

Digital disruption: can the sector of nutrition and dietetics stay unaffected?

Abstract

It is an undeniable fact that there is a rapid emergence of startups, innovative technologies and changing trends in the existing markets. These facts illustrate the altering social needs and are about to influence the structure of traditional practices, products and services in almost all professional sectors. This article mainly focuses on the ramifications of digital disruption in the health professions, especially in the sector of Dietetics and Nutrition, as it will introduce new means in most parts of assessment and counseling, offering numerous new potentials and possibilities. Under these circumstances, it is crucial to highlight which is the proper use of those digital tools and in what extent their use adds value and does not replace the key virtues of the traditional ways. Therefore, every professional should realize the necessity of integrating these technologies so as to follow the social needs and developments, yet without abandoning the vital elements that cannot be replaced by technology and are identified in human experience and interaction.

Keywords: digital, disruption, innovation, technologies, nutrition, dietetics, entrepreneurship

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Introduction

Nowadays we are going through a new era, which is signaled by new and innovative technologies that rapidly emerge. These technologies become all the more evident in the entire spectrum of everyday life, an observation which is widely known as «digital disruption»,¹ a precisely suitable term to describe the upcoming establishment of digital means in all sectors of social structure. Under this umbrella, more and more professional groups realize the need of adopting new digital tools as an integral part of their activities, framing new business strategies in the pursuit of adapting successfully in this competent redefinition of products, services and key activities. Thus, both public and private sector extend their services or even develop new ones, invent and incorporate innovations, alternate their channels and customers relationships and form new structures.^{2,3} In this context, public health and the professions that are involved in this work environment could not stay unaffected, as they integrate new software and relevant applications and seek competitive and viable solutions and suggestions. These altering conditions influence and motivate creatively the community of Dieticians and Nutritionists and in this framework, everyone justifiably wonder what will be the position and the next steps of a nutritionist practitioner, as well as which will be the ramifications of this digital penetration in the traditional practices of dieticians.⁴

Approaching this issue from the perspective of a nutritionist and health professional, technological breakthroughs can nowadays not only facilitate most of the key activities and responsibilities but also upgrade the quality of the services. It is beyond any doubt that these new technologies provide numerous possibilities that allow the simultaneous completion of different and complicated projects, together with flexible individualized approaches in the dietary assessment, evaluation and counseling.⁵ Furthermore, nutritional and food education programs are steadily assumed to be the most important part in the whole “therapeutic procedure” (rather than mere dietary plans) and these new valuable learning programs, often called

“nutritional” lessons as well as the consequent dietary applications and software are a new innovative challenge for all dieticians who recognize their added value, great flexibility and variety of desirable services. Moreover, it goes without saying that the consolidation of the digital age allows for the existence of market applications and products with minimal cost, promising profit and unprecedented improved services that are characterized by innovation and are supported by flexible, sustainable and well-designed business strategies.⁶

Once again, however, competition remains high and demanding as new applications are increasingly emerging and have multiple functions that overlap services from the nutritional sector, food industry, exercise, public health and wellness (what is ideally summarized in the ancient Greek term «Ευ ζην»/Wellbeing), replacing the core activities of a Dietician (at least this is erroneously perceived by the common sense). In contrast, all these digital means have an auxiliary and supplementary role at the hands of a dietitian and by no means can they substitute for the role of a health professional, which encompasses the virtues of personal contact, empathy, personalized and targeted assessment and the combination of experience and scientific background.⁷⁻⁹

Conclusion

Therefore, in the context of this remarkable increasing emergence of such applications and devices and their apparent progressive penetration in people’s life, it is critical for the dietitian to utilize properly and creatively the possibilities that these tools are about to offer. The key in this direction is for the health practitioner to have the experience and the critical thinking to separate which of these tools can indeed be useful in his hands and at which point will he/she allow the digital input replace the traditional techniques that followed his/ hers nutritional practices the past years.

In a nutshell, what man should not forget is that every freelancer, as in this case the dietician, should think and act as an entrepreneur, any time ready to readjust his practices and tools to the evolving

scientific data and to the upcoming market needs and social demands.⁵ Whether a nutritionist who merely uses new digital technologies or an aspiring entrepreneur and at the same time dietician who is about to enter the family of startups entrepreneurship, it is early enough but also urgent - given the rapid speed of the digital revolution and growth of innovations to realize and stare at the role that digitalization of services and products will play the next decades in the Dietetics and Nutrition Industry.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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