

Digital harm reduction in practice: The BOOST experience

Four key insights for policy-makers, healthcare providers and harm reduction services in Europe

BoOst

[https://community-boost.eu/
communication@correlation-net.org](https://community-boost.eu/communication@correlation-net.org)



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Introduction

Thematic papers within the [BOOST Project](#) aim to explore critical challenges and opportunities for improving health and social services for people who use drugs across Europe. This third thematic paper **examines the growing importance of digital tools in enhancing harm reduction services**—particularly for marginalised populations that face systemic barriers to care.

Digital approaches have become increasingly relevant in harm reduction, offering new ways to reach, engage, and support people who use drugs. From social media pages that provide information on drug checking and safe dosages, to online peer support and digital consultations, these tools can reduce access gaps, increase service continuity, and foster innovation—especially for communities traditionally excluded from mainstream healthcare.

To fully realise this potential, **community-based, community-led organisations need targeted support to build digital capacity**. BOOST’s work in digital harm reduction addresses this need through training, resource development, quality standards, and mentorships. This includes:

- A [four-part online training series](#), publicly available on YouTube and detailed in the BOOST Digital Manual, designed to support harm reduction workers in implementing digital approaches.
- A digital mentorship programme that pairs experienced BOOST mentors with selected harm reduction service providers. Over three guided sessions, each pair co-develops a tailored, small-scale project to strengthen digital engagement in their local context.
- The development of best practices for digital harm reduction, grounded in a Delphi study and refined through the BOOST Digital Expert Group, offering a shared framework for service quality, safety and efficacy in digital environments.

This **thematic paper will share key insights from BOOST’s digital harm reduction activities**, helping to pave the way for strategies that strengthen the digital capacity of civil society organisations. By equipping harm reduction services with the tools, standards, and support needed to navigate an increasingly digital landscape, we move closer to an environment where people who use drugs have equitable access to quality, community-driven healthcare and harm reduction services.

BOOST’s work on digital harm reduction highlights how digital tools can transform service delivery in harm reduction settings.

Drawing from a comprehensive needs assessment and resource mapping, BOOST has developed a **multi-faceted approach** to build digital capacity within harm reduction services. This includes an inventory of available tools, the creation and rollout of targeted training sessions, and a mentorship programme connecting experienced digital practitioners with community-based organisations.

These activities have culminated in a practical manual and the development of a best practices collection for digital harm reduction, both of which offer organisations a foundation for navigating digital environments effectively and ethically.

By providing this structured, community-driven support, BOOST has helped chart a path toward digital transformation in harm reduction—one that is rooted in local needs, open access, and equity.

Four key insight learnings

Through its digital harm reduction activities, the BOOST Project has identified four key insights that can guide the integration of digital tools into harm reduction services. These insights **highlight the importance of building digital capacity in ways that are adaptable, inclusive, and sustainable:**

1. The digital landscape must be taken seriously

Digital technologies are now integral to how people access health information, connect with services, and seek support. This shift is particularly significant for people who use drugs, who may face [stigma](#), legal risks, or geographical barriers that make digital access not just convenient but essential. From social media outreach and encrypted messaging apps to virtual peer support and online harm reduction resources, **the digital space offers new ways to reach people who might otherwise be left behind.**

Harm reduction services can no longer treat digital environments as an add-on. Instead, professionals and service providers must be equipped with the knowledge, tools, and infrastructure to work effectively and ethically in these spaces. This includes understanding digital literacy, ensuring data privacy and confidentiality, and designing content and platforms that are inclusive and user-friendly.

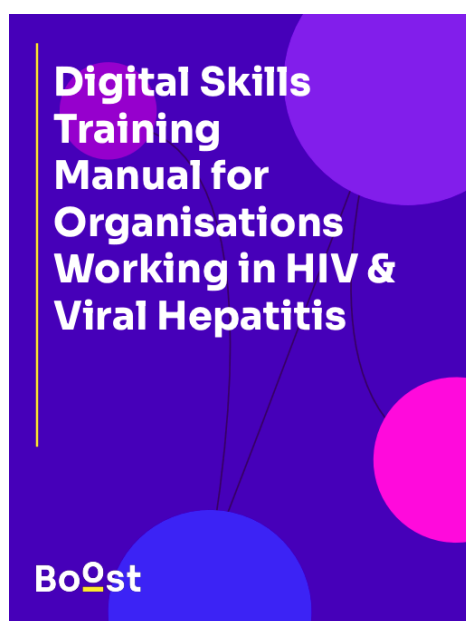
The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both the potential and the urgency of this digital shift. Many services had to adapt overnight, offering teleconsultations, distributing resources through online platforms, and finding creative ways to maintain contact with clients. These lessons must not be lost. **If harm reduction is to remain relevant and equitable, digital inclusion must be a core part of its strategy**—not an afterthought.

2. Training and capacity building are foundational

Digital transformation is not just about introducing new tools—it's about equipping organisations with the skills, confidence, and strategic insight to use them effectively.

As part of the BOOST Project, a dedicated training series was [launched in February and March 2024](#), and repeated in [November 2024](#) to support harm reduction

organisations—particularly those offering or planning to offer HIV and viral hepatitis services. Those themes included the role and specifics of digital services; planning and management of digital services; building practical digital skills for quality services; and ethics and consultant-client relationship in online environments. **BOOST found that by providing these online and YouTube-available sessions, community-based and community-led organisations could receive practical guidance on integrating screening, testing, treatment, and care for communicable diseases**, and be supported in scaling up digital approaches that are both evidence-based and community-informed.



Front cover image of the BOOST Digital Skills Training Manual for Organisations Working in HIV & Viral Hepatitis

Capacity-building opportunities like these are essential if digital harm reduction efforts are to be sustainable and grounded in real-world service needs. For that reason, BOOST has developed a [Digital Skills Training Manual for Organisations Working in HIV & Viral Hepatitis](#) to support these aims.

3. Community involvement drives trust and relevance

Effective digital tools to support harm reduction must be co-developed with the communities they aim to represent. In the case of BOOST, this means working alongside people who use drugs and the organisations that support them to ensure that the tools are grounded in lived experience and meet real advocacy and monitoring needs.

Rather than offering digital harm reduction services, **BOOST is focusing on strengthening data collection and visualisation through open-source platforms**—integrating tools like Kobo Toolbox with a dashboard currently in development. This dashboard aims to reflect the availability and accessibility of harm reduction services across Europe, with a focus on those related to communicable diseases. It will also allow community-based organisations to visualise their own data and create tailored dashboards to support evidence-based advocacy.

As part of this commitment, while developing the dashboard, BOOST coordinated with Correlation Focal Points to conduct two focus group test sessions—one online and the other

during the Warsaw European Harm Reduction Conference. These sessions provided valuable feedback on proposed data collection and dashboard and informed the development of tools and resources. **This participatory approach not only strengthens the relevance and usability of digital solutions but also fosters greater trust, ownership, and engagement** among the people they are designed to support.

4. Unlocking the potential of safer digital harm reduction

While digital tools offer opportunities for broader reach, anonymity, and innovation, they also introduce risks and challenges—particularly around privacy, surveillance, and accessibility. Digital harm reduction should learn from existing safer, effective practices when working within the realms of consent, data protection, and accessibility. For example, **some recommendations and best practices already identified by BOOST** include:

- That the digital harm reduction services have a clearly defined aim and ethical framework that considers the target community and specified service platform.
- That the digital harm reduction service design, implementation and evaluation be evidence-informed.
- That the digital harm reduction service must meaningfully involve community members in the design, implementation and evaluation of the service.

Respecting these best practices is especially critical when working with criminalised or marginalised populations

Summary

Effective harm reduction in the digital age requires an inclusive approach that equips organisations to engage with people who use drugs in accessible, respectful, and secure ways. The BOOST Project's work in digital harm reduction supports community-led organisations and other harm reduction services in building their digital capacity through training, mentorship, best practices, and co-creation processes—**ensuring services remain relevant and resilient in an evolving landscape.**

Key challenges—such as digital literacy gaps, privacy concerns, and uneven access to technology—must be addressed to ensure digital tools are used ethically and effectively. The insights gained from BOOST's activities highlight clear pathways for service providers and community organisations to support a digital transformation that enhances the core values of harm reduction.