DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT @ HOBO

By Daan Vinck, Director of Hobo, Brussels, Belgium

Do you want to know more? Contact us!

Please contact us by emai: **daan.vinck@hobo.brussels** or by phone **00032-(0)2/346.37.73**

You can also find additional info on our website: w**ww. hobo.brussels.**

Contents

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT @ HOBO.

Homelessness and digitalisation. If we had placed these words next to each other a few decades ago, we might have received strange looks. However, today it seems like a given; no matter the situation in which you find yourself, technology always has a place in your life. Participation to society can no longer be envisioned without a digital component. This holds true for homeless individuals as well.[1] Searching for housing, looking for work, connecting with administrative bodies, communicating – whatever the task may be, the way to do it almost always involves a screen. We could argue about whether that's good or bad, but ultimately that debate doesn't matter much to us. What matters is that it's reality. A reality that presents new challenges, problems, and solutions for our target group. As an organisation working with homeless individuals, we have observed this and asked ourselves: what can we do about this?

WHAT IS HOBO?

First, a bit of context. Hobo is a day centre for homeless people in Brussels, Belgium. The definition of a day centre[2] is very minimal: it is a place where homeless people can be during the day, use a toilet, a telephone, access administrative and social guidance, and get something to drink. It should provide 'one aid for daily life' - that can range from providing a meal, a laundry service, to social-cultural activities.

Hobo was established around 30 years ago with the idea that homeless people, sheltered in different organisations in Brussels, should have a place to connect with others. A place with a low threshold, where they could go and keep going to, even if their stay in another centre had ended (for better or for worse). Hobo was intended to be a safe haven, a place where people could participate, find a second home, and build meaningful connections. Where people could develop themselves and have worthwhile occupations. Complementarity with other existing centres was key; we would try to offer services other centres wouldn't, and together provide a holistic approach where the person, not the situation, is central.

Those ideas have not changed, even though the way we achieve this has changed a lot in those 30 years (and will probably continue to change in the future). At this moment Hobo organises itself around four main objectives:

1. Low threshold reception/centre.

We are open at least five days a week, sometimes more. People can come for a quick question, a quick word, advice, to use the telephone, the toilets etc. Between 50 and 100 people every day use this low threshold centre.

2. Guidance towards work

Every year, between 120 and 150 people get individual assistance towards finding a job.

3. Activities

Every week Hobo organises around 15 activities for its target group. Sports, creative ateliers, language-initiations, events, theatre, etc. Between 1000 and 1500 people participate in these activities every year.

---

1 Homeless: we refer to all the different categories of homeless people as mentioned in the ethos-typology. People in temporary shelters, people on the streets, people in bad accommodations, people who need assistance to stay in their homes etc. Our definition does not limit itself to rough sleepers only.

2 In Brussels, the different services for Homeless People are mentioned in an ordonnance, where you can find this definition for a day centre for homeless people.

4. Orientation

This includes helping people find their way to services, to networks, to activities, to guidance etc. The idea is that participation should not be limited to our service, but that we also need to facilitate participation in a 'regular' setting. (We often present ourselves as a parallel organisation, that facilitates the transition from our services and activities to regular services and activities).

Participation lies at the centre and heart of all these objectives. We provide the possibility to participate in the labour market, get on stage, and participate in cultural, educational, and sports activities. If you want to connect people with something you have to give them access, empower them, and give them a place. They have the same need to be part of something as everyone else. The realisation that participation does not come easily, and that there are a number of thresholds to conquer, is what made us develop our different approaches.

A relatively new component AND threshold (sometimes) of participation is the importance of being digital. There is not one of Hobo's other objectives that has not had to deal with the increasing presence and importance of 'being digital'. Over the years our approach has changed and developed, but before elaborating on our specific actions, it is interesting to talk about our digital ambition.

WHAT IS THE AMBITION OF HOBO REGARDING DIGITALISATION?

A question we are regularly asked is whether we consider what we do (e.g., giving courses and creating digital spaces) social work. Another variant of that same question is whether it leaves us enough time to do social work. This is a legitimate question. Shouldn't we be helping people in homelessness with their situation, on an administrative level?

> ## 2022: Hobo in numbers
>
> **1740** people used a service.
>
> **1/3** were woman, **2/3** men.
>
> Hobo organised **986** activities.
>
> **1067** new people arrived in our centre last year.

Shouldn't we be providing them with a way to satisfy their immediate basic needs? Like a meal, a drink, a good night's sleep?

We asked ourselves the same question in the past, and we continue to do so. Teaching courses is indeed not social work, so why do we do it? The answer is pragmatism and realism.

Social work is about lowering obstacles for people - thresholds they need help with. Such thresholds don't stay the same over time. The advancing digitalisation of services throughout all aspects of someone's life is a relatively new threshold that a lot of our target group can't tackle on their own. A second function of social work is to cope with (new) inequalities and (new) 'failings of the system'. Sometimes that means it should do something which normally wouldn't be considered social work (i.e., giving courses) until the failing or inequality is resolved or dealt with. A lot of social progress in society starts like that before they are assimilated into preventive and structural actions. At least, that is our opinion.

Our approach to digitalisation is based on that vision. It is an approach that takes the phenomenon of digitalisation and the problems (and solutions!) it causes, mixed with the situation of homeless people and our experience with those situations, to provide an immediate, hands-on solution. The form

it takes is a pragmatic approach to digital autonomy and a realistic combination of long term and short term (urgency) strategies.

Our ambition for the people who come to our organisation is not to teach them to be digitally fluent. Firstly, because we are not a school, and secondly because it is not what our target group needs. What they need is to be able to use digital tools where it is necessary; their aim is to use them, not master them. The AIM is to participate on a digital level. Thus, our ambition is to give them just enough knowledge so they can do what they need to do. We don't have an ideal pathway for them to learn to use digital tools. Limited time, resources, and their situation prevents us (and them) from taking that path. What we want to do is get them just over the threshold of being unable to use said tools to confident enough to try, with just enough 'keys' to develop (themselves or with help elsewhere) further autonomy (for example, an email address is a 'key', and knowing how to use it 'unlocks' most of the internet or digital services!).

The courses we give them are hence limited. The autonomy we try to give people ends with the (very) basic use of a computer, the internet, and the pragmatic use of an online storage drive and email address. We focus our courses and their syllabus on the necessary and unavoidable. We are grounded in the 'must haves', and not in the 'nice to have' (even though we use the nice to have sometimes to motivate).

Our digital ambitions are therefore heavily influenced and limited by the difficulties our target group encounters. This is visible in the different methodologies we use, shown hereunder:

THE DIFFERENT DIGITAL METHODOLOGIES @HOBO

Intensive courses

These ateliers are called Ordi mon ami (translation: 'computers, your friends'),

and take clients from zero knowledge or familiarity with technology to the use of an online drive and email. These formations take three days, so it is necessary to use a lot of shortcuts. As mentioned before, we work in an urgent setting where being able to use digital tools is more important than completely understanding everything. We give these courses to eight persons at a time and most have a successful outcome.

Mobile ateliers

Even though the need to learn is great, our target group is not always prone to coming to the intensive ateliers mentioned before. It is sometimes a lot to ask individuals to come to these ateliers, given the difficult situations they find themselves in. Even though our other courses are already low threshold, with the mobile atelier we lower the threshold even more by physically moving our courses to places where our target group will be anyway: e.g., other shelters they frequent, centres where they go for medical or social aid, and so forth. For this we rely heavily on other organisations, they provide us with a space to install some laptops, Wi-Fi (but if they don't have Wi-Fi we have portable 4G-wifi), they inform people of the course, etc. Sometimes the environments are not easily adapted to learning (imagine laptops installed on ping pong tables, between lockers, or in a dormitory), but the biggest advantage is that it reaches people who would otherwise most certainly not be reached.

These mobile ateliers are a big success and organisations are glad and eager to receive us. We can't be everywhere, and our offer is insufficient (and highly influenced by the presence or not of project funding), but it is the methodology that is the most successful in reaching those who are the most vulnerable and the fairest away from being digital inclusion. If we find enough funding, we can give a mobile course every week (like we did in 2022), but this is currently reduced to once a month due to a lack of resources.

(Public) digital space

During the COVID period, we installed a digital Hub because people were unable to physically go anywhere. Everything that had to be done, had to be done by computer, and they lacked access. So, we took over a cultural centre (Beursschouwburg) and offered access to tablets and computers. When the COVID period was over, however, we realised the need for a digital space for homeless people persisted. A lot of other 'public' digital spaces are not adapted to deal with the multiple problems our target group has (for example. some things like contacting government/local administrations require specific knowledge of social law and 'how to's') and the sometimes deviant behaviour some of them have (such as psychological problems, being under influence of drugs, alcohol, etc.).[3] Our target group needed a safe space, with social workers at the ready. Thus, our digital space is open five to six times a week for half a day. A lack of resources for this space makes it impossible to be open more. About 20-30 people use this space every day to have digital access and in 2022 around 400 persons used it.

In 2023 and 2024 we will add a digital scan and Vault space in our digital space, addressing an often-occurring problem of our target group whereby they lose important documents, subsequently blocking further administrative solutions. Consider ID cards and passports - this place will offer a solution by giving them the possibility to have digital copies of these documents and a way to access them when needed.

Thematic formations

We offer thematic formations that are focused on different themes that are linked with specific problems our target group encounters. For example, we offer digital ateliers about searching for a job on the Internet or searching for housing. These things sometimes require more advanced knowledge of how some sites work. For these topics, we offer specific very short formations where we focus on acquiring the minimal necessary knowledge. We do this at the demand of other organisations, a minimum of twice a month.

Individual coaching

The digital world is vast and has a lot to offer. In the basic formations we talked about before, we can't go into detail with our clients. Sometimes they need to learn something we can't teach them in these courses, or their situation doesn't allow a collective course (for example people with mental disorders require focused support etc). For these individuals, we offer some individual coaching sessions where we tackle specific problems with them. Our offer here is way too low for the demand there is, but at this instance, we can't offer more than half a day a week, where we see around three to five people.

CONCLUSION

The ambition and methodologies mentioned above come together to form the digital empowerment project of Hobo. It is continuously adapting and changing to be able to cope with the changing needs of our target group. Far from a complete solution or a perfect one, it offers us the possibility to work with our target group around digital inclusion, considering their specific situations

---

3 This is one of our main problems with public digital spaces in Brussels. To be recognised as a public digital space, it should be open to ALL public. But since a lot of our target group can't go there (not because they are not welcome initially, but because they get kicked out after a while for different reasons, or don't get the additional help they need, or don't feel welcome), a digital space designed for them should be considered. We have such a space, but it cannot be recognised as such. Nonetheless, this space makes it possible to have a (more) complete coverage of ALL the public for the public digital spaces in Brussels.

and problems, and to reach a group that is otherwise very unlikely to be reached by any other digital project.

For us, it is essential that we and other organisations keep including these vulnerable target groups digitally and that we keep 'lobbying' and raising awareness of their digital exclusion. That we keep giving our users the possibility (by giving access and transferring knowledge) to digitally participate. Because whether we like it or not, the digital world is becoming an increasingly unavoidable piece of the puzzle for ending Homelessness. As a social organisation, we must acknowledge this and act accordingly.

HOBO

Hobo vzw asbl
Rue du boulet 24 | 1000 Bruxelles
T 02.346.37.73 | contact@hobo.brussels
www.hobo.brussels

FEANTSA

**European Federation of National Organisations
Working with the Homeless**

194 Chaussée de Louvain, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
T +32 (0)2 538 66 69 • information@feantsa.org

www.feantsa.org

Follow us
/FEANTSA_ORG

Like us
/FEANTSA

Follow us
@FEANTSA

Connect with us
FEANTSA