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Pathways to Innovation: Transforming Irish non-profits through the power of digital and emerging technology

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Abstract

Irish non-profits have embarked on an exciting journey towards Digital Transformation which presents significant disruptive and creative innovation possibilities in support of the sector's wider reform and renewal agenda. This research work employed a qualitative interview approach, using Grounded Theory as the analytic methodology, which proved a highly efficacious research design in surfacing a wealth of revealing data from practitioners in the sector examining the barriers and challenges faced by, and opportunities available to, the sector in its technology journey.

Emerging examples of good practice in the effective implementation of technology came to light at Irish non-profit organisations but these had not been documented or disseminated sufficiently within the sector to influence future projects. The key research findings make an empirical contribution to this important subdomain of Information Systems in developing an emergent exploratory theory concerning how the non-profit sector can become more effective and strategic in its journey to fully leverage technology. A survey of the international perspective, especially from the global poverty organisations, revealed important theoretical and practitioner frameworks.

A comprehensive transformation of the sector remains outstanding, frustrated by challenges including limited funding, resource constraints, skills gaps, donor reporting requirements and tendencies to 'reinvent the wheel'. Key findings of this research highlight the need for strategic alignment and the development of new sectoral funding and innovation models.

Some organisations have recognised the need to harness technology strategically, prominently situating their digital roadmap within their overall strategic plan. This alignment was most evident within more farsighted and innovative organisations, with smaller organisations lagging further behind.

The technology industry has ambitious plans to deploy Artificial Intelligence to tackle social problems but this research highlighted discontinuities in its engagement with the non-profit sector. Opportunities exist here for non-profits to develop new collaboration and partnership approaches to proactively reframe this important agenda.