number of (sometimes unexpected) things away with us from these very fruitful exchanges, and they made up our design brief. Then, when we had developed a beta version of ‘Reconnect’, their feedback on their user experiences was very valuable in helping us adapt the service to its intended uses.

To give an idea of these constant back-and-forth exchanges between user experience and building the tool, we will quote a few extracts from an interview by Patrick Declerck. The author of *Les naufragés : avec les clochards de Paris*² (*Stranded souls: living with the homeless people of Paris*) actually grasped a lot of these issues. In printing these extracts, we will show what vulnerable people gave as the different aspects of the problem of losing their identity documents and then we will look at the solutions offered by Reconnect.

¹ In his 2013 annual report, the Ombudsman estimated that digital illiteracy affected between 12-18% of the population and warned of a possible ‘digital blind spot’, meaning “the remaining core of citizens who cannot access what they need via the different digital methods in place, which are absolutely fine for processing the majority of requests but are not adapted to dealing with complex cases or appropriate people experiencing social exclusion”. (www.defenseurdesdroits.fr)

² *Les naufragés : avec les clochards de Paris*, Patrick Declerck, Plon, 2001



(1) “Sooner or later, you will lose your identity papers. It always happens.”

Vulnerable people are at constant risk of losing their identity documents or having them stolen. We can't give them stable accommodation quickly, so we have to find another way to keep their identity documents safe. If they can't keep a hard copy of these documents, why not keep a digital copy of them? The solution we found was to scan people's identity papers so as to keep them long-term in digital format.

What is the status of the digital copy for the government, you may ask? Its real value at the moment is that of a photocopy and not of an original. In some cases, the copy counts as evidence in the same way as the original does, in other cases it does not have the same value as the original but it does make the procedure to apply for a new original much easier. The status of digital copies is nonetheless still uncertain and the trend is moving towards valuing them as evidence in their own right. The State is also in the process of considering whether or not to recognise people's digital identity. Having digital copies thus seemed to us to be a solid piece of ground work.

When we had made this first step, we still had to find the most appropriate way of digitising people's identity papers for social workers to use in their actual working environments. We initially developed a system based on using scanners. This tool worked and continues to work but we realised that it was not really usable in every situation (for example during street outreach work). Our start-up company can react swiftly to problems so we were able to find a solution to this difficulty quickly. We developed a mobile application called *Reconnect Pro* that works with the application *CamScanner*. It allows users to create high-quality digital copies of documents using their smartphone camera and syncs them in real time with the *Reconnect* computer interface. This means that storing documents does not have to be laborious and time-consuming. We still need a good storage space, though - one that is both secure and easy to use for the user and the social worker.

(2) “So we offered patients the option to store their identity documents here and collect them whenever they wanted to.”

The issue of confidentiality of digital data and data storage conditions began to occupy public debate a few years ago. It affects public and private data, businesses' and local authorities' practices and users themselves - who are more or less aware of the status and value of their private data anyway. We do not want to rehash the details of this debate here but do we want to stress that although protecting personal data is of course important for everyone, it is even more so for people who do not have a place to live. Protecting their private life is of key importance to someone who has walls to protect them from the eyes of others and drawers to keep their documents in. This is precisely why it is necessary to ensure the highest level of security to those who don't have any

of that! That's why we have endeavoured at *Reconnect* to guarantee a high level of confidentiality for user data, particularly in their contacts with social workers. We hope to make it easier for social workers themselves to use *Reconnect* and still take seriously their important responsibility to users when they handle their personal data.

(3) “We can't get anything done if we have to take part in research”

As we said earlier, social workers devote on average 30% of their time to reapplying for identity documents on behalf of users. Not only does this administrative task take up time that could have been used to develop the user's personal project, it also means that while it is going on, nothing else can get done. The user's pathway to accessing their rights is blocked. Because losing their papers is disheartening for people, it is like a dark cloud over their future and often means a step backwards. It also means the social worker can't dedicate their time and energy to building a positive pathway with the user. That's why, at *Reconnect* we think that digital tools, far from being there to replace the support provided by social workers, should actually allow them to concentrate on their core business of guiding and supporting users towards independence. Helping them to get through applications is also a way to limit the risk of 'losing' a service user who might otherwise be discouraged by the maze of administration. The digital safe is a basis from which the social worker and user can build a relationship of trust going forward.

(4) “It's a clear sign [...] in the process of rough-sleeper entrenchment [...] We know that losing their identity documents is a precursor to it, which allows the person to hide away from the pressures brought on by reality. They think “oh well, I can't do anything anyway, I haven't got the right documents”.

From our humble standpoint of working on a specific and clear problem that we try to deal with from every angle (vulnerable people losing their official documents) we think digital technology offers practical opportunities for people to become autonomous, even empowered. For some users, being able to use *Reconnect* has actually been their first clear, immediately useful and eye-opening introduction to the use of digital technologies. We don't promise users that creating an email account will find them a job ... but we guarantee them that their proof of address at the hostel, which allows them to register their children at school, for example, is safe. This way, we hope to help those people who are furthest away from digital technology to start using it in a way that is useful for them.

We haven't set up introductory workshops on using digital technology yet but some users have already started sharing *Reconnect* spontaneously with their peers. We are now looking at the idea of setting up workshops run by the users themselves.



In one of the last texts he published before he died,³ André Gorz stated that “IT skills [...] are part of “everyday culture” and do not need to “be taught”. Quoting Ivan Illich (who probably wasn’t a militant technology-lover!), he argued that “everyone can adopt information technology, because, as Ivan Illich wished, everyone can use it easily, as often or

as little as they like [...] without its use encroaching on other people’s freedom to do the same; and because using it [...] fosters personal fulfilment and increases everyone’s independence.” We believe and we hope that a digital tool like *Reconnect* can contribute to helping vulnerable people gain independence.

RECONNECT – CLOUD SOLIDARITY IN BRIEF

www.reconnect.fr

- The *Reconnect* platform was launched in September 2015.
- If an agency becomes a *Reconnect Centre*, it benefits from access to *Reconnect – Cloud Solidarity* and training in using the platform for its social work teams.
- More than 900 users have a *Reconnect* account.
- More than 4,000 documents are stored on the platform.
- 80 agencies have *Reconnect* services (accommodation and resettlement centres (CHRSs), university hospitals (CHUs), nursing beds in homeless shelters (LHSSs), solidarity and integration centres (ESIs), acute care nursing beds in homeless shelters (LAMs), etc.).
- Contact: Tel: +33 (0)1 58 30 55 29 / Email: contact@reconnect.fr

³ *La sortie du capitalisme a déjà commencé [We have already begun to leave capitalism behind]*, Eco’rev – Revue critique d’écologie politique [Critical papers on political ecology], André Gorz, 2007