

Immigrants' digital skills and access to employment

Overview of unemployed working-age immigrants' experiences of digitalisation, their digital skills and their needs for digital support in Finland

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Abstract

Digital skills are increasingly important for managing everyday tasks and participating in societal activities. While many people turn to family and friends for help in digital issues, there is also demand for a wide range of digital support services. In the course of the digital transformation, various communities and organisations have taken on digital support tasks, or such tasks have been assigned to them: the authorities, Public Service Info, wellbeing services counties, municipalities and the third sector. In addition, private companies organise digital support for their target customer groups.

The goal of this study titled Immigrants, employment and digitalisation is to understand how immigrant jobseekers see digitalisation and needs for digital support. The study strives to identify digital skills gaps associated with finding a job and digital support needs. The data were collected by conducting qualitative interviews focusing on certain language groups (N=32) and a telephone survey (N=240).

Main findings of the Immigrants' digital skills and access to employment study:

1. Using Finnish digital services is partly challenging for immigrants, regardless of the level of digital skills they have. Especially the language used in services and challenges related to strong authentication hamper digital service use, also for those with good digital skills.
2. Immigrants with poor digital skills often also face challenges in understanding how Finnish society works and in integration. They could be assisted by new forms of digital support, for example those linked to recreational activities and integration.
3. Lack of digital skills does not appear to be an obstacle to finding employment. These obstacles were mostly associated with the Finnish language skills required at work, regardless of the level of the immigrant's digital skills. The standard of digital skills, or a lack of them, did not affect access to employment.

The Digital and Population Data Services Agency is tasked to develop digital support nationally as well as to help NGOs in providing digital support and developing the competence needed in its provision.

We train and support digital support persons, analyse phenomena related to digital skills, and develop operating models for digital support together with digital support actors.

This work has brought to light a need to understand better the needs for digital support and the ways in which these needs are currently responded to.

In this report, we look at digital skills and digital support needs from the perspective of immigrant jobseekers.



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1 Introduction

Digitalisation in Finnish society is advanced, and Finnish people have good digital skills when compared to their European peers. Globalisation and migration have expanded the user groups of Finnish digital services, however. The number of immigrants in Finland has increased considerably, especially throughout the 2000s. Increased immigration has meant that different languages and cultures have gained more prominence in Finnish society.

An ability to use digital devices and services is becoming more and more important in both managing daily tasks and participating in civic activities. Persons with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds may find using digital services challenging if the needs of all users have not been addressed in the service and the support provided for it.

More than one out of three Finns find that they need help with using digital services always or often. Based on our study, the share of people in need of support may be even larger among people with an immigrant background. For example, more than one half of Russian-speaking respondents in the survey said that they needed help often or always, whereas slightly more than one third of Arabic-speaking respondents said they needed help at least often.

As digital transformation in society progresses, mastering digital skills is also increasingly a question of inclusion.¹ Where digital channels are becoming the primary method of using services, the importance of timely digital support that meets the needs is emphasised further. In Finland, digital support is provided by the public authorities, wellbeing services counties, municipalities, the third sector and private companies. Public Service Info guides users to the correct authority and advises them on the use of services. Customers with an immigrant background are also visible in digital support.

This study combines qualitative data collected through interviews with data gathered by conducting a telephone survey. The aim was to find out how immigrants see the digitalised Finnish society and if they feel that their digital skills are sufficient for operating in society. We also looked at where and for what issues immigrants have sought and received digital support.

1.1 Data collection methods

As background information for the study were used literature, articles and research sources on integration and employment. The sources and especially the experiences of unemployed immigrant jobseekers were expanded on by conducting interviews with target group members.

¹ Hänninen et al.: The concept of digital inclusiveness and its key elements - an interim report on the Digital Inclusiveness in Finland project.



The interviews with unemployed immigrant jobseekers were conducted in spring 2023 in five languages: Russian, Estonian, Arabic, Somali and Kurdish. The interviews were conducted with a culturally sensitive approach, where the interviewer had strong knowledge of the interviewee's culture. We found it important that the interviewees' Finnish or English language proficiency, or lack of it, would not affect their participation in the interview. Most of the interviewees spoke no Finnish or English. Some, who could speak Finnish, had taken a National Language Proficiency test.

The interviewees were working-age people who had mainly been living in Finland for 1 to 5 years and who did not have a job at the time of the interview. Some interviewees had recently found a job, and some had lived in Finland for a longer period. Some of the interviewees had originally come to Finland as asylum seekers, with refugee status or as temporary protection beneficiaries, while others had come because of studies, work or family. Some had migrated to Finland with the intention of looking for work.

The total number of interviewees was 32, including both men and women. The age distribution of the interviewees was 20 to 59 years. Twelve of the interviewees had arrived in Finland as asylum seekers or refugees, while the rest had come for work, studies or other reasons, such as joining their family or starting a new life. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by phone or on Teams. Most of the interviewees live in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

The study also drew on responses received in the Digital Skills Survey of 2023. This survey focused on digital skills and experiences of digitalisation. The respondents included 100 Estonian speakers, 80 Russian speakers and 60 Arabic speakers. The sample size of Finnish-speaking respondents was 1,103. Due to the small sample size of the other language groups, their results are not directly comparable. The findings concerning the language groups are also influenced by the respondents' age distribution: 76% of the Russian-speaking respondents were at working age and the rest were at retirement age, while 91% of the Estonian speakers and 93% of Arabic speakers were at working age, while the remainder were at retirement age. Among Finnish speakers, working-age respondents accounted for 61%.

1.2 Perspective and delimitations

Immigrants are a large and heterogeneous target group, which is why we found it necessary to narrow it down before starting the study. We had a particular interest in immigrants who were no longer in the acute phase of entering the country. In the context of delimiting the target group, we talked to several parties working with immigrants, and our delimitation was confirmed on the basis of these discussions.

We found that, from the perspective of digital skills and the need for digital support, the greatest value could be gained from hearing persons who would already be familiar with the structure, service system and culture of Finnish society but for whom entry into the country would not yet be too distant a memory.



We decided to approach persons who have been in Finland for at least one year, as under such provisions as section 4 of the Municipality of Residence Act (201/1994), a precondition for being allocated a municipality of residence in Finland, and consequently for access to local government services, is temporary residence of at least one year and intention to remain permanently in Finland. We initially set five years as the upper limit for the interviewees' stay in Finland to ensure that they would still have sufficiently accurate memories of daily life in their home countries and digitalisation that was part of it.

We further limited the target group by mainly including unemployed jobseekers in it. It has emerged, among other things in interviews conducted as part of a survey on the findability of digital support carried out in 2022, that in the experience of those excluded from working life, gaps in their digital skills and difficulties in finding digital support could make finding a job more difficult.

We also limited our target group regarding the languages spoken by its members. On the basis of statistics compiled by Statistics Finland², we looked at the largest groups of foreign-language speakers in Finland as well as the numbers of unemployed persons³ in various language groups. Finally, we selected as our subjects unemployed jobseekers who had been living in Finland for 1 to 5 years and whose mother tongue was Russian, Estonian, Arabic, Somali or Kurdish.

Our research question was finding out how immigrants saw the digitalised Finnish society, what kind of requirements they felt a digitalised society imposes on immigrants' digital skills, and whether they found their skills sufficient for operating in society. We also examined where immigrants received support and help with potential challenges associated with digitalisation in their personal situations.

While our research question is specifically related to digitalisation, to understand our target group better, we also examined their experiences associated with entry, integration and access to employment. We found this important because, as digitalisation becomes increasingly integrated into people's everyday lives and activities, looking at it separately from other areas of life and experiences does not lead to sufficient understanding.

1.3 Key concepts

Digital support	Support provided for the use of digital and other services as well as digital devices with the aim of helping individuals and organisations to use these devices and services independently and more securely.
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² Statistics Finland 2023, "Foreign-language speakers"

³ Statistics Finland 2023, "Employment"



Digital support provider	A person who provides assistance, advice and training for using digital devices, software and services. A digital support provider helps people needing digital assistance to do things for themselves. Synonyms for this term include digital guide and digital advisor.
Public digital service	A service or e-service provided on a digital channel by a public actor, including a central government authority, municipality or wellbeing services county. Such services include MyTax, MyKanta and Maisa.
International protection, refugee status and temporary protection	Migrants apply for international protection by submitting an asylum application to the Finnish Immigration Service. A refugee refers to a person who has been granted asylum due to severe persecution or who has entered the country as a quota refugee. Subsidiary protection may be granted to a person threatened by other serious risks. Temporary protection may be granted to a person who has been forced to flee their country of residence, for example as a result of a war or other violent conflict or an environmental disaster. ⁴ If a person is granted asylum, they can obtain a residence permit based on their refugee status. ⁵
Integration	A migrant's individual process that takes place in interaction with society and in which the migrant's participation and equality in society increase. Pre-conditions for integration include the migrant's personal activity, receptiveness on the part of society, and developing this receptiveness in cooperation between the authorities and other actors. A migrant's loved ones can also influence integration. ⁶

⁴ Ministry of the Interior 2023. "Refugees flee persecution in their home countries"

⁵ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021, p. 26.

⁶ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021, p. 15.



Migrant and immigrant	An immigrant is a person born abroad who is not a Finnish citizen but who resides in Finland and has been granted a right of residence (residence permit). ⁷ The term 'migrant' may also be used to make it clear that the person has moved from another country. ⁸
Residence permit	A residence permit is a permit to stay in the country. An immigrant who arrives in Finland from outside the EU and intends to stay for longer than 90 days must apply to the Finnish Immigration Service for a resident permit. A residence permit is issued for a fixed term and, once it expires, the person must apply for a new permit. The reasons for which a residence permit can be issued include working or studying in Finland, joining a family member or some other special reason, such as marriage with a Finnish citizen or a person who has been granted a residence permit in Finland. For citizens of the EU and certain other countries, it is sufficient to register their right of residence, rather than needing to apply for a residence permit separately. Those arriving in Finland for work and other reasons must have an adequate income. ⁹
Asylum seeker	An asylum seeker is a person who seeks asylum and right of residence in a foreign country. When they enter the country, the person does not yet have a residence permit, in other words a permission to stay in the country. Asylum seekers may leave their home countries due to such reasons as a war, persecution or insecurity. ¹⁰
Unemployed jobseeker	An unemployed jobseeker is a person who engages in a job-seeking process with the TE Office. An unemployed

⁷ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021, p. 27.

⁸ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021, Description page.

⁹ Finnish Immigration Service 2023. "Residence permit".

¹⁰ Ministry of the Interior 2023. "Refugees flee persecution in their home countries"



	<p>jobseeker client is looking for paid employment and receives employment services that support their job-seeking. They may receive an unemployment benefit and certain employment services or support forms only intended for unemployed jobseeker clients. ¹¹</p>
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¹¹ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021, p. 24.



2 Key findings

2.1 While most immigrants have good digital skills, such issues as unclear language and technical concerns hamper digital service use

On average, both Finnish people and immigrants living in Finland have very good digital skills. The daily life of many immigrants is closely intertwined with a digitalised society and they have, for example, already been accustomed to dealing with the authorities digitally in their home countries.

Challenges in using Finnish digital services are most commonly associated with their language. While unclear language also creates an obstacle for many Finnish-speaking service users, the fact that the language of the services typically is Finnish or Swedish adds to the challenges. Even if they had good digital skills and used Finnish digital services through a translation application, an immigrant may not be able to use authorities' services without assistance due to the language used in them.

Another key obstacle to immigrants' use of digital services is concerns over information security and data protection. Problems with obtaining tokens needed for strong authentication also emerged in the interviews. Many who had dealt with official matters digitally in their home countries could not do so in Finland as they either could not obtain a token needed for strong authentication at all, or receiving it had taken an unreasonably long time.

2.2 Challenges arising from not knowing how Finnish society works are emphasised among those with poor digital skills

Based on this study, immigrants with poor digital skills are a clear minority. In addition to a severe lack of skills, common denominators for those with poor digital skills also included challenges with integration and knowing how Finnish society works. Many relied on their loved ones in everyday activities and job-seeking, as the support provided by the authorities was often fragmented and did not respond to daily needs. Many immigrants were unfamiliar with third-sector activities.

While many immigrants experienced a need for digital support and help in improving their digital skills, despite their requests and efforts to seek it, no help was forthcoming. Consequently, immigrants with poor digital skills could be assisted with new forms of digital support, for example those linked to recreational activities and integration, allowing these persons to improve their digital skills with a low threshold and as part of everyday life.



2.3 Lack of digital skills has little impact on finding a job

Based on the findings of this study, it appears that gaps in digital skills do not hamper access to employment. For those with poor and good digital skills alike, barriers to employment were mostly related to Finnish language proficiency needed at work and their digital skills, or lack of them, had not affected access to employment.

The Finnish language proficiency requirements had even prevented many highly educated immigrants from finding jobs. Language skills were needed not only at work but also when applying for a job. Many respondents found that job-seeking advertisements are also made out in Finnish in situations where the actual work would require no Finnish language proficiency. Some had also experienced discrimination when applying for jobs and in recruitment.

Having an appropriate network of contacts and finding referees appeared to be the key to getting a job. Immigrants with a good network of acquaintances had been able to find jobs, even with no language or digital skills or educational background. In such situations, however, the person depends fully on the safety net consisting of their family and friends.

3 Experience of digital transformation and digital skills

In the Digital Skills Survey of 2023, thousands of Finns were asked about their experience of their digital skills. The findings indicate that 82% of Finns felt they could use the Internet and digital services at least as well as Finnish people in general. The same question was also put to speakers of Russian (N=80), Estonian (N=100) and Arabic (N=60). Among Estonian-speaking respondents, 87% felt that they were at least as skilled as others, while this proportion was 76% for Russian speakers and 88% for Arabic speakers.

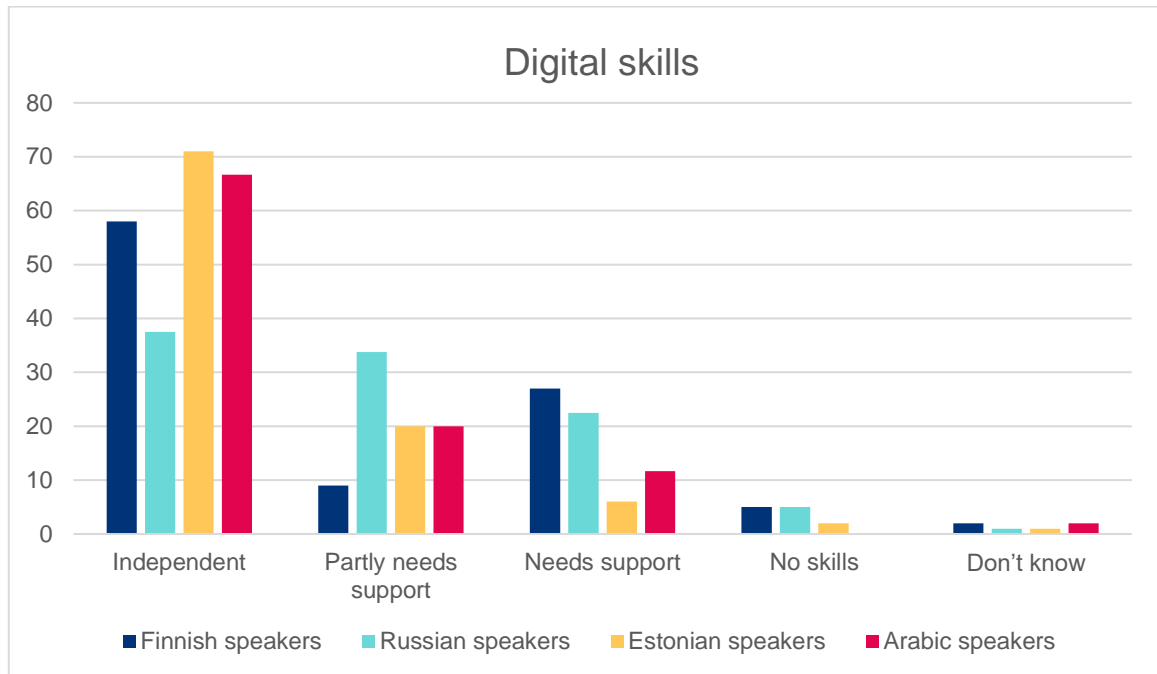
The respondents were additionally asked to assess their digital skills on a four-step scale, which is broadly based on the European Commission's DigComp 2.2 framework:

- I cannot use the Internet or digital devices at all (No skills)
- I need help for learning new things or if something unexpected happens (Needs support)
- I can solve some problem situations myself but I often also need help (Partly needs support)
- When I come across problems, I can find solutions and also help others. (Independent)

The responses received indicate that 36% of Finns need help at least often, whereas this figure is 56% for Russian speakers, 26% for Estonian speakers



and 55% for Arabic speakers. When examining the results, the small sample size of speakers of languages other than Finnish should be noted.



The respondents strongly believed that their skills will also be sufficient in the future. Those who believed they would be well able to keep up with digital development in the next few years accounted for 73% of Russian speakers, 87% of Estonian speakers and 93% of Arabic speakers. This belief was shared by 82% of Finnish speakers.

3.1 Experience of moving to a digitalised Finland and integration

“Everything takes incredibly long. I’m not used to that, things are different in my home country. With us it’s like hop, hop, hop, everything works fast and well. But here the processes take so long and everything is sent to your home by post. [...] In my home country, the digital system works faster. Absolutely everything works faster.”

Interviewee aged 50

Particularly for people who come from a digitalised country and who are accustomed to digitalisation in daily life, digital services and channels are an elemental part of migration and integration, regardless of whether they left their home countries of their free will or were pushed out by the environment or various situations. Migrants use digital services to seek information about the destination country before they enter it. They also look for information about the immigration processes.



Many of them had been accustomed to using digital services when dealing with the authorities in their home countries, and these processes had taken a few days at maximum. The waiting times of several months in Finland came as a surprise to many.

The slowness of such processes as obtaining strong authentication tokens or cards hampered practical arrangements of daily life. Almost all of them had only understood the importance of obtaining a strong authentication token when using other services turned out to be impossible without identification. For some, the significance of this came as a surprise because strong authentication was not used at all in their home countries.

"[I now know that] the most important thing is to first get an electronic ID card because it was the key to all services. When you get an ID card, you also get strong identification, and this makes life much easier."

Interviewee aged 36

"When we came to Finland we had to live somewhere, but we didn't have online banking IDs yet and we lived in an Airbnb apartment, which was much more expensive. We were told to use online banking IDs to find an apartment, for example from Sato I think, but of course we did not have them yet. We were told to go to the bank, and we went to the bank, they asked us for our registration, which we said we did not have, because we cannot do it without online banking IDs. The circle was closed. Finding an apartment and discovering how things work in general was difficult."

Interviewee aged 33

Many people are particularly interested in practical tips for entry and integration. Their peers' experiences were particularly important for many of them.

"Very little official information was available about what I have to do and where I should go next. If I did not have the information I got on Instagram, I don't know how I would have managed. The integration course does not cover such things, you just study the language."

Interviewee aged 51

"I follow a very large number of different Instagram channels. Women just like me who married a foreigner, I follow them. You can find huge amounts of information there, and you could say that it is my primary source of information. The information is all free, and you can really find it on Instagram. You can also find some chats on Telegram. Before I moved here, I did prepare well and read posts on Instagram that help people like me. They provided information on everything, IDs, Kela, applying for a residence permit, in other words everything. I didn't have to go to any official sites."

Interviewee aged 51



Immigrants also found persons who could help them against a fee on the social media.

"There are many social media influencers on Instagram who, for example, coach you for the language test against a small fee, and may also help you fill in applications. I used them a lot, or I followed them when I moved to Finland. At the moment I don't need them, I take no notice of these social media followers. Of course, there are also some groups."

Interviewee aged 36

The social media also provided various types of experience-based information and tips for dealing with the authorities.

"I follow social media influencers who speak my language on Facebook and Instagram. They have been living here for a long time, and I don't know if it's true but I even heard that MIGRI has 'secret' competitions between teams, where the team that turns down the highest number of applications wins."

Interviewee aged 36

The way matters are interconnected had also taken many people by surprise. Many immigrants had only realised the importance of an electronic ID card or online banking IDs when not having them put digital services beyond their reach. However, the price was an obstacle to obtaining an electronic ID card, especially for some students. Many respondents said that they could not get online banking IDs because they did not have an employment contract.

Some of the interviewees had also found official actors who spoke their language, for example on Facebook, and received informal help from them. Others had additionally found their way to official assistance channels on social media.

"There is a person who works in a government agency or for the city. I've written to them many times. If I come across something I don't understand, I write to them. [...] They have a Facebook page where you can read about different things, and there are also [local] meetings where you can ask questions about health care and social welfare [in your mother tongue]."

Interviewee aged 28

"There are a million different groups on Facebook where people from different countries can ask for help from people who work in agencies."

Interviewee aged 41

Those with digital skills also communicated with their family and friends online. Some had not found friends in Finland, or they had moved to Finland without their own networks, which meant that keeping in touch with relatives and friends living far away was a key part of daily life.



***"All my relatives are in my home country and around the world. In practice, all my loved ones are online."
Interviewee aged 36***

***"My loved ones include my parents who live in my home country, we keep in touch via a video link, and I also have some acquaintances here, but in general I am all quite alone in this country. I can only rely on myself and my own strength."
Interviewee aged 36***

3.2 Access to employment and digitalisation

Almost all interviewees found that the job-seeking culture is more digitalised in Finland than in their home countries, but not necessarily in a good way. Many felt that digitalisation was used as a wall between people, which made genuine encounters that would lead to getting a job impossible.

***"Before I came here and starting looking for a job, many places I called told me to send them an e-mail. I was left feeling that they wanted e-mails because then they need not say no to a person's face. On the phone and face-to-face they would have to say that we will not take you on, you are not suitable for us and that's why, but by email it's so easy, they can avoid it. [...] Precisely the fact that you don't have to say no to a person, the way you would on the phone and face-to-face."
Interviewee aged 47***

Many immigrants used different digital channels to look for jobs, including LinkedIn, employers' websites, direct emails, calls to potential employers, and various job search sites. Many of the interviewees mentioned the TE Services' online service, which was considered challenging and not user friendly.

***"I was just thinking the other day that I could offer to work for them and improve their home page."
Interviewee aged 26***

Almost all interviewees found their digital skills sufficient from the perspective of job-seeking and work. Almost all of them also had work and study experience gained in their home countries where digital devices and services had played an integral role.

The only obstacle brought up by interviewees with digital skills was the language of the services. Many interviewees mentioned that too many services and their contents are only available in Finnish or Swedish, which made using the services and finding jobs unreasonably difficult.

***"Ideally, searching for a job online should be easier [than face-to-face], but it is very challenging for immigrants. Looking for a job is difficult because I do not speak Finnish well. I always have to translate the whole text, and it takes time and energy."
Interviewee aged 59***



"I'm well able to use all applications and devices that work in English."

Interviewee aged 36

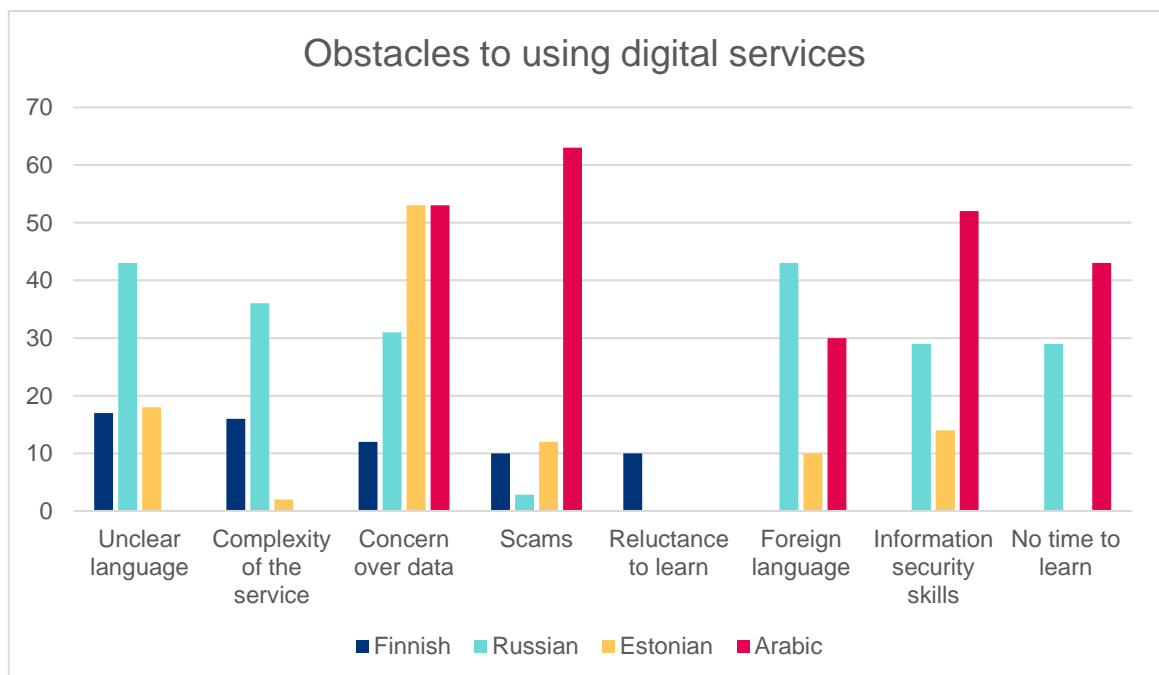
3.3 Obstacles to using digital services

The most common obstacles to using digital services for Finnish people are unclear language used in services (17%), complexity of the service (16%), concerns over appropriate data management (12%), fears related to scams (10%) and unwillingness to learn new digital skills (10%).

For Russian-speaking respondents, the greatest obstacles were unclear language (43%) and a language which the respondent did not know sufficiently well used in services (43%), complexity of the service (36%), concerns over appropriate data management (31%) and concerns over lack of information security skills (29%) as well as not having time to learn to use the services (29%).

For Estonian-speaking respondents, the greatest obstacles were unclear language used in the services (18%), concerns over appropriate data management (14%), concerns over lack of information security skills (14%), fear of scams (12%), and a language which the respondent did not know sufficiently well used in services (10%).

Arabic speakers experienced as the greatest obstacles a fear of scams (63%), concerns over appropriate data management (53%), concerns over lack of information security skills (52%), lack of time for learning digital skills (43%), and a language which the respondent did not know sufficiently well used in services (30%).





4 Needs for assistance and digital support

Estonian and Russian speaking respondents mainly had extremely good digital skills. When asked about the types of issues in which the respondents had needed help in the past year, there was little difference between the leading Estonian and Russian speaking respondents. Arabic speakers appeared to have a clearly greater need for assistance. The percentage in brackets in the Table shows the proportion of respondents who said they had needed help with the issue in question in the past year.

Finnish speakers (N=1,103)	Estonian speakers (N=100)	Russian speakers (N=80)	Arabic speakers (N=60)
1. Selection, commissioning and use of digital devices (16%)	1. Public services or dealing with authorities online (11%)	1. Selection, commissioning and use of digital devices (26%)	1. Using e-mail (53%)
2. Network connections and subscriptions (13%)	2. Information security, virus control, scams, or identifying misinformation (10%) 2. Selection, commissioning and use of digital devices (10%)	2. Information security, virus control, scams, or identifying misinformation (25%)	2. Network connections and subscriptions (50%)
3. Using online banking (10%) 3. Public services or dealing with authorities online (10%) 3. Information security, virus control, scams, or identifying	3. File transfer and backup copies (7%)	3. Using online banking (18 %) 3. Network connections and subscriptions (18%)	3. Using instant messaging apps and social media (47%)



misinformation (10%)			
4. Video conferencing software and video calls (7%)	4. Network connections and subscriptions (5%)	4. Public services or dealing with authorities online (14%) 4. Online shopping (14%)	4. Using online banking (43 %)
5. Using e-mail (5%)	5. Video conferencing software and video calls (3%)	5. File transfer and backup copies (13%) 5. Video conferencing software and video calls (13%)	5. Public services, dealing with authorities online (40%) 5. File transfer and backup copies (40%)

When respondents have problems with using a digital device or service, they typically turn to their loved ones. Almost one half of Finns (42%) have asked their loved ones for help in digital matters in the past year. Family and friends are also an important source of digital support for Estonian, Russian and Arabic speakers. Among Estonian-speaking respondents, 29% said they had sought help from their loved ones, while this proportion was 56% among Russian speakers and 33% among Arabic speakers. When comparing the language groups, however, differences can be found in what their most typical sources of assistance are.

Finnish speakers (N=1,103)	Estonian speakers (N=100)	Russian speakers (N=80)	Arabic speakers (N=60)
1. Family or friends (42%)	1. Family or friends (29%)	1. Family or friends (56%)	1. Instructions found elsewhere on the web, including videos and message boards (50%)
2. Instructions on the service	2. Instructions found elsewhere	2. Instructions found elsewhere on the web, including videos	2. Instructions on the service



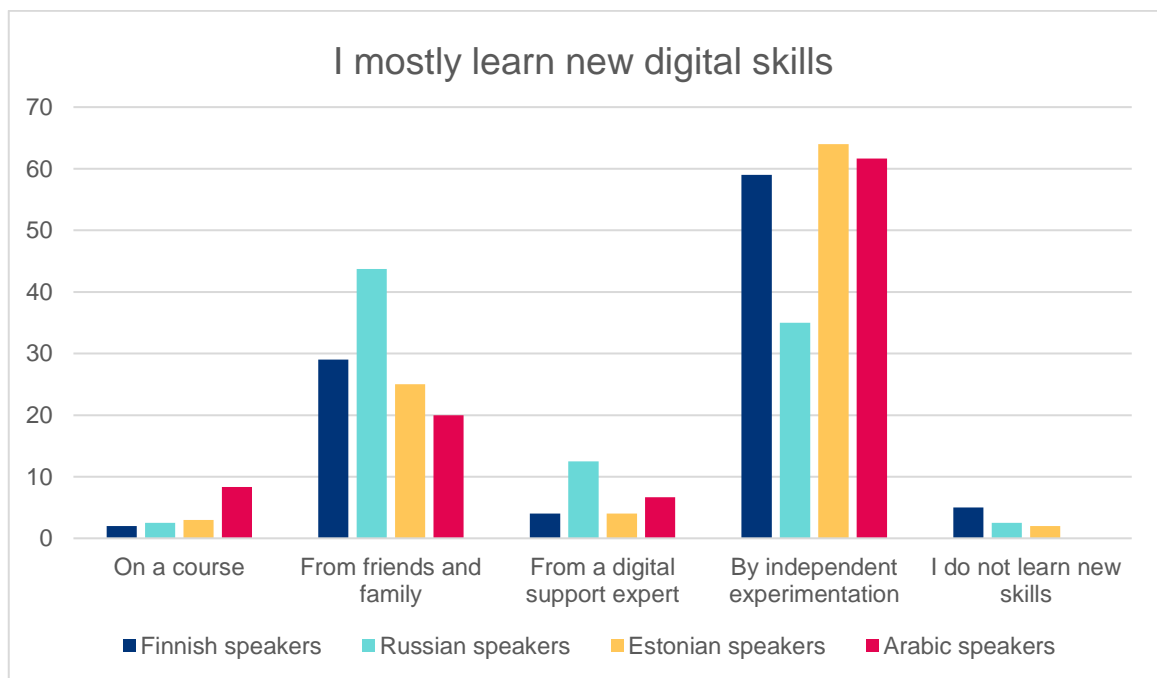
provider's website (25%)	on the web, including videos and message boards (16%)	and message boards (38%)	provider's website (48%)
3. Instructions found elsewhere on the web, including videos and message boards (23%)	3. Instructions on the service provider's website (14%)	3. Sellers of digital devices and services (26%)	3. Support provided by banks in using their services (47%)
4. Sellers of digital devices and services (13%)	4. Sellers of digital devices and services (13%)	4. Instructions on the service provider's website (20%) 4. Support provided by banks in using their services (20%) 4. Digital support provided by NGOs (20%)	4. Customer service of an authority (45%) 4. Sellers of digital devices and services (45%)
5. Customer service of an authority (11%) 5. Support provided by banks in using their services (11%)	5. Customer service of an authority (12%)	5. Customer service of an authority (14%)	5. General telephone advice provided by the authorities (Public Service Info) (42%) 5. General digital support provided at municipalities' customer service points or meeting places (42%)

When the respondents were asked about needing help in using public services in the past year, the most common sources of assistance were different. The most common source of assistance for Estonian-speaking respondents was the customer service of an authority (55% of the respondents), their loved ones (36%), instructions on the service provider's website (27%), municipal customer service points (27%) and banks (27%). Russian-speaking respondents had

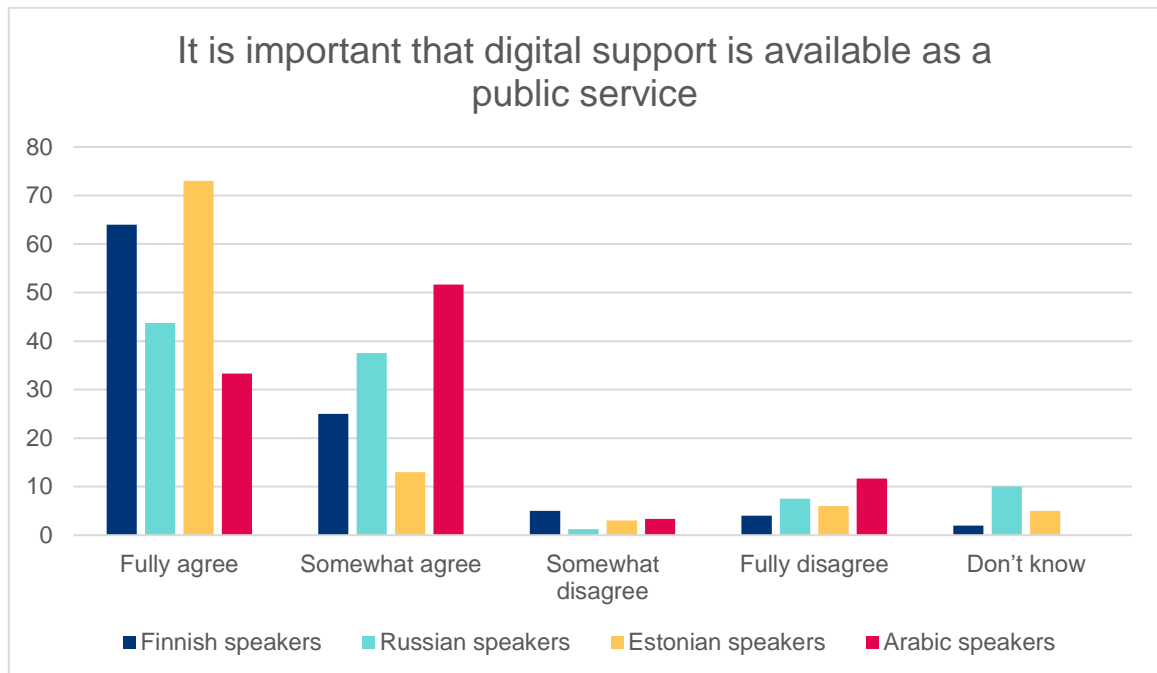


most often sought help from their loved ones (55%), banks (36%) and other online instructions (36%) as well as NGOs (27%). The sources used by Arabic speakers were instructions found elsewhere on the web (75%), the customer service of an authority (71%) and banks (71%), as well as public telephone services provided by the authorities (63%) and the sellers of digital devices and services (62%).

Generally speaking, both Finnish speakers and respondents in the other language groups develop their digital skills by means of independent experimentation and relying on their loved ones' support. Few respondents take courses or ask a digital support expert for help when they feel they need new digital skills.



Of Finnish people, 89% find that digital support should be available as a public service, making it possible for everyone to access it when needed. This opinion was also shared by Russian (81.25%), Estonian (86%) and Arabic (85%) speakers. Estonian speakers had the most positive views of support provided as a public service, and 73% of them fully agreed with the statement.



4.1 Particular support needs and access to support of working-age immigrants

As working-age immigrants are a group with a wide range of different digital skills levels, for the purposes of this study we divided them into two groups on the basis of the digital skills described by them. Those in the first group have little or no digital skills. The persons in the second group have sufficient digital skills to cope with daily life and at the workplace as well as capabilities for developing their competence. As a backdrop to assessing digital skills, existing digital competence levels were used, including DigComp 2.0.

Only a small proportion of the interviewees belonged to the group with poor digital skills. Most had already gained experience of using digital services and digitalisation in daily life in their home countries, and they found their digital skills sufficient from the perspective of working, submitting applications and everyday activities.

4.2 Those with poor digital skills need support to manage everyday tasks

Persons in the first group have no digital skills, or their skills are as yet rather poor. The main reason for their lack of digital skills is that digitalisation did not yet exist in practice in their home countries, and they only gained their first experiences of digital devices and services once they had migrated. In practical terms, they always need another person's assistance if, for example, they have to manage their affairs digitally. Immigrants with poor digital skills are persons



who may have had some contact with digital devices and services but who had already been excluded from support for their use in their home countries. For example, digital devices or services may not have been essential in their tasks, nor did they need smart devices in their leisure time.

Certain issues came up in discussions with actors working with the target groups, especially in the context of the digital skills and support needs of working-age immigrants with poor digital skills. Firstly, it emerged that there often are underlying factors for the lack of digital competence, which may include inadequate literacy skills. Regarding work, it was observed that immigrants did not necessarily find learning digital skills important in a situation where they only did a job, potentially a low-paid one, to earn a living and digital skills were not necessarily needed in the actual work. Additionally, many of them also had a large family, for example, and looking after the family's everyday needs did not always make it possible to spend time on such activities as picking up new digital skills or learning a language in their free time. It was also noted that it may be difficult for a person coming from another culture to perceive the significance of digitalisation and digital skills in Finland, a country whose culture is alien to them. The significance of digitalisation has also not always been made clear to immigrants.

4.2.1 Lack of digital experience and a skills gap that is difficult to close as underlying factors

Some interviewees reported that they had had their first experiences of digital devices after leaving their home countries.

"I had never used a computer or phone in my home country. No digital devices or services were used when dealing with the authorities."

Interviewee aged 20

On arrival in Finland, younger immigrants had ended up in comprehensive school where they had, among other things, practised using computers for their studies. At the same time, however, they felt that they had extremely large gaps in their other digital skills, which made it more difficult for them to find jobs, for example.

"My skills are not good enough to write job applications, print documents and do job applications online. Digital issues are difficult for me, my skills are not sufficient, but I plan to study more and develop my skills on a course. It's just that I don't know where and what kind of course I can take and which schools organise digital courses. [...] More training related to digitalisation and job-seeking should be included in integration training."

Interviewee aged 20

Those arriving in Finland at an older age had also encountered difficulties in finding support or suitable courses for learning digital skills, even if the lack of skills made their everyday life more difficult.



***"In many agencies, they tell me to go and do this on a computer, and I have had difficulties with many agencies because I don't know how to use those computers. I asked the employment services to send me to a computer course, because these skills are needed all the time, but they never did."
Interviewee aged 47***

The interviewees also included a person who could not attend basic education due to their age but who, while waiting for a residence permit for years, had also not been able to integrate into the Finnish culture or learn the language, let alone access instruction that would improve their digital skills.

***"I don't know how to use a computer, but I can use a smartphone. Before arriving in Finland, I had never used a digital service. I know how to manage everyday tasks with a smartphone. But if I had to make a travel reservation or buy a ticket, for example, I need help. I haven't used online banking. [Digital services] are sometimes difficult to understand because I cannot read properly. At the moment, I don't want to do anything online."
Interviewee aged 39***

The interviewees also included a person who came from a digitalised country but who had not needed digital skills in their work or everyday life. They were accustomed to handling their affairs by phone or face-to-face in their home country, and they were not interested in learning how to use digital devices or services.

4.2.2 Immigrants rely on family and friends to use digital services and devices

People with poor digital skills relied on help from their loved ones or acquaintances to use digital services and deal with the authorities. In practice, this involved others acting on behalf of them rather than learning to use the service. For example, the assistance could be provided by a friend, a child of primary school age or a sibling.

***"I have an 8-year-old daughter who teaches me to use a phone and digital services."
Interviewee aged 47***

It is worth noting that, due to challenges relating to language proficiency and digital skills, one person who had a job could not use such services as online banking at all and relied on the help of their friends in everything.

***"I have two good friends who help me."
Interviewee aged 39***

Some immigrants seek help from information services especially intended for immigrants, which are available in larger cities, for example.



4.3 Processes, authentication and language versions are a challenge for those with good digital skills

Using digital services is difficult even for many people with digital skills, as the services are often only available in Finnish or Swedish. While some are also provided in English, the immigrant does not always know this language, either. And with potentially non-existing language proficiency, it may be difficult to tell apart important and non-essential elements in the service: for example, an immigrant may struggle to distinguish between an advertisement and other content. In work-related systems, language problems often tend to accumulate, with growing requirements of understanding different technologies. Having to resort to separate translation applications slows down the use of services, with poor-quality translations adding to the difficulty.

4.3.1 The slowness of Finnish processes is emphasised in digital services

Most of the interviewees were already accustomed to managing their affairs, working and studying digitally in their home countries. For instance, several interviewees came from countries where all official services can be accessed through a single phone application. The greatest share of interviewees with good digital skills brought up the slowness of Finnish processes and the wider use made of the opportunities created by digitalisation in their home countries.

"Tax refunds and signing different documents, for example. We have had the option of using digital signatures for a very long time, and an example of what I like to use is the Christmas tree app. When Christmas comes and you want a tree, you can open an app on your phone with a map of state-owned forests and check where you can go and pick up a tree. Then you go into the woods, pick up your tree, pay for it on the app and go home."
Interviewee aged 41

"I would certainly like to use digital services but it is not possible. I can do it within Finland, but not outside the country. You cannot identify yourself in another country across the border, this takes documents, more documents, and someone's signature and stamps on top of everything. It's a shitshow."
Interviewee aged 54

"The rhythms of life in my home country are completely different. For example, when you place an order with Oda, you can't get the food on the same day, but at home if you order something, you get it in an hour and it can be anything, and it even works at night. So it's not just food. Everything works 24/7, here things are different, you have to wait until a working day or the morning."
Interviewee aged 32

"Digitalisation is much more advanced in my home country because you could do everything online, there were no problems, you never had to go there in person. You could even get a debit card"



completely online. In Finland, I still cannot get a debit card because the bank was not happy with my status. I had a summer job last summer as a housekeeper in Loviisa, I had an official employment contract but I had to get my wages paid to some friends' account, and ask them to withdraw it in cash."
Interviewee aged 21

Many of the interviewees also already had work experience which involved digital devices or services in one way or another. Some described digitalisation in their home country's society and working life as more advanced than in Finland.

4.3.2 Immigrants rely on translation applications to use Finnish-language digital services

All interviewees highlighted the language of digital services as a key problem that hampered their use, as many services were only available in Finnish or Swedish.

"It is easier if you know English but if you don't know English or Finnish, things are really very difficult. Even if I am on first-name terms with all digital devices, I can't manage without knowing the language. I also get help from Google and ChatGPT."
Interviewee aged 43

"If it is in English, everything is easy. I had challenges with the bank, it is in Finnish, and there is always something that needs to be acknowledged on every single step. I was scared at the beginning, because this is a bank, and if you do something wrong, you have to go there in person."
Interviewee aged 32

Most of the interviewees with digital skills said they used digital services by taking a screenshot of the content and entering the text in a translation program, such as Google Translate or Yandex. Some said they always use several programs to ensure that the translation is of a good quality.

"Sometimes the translations are of poor quality, I was making some appointment and Google Translate was talking about drugs and something like that, from Finnish into my language in other words. If you translate from Finnish into English, the quality is better. On the other hand, I do not even expect the translation to be of very high quality, and if some word sounds suspicious, I just translate it separately. It's great to have Google Translate and Yandex Translate, I can't imagine how people managed before without these services."
Interviewee aged 32

If the translation program produced a translation of such poor quality that it was incomprehensible, they sought help from friends or family, for example. Many of them also found help in various social media groups, such as Telegram.



***"I go online for support, I don't know very many people here."
Interviewee aged 36***

4.3.3 Digitalisation is also part of ordinary daily life in Finland

Digital services and devices were an integral part of the daily life for all interviewees with good digital skills. They used devices and services to keep in touch with friends and family, watch films, listen to music, read, paint, draw and study.

Those who had jobs used the digital services of working life the same as other employees. Some had received good support for using digital services at the workplace.

***"I was given an opportunity to practise when I started work [in an international company]. My training took less than two days because I already knew how to use the systems needed for the work."
Interviewee aged 28***

Some of the interviewees had encountered exactly the same challenges in using the digital services needed in the workplace as Finnish users. They did not always receive adequate support for tackling these challenges.

***"I got no instruction or tips for using the system. I often ask [my supervisor] for help, but they are always busy. I feel my questions irritate them."
Interviewee aged 45***

The devices the interviewees used at work and in their leisure time were mainly sufficient to meet their needs. Few felt that the devices they used were too old or too slow, for example.

Digital services made everyday life easier, for example by providing information about public transport. Some had started using the Finnish online banking system, and many mentioned that they were using the S-Bank, where their only challenge was the interface, which is only available in Finnish and Swedish. Many continued to rely on online banking systems of their home countries because they were easy to use.

What interviewees found particularly challenging was using strong authentication, as they found obtaining online banking IDs and electronic ID cards difficult. The importance of strong electronic authentication took some of them by surprise, as no similar system was in use in all countries.

***"I don't have a bank account in Finland, and the way it goes is that when you do not have an employment contract, the bank will give you no [account]. If you are a foreigner, you must first receive two or three salaries before you can get the banking IDs. In my country, you could open a bank account in a few minutes."
Interviewee aged 50***



"I did get a personal identity code right away, but because an electronic ID card costs 60 euros, us students do not have that kind of money, so I only got the card a month ago [after living in the country for a year]. I spent all this time without the card, and because the bank could not give me strong identification, I could not log in to any services. You can access some services without an electronic ID, but I have to walk to the other services that do require it every time."

Interviewee aged 36

"Getting your online banking ID is a time-consuming process, first you open an account, and then they called me and asked a huge amount of different questions. This is not what happens in my country. A debit card was then sent to me by post, and only then could I go to the bank to get the IDs, so it all took like three weeks. I now have a banking ID."

Interviewee aged 32

More experienced users had concerns over digital services and devices, for example relating to the time spent using them and their security.

"Devices take out too big a chunk of people's lives today, people go out less, walk less and spend less time with their spouses. I see young people doing this, they go to a restaurant and sit there like this [mimes using a smartphone], why do they even go there."

Interviewee aged 50

"What annoys me is the social media of today, it seems that nothing is real anymore. I think the social media has destroyed what we had, everyone used to get along. Now people give each other 'likes', they are superficial."

Interviewee aged 26

"There are plenty of dangers [on the web]. I think I can recognise phishing messages and scams...but I have also heard that even people who have better than average digital skills are not sure about who is a scammer, you cannot be 100% sure that you do not get scammed. I know that scams can be of a really high quality."

Interviewee aged 43

For many, digital channels also provided important support for their entry in the country and integration.

"I communicate with everyone on the Internet. I call my family and friends on WhatsApp every day."

Interviewee aged 28

Some respondents followed various social media influencers who were in a similar life situation with them. They also sought help for various everyday problems from Telegram and Facebook groups whose members came from their countries.



Many interviewees highlighted the differences between job-seeking in Finland and their home countries. In their home countries, they were used to relying on encounters and contacts rather than faceless applications when looking for a job. Many consequently felt that applying for a job face to face was a better option, especially in low-paid jobs, than submitting applications through job-seeking systems.

"It's good that you can search for jobs online in Finland. However, in my home country the advantage is that you can only find a job by knocking on doors and asking. This is more effective if you want to find a job quickly, and you don't need to send out a CV or have interviews."

Interviewee aged 22

In addition to searching for a job, they also primarily wanted to deal with another person in some other issues that they found important, including applying for a visa.



5 Background: Migration and integration in Finland

Digitalisation is not something separate from society and its processes. In order to assess immigrants' digital skills and experience related to digitalisation, the context in which an immigrant sees digitalisation in Finnish society must be understood. This chapter contains observations on immigrants' integration. Having the big picture also helps to understand how or in what forms digital support could be organised the most effectively.

At the end of 2021, there were 458,000 people living in Finland who spoke a language other than Finnish, Swedish or Sámi. The most common languages among foreign-language speakers were Russian, Estonian, Arabic, English and Somali.¹²

5.1 Moving to Finland and reasons behind migration

People move to Finland for a wide range of reasons, the most typical ones being work, family and studies. In 2015–2022, nearly 69,000 applicants received their first residence permits in Finland for family reasons, almost 65,000 for work and almost 40,000 for studies. During the same period, over 70,000 people were granted asylum, more than a half of whom were Ukrainians in 2022. In 2022, the largest individual group of immigrants in Finland were Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion.¹³

Slightly less than a half of the persons we interviewed for the study (13) had come to Finland as asylum seekers or refugees from such countries as Ukraine, Russia, Somalia, Iraq and Syria. Some of the interviewees had come to Finland to work or study. A few of those who came to Finland for work had worked remotely from Finland for an employer in another country but, due to the changed global situation, had ultimately become unemployed. Some of the interviewees had come to Finland for other reasons, typically because of their spouse's work. Some had come with the aim of looking for work in this country, even if they had not found a job as they moved here. The decision to migrate was not always easy.

"My feelings have kind of been hurt. [...] Many of my friends were cross with me because I dared leave. The same discussions with my parents, how could you go, why don't you stay and suffer like we do. [...] When making this decision, I left behind people who are angry with me."

Interviewee aged 30

¹² Statistics Finland 2023, "Foreign-language speakers"

¹³ Finnish Immigration Service 2023, Statistics.



5.2 Paths of entry and integration

5.2.1 Asylum seekers and refugees

There were major differences between the paths of entry and integration of the persons interviewed for the study. Those who had arrived in Finland as asylum seekers or refugees typically first stayed in a reception centre. However, some asylum seekers had stayed in accommodation provided by volunteers or with friends. Some of the asylum seekers had come alone, others with their families. There were large differences between the asylum seekers in the time it took for them to obtain a residence permit. At its longest, getting a residence permit had taken eight years, and the applicant had not always received sufficient, or any, information about or support for staying in the country during that period, at least not from the authorities.

*"It took ages to get an integration plan, and by then I had already learned things myself. I was disappointed because I did not receive enough support and the future seemed unpredictable. This is why my Finnish skills are not very good now. When I arrived in Finland, my lawyer encouraged me to learn English rather than Finnish, because I might be moving on somewhere else. All the difficulties I experienced as an asylum seeker have kept me back till this day."
Interviewee aged 28*

*"Finnish people are busy, which is why newcomers are supported by the friends of other immigrants. However, you should be careful about the information received from your immigrant friends, because it is not always correct. Sometimes those who give you advice have no experience, or their experiences were different. You must also be careful with interpreters because in many cases they mistranslate, and this may have serious consequences for the newcomer, who will alone be responsible for them."
Interviewee aged 45*

*"We always got our information through people, not through reception centre employees, they were a little uptight and busy. They kept their distance from us. I think because they had to keep their distance from us, they didn't tell us everything they knew. There was a bit of distrust or something. We had social workers, but we never asked them because they did not help us 'from their souls', other ordinary people always helped 'from their hearts'.
Interviewee aged 30*

The interviewees also partly found that the integration plans were too theoretical and inflexible. Rather than theoretical courses, they would have welcomed more active stages in real life. Some also felt that the integration process had not been able to renew itself over the years.

"My wife just arrived in Finland and she now has an integration plan. The same technique is used that they tried with me seven



years ago. They don't really take immigrant's feedback and experiences onboard."

Interviewee aged 59

5.2.2 Those who migrated for work or studies

Those who had come to Finland for work had often investigated such issues as housing-related arrangements in advance themselves or with the help of their employer.

"I was lucky because when I moved here, we had a person at work who helped us specifically with these matters. Their duties also included instructing us about these matters, or everything related to integration."

Interviewee aged 33

Other interviewees, however, had not received help from the employer, for example in finding a home or organising day care for a child. These interviewees had consequently found the arrangements of moving difficult and expensive, as they had lived in an Airbnb apartment instead of a rental flat. Some of those who came to Finland for work had previous experience of moving between countries, and they found changing countries fairly easy.

Entering Finland had also been made easy for those who came here to study: many were already familiar with Finland at some level in advance, even though they had not necessarily visited the country. For many, the school was also an important contact when it came to organising immigration matters.

Some of those who came to Finland for some other reason, including joining their family or work, had already found out about many things before they moved. For example, they had worked remotely from Finland for an employer in their home country previously, or they had prior experience of moving from one country to another and integrating. For some interviewees, it had been a challenge to find out about the types of issues involved in entering and moving to Finland. While some had relied on the InfoFinland website, most of them had investigated things through their acquaintances, for example.

"It is difficult to live in Finland because you can't find things. No one has told or taught you what to do, and I have to try and discover things myself."

Interviewee aged 50

While persons who were married to a Finn had also requested help from their spouses, spouses had not been able to help with immigration issues. The most important help had often come from a person who had already gone through the same process before. However, finding such persons had been sometimes challenging, or the assistance received from them was ultimately not useful.



"I asked my spouse for help when moving, but they did not know, either, because they are Finnish and have no knowledge of this immigration bureaucracy, so they could not help."

Interviewee aged 43

"My Finnish husband did not understand the concepts used by the TE Office or MIGRI because he never went through the process himself."

Interviewee aged 32

Many immigrants called for clear instructions, especially regarding the order in which official matters should be taken care of when arriving in the country and which issues were interlinked. Many of the interviewees had taken quite a while to notice how long dealings with the authorities and similar can take.

"Everything is really complicated when you are new here, and you don't have anyone to instruct you and tell you how things work, it's really hard to know how things work. And up till now, I have had a lot of things that I don't know and that are very confusing about how these processes go."

Interviewee aged 34

"I have gradually put together a chain of steps you need to take by making enquiries with different parties. I had to build this chain up piece by piece. So, if you could have instructions that say: 'if you come here to work, do such and such...', 'if you want to live in the country, do this and that...' etc. Some sort of instructions telling you the right order in every situation."

Interviewee, aged 30

"Waiting is the most challenging thing in Finland, you hand over all your documents and wait. You start wondering if everything's going okay."

Interviewee aged 30

"When I moved to Finland and submitted my residence permit application, I had to wait and it was really hard. I even wrote to MIGRI to say that if the process is so long, people should be given, not necessarily support, but they must have some rights. Because in the waiting phase, you have no rights and you can't even leave the country, you can't do anything, you can't even visit a doctor, well you can visit a private doctor of course and I did, but it's expensive and there are probably a lot of people who can't afford it. You cannot even visit the library, you do not have banking IDs, you must bring your passport wherever you go."

Interviewee aged 32

Many interviewees also felt that the official who handles the matter influences the type of decision they receive, for example.



"The decision depends on how the official is feeling. If three different people turn to the authorities with one and the same problem, everyone will have different outcomes."

Interviewee aged 38

"If MIGRI turns your residence permit application down, there is no point in appealing. You should lodge a new application instead, hoping that it is processed by someone else who is more merciful. In other words, the human factor once again. Of course, you must provide some more information or change the application and then probably you increase your chances."

Interviewee aged 36

5.3 Integration and language proficiency

Integration means setting down in a new country and culture and adopting new practices while preserving your own language and culture. As this process is individual, to an outsider's view there are many types of immigration and integration processes. The activities of the authorities are guided by the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010). As the dealings with the authorities partly depend on the immigrant's reasons for entering Finland, describing a single uniform immigration process is impossible. Describing the services and processes is also challenged by the fact that especially the low-threshold guidance and counselling services are fragmented in terms of their availability and resources in Finland, and access to such services is not equal at the national level. Several parallel processes may additionally often be in progress if, for example, family members come to Finland at different times.

In any case, integration is a process that includes not only the immigrant's experiences and personal willingness to integrate but also the role of the people and society around the immigrant in supporting and enabling the process.¹⁴ The time the immigrant has spent in the country and their life situation affect integration. For example, immigrants with a lower level of education, recipients of international protection, persons not in the labour market and immigrants who belong to groups subjected discrimination are in a disadvantaged position.¹⁵

Building up language skills is an important part of integration. Proficiency in Finnish or Swedish, and partly also in English, makes it easier to use services and adapt to a new environment as well as creates more opportunities for studying and finding a job. Language proficiency is essential from the perspective of managing daily life and inclusion.¹⁶ While there are no statistics on immigrants' language proficiency, data from 2014 indicates that only a few per cent of immigrants did not speak any Finnish, Swedish or English. The younger an immi-

¹⁴ Finnish Red Cross 2023, Integration timeline; Tampere University of Applied Sciences 2023, Kotoutuminen ja kotouttaminen Suomessa; Karinen – Luukkonen – Oosi 2020, pp. 9–10.

¹⁵ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2023, Kotoutumisen vuosikatsaus.

¹⁶ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 44.



grant is when they move to Finland, the better language skills they typically acquire over the years.¹⁷ More than a half of immigrants with a refugee background have taken a language course, but one third of the participants still said that their language proficiency had reached the beginner level at best, which may be an indication of the courses' short duration. The most common reason for not participating in a language course was working, as combining course attendance with work had been found challenging.¹⁸ On the basis of the data, however, the language proficiency of persons with a foreign background has been good in general: almost all (86%) of first-generation immigrants in the 15 to 64 age group had at least some proficiency in Finnish. Language proficiency was particularly good among young people and those who moved to Finland as children or at school age, and the poorest among immigrants who had lived in Finland for a short period of time, those with an Asian background and those who moved to Finland to study. However, it should be noted that the data were collected before the influx of refugees in 2015–2016.

All interviewees brought up the importance of language proficiency. From the perspective of successful integration, language proficiency appeared to play a key role: those interviewees who spoke Finnish at least well seemed to be more satisfied with their daily lives in Finland, regardless of how long they had been in the country and whether they were also working.

***"I'm doing really well because I can speak the language. I don't write it well, but in terms of communication, I can talk and I find it easy here. [...] I like to be here."
Interviewee aged 50***

***"I have various hobbies, Zumba, yoga, courses. They are really inexpensive and help me learn the language. Everyone's very friendly. My hobbies help me integrate. I try to speak Finnish and if I can't understand something, I say I don't understand and ask them to say it again."
Interviewee aged 51***

Most of the interviewees did not speak Finnish at all, or only very little. Some of them spoke English, some also spoke other languages. All interviewees said that you cannot manage in Finland without Finnish, Swedish or English skills. However, many were disappointed with the language skills they acquired in integration training. Some would have liked to get a job to improve their language proficiency, while others had found other solutions.

"Language skills are my personal challenge. I learned German at school. I'm now studying Finnish, I have a private teacher, I found them and pay for them myself. The TE Office also has a language course and it takes 6 hours a day and 2 months, it takes up too much time and is too thin. I would like to spend that time on looking for a job or enterprising and study the language at the same time. Although it takes more time, I feel that investing in work is

¹⁷ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 45.

¹⁸ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, pp. 47–48.



***more important in the early stages."
Interviewee aged 32***

Most of those who spoke English had found in practice that integrating in Finland was not possible even by speaking English, and learning Finnish was essential.

***"I noticed quite soon that without Finnish skills, you can't do anything here.[...] In this society, people are proud of their country and their language, and even if they can speak English, you are praised for speaking Finnish. And people's attitudes are completely different if you speak Finnish. They are wise people, but they still think that if you live here, why don't you speak our language."
Interviewee aged 34***

***"99% of Finns speak English, they can speak perfect English but they won't. If they notice that I do not speak Finnish, neither will they speak to me in English. When I try to speak Finnish and make mistakes, then they can speak to me in English. This is something I don't understand."
Interviewee aged 47***

5.4 Integration as a life change and support networks

***"You can compare integration to going to grade 1. In a way you know that school exists and so on, but you only understand what it really is like when you go to the first grade. Or giving birth, even if you had read about it, you really don't know what it is and you can only know once you have experienced it. You cannot know in advance how you will react or what you will be like in that specific situation."
Interviewee aged 32***

Moving to and integrating in a new country are also about a great deal more than only the external process that we can see. Immigration is a major life change that requires adjustment to a new environment. It involves stressors that affect the immigrant's psychological well-being. They include the immigrant's background, life situation and immigration-related processes. Bremer & Haavikko divide the psychological process of immigration into six stages: migration, honeymoon, shock phase, reaction phase, readjustment phase and reorientation. The psychological process of immigration begins when a person moves to Finland. This phase is followed by feelings of relief, gratitude and enthusiasm associated with the honeymoon period. Next the immigrant faces the shock phase, in which they may experience disappointment and loneliness, followed by the reaction phase, in which their feelings may include irritation, anger and powerlessness. This may also be manifested as physical symptoms, including fatigue, sleeping difficulties or various physical problems. The reaction phase is followed by a readjustment phase, in which the topmost feelings are sadness and homesickness but also faith in the future. Finally, the immigrant reaches the



reorientation phase, in which their life is dominated by ordinary, everyday joys and sorrows, and achieves calmness.¹⁹

The interviewees included persons in different stages of this psychological process. Some were still living through the honeymoon period; they were positive about the new country and hopeful about the opportunities it offered for starting a new life or a temporary change. Some had progressed to the shock stage; Finland was perceived as depressing and boring, while others also felt lonely.

"Everyone arriving in Finland should be mentally prepared. Life here is really difficult for a foreigner, especially if you come alone without a family. And when you get here, you shouldn't trust people very easily. But you need to try and integrate anyway to hear about job opportunities."

Interviewee aged 20

Some of the interviewees were also in the reaction phase: many were disappointed with how alone they had been left with their issues in Finland. Many of them missed their home countries and were going to move back as soon as possible. Some were even angry about how little help they had received from Finnish society for their situation.

"If I did not have school-age children, I would have already gone back to my home country. I'm not used to sitting at home, I find it really tough."

Interviewee aged 41

"People are all so independent, everyone is responsible for themselves, you are not needed here, or no one cares about you. So if anything happens, no one will help you. Even the social workers, I have heard it and also experienced it myself, even they will not help you at all. [...] There is also a lot of domestic violence here, and women do not dare tell anyone about it, because then you are sent back to your home country and the children are taken or even given to their father. Nobody will help you here. Here you are afraid that your children will be taken away from you, many women live with such fear. Nobody is afraid of the police, but everyone is mentally afraid of the child welfare people."

Interviewee aged 36

The persons who had reached the reorientation phase were mainly satisfied with their current lives and were positive about Finnish society and the opportunities it offers.

"I worked for 30 years in my home country. [...] I feel unproductive because I am unemployed. My daughter thinks I'm depressed, but I don't believe I am because I'm sociable and I like to talk. I try to live

¹⁹ Bremer – Haavikko 2009.



***cheerfully and positively even if I am hurting inside."
Interviewee aged 59***

***"Life is good for me here. I found a lovely partner and I'm really happy. My home is where I feel good."
Interviewee aged 50***

***"I like Finnish society more than my own country, people are different. I only have good things to say about Finns. I decided I want to stay. I started thinking about how I could attach to this country, it was clear that I would no longer return to my home country when I had already seen that I was much better suited for living here."
Interviewee aged 34***

We also discussed with the interviewees everyday assistance and parties that helped them in daily situations in Finland. In the early stages, those who had arrived as asylum seekers or refugees had received help with organising their affairs from the authorities or other local actors, but the support of loved ones was also very important.

***"Some people we know who have already gone through the same process told us about everything to do with integration."
Interviewee aged 30***

Persons who had arrived in Finland for work or studies had usually received help with arranging their lives here from the contact person of their educational institution or workplace. Those who had arrived in Finland for other reasons had mainly been responsible for organising their lives themselves, in which the most important sources of assistance were acquaintances, family and friends.

For some of the interviewees, it was important to manage themselves in all situations without the help of others.

***"I want to learn to solve problems myself. If something is more complicated and I cannot crack it myself, I may ask my sons for help."
Interviewee aged 45***

***"When I arrived in Finland, no one advised me, and I will not advise anyone, either."
Interviewee aged 54***

***"We manage on our own and if we get sick, we have a self-care programme. This isn't a joke, it's true. If you are slightly sick, I run to the store and buy onions and garlic, and if the illness is serious, I find someone who will bring medicines from my home country. There are many people here in Finland who will bring the necessary medicines from over there, for example there are different FB groups you can ask for help. Sometimes on Telegram, but the easiest way to find them is on FB."
Interviewee aged 43***



Loved ones played a very important role for those immigrants who had them. Many families were close. Some lived with their siblings, for example, or older interviewees had adult children living with them. They received help in managing daily life and, for example, dealing with the authorities from family and friends, and a very high number also helped their loved ones in various matters.

If the interviewee's loved ones all lived far away, they may have sought assistance from other networks. Those who had come to Finland for other reasons could, for instance, receive support from their former colleagues or their spouse's acquaintances.

"We have my wife's former colleagues here and also friends we can ask help from. She has worked remotely in Finland since 2015, and it has helped us a lot, because we already knew a lot of people here before we moved. They also helped us in the early stages with such things as tax refunds or online banking, insurance, and so on. We received a lot of useful information from them, and then we just go to different websites to check the information in concrete terms."
Interviewee aged 32

The interviewees' daily lives were closely intertwined with their families, possibly friends and, especially for younger interviewees, hobbies. Some of the interviewees had a job or a study place, which set the schedule of their daily lives. Such persons as asylum seekers may have arrived in Finland alone, however. In this case, their network of friends may only consist of other asylum seekers, and these networks may not always pass on correct right information.

"Asylum seekers do not get an integration plan, and the process may take up to 8 years. They learn new things in the street, sometimes without guidance, and as a result they do not turn into successful immigrants by the Finnish standards."
Interviewee aged 28

Some of the interviewees found it important that they had got to know local people. This enabled them to familiarise themselves with local culture and find new ways of spending leisure time, also with their families.

Almost all of the interviewees knew nothing about the existence of the third sector or other voluntary work. This is partly explained by cultural factors: few interviewees had a strong culture of volunteering in their home countries, which meant that it did not occur to them to seek a similar network in Finland. Those who had discovered volunteers and the third sector felt that their role was of primary importance, especially from the perspective of integration.

"When we first arrived in Finland, we lived with a family. They immediately started looking for a place where we could live for a longer time and in a way, they 'moved' us to the next Finnish family. We lived with them for a few months and they have helped us very much. We still keep in touch with them, even though we now live independently in a way. In other words, we kind of came to a family straight away, and the stream carried us along and everyone



helped, we didn't have to think about any processes. We were actually in shock, and a Finnish person found out about everything for us, we didn't have to think about anything."

Interviewee aged 21

"The NGO workers spoke Arabic and assisted me in getting an apartment from the city, for example, which really helped. [...] All newcomers should use third-sector services. People are mistaken if they think they know how to do everything themselves, because there is a lot of information that ordinary people can't find."

Interviewee aged 54

"We went to Startup Refugees straight away and that was a really good decision. They help people find jobs. It's an association that helps for free. If we could not get jobs, they found some courses for us. They visited the reception centre to introduce their organisation. I found my first job – cleaning – through them. My husband found a job himself."

Interviewee aged 30



6 Background: Immigrants' access to employment in Finland

Immigrants actively seek employment in Finland.²⁰ Despite this, their employment rate is lower than that of people with a Finnish background, even if the differences are narrowing over the longer term. Women's employment rate is lower than men's, and international protection beneficiaries also have a low employment rate. Finding a job is difficult, particularly if the immigrant has a low level of education or poor Finnish or Swedish skills, or if they have only been living in Finland for a short period or have entered the country as a refugee.²¹

Employment is a key pathway to integration for many immigrants, as through Finnish-speaking colleagues, they can learn the language, get to grips with the Finnish work culture and its rules, and learn to understand Finnish culture and society in a broader sense.²² However, they encounter many challenges when seeking jobs, including those associated with language skills and education but also discrimination.

***"I wish they would give foreigners more opportunities to work even if we do not speak the local languages, I believe that this would help us integrate better and learn Finnish much more easily and faster, otherwise we just hang out with others who speak our own language and learn little or nothing."
Interviewee aged 20***

6.1 Job-seeking process and TE Services

With a few exceptions, the interviewees had experiences of the TE Services. They mainly felt that they had found some suitable courses through the services, and perhaps places for on-the-job learning. The interviewees did not feel that the TE Services were helpful in finding jobs.

***"When I went to the TE Office to speak with them, I was told that they had no work for someone with my profile. The TE Office gives me no concrete help. Now that I am thinking of setting up my own company, I have an English-speaking social worker at the TE Office and my wife has one who speaks our language. Having it the other way around would be good, because my wife speaks English and I don't. And I have been thinking that it would be easier for us to share the same worker, like a TE Office social worker for the whole family."
Interviewee aged 32***

²⁰ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 131.

²¹ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 133.

²² Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 115.



***"You don't get any help there, no concrete help. They have contact numbers, contact persons, but you never get a job through them."
Interviewee aged 54***

Some would like to see more digitalisation in the TE service processes to lighten the burden of using them.

***"The fact that I have to visit the TE Office feels like they are controlling me, checking if I still exist (gives a short laugh). I wish you could do that digitally, too."
Interviewee aged 41***

6.2 Challenges in access to employment: language skills

Immigrants themselves find that their language skills are the key challenge in job-seeking²³. Excellent Finnish proficiency improves their access to employment, whereas medium or beginner level language skills make finding a job difficult. In integration training, for example, language instruction does usually not go beyond medium level studies, for instance.

Interviewees also brought up language skills as the first challenge to finding a job. A common experience was that without fluent Finnish skills, finding work is impossible, no matter what your other competence is like. One highly educated interviewee had even been encouraged not to mention their mother tongue in a job application, as it might stop them from getting a job interview.

"My biggest and most important problem is language skills, I cannot speak Finnish. I'm studying it, but I don't speak it well. I think that they open my CV and say that you have great experience and education, but if you can't speak Finnish, you don't suit us." Interviewee aged 30

***"There are two groups of applicants: those who know the language (Finnish or English) and those who do not. Those who do not know the language have no challenges with digitalisation because they don't even need it, they can only find so-called 'black work' (such as manual labour), which is why they have no need for digital devices. On the other hand, when they do not know Finnish, there are very few jobs, so it is a really big problem. All those who speak Finnish or English. There are many jobs in which only English is required. I don't know English or Finnish, I always look things up in the translation app. All those who can speak Finnish, they have no problem finding jobs, except that certification is required in some professions, such as doctors or electricians."
Interviewee aged 43***

Some of the interviewees spoke English but felt that English proficiency had not helped them find jobs. Others had also noticed when working with Finns in their previous jobs that Finns find it hard to speak English.

²³ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 133.



***"In a Finnish company their English is bad, just like my Finnish."
Interviewee aged 30***

Many of the interviewees also found it challenging that job advertisements were often made out in Finnish, even if Finnish was not needed in the actual work. Many of them had to first translate the job advertisement to see what it was about.

***"When I found my current job, the ad was in Finnish, even though there was no requirement of knowing Finnish in the work. I translated the ad and applied, but what if someone else hadn't translated it, they would never even have applied for this job. When I see an ad in Finnish, I get the impression that Finnish skills are required for the job, and I often don't even look at the ad."
Interviewee aged 36***

The interviewees found browsing job advertisements labourious. Those actively looking for work often contacted potential employers directly, for example by e-mail. Some had also submitted video applications.

6.3 Challenges in access to employment: methods of job-seeking and referees

Many interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that as job-seeking has become digitalised, there are no more encounters between the employer and the jobseeker. Many of them felt that they would have been able to make a good first impression face to face, but this was not possible in the world of electronic applications. What they often encountered instead was a faceless system in which no response was received even if you submitted an application.

***"When I'm looking for a job, I prefer to go there personally and talk to the HR people and present my CV, because I believe that I have a better chance of getting a job this way than by just sending my CV, in which case I will never hear from the recruiter again."
Interviewee aged 20***

Another challenge to getting a job was that many people did not have a referee. Many interviewees felt that the absence of a referee could also have stopped them from progressing beyond the application stage in the job-seeking process.

"I think there are very few jobs here for women, even if you have a higher education degree and speak Finnish, so I heard that you can only find work through contacts in this country. Getting a good job is impossible. Otherwise, there is the construction industry or logistics sector. I am really shocked that women work as drivers here. Women work in warehouses, someone I know told me that when he saw a woman lifting something heavy and offered help, he was ticked off. Women don't take care of themselves here, and they are sexless. This is shocking, because a woman is a woman, she



must be a woman. I saw a woman once and I didn't even understand if it was a woman or a man, she was driving a tractor, and I was appalled. I find it shocking."

Interviewee aged 36

"I think that in order to get a job, you need to know people. Somebody has to recommend you."

Interviewee aged 20

Some had solved the problem by doing voluntary work, which they could put on their CVs and get a referee.

6.4 Challenges in access to employment: discrimination

Discrimination also makes it more difficult for immigrants to find jobs. Discrimination is a significant obstacle to the employment of immigrants with a Somali or Iraqi background and also makes it more difficult for Russian speakers to find jobs, despite having a high level of education.²⁴ Inequality experienced in working life by people with a Middle Eastern and African background was already visible before the influx of refugees in 2015–2016.²⁵

Discrimination in its different forms was also brought up in the interviews. Some of those who had found a job had been subjected to direct discrimination at the workplace by customers, and their supervisor had not taken any action to remedy the situation.

"I encounter a lot of racism at work, people are disrespectful towards me. Even if I go and tell my supervisors, they do nothing about it and literally ignore me. I still go to work because there are not many job opportunities for foreigners and English speakers."

Interviewee aged 20

The work community may give a different reception to immigrants than to native Finns. For example, immigrants experience that they receive less assistance and support from their colleagues than Finnish-speaking employees. Especially persons coming from the Middle East and Africa feel that they get less support at the workplace from their colleagues.²⁶

Some interviewees had experienced structural discrimination, for example during training.

"I was told that I couldn't work in my profession unless I had perfect language skills. In the language school, our teacher always started the day by saying that we are very stupid and that you don't have to understand. And when I was confident of getting a B2 or C1, because I had studied Finnish a lot at home, I felt that because of my home country, after each period they controlled the results"

²⁴ Ahmad 2020, pp. 8–11.

²⁵ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 115.

²⁶ Nieminen – Sutela – Hannula 2015, p. 115.



and adjusted my vocational language skills downwards. I have experienced that kind of discrimination a lot. They don't want us for any professions; we are needed for line work. [...] Now a couple of years later, the same workplaces are full of people from other countries who don't speak a word of Finnish. Damn it, why did I not get the job."

Interviewee aged 38

Many ways of making it easier for immigrants to get jobs were already identified in 2016: immigrants' language skills should be improved and language skills requirements in working life should be reassessed, immigrant networks should be strengthened, training paths should be made more flexible, cooperation between NGOs and the authorities should be developed, and employers and work communities should be supported in developing their diversity.²⁷

6.5 Educational background and employment

Some of the challenges associated with access to employment are related to recognition of education and competence.²⁸ Employed immigrants work more often than Finns in positions that do not correspond to their level of education.²⁹ In particular, people from the Middle East and Africa find that the competence level required in their current jobs is lower than in the jobs they held previously in their home countries.

Many of the interviewees criticised the fact that prestigious qualifications completed in their home countries, or long work experience, were of no benefit in Finland.

"Highly educated immigrants should be used more in Finland, without requiring language skills and experience. The education in my country is excellent. Experience gained there cannot be compared to experience gained here, as people do so much with minimal resources and support. If they received support in Finland, these skilled immigrants could do very worthwhile things here."

Interviewee aged 45

The interviewees who had found a job typically did tasks not requiring a high level of education or specific skills. However, there was also a person who had recently been employed in a position requiring higher education. Some of the interviewees had a background of studies or a qualification unrelated to the field in which they were currently working. Some had trained in a new field despite having prior higher education, however without finding a job in the new field, either.

"I was trained as a plumber but I couldn't get a job. Now I'm looking for any work at all. [...] I would advise other people coming to Finland to stay in the field where they already have experience, to

²⁷ Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2016, pp. 12–15.

²⁸ Luukko 2017, p. 22.

²⁹ Luukko 2017, p. 55.



***build on it and to see what is needed in the Finnish labour market."
Interviewee aged 59***

***"I have asked about five or six courses and education programmes, and they always keep telling me to go to a building site. And when I wanted to study to become a chef, they told me to go to a restaurant and get a part-time job washing dishes. How can I learn anything about being a chef by washing dishes (gets excited). And I should do this three hours a day, three days a week, but they will not give me training. Bloody hell, I know how to wash dishes, I don't need to learn it. [...] Or go and work at a building site. I didn't go to school for 12 years and study English so that I could carry stones or buckets, for fuck's sake."
Interviewee aged 47***

From the perspective of educational background, it is interesting that the interviewees who had found a job represented the opposite ends of the scale in their education levels; on the one hand, a person who had completed a higher education degree and worked in their field for a long time in their home country and, on the other hand, an illiterate person who had no linguistic skills. The latter had found a job through their friends, who also otherwise supported them in managing everyday matters.

***"I've always asked a friend to help me. Because I can't read or write."
Interviewee aged 39***



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Appendix 1 Interview questions

Daily life in Finland

- What is your daily life like at the moment?
- Who are the members of your family? What about your other loved ones?
- What do you do on your ordinary days?
- Are you taking any courses?
- Do you have any hobbies, how do you spend your free time?
- How do you find daily life in Finland? Who can you go to for help if you need assistance with taking care of something (such as help when you are ill, dealing with an authority, buying a train ticket, submitting a tax return)

Arrival in Finland and integration

- What was your situation like when you arrived in Finland? What were things like in your home country at that time?
- Were you working in your home country? What kind of work did you do? Were you studying?
- How would you describe digitalisation in your country? For example, do you use the authorities' services on a computer or telephone, or do you visit agencies in person? In what types of work are digital devices used in your home country?
- If you were working or studying in your home country before coming to Finland, how did you use digital devices in your work or studies?
 - What kinds of issues did you notice about Finland and digitalisation during your integration process?
 - Which things are done differently (digitally or non-digitally) in Finland compared to the country you came from? Which way do you find better and why?
- If you had any challenges during integration (for example, you had to ask about something important), whom did you ask?
- Have you later learned or noticed something that would have been useful to know before? What kinds of tips or instructions (digital or otherwise) would you give to a person who has recently arrived in Finland?

Daily life in a digitalised Finland

- How is digitalisation visible in your daily life?
 - What types of digital devices do you use/own (such as a smartphone, TV, computer, tablet)
 - What do you use your smartphone for? Or your computer or tablet (if you have one)?
 - How do you find your skills? Are you able to use these devices as well as other people, or are your skills better or poorer? Is using devices always easy? If not, why and when is it not easy?



- Do you associate any feelings with using smart devices? What positive and negative aspects do smart devices have? Does anything about using digital devices and services worry you?
- You nowadays use many services online. Which services do you prefer to use face to face rather than online? Why?
- Let's imagine that you are using an online banking system and a Finnish pop-up appears on the screen, and you cannot go further unless you click either 'yes' or 'no'. What would you do in this situation? If you ask for help, who do you go to?
 - Which (digital or non-digital) issues do you otherwise ask for help and from whom? In what kinds of issues do you ask for help from authorities or local NGOs, for instance, and in which issues do you go to family members or friends?

Job-seeking in Finland

- How is your job-seeking going?
 - What kind of work are you looking for?
 - What is easy about job-seeking, and what is difficult? Why?
 - Is looking for a job similar in Finland and in the country you came from? Which things are better in your own country? Or worse?
- How does digitalisation affect job-seeking?
 - Do you find that, in order to be able to work in Finland, you need to be able to do more things digitally than in your home country? Or do you need to be able to know more about digitalisation in your home country in order to be able to work?
 - Have you encountered any challenges in applying for jobs digitally? Which are the most difficult things?
 - Do you find that your digital skills are sufficient for applying for a job or working?
 - If you needed to improve something in your digital skills, what would it be?
 - How would you like to improve these skills (for example, ask a friend to show you how to do it, go on a course)
 - If you had to produce a video for a job application and submit it as a downloadable link to an employer (and you were unable to do it yourself), whom would ask for help?
- Not all digital services or devices are easy to use. Even a skilled user cannot use all devices or services. Which digital devices or services do you find challenging?
 - Which are so difficult that even if you get help, understanding how the service works is still difficult?

Working in Finland

- Is the job you are now doing in Finland one where you want to progress and develop, or is it 'just a job'?
- Do you use a smartphone, tablet or computer in your current job in Finland? Or some other digital device? For what?



- If you compare it to similar work in your home country, do they use the same devices to do similar tasks?
- How do you feel about an employer wanting you to use different digital devices and services as part of your work? What do you find positive about it? Or negative?
- How do you learn to use digital devices and services at work? Are you taught how to use them separately, or do you learn this while working? Is there enough time to learn how to use it?
- If a Finnish notification with a red exclamation mark appears on your work phone and you are not sure what the notification means, what do you do? Do you ask someone for help? Whom?
 - Where do you usually ask for help in work matters?
- All digital devices or services related to work are not simple to use. Some are poorly designed. Does your job involve services or devices that are so difficult that they should be made easier?

Conclusion

- Is there something that we did not think to ask about and you would like to tell us about digitalisation?
- Can you think of something (however simple) about digital services and devices that you have been too embarrassed to ask about?