

## Part II: Online Supervision in Practice: Experiences, Processes and Relationships



## CHAPTER 3

### First Experience with Online Supervision

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In recent years, the popularity and prevalence of digital technologies have accelerated and continue to grow exponentially. The digital wave has become increasingly intertwined with everyday life (Elliott, 2019). The professional field of social work, including the practice of supervision, is no exception. As noted by Hovanová and Šišanská (2024), digitalization and the related phenomena of social isolation and weakened social support represent significant societal challenges that may also manifest in the professional environment of helping practitioners. Capturing the first experience with distance supervision is considered essential, particularly because of its strong formative effect on the supervisee's attitude toward this mode of work. It also enables the identification of aspects that tend to be most demanding in the initial phase. The first encounter with distance supervision was strongly shaped by technology – its usability and functionality. Some participants, however, emphasized the advantages of flexibility and time efficiency. Hovanová and Šed'o (2025) point to risks associated with the online environment that may affect the quality of interaction, comprehension of content, and the emotional dimension of communication, which is equally relevant for online supervision.

Yet other participants reported a lack of depth and confidentiality in the relationship when it was formed through the barrier of a screen or headset.

#### *Distance and Online Supervision*

Distance supervision is understood as a form of the supervisory process that takes place without in-person contact between the supervisor and the supervisee, most commonly through digital technologies such as videoconferencing, phone calls, or e-mail communication. It is therefore a broader concept than the term online supervision. Online supervision can be defined as supervision conducted exclusively through internet-based infrastructure, using various digital technologies that enable and mediate

communication. A fundamental condition for supervision to be considered online supervision is the implementation of the supervisory process within a digital environment. Compared to traditional face-to-face supervision, online supervision may be perceived through its specific advantages as well as disadvantages arising from the technological dimension of the relationship. On the one hand, technology overcomes physical distance, increases accessibility, and enhances flexibility. On the other hand, it may lead to strained communication, distorted nonverbal cues, or misunderstandings when reflecting on more complex cases. A further potential risk is excessive dependence on the supervisor and the supervisee's expectation of immediate support or understanding, for instance through chat-based tools. In the following text, the term *distance supervision* is used to refer to all forms of supervision conducted without in-person contact, while the term online supervision is applied primarily to synchronous supervision delivered via videoconferencing.

### *Theoretical Framework of Online Supervision*

From the perspective of theoretical approaches, the ecological systems theory appears particularly fitting for understanding the interconnection between an individual's social environment and ICT. This theory situates the individual within multiple, mutually interconnected ecological contexts that exert influence upon them (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Its core lies in examining the relationships between the organism, the individual, and diverse environmental systems – such as the family, school, the wider society – as well as the interrelationships among these systems. The interaction between the individual and the environment is bidirectional, constituting a reciprocal relationship. The ecology of human development focuses on the dynamic mutual adaptation between active, self-developing individuals and the evolving characteristics of their immediate life contexts. More recent extensions of this framework incorporate the digital sphere into the ecology of social systems and individual contexts. Bronfenbrenner's ideas remain highly relevant today, particularly as technology, online interactions, and major societal changes generate new environmental influences on development (Guy-Evans, 2020). ICTs are now integrated into all societal contexts, including social work (Foeday, 2011), making it necessary to understand both their beneficial and challenging implications for individuals. Practitioners and clients alike make use of ICTs because of their utility and ease

of use, which enhances not only work performance but also the effectiveness of services provided.

To frame the initial experience with online supervision, the widely recognized Integrated Developmental Model by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) is employed, as it is considered highly applicable to the field of social work. The Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision (IDMS) offers a holistic approach to supervision that goes beyond traditional models, which may focus solely on performance evaluation or task completion. Instead, the IDMS acknowledges the interconnectedness of the supervisee's personal, professional, and relational development, recognizing that growth in one domain inevitably influences the others. This model emphasizes a collaborative, developmentally oriented relationship between supervisor and supervisee, fostering a supportive environment for self-awareness and skill enhancement. The IDMS is a flexible framework adaptable to a variety of contexts and supervisory relationships. Its strength lies in its ability to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives and practical techniques, thereby tailoring the supervisory process to the unique needs of each supervisee. The model is grounded in several core principles:

- a) *Developmental perspective* acknowledges that individuals progress at different paces and along different pathways. It avoids a universal approach and instead highlights individualized support based on the supervisee's developmental stage and learning style.
- b) *Holistic approach* considers the interconnection between the supervisee's personal, professional, and relational life. Challenges arising in one area may influence others, underscoring the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the individual.
- c) *Collaborative, respectful relationship* means that supervisors and supervisees work together to identify goals, strategies, and methods of evaluation within a relationship built on mutual respect.
- d) *A strengths-based approach* emphasizes the identification and cultivation of the supervisee's existing strengths and capacities, thereby supporting a positive and empowering supervisory experience.
- e) *The integrative theoretical framework* indicates that this model draws on a variety of theoretical perspectives, including psychodynamic, cognitive and behavioral, humanistic, and systemic theories. This breadth allows supervisors to employ a wide range of tools and techniques in order to most effectively achieve shared goals with supervisees (Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision, 2025).

The Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision proposes changes across three structural dimensions – self-awareness and awareness of the others, motivation, and the dependence–autonomy continuum – which are used to track supervisee progress across four developmental stages or levels: novice, advanced beginner, competent worker, and integrated professional (McNeill, Stoltenberg & Romans, 1992; Stoltenberg, McNeill & Delworth, 1998). For example, at the first developmental level, supervisees are assumed to be highly dependent on the supervisor’s guidance and direction. They tend to focus excessively on their own anxieties and demonstrate high motivation driven by a strong desire to become practitioners, yet they lack a deeper understanding of the complexities of the counseling role or process. At the second level, supervisees experience a tension between dependence and autonomy in their relationship with the supervisor. As they gain experience in the counseling process – along with its accompanying successes and setbacks – they begin to question their own skills, leading to fluctuating levels of motivation. At this point, the supervisee shifts from a self-focused perspective to a predominantly client-focused one, which often results in confusion or emotional distress. At the third level, the supervisee has overcome earlier conflicts and functions more autonomously, with an increased degree of self-confidence. Motivation again becomes high and stable, grounded in an understanding of the limits and complexities of the counseling process. These advanced trainees are also able to engage in reflection and empathy, integrating their own emotional and cognitive responses to the client with an awareness of the client’s experience. The final stage, the integrated level three, is conceptualized by Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) as a broadly integrative phase in which the structural dimensions of this level are present across multiple domains, and the practitioner attains integration across these domains. Supervision shifts toward a collegial dialog aimed at maintaining quality and fostering reflection; the supervisee possesses a strong professional identity, confidence, and openness to feedback. Supervisory environments are intentionally designed and adapted to the supervisee’s developmental level in order to support progression through the stages. For example, a dependent supervisee at level one requires a highly structured, directive learning environment that meets the fundamental needs of a beginner. By contrast, an advanced supervisee benefits from a less structured environment that is designed not only to provide support, but also to encourage independent thinking and functioning.

Across its four stages, the Integrated Developmental Model of Supervision focuses on professional identity, self-efficacy, the need for support, and individual autonomy. The supervisee begins in a state of dependence and, through a phase of unstable autonomy, moves toward becoming an integrated professional. In this process, the supervisory relationship gradually shifts from guidance to facilitation. Another model – the developmental process model of supervision by Hawkins and Shohet (2012) – comprises three stages and places greater emphasis on the dynamics of the supervisory relationship and process. It begins with establishing the supervisor-supervisee relationship, continues through the working phase, and concludes with termination. The quality of the relationship is considered crucial. The supervisor's role is to create safety and facilitate learning, that is, to accompany the supervisee throughout the learning process. In the first stage of the supervisory process, the focus is on building the relationship and establishing safety. The supervisor and supervisee get to know one another, develop mutual trust, and create a secure environment. Among other tasks, they clarify the aims of supervision, expectations, rules, and the boundaries of the relationship. In the second, working stage, reflection deepens, and case analysis and work analysis take place. The joint work increasingly focuses on developing competencies, attitudes, and boundaries. The supervisee becomes more active and takes the lead on some topics. In the final stage, the achieved progress is reviewed, and the collaboration is ended. This stage may also involve processing feelings of loss or change, as well as offering mutual feedback.

### *Changes in the Experience of Supervision*

Changes in how supervision is experienced have recently been examined in the Slovak context by Vrťová and Vaska (2022), who identified research categories related to changes and experiences of supervision from the perspective of supervisors. Within the domain of experiential changes, they observed mainly psychological and physical discomfort, a limited ability to perceive the supervisee's non-verbal communication, reduced attention, and emotional detachment or coolness. In terms of changes brought about by the mode of supervision delivery, the most salient shifts appeared in the spatial, technological, content-related, ethical, and relational dimensions. The authors also identified benefits associated with online supervision, such as saving time, financial costs, or personal energy; increased flexibility

and variability; improved accessibility of supervisors; and personal growth stemming from new topics. Among the disadvantages most frequently mentioned were reduced sense of safety, limited ability to assess non-verbal cues, lower levels of trust and concentration, as well as restricted opportunities to use creative methods and techniques. Šavrnochová (2024) also highlights the need to reflect on changes in social interactions and communication styles within helping professions, pointing to the importance of a sensitive approach, mutual trust, and contextual understanding when working with vulnerable groups – elements that are equally crucial in online supervision.

Farkašová (2023), whose research focused on the quality of supervision from the perspective of supervisees, identified several important factors related to perceptions of online supervision and evaluations of its quality. These were primarily associated with the presence of a more personal approach, which was perceived as stronger in face-to-face formats. At the same time, online supervision was described as “cold,” lacking orientation toward the relational dimension between supervisor and supervisee, and accepted as necessary mainly during the pandemic or similar crises. Outside such circumstances, it was generally regarded as a less valid form of supervision. Deficits in online supervision were also identified in relation to professionalism. Adequate preparation on the part of the supervisor is considered a hallmark of good supervision; however, in the online format, supervisees felt that the supervisor could not convincingly demonstrate that they had prepared sufficiently. Some participants, however, expressed the view that no significant differences existed between individual online supervision and individual in-person supervision.

### *Beginning Supervisees*

In their research on beginning social workers, Vaska and Čavojská (2012) divided supervision into two areas. The first included students who received supervision as part of their practical training during which they worked directly with social work clients. The second category comprised “fresh” graduates of social work. Upon entering the supervisory process, beginning social workers and social work students progressed through developmental stages which the authors summarized into four stages:

- Stage One: Self-focused: “Will I succeed in this job?”
- Stage Two: Client-focused: “Will I be able to help the client succeed?”
- Stage Three: Process-focused: “What is the nature of our relationship; how do we communicate?”
- Stage Four: Focused on the process in context: “How do these processes influence one another?”

Findings from Vaska and Čavojská (2012) indicated that at the first stage, the supervisee is highly motivated yet simultaneously anxious and dependent on the supervisor. Their ability to perceive themselves and others is limited, although their attention is primarily self-directed. At this stage, the supervisor is expected to create a clear, structured, and supportive environment. They take on the role of a teacher and often provide guidance on how to apply various techniques in client work. The supervisor also offers direction to the beginning practitioner, with particular emphasis on maintaining boundaries and adhering to ethical standards. New experiences, stimuli, or differing perspectives in practice may evoke discomfort in beginning social workers. They may also confront unfamiliar situations that subsequently affect their enthusiasm – an enthusiasm that tends to be oriented more toward helping others than toward personal development or self-reflection.

At the second stage, the social worker’s motivation becomes more variable, shifting from dependence on the supervisor toward increasing autonomy. This phase is characterized by oscillation between excessive confidence and feelings of being overwhelmed by complicated practical situations. The supervisee begins to develop an awareness of their own professional identity. They start to apply new work methods and experiment with new techniques. Their capacity for empathy and deeper client understanding expands. At this stage, the supervisor is expected to provide emotional support while reducing the level of didactic instruction. Balanced support from the supervisor – attuned to both the client’s and the supervisee’s perspectives – is essential at this stage.

The third stage is characterized by the supervisee’s stability in personal autonomy and professional self-confidence. They are able to reflect on both their strengths and weaknesses, and their motivation for professional performance becomes stable. They employ methods and techniques creatively and flexibly and are capable of self-instrumentalization. A sense of collegiality between supervisor and supervisee increases, grounded in more pronounced personal and professional confrontation. The supervisor

becomes more focused on areas of the supervisee's further development. The fourth and final level is achieved by social workers who demonstrate a high degree of personal autonomy and professional competence. These individuals often later become supervisors themselves. They are capable of self-instrumentalization and cognitive self-distancing (Vaska & Čavojská, 2012).

Gabura (1999) identifies three levels of professional development among supervised social workers in relation to the supervisor's approach and the specifics of supervision in social work. He emphasizes that the supervisor's approach and the methods used should be modified according to the social worker's level of professional experience. In his categorization, the first level corresponds to the student, the second to the beginner, and the final level to the mature social worker. Both students and beginners may be uncertain in their roles or, conversely, overly motivated, which requires a specific form of supervision. In this regard, induction or adaptation programs implemented in some social service organizations hold particular significance, as they are designed specifically for beginning practitioners. A mature social worker is professionally capable of guiding clients within a broader context and is aware of the need to share personal and professional challenges. Supervision with a mature practitioner is more collegial, consisting of the exchange of experience, the exploration of unconventional solutions, and the verification of appropriate procedures.

Vaska and Čavojská (2012) also captured supervisees' first experiences with supervision in their research. These experiences were described primarily through emotions of fear, worry, and uncertainty. Respondents reported that their feelings stemmed from insufficient information and a lack of understanding about what supervision actually entails, how it unfolds, and what its purpose is. They also feared "exposing their professional shortcomings." Social work students additionally expressed concerns about "awkward silences" or being controlled. Vaska and Čavojská (2012) conclude that, in addition to adequate preparation prior to entering the supervision process, the first supervisory experience is crucial, as it shapes the supervisee's willingness and interest in continuing with supervision – particularly among beginning helping professionals. Equally important is the presence of a "good supervisor" during the first experience, primarily to ensure that the supervisee is not "discouraged" or "harmed."

*Needs of Beginning Supervisee*

Beginning helping professionals often hold inflated expectations, particularly regarding positive outcomes of their work with clients. The absence of visible positive results may lead to heightened frustration and an accumulation of feelings of failure and inadequacy. However, there are many possible reasons for difficulties in practice – from insufficient information about the client, to excessive caution, to the absence of clear goals on the part of either the client or the practitioner. According to Hajný (2008, in Havrdová et al., 2008, p. 96), supervision for beginning helping professionals “should be able to provide greater structure for reflecting on their work, as well as a sensitive expansion of what is sometimes a temporarily narrowed spectrum of strategies, methods, or attitudes.”

Supervision must have a clearly defined purpose. When appropriately targeted, it can correct potentially ineffective professional practices. Just as the supervisor should highlight all suitably applied methods, they should also draw attention to those that are ineffective. The use of “preventive measures,” which aim to optimize the practitioner’s performance, is also meaningful. For students, in addition to group supervision sessions – which should be mandatory – individual voluntary supervision is recommended and should be implemented already during practical training. A separate topic concerns tandem work with a colleague.

Interesting insights are offered by a Taiwanese study conducted by L. J. Liang (2025), which aimed to examine the dynamics between supervisors and new, beginning social workers, particularly in terms of supervisory approaches and their impact on service provision and professional growth. A series of group discussions involving four supervisors and nine social workers with one year of practice revealed findings suggesting that although both supervisors and beginning social workers value emotional stability and mediation skills, supervisors tend to adopt a targeted approach with an emphasis on administrative and professional guidance, devoting less attention to emotional support. In contrast, beginning social workers desire more comprehensive support and improved communication. The author also points to existing training programs based on mentorship and heavily reliant on supervisors’ prior experience, yet unable to address the diverse educational needs of staff, resulting in a dependence on trial-and-error learning. Both groups – supervisors and supervisees – reported that it typically takes beginning social workers approximately six months to adapt to their roles, during which they also struggle with external pressures, par-

ticularly high caseloads, which hinder the effectiveness of service delivery. The study further highlights discrepancies between what beginning social workers actually need and what supervisors believe they need.

### *Main Research Findings*

*The analysis of statements related to supervisees' first experience with online supervision yielded the following key findings:*

- a prevailing preference for in-person supervision;
- technical and organizational limitations of online supervision contributed to relatively negative evaluations of online supervision;
- decreased attention and increased feelings of insufficient personal engagement during online meetings;
- the main advantage of online supervision lies in its temporal and physical flexibility for both parties;
- the format of supervision was perceived as less important when the supervisee already knew the supervisor and had an established relationship and trust with them.

*The analysis of statements from 14 supervisors revealed several parallels as well as specific nuances:*

- Supervisors entered online supervision with respect and apprehension, which gradually diminished during subsequent sessions.
- Some supervisors perceived the online format as limiting and “artificial,” while others accepted it from the outset as a natural part of practice.
- During initial experiences, concerns emerged regarding potential technical complications and uncertainty about maintaining group dynamics. These were later addressed through adjusted ground rules and greater preparedness.
- Subsequent online supervision sessions were described by several supervisors as higher in quality, more efficient, and less burdensome, though a preference for in-person contact persisted.
- The online format offered greater flexibility and accessibility, but its limitations include weakened nonverbal communication and a reduced level of emotional depth.

Five categories, each encompassing several subcategories, were identified through open coding of interview transcripts from 17 supervisees and 14

supervisors (Table 1). This process aligns with methodological principles described by Patyi (2024), who conceptualizes reflexive integration of theoretical knowledge and empirical experience in social work as a continuous effort to understand reality through the researcher's own experiential lens.

*Table 1: Subcategories, Categories, and Concept*

Concept	Categories	Subcategories
In-person supervision as a prerequisite for a high-quality and trustworthy supervisory relationship, with online supervision serving as a highly effective alternative when needed.	Form of supervision	In-person supervision Online supervision Telephone supervision Hybrid supervision
	Technological and practical aspects	Temporal and spatial flexibility Technical complications
	Relationship and interaction	Trust within the relationship Limited ability to perceive multiple communication aspects
	Content and contribution	Content of the session Help and support Formality
	Emotional disposition and reflexivity	Positive experience Negative experience Ambivalence

*Source: Author's own elaboration.*

### *Form of Supervision*

Participants encountered multiple forms of supervision throughout their professional practice. Online supervision emerged primarily in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the related public health measures that restricted in-person meetings. As a result, selected work activities were reduced to distance formats, including both individual and group supervi-

sion. Despite recognizing the benefits of online supervision, many participants continue to *prefer in-person supervision*, which they perceive as more personal and less affected by distracting stimuli.

*“It wasn’t a bad experience, but I’m generally a very contact-oriented person, so it really bothered me that I was talking to a screen. I didn’t see much meaning in it.” (P1)*

*“Even though I know the person who was on the other side, I can communicate much better in person.” (P2)*

*“...when it’s a situation where there really is no other option, of course it can be done online, although I definitely prefer the in-person form. The personal contact...” (P6)*

*“I’m not saying it didn’t help me, but when the supervisor is sitting right in front of you and can see how you react – your facial expressions, your gestures, everything – it allows them to ask questions differently than when they can’t see you.” (P11)*

Some respondents had only a *one-time experience with online supervision*:

*“...I encountered it when I had my very first individual supervision – and it happened to be online. I think after that we didn’t have any more online sessions.” (P6)*

*“Basically, I came into contact with online supervision only once, two or three years ago during Covid, and it was just that one time.” (P8)*

*“Yes, I have experienced it, but only once in my life. I think it was during the COVID pandemic. That was the reason the supervision was held online. And that was about four years ago.” (P10)*

*“...I think that if a similar situation arose again – where for some reason we could not meet in person – then we would simply shift back into the online space.” (P6)*

*“...during the pandemic, the supervisions were already scheduled, and since we couldn’t meet in person – the supervisor couldn’t come to us – we handled it by doing them online, each person completing their session individually, so they were held as separate supervisions...” (P8)*

The *preference for in-person supervision* nevertheless persisted after the pandemic, and there was an automatic return to face-to-face sessions. This is due to the specific nature of the supervisory relationship, which is built on the need for closeness and confidentiality, as well as on the quality of interpersonal interaction associated with feelings of safety and stronger support (cf. Vrtová, 2021). In-person contact also facilitates inter-

active discussions and work with emotions, which frequently surface during sessions. Likewise, transferring certain supervisory methods to the online environment limits the richness of their implementation. Meeting in person allows for greater concentration and fewer distractions compared to online formats. Finally, it may also reflect professional routine and habit, whereby online supervision can feel less “serious” or less “valuable” than in-person supervision.

*“And then, when you returned to direct, in-person supervision, it was as if you didn’t even talk anymore about the option of online supervision.” (P6)*

*“...it can be done online, but I still think that most people prefer in-person meetings.” (P6)*

*“...speaking for myself, online supervision simply didn’t feel as close or natural to me as the in-person form...” (P10)*

*“Probably not, I probably wouldn’t support that. Even though the technology is really advanced – and maybe soon we’ll be doing it through holograms or something like that – I still miss the personal contact.” (P16)*

Several participants noted that they *needed a longer period to adapt* to this new form of supervision and adjust to the changed conditions. Adapting to online communication requires higher digital competencies, reliable technical transmission of data, and overcoming the “barrier” that a computer screen or other device can create. This shift also represents a disruption of an established routine – of a ritual that supervision may constitute for some participants. The clearly delineated time and space typical of in-person supervision is often absent in online supervision. Adaptation to new and altered working conditions may be particularly challenging for older employees or for those who do not typically rely on ICT in their work. On the supervisor’s side, there may also be a tendency to underestimate this format, resulting in insufficient preparation and a lack of adaptation to the transition into the online environment.

*“At the beginning it was quite difficult, but later, once the topic gained momentum, we were fully engaged. We might have kept talking even longer if we hadn’t had a set time limit.” (P8)*

*“There were concerns. But then it worked, and honestly, we probably could have talked for another half hour even after the session ended.” (P8)*

*“...I had a specific problem; I felt stuck because I had a client I had to work with, and I had a personal conflict with him. It was really difficult, I have*

*to say, but in the end it worked. It worked. I had about two sessions with him (the supervisor).” (P11)*

Many organizations providing social services are, by the very nature of their work, oriented toward direct, in-person contact with clients. The same applies to professional collaboration aimed at supervision or training activities. At the same time, organizations accept online or distance supervision as a solution in *exceptional situations* that require the elimination of in-person contact for various reasons. Similarly, Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020) argue that there is no true substitute for direct interaction – that is, for in-person supervision, which they regard as their preferred mode of practice. Nevertheless, they were positively surprised by the effectiveness and advantages of online supervision and believe that this form of work may serve as a suitable alternative in cases where participants have limited ability to meet or cannot convene in the same physical location for various reasons.

Supervisors also noted that the online format is more suitable for individual work, while group sessions conducted at a distance were perceived as limited. Some described positive experiences after initial uncertainty, whereas others remained reserved about this format.

*“I can’t imagine that; I wouldn’t be able to do it. The group dynamics... what is happening, who is engaging, who is not responding – I wouldn’t be able to follow that at a distance.” (S1)*

*“The first online supervision I had was a group session, and the overall feeling was very good. At the beginning, I had a lot of apprehension, but after the first fifteen minutes I relaxed, and I felt that it was fine and that the atmosphere was very similar to the in-person setting.” (S3)*

*“At first, I thought, ‘Let’s see how it will go,’ but after a year I said to myself, ‘No, not for groups.’ If it is a group supervision, then everyone needs to be at their own computer. There are different rules in the online space.” (S8)*

*“I have good experience with online supervision, but whenever possible, I prefer direct contact, because there is more stimulus and authenticity in it.” (S10)*

*“I would certainly say yes to individual online supervision, but not to group online supervision. There is a risk that you do not actually know who is in the room.” (S12)*

### *Technological and Practical Aspects of the Supervisory Session*

*Synchronous communication takes place in real time*, meaning that the recipient responds immediately to what the other participant communicates. This includes video calls, telephone calls, and chat-based communication – all of which were used by participants in our research. Many everyday activities continue to take place in the online environment; people spend considerable time using the internet or social media for both personal and work-related purposes. However, not everyone has access to reliable internet or the necessary technological tools for effective online supervision. Issues such as poor connectivity, software errors, and limited familiarity with digital platforms can hinder the quality of this form of supervision.

Feelings of helplessness and frustration arising from technical problems – such as *slow internet connection or interruptions in transmission* – may lead to sessions being disrupted or disconnected altogether. Another challenge was divided attention: the need to concentrate on the session itself while simultaneously managing communication with the supervisor. Such a situation can be overly demanding and exceptionally tiring. In addition, the need to *remain focused on the screen* for a relatively long time *can be exhausting* for both parties. This can, however, be mitigated by incorporating breaks, which may help maintain concentration and improve the subjective experience of the session.

*“I didn’t approach it – well, what I’m about to say – very responsibly. It was more like, ‘Ah, I have you on the screen,’ and sometimes the signal would drop, the sound would cut out, we couldn’t hear each other...” (P4)*

*“...because basically you’re just talking to a screen. The other person is either looking at you or not looking at you, and the signal kept dropping, so the transmission was freezing...” (P6)*

*“...I think these online contacts lose a bit of their credibility, or authenticity – I don’t even know what to call it.” (P6)*

*“...it also depends on how we would connect – for example, if we were in one room as a group – but I don’t even know how that would work technically. Because a lot depends on the technology, whether the equipment is good. If it isn’t, then things just fall apart...” (P6)*

*“...the signal kept dropping, so the call kept freezing...” (P7)*

*“If the technology worked properly, then it wasn’t a problem.” (P8)*

*“...sometimes the technology failed, and it was as if the thread of the conversation snapped, and we had to figure out again how to reconnect and keep the session going...” (P9)*

*“In supervision you normally notice whether a person is fiddling with a pen, shifting in their seat, or what’s happening in their environment. In the online world we lost all that and were left with faces switching on and off, one after another... So in that sense we were deprived of something. But in terms of content or the overall purpose of the supervision, it didn’t lose its meaning – it still made sense in the online format.” (P15)*

Supervisors emphasized that the technical management of online sessions was initially demanding and required new rules and safeguards. Alongside the challenges, however, they also recognized practical benefits such as time savings and financial efficiency.

*“For me, the technology was quite a challenge, because I had to learn everything from scratch. In addition, we had to introduce rules – for example, whether the room where the person was sitting was secure – because in the online space you need different rules than for in-person meetings.” (S8)*

*“The biggest impact for me was the silence. When there was silence online, it was very unsettling; I had to be more directive. And we spent a lot of time dealing with safety – we switched from Zoom to MS Teams so that we could be sure we were sharing information in a secure environment and in line with professional values.” (S11)*

*“Online supervision saved a lot of money on travel; that was very practical. But when the sessions were in the evening, it was very tiring – much more than in person. So I preferred when they took place in the morning.” (S12)*

*Difficulties with verbal and non-verbal cues*, reduced spontaneity, limited control, and inconsistent technologies are also reported by Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020), who implemented online supervision for counselors working with couples and families. The technological aspects of supervision can be influenced, among other things, by participants’ digital literacy and by their overall attitudes toward ICT and the degree of trust or distrust they place in it. A certain level of skepticism is evident in this regard. Although, according to Eurobarometer (2025), 83 % of EU citizens consider science and technology to be positive for society, 58 % express concern that scientific applications may threaten human rights. As many as 58 % of Slovak respondents feel no need to keep track of developments in science and technology, while the EU-wide average is only 36 %. Concerns about the rapid changes that science and technology bring into people’s lives are

reported by 80 % of Slovaks, with the highest level of concern among the oldest age group (55+) (Výskumná a inovačná autorita, 2025).

Despite these attitudes, the findings confirm the *contemporary perception of both the benefits and the deficits associated with working in the online environment*. Similarly, in a study by Malík Holasová (2024), the author identified benefits related to accessibility in terms of time, space, and finances, as well as support for developmental functions and opportunities for more open communication. At the level of limitations, the main issues included a dehumanizing group atmosphere, anxiety related to online communication, unsuitable physical environments, and technical difficulties.

*“Maybe also because it was a conversation through a screen, we had more time. With in-person meetings, people tend to analyze things more, or drift into other areas connected to the topic. Online, we stuck more strictly to the issue we needed to address.” (P2)*

*“The only difference was that it was online; otherwise, it was basically the same as if we had been together in person.” (P3)*

*“...in my previous job, mainly because of the distance between management and staff and the fact that we were spread across the whole country, we did supervision online, so I will draw on that experience. I took part in various forms.” (P5)*

*“...the personal advantages – like not having to travel, more comfort and so on – that was also one of the benefits...” (P13)*

Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020) define the advantages of online supervision in terms of convenient scheduling and more efficient use of time, which enables collaboration among people from different geographical locations. At the same time, they recognize that working online requires users to be experienced with technology, since insufficient training in this area may, according to Vaccaro & Lambie (2007, in Nadan, Shachar et al., 2020), lead to breaches of confidentiality. They further note that the absence of physical interaction between participants can negatively affect the process, especially in terms of perceiving and processing non-verbal signals, which may lead to misunderstandings that hinder both parties' ability to improve and deepen their communication. The online setting allows participants in supervision to observe facial nuances and micro-expressions in more detail, although other non-verbal signals and body language may remain hidden. Pennington et al. (2019) remark that supervisors must see themselves as innovators and explorers of new technological frontiers, striving to perceive

the broader potential of internet technologies and not allowing themselves to be limited by geography alone.

### *Relationship and Interaction Between Supervisor and Supervisee*

The supervisor as a person significantly influences the course and process of supervision. According to Vaska and Čavojská (2012), a good supervisor is someone who is able to receive feedback and who has personal experience of being supervised. The quality of professional performance and the ability to provide expert support depend to a large extent on the supervisor's professionalism. Personally, *the supervisor should be mature and respectful, act authentically, and possess sufficient expertise*. The outcome of supervision is a joint product of the interaction between supervisor and supervisee(s). The experiences of participants in the research largely indicate barriers in the supervisory relationship caused by physical distance or a sense of formality.

According to Kadushin (1992, in Matoušek et al., 2003, p. 358), a good supervisor is someone whom supervisees prefer and assess as suitable, to whom they respond positively, whom they like and trust. They are also expected to *draw on their own practical experience*, which often enables them to understand the supervisee's difficulties more deeply, to identify and name specific experiences or situations, and to provide feedback, recognition, and encouragement that the supervisee needs and often expects. In this regard, a sensitive, respectful, and non-directive communication style is crucial, as are clearly agreed communication rules and safety principles that support participants' trust and autonomy (Brnula & Kuchárová, 2019; Šavrnöchová, 2024).

A good supervisory relationship primarily assumes *stimulating input for the supervisee* and a reduction of risks associated with individual work overload. The importance of the supervisory relationship is further evidenced by findings of Hiebler-Ragger, Nausnerová et al. (2020), who report that a good supervisory relationship is associated with fewer burnout symptoms and a higher sense of coherence among supervisees.

*"...and it was just formal – 'let's do the supervision because it's required, we'll tick the box and that's it.'" (P4)*

*"So I didn't know the supervisor, and she didn't know me. We dealt only with a specific problem. For me this was something new, that I had no information about her and she had none about me. But I think it was*

*not that the online supervision was bad, it was more that the supervisor did not meet my expectations. It wasn't that the online format failed, but evidently the supervisor did.” (P7)*

*“It didn't go as I imagined, or as we were taught. It was different, because the supervisor wasn't physically present, we only saw each other through a tablet, and we dealt with the problem I had at the time. So we just talked, there was no interaction, no tasks, it wasn't personal. It was just the problem solved, and that was it.” (P7)*

*“...when supervision is in direct, face-to-face contact, it's different, because non-verbal communication really tells you a lot...” (P12)*

According to supervisors, online sessions tended to remain at a more rational level; spontaneity and emotional closeness were lacking. Over the course of repeated supervisions, however, they were able to gradually restore a sense of trust and safety, similar to in-person settings.

*“In the online space, we were operating more on a cognitive level; we did not get as much into emotions. The group dynamic could not be created there in the same way as in a natural, in-person environment.” (S9)*

*“After the first fifteen minutes of online supervision, everyone seemed to forget that we were not together in person. The atmosphere then was very similar to before.” (S3)*

*“The second and third time it got going much faster; there was a sense of certainty, safety, and trust, people started sharing more, and the process became easier.” (S7)*

These findings suggest that the quality of supervision is determined not only by the format (in-person vs. online), but primarily by the quality of the relationship and interaction between supervisor and supervisee. According to Nadan, Shachar et al. (2020), supervisors in their study felt that, after a short adaptation period when moving from in-person exercises to distance or online supervision, their relationships with supervisees remained more or less unchanged. Supervisees likewise reported that their experience of supervisory relationships in the online environment was similar to that in face-to-face meetings and that they felt safe and stable. They concluded that the online environment offers greater flexibility and more effective adaptation to supervisees' preferences.

### *Content and Benefits of the Supervisory Session*

The main benefits of high-quality supervision in helping professions include the *professional growth and development of supervisees*, who learn from both their own experiences and those of the supervisor. This should subsequently be reflected in the quality of services provided to clients. In the context of subjective job satisfaction in the social sector, Lichner and Maximov (2025) found that workers attributed the highest ratings to areas such as supervision, colleagues, the nature of the work, and communication, while dissatisfaction persisted mainly regarding salary, working conditions, and career development; overall, ambivalence prevailed.

Supervision *develops skills, knowledge, and competences*, and supports the internalization of ethical standards and professional practice norms. It facilitates a better *understanding of one's own reactions, emotions, values, and biases*. Quality supervision strengthens the supervisee's capacity to *make informed decisions* in complicated professional situations, particularly by reducing doubts associated with complex cases.

Good supervision provides feedback, *recognition, and support, offers space for emotional ventilation*, reduces stress, and promotes psychological wellbeing. It serves as a preventive measure against burnout and supports work-life balance. Finally, it helps to address ethical and practical dilemmas and provides constructive feedback.

A key contribution of group supervision is the *strengthening of team identity and cohesion* based on mutual understanding and trust among colleagues. Nevertheless, several participants in the study pointed to a sense of formality in the supervisory sessions, which they associated, among other factors, with the online format.

*"It was kind of loose. I didn't give it much importance. It felt, I don't know, somewhat simplified." (P4)*

*"...I prefer face-to-face contact, and that was something I missed. There was a screen between us, and it was just formal – 'let's do the supervision because it's required, we'll tick the box and that's it.'" (P4)*

*"So it didn't happen the way I had imagined, or the way we had been taught. It was different, because the supervisor wasn't really there with me; we only saw each other on a tablet, and we just solved the problem I had at that time. We simply talked – there was no interaction, no tasks. It wasn't personal; the problem was solved, and that was it." (P7)*

*"...I had a specific problem; I felt stuck because I had a client I had to work with, and I had a personal conflict with him..." (P11)*

The home environment or other less familiar work settings in which online supervision takes place *can be distracting* and may disrupt the flow of supervision and participants' concentration. Live, in-person supervision offers more effective perception of multiple aspects of non-verbal communication, body language, and behavior during the supervisory process. This may, in turn, limit the range of possible interventions available to supervisors (Springer et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of supervision depends on *personal preferences and individual circumstances*: some supervisees (and supervisors) may feel more comfortable and connected in personal interaction, while others appreciate the convenience and flexibility of online meetings.

According to some supervisors, the content of online supervision tended to focus more on methodological issues than on deeper reflection. With growing experience, however, they came to view the sessions as more effective and more structured, and they appreciated the practical advantages of the online environment.

*“In online supervision I focused more on methodological and behavioral aspects. I had no ambition to go into deeper self-exploration, because the online format did not provide sufficient space for that.” (S9)*

*“Over time, I noticed that the process improved. People were better prepared; the sessions were less tiring and more structured. We used visual tools – whiteboards, screen sharing – and the applications themselves had also improved.” (S11)*

*“I started to realize that a major advantage was that I didn't have to travel. I consider that a big plus.” (S8)*

### *Emotional Disposition and Reflexivity*

The supervisee's emotional state is an integral part of their professional functioning and influences their *capacity for reflection, their ability to think things through, and to receive feedback*. Feeling safe and trusting the supervisor increases the likelihood that supervisees will speak openly and engage in self-development. Screen-based interactions can sometimes *lack the depth of personal connection*; non-verbal cues and body language may be harder to interpret, which can significantly affect the supervisory process. *Concerns around maintaining confidentiality* may be particularly salient when compared with in-person supervision.

The supervisee's emotional state is crucial for the overall effectiveness of supervision and directly affects their ability to perform their professional role. *Negative emotions* reduce their capacity to think openly and accept feedback. Conversely, *overly intense emotions* may impair the ability to maintain perspective. Emotional strain can also signal that the supervisee is approaching or crossing personal limits, for example in the context of ethical dilemmas or early symptoms of burnout. Vosečková, Truhlářová and Blažek (2022) confirm that social work students already face increased psychological load and a higher risk of burnout during their undergraduate studies, which underscores the need for systematic support and development of coping strategies – among which supervision is an important form of prevention against mental overload.

A competent supervisee *actively contributes to discussion*, responds to the topics brought by others in the group, and is able to maintain appropriate boundaries in client work in order to prevent burnout. When a supervisee is attending supervision for the first time, the supervisor should familiarize them with both parties' roles and gradually introduce them into the process, so that the supervisee can develop these specific skills. The supervisee's emotional disposition forms *the foundation of effective supervision*. The range of emotions associated with supervision is very broad, as illustrated by our findings.

“Well, it didn't really give me anything.” (P1)

“I didn't have any particularly negative feelings, but it felt strange.” (P2)

“...there was no fear...” (P3)

“...I prefer face-to-face contact, and that was something I missed. There was a screen between us, and it was just formal – ‘let's do the supervision because it's required, we'll tick the box and that's it. The feeling was one of indifference...” (P4)

“I know that, especially with the difficult issues, when I'm being supervised, a lot of things I don't want to open up right away – or rather, I'm weighing up whether to open them at all. It's more like: should I go into this, or not?” (P5)

“There wasn't any particular feeling. Maybe it was more like: ‘An hour... what are we going to talk about?’ Because when there are more of us in supervision and we're face to face, everyone gets involved and the two hours just fly by. But talking alone for an hour like that... in the end, we managed.” (P8)

Supervision creates *space for preventing burnout and psychological overload*, allowing supervisees to safely ventilate accumulated emotions. When supervisees are emotionally open and have the space to express their emotions safely, trust between them and the supervisor is strengthened. A sensitive, non-judgmental attitude on the part of the supervisor reinforces this trust and the supervisory relationship as a whole.

Supervisors' emotional attitudes ranged from respect and apprehension through mixed feelings to gradual acceptance. Some described relief after the first few minutes; others continued to perceive the online format as cold and impersonal.

*“At the beginning I was afraid I would miss the contact, but in the end, I had a very good feeling and felt safer.” (S1)*

*“I felt fear and respect. After the first fifteen minutes, when it started to work, a great weight fell from my shoulders.” (S3)*

*“I had very mixed feelings, because the online space is not exactly my favorite, even though I was able to function in it.” (S6)*

*“The screen felt very foreign to me – cold, not alive. It’s artificial; that’s why I still prefer in-person, face-to-face meetings.” (S12)*

Overall, the effectiveness of supervision appears to depend on personal preferences and individual circumstances. Some supervisees (P1, P4, P10) perceived the online format as colder, less personal, and making emotional work more difficult, whereas others appreciated its practical advantages, such as time savings and accessibility (P6, P8). Similarly, among supervisors there were initial fears and reservations (S1, S3, S5), which gradually shifted toward acceptance and positive experience. At the same time, ambivalence persisted – some considered online supervision limited and artificial (S6, S12), while others accepted it as a functional complement to in-person practice (S8, S10, S11). A combined analysis of both groups shows that online supervision was initially received with uncertainty but, with increasing experience, it became a useful alternative. While supervisees emphasized the need for safety and closeness in the relationship with the supervisor, supervisors primarily described their own development – from uncertainty toward greater confidence and the ability to flexibly establish new working rules. The common denominator remains that the online format can fulfill the core aims of supervision; however, the preference for in-person supervision – due to its natural support for non-verbal communication and group dynamics – continues to dominate.

*Discussion*

Sidsel Tveiten (2019, p. 22, in Dyrstad, Folkvord et al., 2024) defines supervision as a formal, relational and pedagogical learning strategy aimed at strengthening a person's competence in dealing with problems, based on knowledge grounded in dialog and humanistic values. Current social legislation stipulates that providers of social services and employees of child protection and social guardianship authorities are required to implement supervision programs, without specifying the form or content of these programs in further detail. According to Boriščáková and Balogová (2024), supervision in the Slovak context represents a key component of professional support for social workers, and its further development requires solid legislative and organizational anchoring.

Distance supervision, conducted without in-person contact between supervisor and supervisee, most commonly takes place through digital technologies, particularly in the form of videoconferencing. Online supervision is one of the tools for the professional development of supervisees, although it tends to be perceived as a secondary option, preferred mainly when direct, face-to-face contact with the supervisor is not possible.

Our research findings indicate mixed evaluations regarding the preference for and effectiveness of distance supervision. At the same time, several participants pointed out that this form can still be effective in supporting skill development, building strong and high-quality relationships with the supervisor, and addressing sensitive topics and issues. Most participants in our study encountered various forms of supervision over the course of their professional careers. Despite recognizing the benefits of distance supervision, many continue to prefer in-person supervision, which they perceive as more personal. Some participants, however, had only a one-off experience with online supervision. Technical and practical aspects of the supervisory session also played a crucial role. These were influenced, among other factors, by participants' digital skills and their overall attitude to the use of ICT. Respondents also reported that it took a longer time to adapt to the new, distance form of supervision.

Equally important was the supervisory relationship itself. The relationship between supervisor and supervisee significantly shapes the course and process of supervision. There is also room for deeper reflection on the specific aspects that need to be considered in the online environment, such as observing non-verbal behavior alongside verbal content, the pace of the supervisee's speech, or potential reluctance to appear on camera. In this

regard, a more active stance is required especially from supervisors, who can compensate for non-technological limitations of distance supervision through a proactive and attentive approach. Supervisees expect a “good” supervisor to draw on their own practical experience, enabling a deeper understanding of the supervisee’s difficulties. The supervisor’s maturity, authenticity and expertise may be more decisive for the quality of the work than the format of supervision itself.

Findings from supervisors highlighted their own developmental process in adapting to the online environment – from initial uncertainty and apprehension to gradual acceptance and the ability to flexibly establish new working rules. Ambivalence was also present: while some supervisors regarded the online format as limiting and impersonal, others accepted it as a practical and purposeful complement to in-person supervision. Combined with supervisees’ experiences, this suggests that online supervision can fulfill the core aims of supervision, even though the preference for in-person formats – due to their natural support for relationships, non-verbal communication and group dynamics – remains dominant.

Taken together, the research findings open up space for combining the strengths of online and in-person supervision into a *hybrid supervision model* that offers accessibility and flexibility while preserving personal contact. For such a model to function effectively, reliable technology must be ensured on both the supervisor’s and supervisee’s side, particularly stable network connections and high-quality conferencing tools, as well as conducting online sessions in an environment free from unnecessary distractions. It is also advisable to use digital tools for content sharing and to support interactive discussion. Equally necessary is the systematic cultivation of effective communication and the maintenance of a high-quality supervisory relationship based on trust. In this context, Parker-Barnes et al. (2023) highlight the need to broaden supervisors’ competences in the area of online culture and new digital modalities, which introduce not only uncertainties but also new opportunities.

### *Practical Recommendations for the Development of Distance and Hybrid Supervision*

When considered alongside the theoretical framework, the research findings indicate clear potential for integrating the strengths of in-person and online supervision into a *hybrid model* that combines accessibility and

flexibility with personal contact and high-quality interpersonal interaction. For the effective use of this model, the following recommendations appear crucial:

- *Technical infrastructure*: It is essential to ensure robust technical conditions (stable network, appropriate devices, secure platforms) that minimize the risk of interruptions and support a sense of safety.
- *Clear ground rules*: For online sessions, it is necessary to define clear rules regarding confidentiality, the presence of other persons in the room, and the use of cameras and microphones.
- *Relationship-building*: Even in the online environment, particular attention must be paid to building trust and psychological safety – for example, through regular reflection on participants’ needs and open communication about the process.
- *Flexible formats*: It is advisable to consider combining online and in-person forms of supervision (a hybrid model) that can integrate the benefits of both approaches – accessibility and flexibility on the one hand, and personal contact and spontaneity on the other.
- *Reflection and adaptation*: Supervisors should continuously reflect on their own approach and gradually adapt methods to the online environment (use of visual aids, interactive tools) to ensure that the process does not lose depth or effectiveness.

The development of digital forms of supervision also creates opportunities for further professional education of supervisors in online culture, the use of artificial intelligence and new communication modalities (Parker-Barnes et al., 2023). The key to maximizing the effectiveness of distance supervision lies in a sensitive awareness of its limitations and in tailoring the supervisory approach to the individual needs of supervisees.

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