

Despite some notable examples of excellent practice, Northern Ireland's voluntary sector overall is lagging behind in terms of digital transformation and this is impacting on its ability to remain competitive and deliver services.



That's according to the latest Ulster Bank and CO3 3rd Sector Index, which surveyed the

directors and CEOs of organisations such as charities and social enterprises.

94 percent of third sector leaders responding to the survey said that their organisation faces barriers to fully accessing technology due to factors including cost and a lack of appropriate skills. Only 28 percent believe that technology has significantly changed their organisation over the last five years.

However, there is a strong belief in the sector that digital adoption is important, with 62 percent of respondents agreeing that this can make the third sector more resilient and sustainable. And 40 percent anticipate that technology will have a significant impact on their organisation in the five years ahead.

One organisation that has been introducing innovative technology to improve and develop its services is Angel Eyes NI, a Belfast-based charity that supports and advocates for parents and carers with a child who is blind or partially sighted.

It has developed a virtual reality (VR) training tool for parents and professionals supporting visually impaired children. It simulates a visual impairment to enable parents and others to better understand what their child can and can't see.

It is a world-first in that it allows the user to layer clinical measurements together to replicate a child's sight loss.

Third sector organisations have shown themselves to be resilient in recent years in the face of a range of challenges. But many organisations are finding themselves having to run faster just to stand still. It would appear that finding new and better ways to do things through technology so that they can increase productivity has to be at least part of the solution. A major challenge though is the skills to implement and utilise such technology. With a tight

labour market in Northern Ireland, demand for technology-related skills is high. The third sector perhaps needs to focus on both outsourcing some expertise and investing where possible in reskilling existing employees.

Nora Smith, Chief Executive of CO3, commented: “Technology has a really important role to play in the third sector, with the potential to allow organisations to do more with less and to further increase the positive impact they make in society. Angel Eyes NI is just one example of an organisation doing this to great effect. The latest report shows that demand for the services third sector organisations in Northern Ireland offer continues to increase at the same time as funding pressures mount. Organisations recognise that technology can help them deal with this difficult situation and it is extremely important that digital transformation continues in the third sector over the years ahead.”

The Ulster Bank and CO3 3rd Sector Index is a key barometer of Northern Ireland’s third sector, involving a survey of CO3 members who include the leaders of some of Northern Ireland’s largest charities and social enterprises. Services they provide range from care, to counselling and support, and training and development.

Overall, the latest survey shows that 66 percent of respondents saw an increase in demand for their organisation’s services in the last quarter and three quarters indicate that their organisation is facing financial pressures. 41 percent expect their organisation’s turnover to increase in the next 12 months.

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