

# REDUCING SOCIAL STRATIFICATION VIA DIGITAL SKILLS IMPROVEMENT: THE CASE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES IN LATVIA

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## **Abstract**

*Latvian social enterprises and social entrepreneurship are becoming important since the adoption of the Social Enterprise Law in 2017 (effective as of 01.04.2018). The number of social enterprises with the legal status and the number of financial grants awarded to social enterprises has been steadily increasing, reaching 161 and 110 of them have received support over 7 million EUR as of 28.02.2021, data of the Register of Social Enterprises. Covid-19 crisis is continuing to have a negative effect on the sector since Latvian social enterprises were not provided any complementary support despite the double-bottom lines they are achieving. Inability to provide structured support mechanisms in place for social enterprises may have a negative effect on their ability to achieve their social mission, thus diminishing their capabilities to minimize social stratification within Latvian society. In the face of crises, such as Covid-19, digital skills are of utmost importance as often the only way for social enterprises to continue operations, achieve their social goals and remain financially sustainable is to fully embrace the digital environment. While some enterprises are better at embracing the digital environment, others find it more challenging. The purpose of the study is to investigate the activities of Latvian work integration social enterprises in the digital environment and search for effective solutions for strengthening their digital capacity. Tasks - (1) analyze existing research (2) analyze social enterprise level of activity in the digital environment (3) investigate social enterprise management needs for digital skills improvement. Primary research methods – analysis of social enterprise activities in the Internet and social networks, interviews of management of social enterprises on digital skills improvement options. Research results indicate a need to invest concentrated efforts towards supporting the social enterprises at their initial entry into the digital environment.*

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, social inclusion, social stratification, digital skills

**JEL classification:** I31, I38, L31, L23, L26

## **Introduction**

Social entrepreneurship is developing in many countries world-wide. In different continents, legislation on social entrepreneurship development is different stressing several aspects for development of social entrepreneurship. Latvian social enterprises and social entrepreneurship are becoming important since the adoption of the Social Enterprise Law in 2017 (effective as of 01.04.2018). Academic researchers have performed research and have paid attention of different aspects of social entrepreneurship including competitiveness in the market. The purpose of the study is to investigate the activities of Latvian work integration social enterprises in the digital environment and search for effective solutions for strengthening their digital capacity. Tasks - (1) analyze existing research (2) analyze social enterprise level of activity in the digital environment (3) investigate social enterprise management needs for digital skills improvement. Primary research methods: analysis of social enterprise activities in the Internet and social networks, interviews of management of social enterprises on digital skills improvement options.

## **Theoretical findings on social entrepreneurship development**

Researchers analyse different aspects of social entrepreneurship, as often such entrepreneurship is very important to those involved in it to size up their self-confidence. It is very good from economic development side if such enterprises are developed from the non-governmental sector (Reficco, Layrisse & Barrios, 2021) where the business model innovations are applied. Encouraging social entrepreneurship is considered as very good and valuable issue (Le, Nguyen & Tran, 2020). Economic development of the respective country is important (Daugeliene & Liepinyte, 2012; Daugeliene, 2016). Investigations on aspects how do social entrepreneurs develop technological innovation and survive and develop their activities (Turker & Ozmen, 2021) where is concluded that sometimes technological innovations are considered only by respective companies and not by anybody from outside. Motivation on social entrepreneurship start (Caldwell, Parker & Renko, 2020) especially for people with intellectual disabilities is a very hard aspect also for researchers. Researchers analyse also who wants to become social entrepreneur (Dickel & Eckardt, 2021) where is concluded that there are several ways which lead to social entrepreneurship including gender motivations for social entrepreneurship. Teams have definite importance (Crucke & Knockaert 2021) influencing efficiency of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship has several definitions in many cases depending from the country (Wu, Wu & Sharpe 2020) and actual choice of the respective definition influences also research findings. Still, most researchers, including Authors, agree that what binds all social enterprises is the primary focus on social mission, which is achieved by simultaneously engaging in economic activities (Saebi, Foss & Linder, 2019; Young, Lecy, 2014).

## **Social entrepreneurship - an effective solution for reducing social stratification**

Social entrepreneurship is becoming more and more stable for sustainable development (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020; Eun-Jeong & Kihwan, 2020; Casno, Skiltere & Sloka, 2020; Casno, Skiltere & Sloka, 2019). Aspects of bridging the rural-urban divide in social innovation transfer: the role of values are also on research agenda in the frame of social entrepreneurship (Chowdhury, 2020) where it is concluded that experience sharing among the social enterprises is beneficial to all. Prodanov (2018) highlights the significant role of social entrepreneurship in reducing social inequality and social stratification especially in the context of the upcoming Fourth Industrial Revolution. He argues that the Fourth Industrial Revolution is expected to bring about another crisis of capitalism, further widening the social gaps within societies and increasing inequality. In the context of the aforementioned, Prodanov (2018) has perceived social entrepreneurship as an effective solution to counter the crisis of capitalism and restore some balance within societies, provided authorities integrate social entrepreneurship in their agendas, "...social entrepreneurship must be embraced by the state and political parties that are able to put it in the center of their socio-economic policies" (Prodanov, 2018, p. 136). Fourth Industrial Revolution is still very influential and there are already big attention also to the Fifth Industrial Revolution becoming more and more important.

## **Digital skills as one of the driving forces of social entrepreneurship**

Digital skills are becoming more and more important in different fields including social entrepreneurship. In the era of growing digitalization, reliance on internet, technologies and automation, there is a growing pressure for both commercial and social enterprises to constantly adapt, innovate and find new ways of being. Questions on ability of learning different digital issues needed for social entrepreneurship (Blunck, Fetzer & Tilley, 2021) are stated and evaluated by many researchers including analysis on application of special training programs (Villa, *et. al.*, 2021; Batraga, *et. al.*, 2019, Poveda, *et. al.*, 2019). Digital skills are becoming more and more influential in communication (Zoppelletto, Bullini Orlandi & Rossignoli, 2020); Bartaga, *et. al.*, 2018-a; Batraga, *et. al.*, 2018-b). World-wide pandemic COVID-19 has influenced also social entrepreneurs (Bacq & Lumpkin, 2021; Ratten, 2020) and digital skills and successful application of those increases competitiveness of social enterprises. The significant role of digital technologies is well-summarized by Prodanov (2018), "Digital technologies give us the ability for much easier exchange of data and information between entrepreneurs and customers, they allow us to reach many more people, to identify target groups and to popularize any initiative at a much lower price" (Prodanov, 2018, p.131). Contrary to many developed countries, where the tradition of social entrepreneurship is rather strong, vibrant and well-recognized, in Latvia the sector lacks business and digital skills (Dobele & Pietere, 2015; Līcīte, 2018 a; and Lis, *et. al.*, 2017) which prevent social enterprises from realizing their full potential. Social enterprises, among other challenges, are faced with difficulties to afford various technological solutions and to attract digitally savvy specialists (Prodanov, 2018) who could help them embrace the digital environment on the same level that their commercial counterparts are able to achieve.

The aforementioned is a true challenge as social enterprises' ability to compete with their commercial counterparts is often inherently inferior, due to their simultaneous focus on

achieving both of their missions – social goals and financial sustainability. Therefore social entrepreneurship should be promoted and supported by governments (Casno, Sloka & Šķiltere, 2020). Significant support should be allocated for increasing the digital skills and capacities of social enterprises as digitally savvy social enterprises are more efficient at communication and dissemination of their ideas, attraction of resources (financial and human) and creation of social value (Prodanov, 2018). A bright example of the power of digital technologies in social entrepreneurship, specifically in the context of Covid-19 crisis, is the Latvian work integration social enterprise “OWA Ltd”. “OWA Ltd” is selling high quality design clothing and accessories with unique prints by Latvian artists with the mission to inspire women at risk to pursue personal growth and a rich life despite unfortunate life circumstances. In the face of Covid-19 crisis, this social enterprise successfully refocused on developing digital sales, which allowed the company to reach new sales records and maintain financial sustainability during crisis (Mozello Blog, 2020). Digital skills and technologies can certainly further the growth of social enterprises and increase the social value they deliver to societies. Support from public authorities in the form of additional training and various resources can be of immense help for social enterprises in order to speed up their road towards embracing digital technologies.

## **Empirical research methodology and results**

For research purposes, Register of Social Enterprises (Register, 2021) was consulted (data as of 10.03.2021) in order to acquire data regarding active work integration social enterprises (WISEs) in Latvia. First, order to determine the digital capacity of WISEs, Authors performed an analysis of WISEs’ websites (where applicable) using a free trial version of the tool *SimilarWeb*. Second, Authors performed a detailed analysis of WISEs’ activity on the social network *Facebook* over a 6-month period (from September 2020 – February 2021) and assessed WISEs digital presence in the social network *Instagram*. Third, Authors also conducted 3 structured interviews during the time period of 18.03.2021-22.03.2021.with WISE management to obtain their viewpoint with regards the digital skills and resources they lack the most and future ambitions with regards digital capacities. Taking into account the restrictions due to Covid-19, interviews took place remotely via phone and email.

The number of social enterprises with the legal status and the number of financial grants awarded to social enterprises has been steadily increasing, reaching 161 and 110 of them have received support over 7 million EUR as of 28.02.2021, data of the Register of Social Enterprises. Covid-19 crisis is continuing to have a negative effect on the sector since Latvian social enterprises were not provided any complementary support despite the double-bottom lines they are achieving. Inability to provide structured support mechanisms in place for social enterprises may have a negative effect on their ability to achieve their social mission, thus diminishing their capabilities to minimize social stratification within Latvian society. In the face of crises, such as Covid-19, digital skills are of utmost importance as often the only way for social enterprises to continue operations, achieve their social goals and remain financially sustainable is to fully embrace the digital environment.

While some enterprises are better at embracing the digital environment, others find it more challenging. The number of WISEs in Latvia has reached 42, as of 10.03.2021 (Register, 2021). While 72% of social enterprises in Latvia are concentrated in Riga or Pierīga regions, the geographical spread of WISEs is more balanced, as reflected in Figure 1 below.

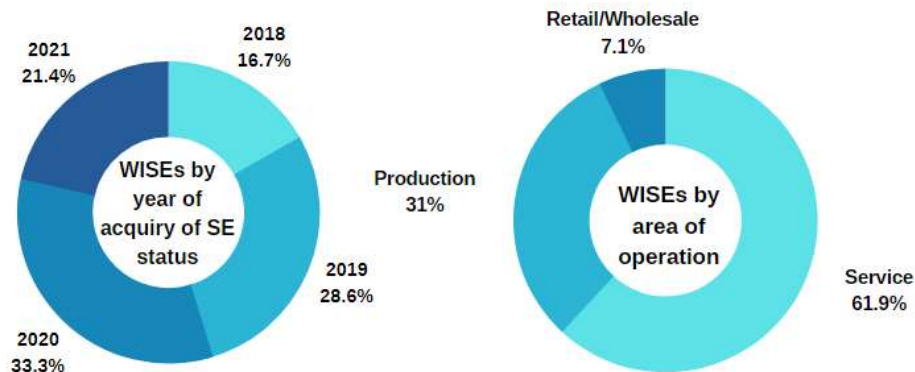
Figure 1: Regional spread of WISEs in Latvia, n=42



Source: Authors' construction, based on Register, 2021

A more concentrated spread of WISEs outside Riga and surrounding Pierīga region marks a positive trend confirming the potential of social enterprises and specifically WISEs in furthering regionally balanced development. According to the latest data from the Register of Social Enterprises, majority of WISEs in Latvia have acquired the official social enterprise status in 2020 (as reflected in Figure 2 below). However, taking into consideration that the data for 2021 reflect only partial results of the first quarter, there is a high probability that by the end of 2021, the number of new WISEs will have exceeded respective results from previous years.

Figure 2: WISEs in Latvia by year of acquirement of social enterprise status and by area of operation, n=42

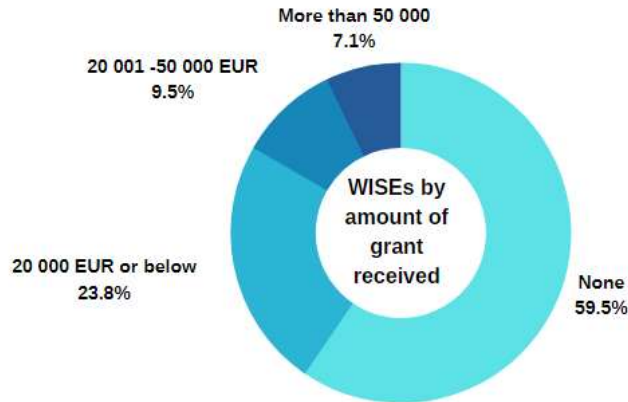


Source: Authors' construction, based on Register, 2021

As reflected in Figure 2 above, majority of WISEs are engaged in provision of services (social care services, catering etc.), followed by production of goods and operations in

retail/wholesale. A little more than 40% of WISEs have received financial grants (as reflected in Figure 3 below), which confirms an ability to generate a robust business plan and indicates high potential for further enterprise development in the future.

Figure 3: WISEs in Latvia by amount of financial grant received, n=42

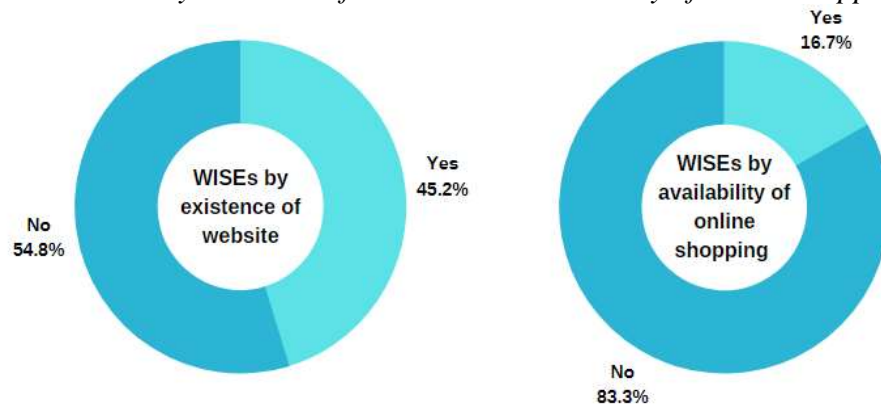


Source: Authors' construction, based on Register, 2021

Specifically, two WISEs - *RB Caf  Ltd.* and *Upeslici Atputai Ltd.* (Upeslici for Leisure) – have demonstrated ambitious growth plans by acquiring grants that exceed 100 000 EUR.

While social enterprises have been visible in the digital public media rather often over the course of the past few years, Authors find it alarming that majority of WISEs do not have their own website (as reflected in Figure 4 below) which potentially indicates a significant digital knowledge and resource gap.

Figure 4: WISEs in Latvia by existence of website and availability of online shopping, n=42



Source: Authors' construction, based on Register, 2021

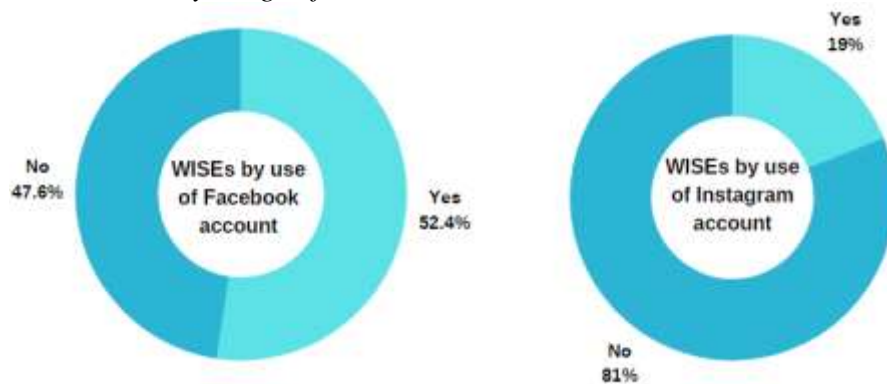
While a partial explanation for the aforementioned could be the relatively young age of the enterprises, the importance of having a website cannot be overlooked as it constitutes a significant part of a company's overall image, which conveys a message of trust to potential

customer audience. Absence of a website is a significant drawback especially for WISEs working in the *B2B* (business to business) market. Nevertheless, a significant number of WISEs have managed to set up their own websites. While they vary significantly in terms of sophistication, for many WISEs websites are the backbone of their public image in the digital world. Less than 20% of WISEs offer online shopping (as reflected in Figure 4 above), however, this can be explained by the high proportion of WISEs operating in service industry. Authors also observed that only 7 of a total of 19 WISEs have clearly indicated their social enterprise status and participation in inclusive employment on their websites which indicates significant unused potential in terms of communicating their valuable cause to the wider audience. In terms of website traffic, *SimilarWeb* tool was able to capture traffic to only 7 WISEs' websites due to comparatively low level (less than 5000) of visitors (data were available for the period of January-March 2020). Majority of WISEs were able to attract several hundred visitors to their website per month, however, Authors observed a considerable degree of variability in website traffic from month to month which altogether indicate significant room for improvement especially for those WISEs which also provide purchases online.

While in most cases majority of traffic to WISEs' websites came from desktop computers, for several enterprises the share of traffic from mobile phones clearly indicate that it is certainly worth to invest in developing a mobile-friendly website. For most WISEs traffic to their websites was brought in by organic search and direct entry, however for several social enterprises the traffic from social networks was also significant, potentially indicating effective social management and usage of social networks.

With regards activity in the social networks (in particular, *Facebook* and *Instagram*), Authors observed that a significant number of WISEs are not utilizing the power of social networks for furthering their cause and mission and communicating with their audience, as reflected in Figure 5 below.

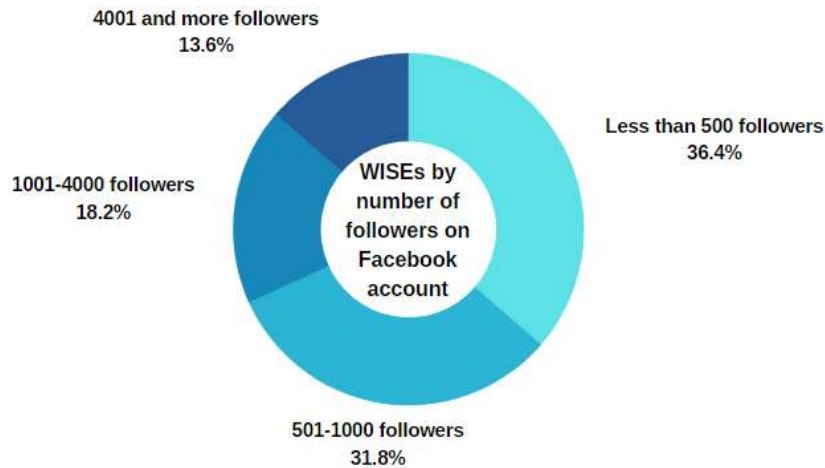
Figure 5: WISEs in Latvia by usage of social network accounts, n=42



Source: Authors' construction, based on performed analysis 13.03.2021

While the above results could be also explained by specificity of particular audience of WISEs, Authors conclude that lack of digital skills, knowledge and resources are a more pertinent explanation. A further indication of the aforementioned is depicted in Figure 6 below.

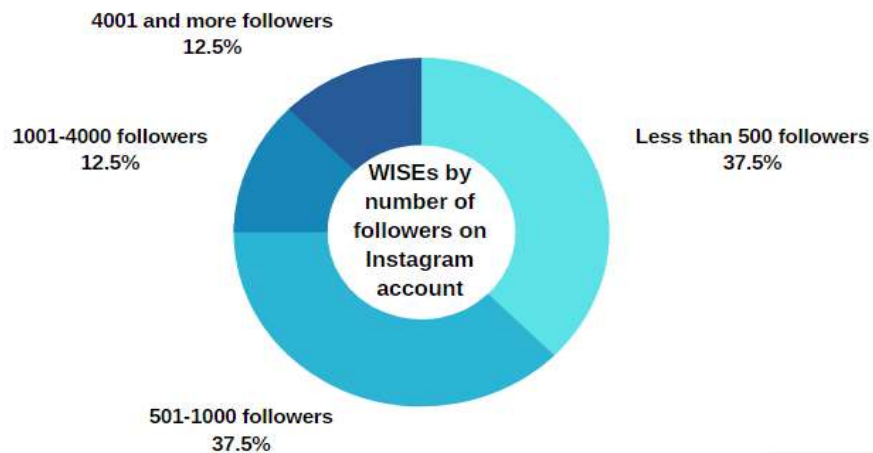
Figure 6: WISEs in Latvia by number of followers of their Facebook accounts, n=22



Source: Authors' construction, based on performed analysis 13.03.2021

Majority of WISEs (68.2%) have less than 1000 followers of their Facebook accounts and the greater half of respective WISEs have even less than 500 followers. A similar trend is observed with regards followers of WISEs' Instagram accounts, as reflected in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7: WISEs in Latvia by number of followers of their Instagram accounts, n=8



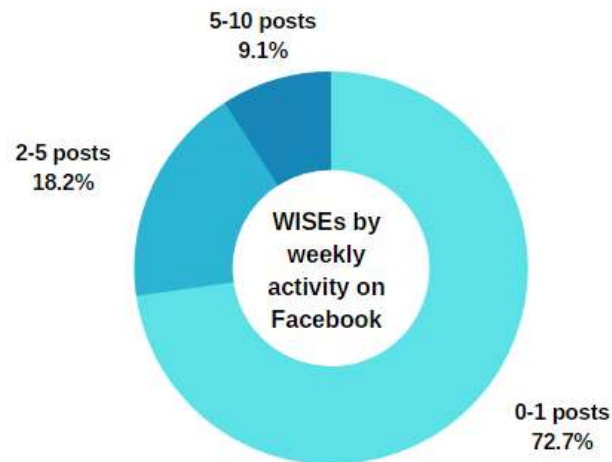
Source: Authors' construction, based on performed analysis 13.03.2021

This clearly indicates that a significant number of WISEs have an underdeveloped social network strategy potentially resulting from a mix of such reasons as insufficient knowledge, skills and resources (human, time, financial). While the majority of WISEs activity on Facebook



is rather weak, there are several (specifically 2 or 9.1%) WISEs, which belong to the weekly posting category of 5-10 posts. Specifically each of those 2 WISEs managed to post 10 posts on Facebook per week, as reflected in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: WISEs in Latvia by average weekly posting activity on Facebook from September 2020-February 2021, n=22

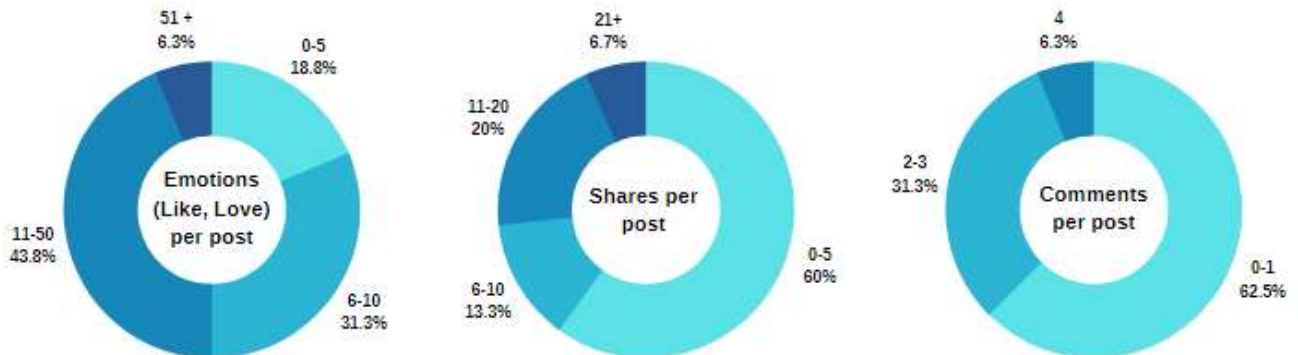


Source: Authors' construction, based on performed analysis 13.03.2021

Among the majority of WISEs with a weekly posting activity of 1 post or less, where 6 WISEs which had not made any posts at all during the observed time period, indicating idleness of their Facebook accounts. In addition to that, in this category Authors also observed several WISEs, which had not made any posts for an entire month or two but were active at posting during the remaining timeframe, which had a negative effect on their overall average weekly posting regularity.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the posts made by WISEs, Authors also analyzed the reaction of the audience to the posts on Facebook, in terms of how many times emotions on average were expressed per post (e.g. Like, Love etc.), and how many Shares and Comments were made per post, as reflected in Figure 9, below.

Figure 9: WISEs in Latvia by average number of emotions, shares and comments achieved per Facebook post from September 2020-February 2021, n=16



Source: Authors' construction, based on performed analysis 13.03.2021

Majority of WISEs are well able to achieve a decent amount of reaction from the audience in terms of emotions. 43.8% of WISEs' obtain on average 11-50 likes per each post they make which indicates that they are able to generate content that resonates with their audience, however, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Considering the size of their *Facebook* audience in terms of followers, majority of WISEs (68.75%) are able to engage only 2% or less of their follower audience, 12.5% of WISEs are able to engage 2.1-5% of their follower audience and only 18.75% of WISEs engage 5.1-8.6% of their follower audience. Compared to ability to achieve follower reactions, Authors observed that achieving sharing and commenting was significantly more challenging for WISEs, as reflected in Figure 9 above. Only 25% of WISEs' displayed a high degree of variety with regards their *Facebook* content, mixing stories with, new product releases, offering competitions etc. Authors also observed that the posts that received the highest reaction from the audience were personal messages regarding achievements, opinion statements and calls for action that revealed the true spirit of the WISE. Authors observed frequent sharing of content generated by other parties on WISEs' *Facebook* accounts, however, it was effective only when WISEs provided their own evaluation or personal statement regarding the content. Furthermore, none of the WISEs are active on the social network *LinkedIn* which holds significant uncovered potential especially for WISEs aiming to obtain commercial customers. Overall, the aforementioned indicates significant disparity among WISEs in terms of communication effectiveness, which could potentially be evened out by additional skills training. Interviews with WISEs management revealed that while skills and knowledge are significant, the issue of financial and human resources is also critical.

Answers to the question about the extent the current stage of digital development (on a scale from 1-10, where 1- does not correspond at all, and 10 – fully corresponds) of WISEs corresponds with their desired vision, managing staff revealed scores from 2 to 6. As WISEs explain, the main difficulties associated with the aforementioned are financial aspects as well as constraints of time and human resources. The extent to which their knowledge, skills and resources correspond to the level necessary to be successful in the digital environment, WISEs report scores from 5 to 8, 5 to 7 and 5 to 7 respectively (scale from 1-10, where 1 – does not

correspond at all, 10 – fully correspond) which not only confirm a need to enhance their knowledge and skills, but also highlight a resource barrier. Specifically, WISEs highlight that they lack human resources, time and financial resources the most. With regards knowledge and skills, WISEs highlight a need for in-depth knowledge of e-commerce, website development and optimization, development of digital marketing strategy, making photos with a smartphone and a need for a better understanding of the trends in the digital environment and their application to their own case and situation. Despite the aforementioned, in the nearest future WISEs are determined to focus their attention to various digital marketing aspects such as social networks and website development and one of the WISEs is planning to hire additional marketing staff. While clearly there are significant needs for skills and knowledge development, WISEs are also often constrained significantly by lack of human resources, financial resources and time, which are important aspects that should be included in training programs. While training cannot resolve all challenges, it can provide ideas and suggestions for attracting talented professionals looking for meaningful work, point out low cost or free of charge digital marketing tools that are used for website design, development of various marketing materials and organizing e-mail campaigns.

## **Conclusions**

Work integration social enterprises are a valuable solution for reducing social stratification within societies as they provide meaningful job opportunities for social risk groups.

Strengthening of digital skills and capacities of WISEs, especially with regards website maintenance, online sales and effective communication on social networks, and during their early development efforts are crucial for financial sustainability of WISEs especially during times of crisis such as Covid-19.

The digital skills and capacities of WISEs in Latvia vary significantly both in terms of their presence in the digital environment via website and also in terms of their ability to use social networks effectively.

WISEs would benefit significantly if public authorities provided support for digital skill development, especially in the early stages of enterprise development, as well as for improvement of digital skills. Additional digital skills training are crucial due to the high proportion of WISEs without a website and comparatively low engagement in utilization of social networks.

Among needed digital knowledge and skills are in-depth knowledge of e-commerce, website development and optimization, development of digital marketing strategy, making photos with a smartphone and a need for a better understanding of the trends in the digital environment and ability to select the most appropriate solutions for their particular case.

Training programs should specifically take into account the resource constraints of WISEs and provide insight and assistance in application of digital solutions that are cost-effective, easy to use and do not require much time.

WISEs could significantly benefit by to sharing diverse content on social networks, voicing their personal opinions and sharing their stories and challenges reflecting the true nature of a WISE, as these types of posts achieve the highest engagement from the audience. Posting of content generated by third parties unless a personal opinion, call for action or other personal message is provided along with the post, generates little attention from the audience.

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