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Supporting independently living people with intellectual disabilities: A qualitative study into professional remote support practices

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Abstract

Background: Professional support for people with intellectual disabilities is increasingly delivered remotely. Understanding what support workers do to support people with intellectual disabilities remotely, and how they do this, is therefore important. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the remote support practice of the support staff of the Dutch service DigiContact.

Methods: A qualitative study was performed in which we followed an inductiveiterative process and used different sources of information: documents, interviews with people who are supported by DigiContact and their caseworkers, and interviews with DigiContact support workers.

Findings: Seven themes were constructed and described. Four themes reflected the support activities of DigiContact support workers, and three themes reflected qualities that guide how the support is provided.

Conclusions: A remote support context can bring both challenges and opportunities to the practice of supporting people with intellectual disabilities. The findings can be useful for service organisations who are contemplating the adoption of remote support initiatives for people with intellectual disabilities.

KEYWORDS

eHealth, intellectual disabilities, remote support, services, support practice, support staff

1 | INTRODUCTION

Service organisations for people with intellectual disabilities increasingly deliver support remotely (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). Examples consist of the deployment of sensors, cameras and detectors for monitoring people's health and safety, and the use of online devices (e.g., tablets, smartphones and computers) to enable live communication with support professionals (Taber-Doughty et al., 2010; Tassé et al., 2020). The rationale behind the adoption of remote support strategies can be the desire to save costs and/or to increase access to support (Brewer et al., 2010; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Tassé et al., 2020). Another aspect that may play a role is that remote support has been found to contribute to people experiencing more independence, autonomy and privacy because the need for the physical presence of support staff in their homes reduces (Niemeijer et al., 2010; Tassé et al., 2020; Wennberg & Kjellberg, 2010). On top of this, the

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coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has given an extra impulse to the adoption of remote support, as organisations searched for ways to safeguard the continuity of their service provision during periods of lockdown and social distancing (Doody & Keenan, 2021; Wos et al., 2021).

For the Dutch service organisation Philadelphia Care Foundation (PCF), reforms of the national long-term care sector formed the motivation for the development of the remote support service DigiContact and its implementation as part of its service portfolio for independently living people with intellectual disabilities (Vijfhuizen & Volkers, 2016). The reforms were intended to improve the quality of long-term care by making it more person-centred, and to increase the self-direction and social inclusion of people with disabilities (Kromhout et al., 2018; Van Ginneken & Kroneman, 2015). However, as they were accompanied by substantial budget cuts (Maarse & Jeurissen, 2016), the reforms also resulted in tighter eligibility criteria and a higher risk that people with so-called 'mild support needs' were excluded from a right to care (Grootegoed & Tonkens, 2017). In response, service organisations felt the urgency to search for new and innovative support concepts and services that would enable them to continue their service provision to independently living people with a need for professional support. The remote service DigiContact offers 24/7 available and on-demand remote support through video calls (online) and audio-only calls (online and offline) with specially trained support workers. Table 1 provides a description of the service using its main characteristics. DigiContact support is mainly used as an addition to onsite support (either at home or a community centre).

The increased adoption of remote support initiatives such as the DigiContact service underlines the importance of evaluating them, for example, with respect to quality and impact. To understand how a service operates and plans to obtain its intended outcomes, it is essential to take into account the role of its support staff, that is, what their support activities entail and how their support is provided (Rossi et al., 2019; van Yperen et al., 2017). In the case of remote

support services, gaining insight into the support practice of its staff might be of particular interest, as not being present at the same location as the person whom one supports may require a specific approach. Besides providing valuable input for evaluation, being able to describe support activities will facilitate the transfer of a service's support practice towards other (new) support staff members (Clement & Bigby, 2011; Douglas & Bigby, 2020) as well as to other organisations. The latter seems especially relevant nowadays, as service organisations display an increased interest in setting up new remote support services, and may profit from the experience gathered by other organisations.

Unfortunately, studies seem to have paid relatively little attention to the role of remote support workers. In general, studies on remote support have focused on exploring the experiences and perceptions of people with intellectual disabilities and/or on onsite support staff (e.g., Frielink et al., 2020; Perry & Beyer, 2012; Tassé et al., 2020), or on evaluating the outcomes of specific initiatives (e.g., Taber-Doughty et al., 2010: de Wit et al., 2015). To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have shed some light on the support practice of remote support staff. In a feasibility study on a web-based support programme for people with mild intellectual disabilities or chronic psychiatric disorders, de Wit et al. (2015) asked both programme users and support workers for feedback on the quality of their communication. Their participants indicated that the online support became more directed towards encouraging them to draw on their personal strengths and skills when executing daily tasks, but they did not specify how this was done. In one of our own studies on support user experiences with support from the DigiContact service, we found that the support staff was experienced to adopt a coaching style during their contacts (Zaagsma et al., 2021). Like in the study of de Wit et al. (2015), the participating support users did not elaborate on what the coaching style of supporting entailed.

The limited knowledge of the role and practice of remote support staff underlines the importance of research on this topic. The current study was designed and conducted to describe the support practice

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the DigiContact service

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Characteristics	Description		
24/7 available	Support is available 24 h a day, 7 days a week. The support workers work in rotating 6-8 h shifts.		
Support is provided remotely	Support is provided through live video calls (online) and audio-only calls (online and offline). Support users either use their own device (e.g., tablet, pc, smartphone, landline phone) to contact the service or a tablet they receive on loan from the service organisation. Technical support is available in the form of technicians who assist either from a distance or at home		
Support can be planned and unplanned	Contacts can be planned and unplanned. Planned contacts are with appointment, usually according to an agreed-on time interval. Unplanned contacts are without an appointment: support users call in whenever they want or need support (on demand).		
No fixed contacts between support workers and support users	Support users cannot choose which support worker they speak to: they talk to the support worker who picks up their call.		
Usually combined with onsite services	The service is implemented as one component of a broader support concept for independently living people with intellectual disabilities (called My Network). In practice, support from the DigiContact service is usually combined with onsite support at home or a community center.		

of the DigiContact service's support staff. More specifically, the study aimed to explore the support activities of DigiContact support workers by focusing on the following question: What do DigiContact support workers do during their remote contact with independently living people with intellectual disabilities to support them and how do they do this?

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Study design

A qualitative and descriptive research design was adopted in which we followed an inductive-iterative process (e.g., Kekeya, 2016; Yom, 2014), which consisted of four steps and included three sources of information: (1) key documents on DigiContact, (2) interviews with DigiContact support users and their caseworkers (senior support workers who provide onsite support and coordinate supports), and (3) interviews with DigiContact support workers. The Medical Ethics Review Committee of VU University Medical Centre (FWA00017598) confirmed that the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) did not apply to this study, which meant that official approval by the committee was not required. The study was designed, planned and carried out by two researchers: an academically trained researcher (M. Z.) and a coresearcher with an intellectual disability (M. H. and M. K.). Three senior researchers (K. M., A. S. and G. v H.) advised on methodological issues, were actively involved in data analysis and provided feedback on previous versions of this paper.

2.2 | Step 1: Desk research

Together with two DigiContact staff members, we selected seven documents that were expected to provide initial insights into the provided support: one programme description, two informational documents for new support workers, the official job description for the role of remote support worker, two brochures for support users and their families, and a text on the service organisation's website.

TABLE 2 Characteristics of participants

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The content of the documents was analysed through a qualitative content analysis process based on a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Two authors (M. Z. and K. V.) selected and coded pieces of texts that provided information regarding the support activities of DigiContact support workers. The codes were clustered into categories and subsequently into themes.

2.3 | Step 2: Interviews with remote support workers and case workers

During three previous studies on DigiContact (Zaagsma et al., 2019; Zaagsma, Volkers, Koning, et al., 2020; Zaagsma et al., 2021), a total of 55 interviews were carried out with support users and/or their caseworkers to explore their experiences with DigiContact. Although these interviews were not specifically focused on the support activities of DigiContact support workers, the subject had often come up and we seized the opportunity to include this material in the current analysis. As analysing all 55 interview transcripts would require a time frame that went beyond our planning, we selected 40 transcripts (Table 2) that we considered to be rich in information (criterion: highest number of codes from the original analysis). A new analysis, again following the inductive approach of Thomas (2006), was performed on these transcripts by three authors (transcripts were divided amongst M. Z., K. V. and M. K.) to find both information that confirmed the coding scheme from Step 1, as well as new information that was added to form a supplementary coding scheme.

2.4 | Step 3: Interviews with remote support workers

As a next step, we conducted semistructured interviews with 10 DigiContact support workers. The interviews focused specifically on their support activities during contact with independently living people with intellectual disabilities.

A combination of purposive and convenience sampling procedures (Patton, 2005) was used for recruitment. The DigiContact

	Step 2, support users ^a (N = 21)	Step 2, caseworkers ^b (N = 9)	Step 3, remote support workers (N = 10)
Woman, n	7	8	8
Age, median (range)	49 (33-71)		
Years of using online support, M (SD)	2.0 (1.4)		
Years of providing online support, M (SD)			3.1 (1.9)
Experience with providing onsite support, n			8

^aParticipants from previous studies on DigiContact (Zaagsma et al., 2019; Zaagsma, Volkers, Koning, et al., 2020; Zaagsma et al., 2021). Included in the analysis were 31 transcripts of interviews with 21 support users (most support users were interviewed twice).

^bParticipants from a previous study on DigiContact (Zaagsma, Volkers, Koning, et al., 2020). Included in the analysis were nine transcripts of interviews with nine caseworkers.

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support staff team consisted of 25 support workers at the time of planning the interviews (December 2019). Three support workers were excluded a priori because they had only recently (<6 months earlier) joined the team and we felt that this might be too short to be acquainted with every detail of our enquiries. An informational e-mail with an appeal to participate in an interview was sent to the remaining 22 support workers. Seven support workers enlisted themselves in response. To obtain a better representation of the team (with respect to sex, length of time working at DigiContact and having previous experience with providing onsite support), five more support workers were selected and recontacted. Three of them agreed to an interview. One support worker did not want to participate, because (s)he felt not experienced enough to reflect on her/his work and the other was not interviewed as we failed to plan an interview due to conflicting agendas. As a result, a total of 10 DigiContact support workers were interviewed (Table 2).

An interview guide was developed based on the coding scheme from Step 2. The guide included four main topics: (1) values and goals, (2) activities and strategies, (3) working in a team and (4) conditions for providing good support. The interviews (held by M. Z. and M. K. together) were all audio-recorded with participant approval and transcribed verbatim. We used member validation as a validity check (Green & Thorogood, 2014), in which each participant received a typed summary of their interview to check for accuracy. One participant provided additional input to nuance his/her views regarding the conditions for providing good support.

For analysis, the transcripts were distributed amongst all authors in such a way that each transcript was coded, again inductively, by at least two authors (M. Z. coded all transcripts). The resulting codes, categories and themes were compared to those in the coding scheme from Step 2 by the first author. New codes were added to the scheme, and categories and themes were adjusted where relevant to improve the fit with all data. The new coding scheme was discussed amongst all authors before continuing with the final step.

2.5 | Step 4: Check on recognisability and relevance

Short descriptions were made of the themes in the coding scheme after Step 3. These descriptions were presented to and discussed with two senior DigiContact support professionals in terms of their recognisability and relevance. Although the descriptions were recognised to be an adequate reflection of the provided support, some feedback was given on one of the themes (3.1.1), which led to a reformulation of its description.

3 | FINDINGS

The analysis of Steps 1–3 resulted in the construction of seven themes. Four themes, called areas of support, reflect *what* the support activities of DigiContact support workers entail. Contacts



FIGURE 1 Visual representation of the interconnectedness between the areas and qualities of DigiContact support

vary with respect to how many and which areas of support are present, as well as the relative emphasis placed on each of them. Three themes reflect central qualities that guide *how* DigiContact support workers provide support during their contact with support users across all areas of support. The areas and qualities of support are interconnected, as depicted in Figure 1. The following paragraphs provide a description of the seven themes, resulting from Step 4. Quotes from the interviews with DigiContact support workers are used sparingly by way of illustration.

3.1 | Areas of support

3.1.1 | Creating a welcoming and safe digital environment

During each support contact, the support workers aim to create an environment in which support users feel sufficiently welcome and safe to share and discuss their issues and can be open and receptive to assistance. It was experienced that creating such an environment is hampered by the absence of fixed contacts between specific support workers and support users. That is, support workers do not have a fixed subselection of support users under their wings¹, and support users talk to the support worker who happens to answer their call (which can be a different support worker each time they call in).

¹There are no fixed contacts between specific support workers and support users, which means that the support workers provide support to any support user who calls in during their work shifts.

Clients should feel welcome and be invited to discuss their problems. [...]. It is always a challenge to realize a pleasant atmosphere during conversations, as you are rather anonymous due to being part of a large team, and having plenty of clients. So you miss out on a oneto-one relationship with a client, but even so you need to find a pleasant informal way of conversing. (Support worker 8)

Despite-and because of-the absence of fixed contacts, the support workers invest time and effort during each contact into making personal contact with support users by using several strategies. First, they adopt an affective attitude characterised by openness, empathy, respect, equality and tranquillity. Second, they present themselves as a present and available partner in conversation by giving support users space and time to talk about what is on their mind, by showing sincere interest in their stories, and by providing some level of reciprocity in conversation. Third, they positively reinforce the self-image and self-confidence of support users by complimenting them (e.g., on taking initiative to contact the service) and highlighting positive aspects of their situation. The support workers align their strategies with the specific characteristics and context of each contact. For example, a warm atmosphere is more important when support users call in in tears to talk about an argument with their partner, than when they seek help with drawing up a shopping list.

Sometimes support workers do not succeed in creating a safe environment for (and with) a support user. When they notice that, despite their efforts, a support user does not feel at ease, they consider the possibility of offering the possibility to be connected with a colleague.

3.1.2 | Focusing on current support needs

In their support contacts, the support workers focus their attention and support on the question(s) and/or issue(s) that are, right there and then, bothering the support users. This is especially the case in unplanned contacts, as there is often a specific issue that caused support users to contact the service. Therefore, in unplanned contacts, the support workers try to get a clear and comprehensive picture of the issue(s) for which support is sought on early in the conversation by listening attentively (with the intent of fully understanding support users), and by reading their support plans and the recent reports on previous support contacts in their electronic client file (ECF). Subsequently, they try to accommodate support users by validating their request for help and letting them know that their support question is understood. In planned contacts, the support users' focus on the support goals as defined in the support users' support plans (in ECF).

If someone calls in unplanned, there is usually something that is really bothering the client. So I

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generally start with an open question like 'How are you doing today?' or 'I see that you do not have an appointment for today, what has made you contact us?' When the call is planned, I usually focus on the support goals that we agreed on. But even then, I do ask whether there are other things to discuss. (Support worker 10)

Although getting a clear picture of what is bothering a support user may be relatively easy when s/he is able to put thoughts and feelings into words, it can be quite difficult when s/he is not able to do so. In the latter case, support workers try to figure out the 'question behind the story' by asking explorative questions, by intuitively sensing what might be going on and by checking if their assumptions are valid. In this process, not knowing a support user well personally (due to the absence of fixed contacts) was experienced to add to the complexity of identifying the current support needs.

3.1.3 | Supporting an active role in addressing support needs

After clarifying the support users' questions and/or issues, the support workers steer the conversation towards what they need and want in terms of support. While in some cases it is sufficient to provide support users with emotional support in the form of 'a sympathetic ear', in other cases, they may (also) need informational and/or practical support. In general, support users are supported towards reaching a point at which they are confident about being able to continue on their own. Several support workers stressed the relatively reactive (ad hoc) character of their support:

When you work as an onsite support worker, you may well have two hours to find a solution with someone and you pick up on that theme the next time you meet again. At DigiContact, we do not get that next time. So our support is especially about helping clients with their issues and feelings, so they can deal with them and continue with their day. (Support worker 7)

Support users are stimulated to take on an active role in thinking about possible answers and solutions. The support workers for example ask them about previous situations in which they encountered similar problems and how they handled them, or about people from their social network who might be able to help. Not being in the same room was experienced to prevent the support workers from taking over tasks and to enable them to guide support users towards using their own skills, knowledge and talents to solve issues.

Although the support workers aim to take over as little as possible, they will do so when a situation calls for it. In the extreme example of a crisis, they take over and arrange what is needed to ensure the support user's safety (e.g., calming them, calling a doctor WILEY-

or emergency service, informing and mobilising family and caseworker) and subsequently remain in touch and coordinate actions until this role can be handed over to the caseworker. In this respect, the 24/7 availability of DigiContact support was experienced to be of great value, both by support workers and users.

3.1.4 | Collaborating with onsite professionals

For the grand majority of support users, DigiContact support is an addition to onsite support provided by their caseworker (and sometimes also by other support workers). In this case, DigiContact support workers form a collaboration with their onsite colleagues, with the purpose of working together and aligning their support. In their contacts with support users, careful attention is paid to signalling issues that would benefit from being addressed by an onsite support worker, in which case support users are referred accordingly, and a note is made in their ECF. When a potential problem is signalled, the support workers (DigiContact and onsite) contact each other directly to enable a quick intervention which might prevent problems from getting worse:

Once we suspect that someone is not doing well, we contact the regular onsite worker who will then pay a visit to this client. It is also possible that the onsite worker calls us, for instance when the weekend is approaching and he or she will be off duty. They may say something like: 'I will not be there over the weekend, but [name client] is having trouble with this and that, and it may be important for you to know this, should this client phone in. Could you phone her/him once or twice additionally?' (Support worker 3)

As described before, DigiContact can function as the first contact for support users in the case of a crisis, and its support workers undertake the first necessary steps before informing the onsite support worker, who then takes over.

The collaboration with onsite support workers is anchored in the overall support process. At intakes and evaluation sessions, the support user, his/her caseworker and one of the DigiContact support workers all participate. An ECF system that is accessible to all parties is used to record the support plan and reports on support contacts.

3.2 | Qualities of support

3.2.1 | Self-direction of support users

The support activities of DigiContact support staff are guided by the principle that support users are in control of their support. Not only do they control the timing and frequency of their support contacts by making decisions on when and how often they need support, they are also given a steering role regarding the content of the support (i.e.,

what their support focuses on (3.1.2) and what they need to move forward in terms of possible answers and solutions (3.1.3): 'You always put the clients in charge. You hear them out and you provide the support that is desired' (Support worker 8).

The self-direction of support users is most evident in unplanned contacts, as the opportunity to deploy online support without having an appointment enables them to make on-the-spot decisions regarding if and what kind of support is needed. In planned contacts, support user control is exerted more indirectly, as decisions regarding timing, frequency and content of contacts are made during intakes and periodic evaluations, together with their caseworker and a DigiContact support worker.

3.2.2 | Personalisation

DigiContact support workers aim to adjust their support as much as possible to the personal needs and preferences of support users. This was experienced to be a challenging process, because they provide support to a very large and diverse group of support users² and they do not know each of them well, due to the absence of fixed contacts. Having access to up-to-date information on each support user (i.e., support goals and plans, points of attention in the interaction and reports on support contacts with onsite support workers) is therefore of essential importance. Ideally, the support workers prepare themselves by reading this information in advance. When this is not possible, for example, in case of an unplanned contact or when there is not enough time to prepare, the support workers read this info during their contact with the support user:

The first thing we look up are the instructions concerning how to relate to this client. It regularly happens that we have a call with someone whom we only speak to once every three months or so. In that case I obviously do not know immediately who this client is, and how I can best relate to him or her. We really want these instructions to be up to date and well organized. (Support worker 2)

Besides having access to information on support users, it is important for the support workers to rely on their intuition, to try out approaches and to evaluate them together with the support users.

3.2.3 | Targeted support

For each support contact, DigiContact support workers take out as much time as needed, but also as little as possible by keeping their conversations to the point and directed towards the four areas of support (as described in 3.1):

 $^{^2\}mathrm{At}$ the time of the interviews with support workers (January 2020), about 1500 support users were connected to the service.

We want conversations to be about what is the matter. Once the problems have been discussed and, in some cases, the solutions established, we should end the conversation. We do not talk for the sake of talking, but we support and guide. (Support worker 9)

The remote context of DigiContact was experienced to make it easier to keep conversations to the point, as the absence of fixed contacts and the physical distance between support workers and support users free up time that would otherwise be used for things like 'catching up and drinking coffee'.

4 | DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that remote professional support for people with intellectual disabilities is becoming increasingly prevalent, there is still limited knowledge of the role of remote support workers. This paper contributes to the body of such knowledge by exploring the support practice of the remote support service DigiContact. The findings show that the support activities of DigiContact workers focus on strengthening the capabilities of independently living people with intellectual disabilities regarding coping and problem-solving and on giving them (more) control over their support and the way they confront the difficulties they encounter in their everyday lives. In addition, they aim to create the conditions that enable and facilitate the support process: a welcoming and safe digital environment and a close collaboration with onsite support staff.

The findings indicate that a remote support context can bring both challenges and opportunities to the practice of supporting independently living people with intellectual disabilities. With regard to challenges, the findings show that that DigiContact support workers feel the need to pay extra attention to the creation of a safe and welcoming environment in which people feel invited and sufficiently safe to discuss problems. As people are not supported by fixed remote support workers (i.e. every time they contact the service, they speak with a support worker who happens to pick up their call; this can be a different support worker every time), they do not know the remote support workers well (and vice versa) and are therefore not able to build up a bond of trust over time. Not knowing the people who one supports well underlines the key importance of support workers having access to up-to-date information on each support user and taking the time to read this and prepare. Although giving support users space and time to talk is part of the support workers' strategy to make people feel at ease, this seems to interfere with the aim to keep conversations to the point. Finding the right balance between keeping conversations to the point and making people feel safe and welcome seems complicated (especially as this balance might be different for every person). Creating a safe and welcoming environment brings to mind the term safe space, which is often used in referral to a physical place (e.g., in schools, universities, workplaces) where people can meet and discuss their experiences without facing prejudice, judgement, conflict and critique (e.g.,

Flensner & von der Lippe, 2019; Harless, 2018). In reference to working with people with intellectual disabilities, the importance of creating a safe space has been stressed with regard to different contexts, such as inclusive research collaborations (Puyalto et al., 2016; Schwartz & Durkin, 2020) and inclusive training settings (Sergeant et al., 2021). Despite the efforts of the DigiContact support workers to make personal contact with each support user and to create a friendly, open, respectful and positive atmosphere, in a previous study we found that support users can still perceive their contacts with the service as relatively impersonal and that this can inhibit them to open up and discuss certain issues (Zaagsma et al., 2021).

With regard to opportunities, the findings indicate that providing support from a distance may compel support workers to take a step back and give support users room to do things their way. DigiContact support workers encourage and guide support users from a distance to tap into their own skills, knowledge, experiences and motivations as much as possible when confronting their problems, and they try to provide the tools and support that they need to take on an active role towards struggles and difficulties. Their support is not about pushing people into dealing with problems alone or independently, but about partnering up with them and giving support and guidance so that they can act as a causal agent in their own lives (Wehmeyer et al., 2017). This finding corresponds to the concept of relational autonomy, which centres around the conviction that agency and autonomy emerge through the support and enablement of other people (Björnsdóttir et al., 2015; Davy, 2019). Another parallel can be drawn between the support activities of DigiContact support workers and Freire's concept of 'conscientisation', which refers to a process of raising critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action that often leads to personal and social transformation (Freire, 1970). DigiContact support may have an empowering impact on people with intellectual disabilities through enhancing their understanding of the difficulties that they encounter and their own potential with regard to addressing them. This may in turn lead to a growth in (self)confidence regarding one's competence to confront issues (Zaagsma et al., 2021).

Besides indicating that a remote support context can bring both challenges and opportunities to the practice of supporting independently living people with intellectual disabilities, the findings also underline the importance of remote support workers collaborating closely with onsite support workers to provide good support. DigiContact support workers were found to coordinate and align support plans and activities with their onsite colleagues, and to work closely together in supporting support users. This resonates with the concept of collaborative teaming, which is used in inclusive education literature to depict the collaboration between professionals (e.g., special needs and general educators) who share the goal of supporting students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (King-Sears et al., 2015; Snell & Janney, 2000). In care settings, a frequently used term for situations in which onsite and remote (online) services are combined is blended care (Wentzel et al., 2016). Several authors have stressed the potential value of blended care for the daily

functioning of people with intellectual disabilities (Frielink et al., 2020; Timmer, 2014; Vereenooghe et al., 2017). However, studies on its use in the field of intellectual disability services have so far been relatively limited and primarily focused on initiatives in therapy and educational settings (e.g., Bell et al., 2016; Cooney et al., 2017; Hronis et al., 2019; Zavaraki & Schneider, 2019). The fact that DigiContact support is generally used in combination with onsite support at home (Zaagsma, Volkers, Koning, et al., 2020) is an example of how blended care can be realised in support settings.

4.1 | Limitations

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This study focused on the support practice of one specific remote support initiative: the DigiContact service. The findings can therefore not be generalised to other initiatives or remote support services in general. Caution is also warranted regarding the transferability of the findings towards other support user groups than people with intellectual disabilities living independently. Although it may not be likely that DigiContact support workers will adopt an entirely different approach when supporting groups like people with intellectual disabilities in supported accommodation settings, it is possible that some differentiation will occur. Another limitation lies in the use of semistructured interviews as the main method of data collection. The use of interviews implies that we explored beliefs and perceptions regarding the DigiContact support practice, and these may not be a direct reflection of actual behaviour and actions (Green & Thorogood, 2014). Observational data on the interactions between DigiContact support staff and support users are needed to investigate this.

4.2 | Implications for practice and research

Although the DigiContact support practice may not be easily transferrable beyond the context of this service, it may function as an example for organisations in the field of intellectual disability services who look into the possibility of organising remote support and how to shape the role of the involved support workers. Previous studies have shown that a service like DigiContact should not be seen nor used as a 'miracle service' in times of social care reforms, as it is not equally suitable for all people with intellectual disabilities and it cannot replace all onsite support (Zaagsma, Volkers, Koning, et al., 2020; Zaagsma et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the current findings indicate that DigiContact is not an efficiency measure of which the quality of support cannot be guaranteed and/or receives little attention. Instead, they suggest that DigiContact can play a valuable role in the support of people with intellectual disabilities, especially when deployed as an addition to and in close collaboration with onsite support services. It may for example offer people the opportunity to exert (more) control over their own professional support and give them room to learn and develop in the area of coping and problem-solving. DigiContact may also increase the

chances of relatively high-functioning and independently living people with intellectual disabilities maintaining access to specialised support services in the face of budget cuts and tightened eligibility criteria (Zaagsma et al., 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the usefulness of having remote support to fall back upon when onsite support provision is hampered (European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities, 2020; Zaagsma, Volkers, Swart et al., 2020).

Regarding future research, the insights into the support activities of DigiContact support staff contribute to an enhanced understanding of how the service operates and plans to obtain its intended outcomes. Thereby, they provide input for future evaluation efforts (Rossi et al., 2019; van Yperen et al., 2017). It would for example be valuable to explore whether, and to what extent, DigiContact support has an empowering impact by promoting the (relational) autonomy, self-direction and (self-)confidence of people with intellectual disabilities. In addition, to gain insight into potential differences between remote and onsite support activities, it would be interesting to perform an observational study in which remote and onsite support interactions are compared.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data presented in this study (transcripts) are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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