ABSTRACT

The authors are developing a pilot project for a Municipality in the North of Portugal, envisaging the definition and implementation of an e-marketplace for healthcare and social services, in order to facilitate the interaction between healthcare and social services professionals and people with special needs (or their relatives). Based on the results of a survey on user needs analysis and expectations conducted in 2011, the paper discusses the relevance and interest of such platforms and the main drivers and motivations of the population for using such services, as well as which services would motivate citizens to use the platform. The results of the study will be used to select the products and services perceived to be the most desired by the potential users. The paper thus makes three main contributions: (1) the results of the study confirm the interest and the perceived potential of such a service, from the end-users perspective; (2) the findings support the advantage of expanding this pilot project to a full scale implementation; and (3) the performed analysis improves our understanding of the relations between the characteristics of the inquired population and the perceived interest in such platforms.

Keywords: Elderly People, e-Marketplace, Healthcare Services, People with Special Needs, Social Care Services

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1. INTRODUCTION

Local health care and social care units in Portugal have geographically dispersed facilities, covering both urban and rural areas, according to geographic-population criteria. Among these units we can find health centers, hospitals, private and non-profit institutions, non-governmental organizations, and community/community institutions and individual professionals active in the health and social care intervention. Similarly, a wide range of services related to wellbeing, which can be included in the category of social care services, is provided by independent enterprises, organizations and individuals.

Frequently, individuals have difficulty knowing the available services in their region or their specific location, and even less available is the opportunity to select among different service providers which might have offer considerably different service conditions. This happens mainly because a network of health care, social care and professional services providers, working articulately with an underlying effective management and intermediation service, is missing. Such a network is proposed by the authors as an e-Marketplace for health care and social care services. A platform for this purpose can be a powerful tool and result in effective and efficient service to citizens in general, but in particular to people with special needs (both the elderly and permanently or temporarily disabled people). The proposed e-Marketplace is an integrating environment to identify user needs transmitted over an online platform and the allocation of service providers to answer these needs; additionally it features integration and management, performance monitoring and evaluation, commitment control, etc., at each phase of the service lifecycle.

The Social Development Plan for the Municipality of Guimarães, conceived by the Department of Social Intervention for the period 2008-2011 (Miranda, 2008), considers several pilot actions in order to put information and communication technologies at the service of the population, in particular of individuals with special needs, both elderly and temporarily/permanently disabled people, and their caregivers or potential caregivers (although several of those services can be equally offered to the population in general). Guimarães is a northern Portuguese city with a population of circa 52 thousand inhabitants, distributed by 20 parishes, in an urban area of approximately 23 km² with a population density of roughly 2224/km². The municipality of Guimarães has circa 159 thousand inhabitants, distributed by 69 parishes, and occupies an area of roughly 241 km². A survey of living conditions undertaken in 2007 by the “Expresso” national newspaper ranked Guimarães as number 2 in the most attractive Portuguese cities.

The authors are developing a pilot project for the Municipality of Guimarães envisaging the definition and implementation of the described e-marketplace for healthcare and social services, in order to facilitate the interaction between healthcare and social services professionals and people with special needs (or their relatives), as well as with institutions willing to accede to these services. The e-marketplace has been termed GuiMarket.

Considerable literature suggest that Assistive Technologies and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) may improve quality of life, extend length of community residence, improve physical and mental health status, delay the onset of serious health problems and reduce family and care-giver burden (for example Blaschke, Freddolino & Mullen, 2009; Doukas et al., 2011; Magnusson, Hanson & Borg, 2004; Muncan et al., 2012).

In this paper we also discuss the relevance and interest of such platforms as interfaces between health and social care services providers and the potential users, based on the results of a survey on user needs analysis and expectations conducted in 2011. This survey aimed at identifying the main drivers and motivations of the population in general (besides people with special needs) for using such services and which services would motivate them to use the
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