The Impact of Digitalization on Social Work Development

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Abstract

The article presents the results of an empirical study conducted by the authors according to the method of an online questionnaire survey (N=157) in 2020. The respondents are Russian social workers. The study is aimed at identifying the specifics of the use of digital technologies in the professional activities of social workers and managers in the social sphere. The authors raise the question of what is the real goal of introducing digital technologies: to provide assistance to service recipients or to solve organizational problems. The article analyses the effectiveness of the use of digital tools and highlights the problems in this activity. The authors also try to identify ways of solving these problems for the possible increase of the efficiency of digitalization in social work. The analysis of the respondents' opinions has shown that among the main advantages are the increase in the efficiency of a labour organization (acceleration of data processing, automation of document management, online purchases and delivery) and obtaining the necessary information, including from other departments. The main disadvantages are technical problems: failures leading to duplicate information and software imperfections.

Key-words: Digitalization, Social Work, Digital Technologies.

1. Introduction

The integration of all social strata and groups into the digital space has become an urgent task in the transforming world. Not all people have the same starting opportunities for this, more attention should be paid to supporting socially vulnerable groups of the population. This is what social work is supposed to do.

The cultural transformation caused by the spread of digital technologies is challenging the practice of social work at the macro, meso and micro levels [1]. According to the research, there is a need for digitalization in social work development [2].

However, nowadays, there is not enough research on how social workers use digital technologies in their daily professional activities, whether the technologies are aimed at assisting citizens in need, what new opportunities and risks they generate, etc.

Therefore, the need to interview practitioners is becoming relevant. It is important to know what the use of digital technologies and tools offers, what are the difficulties of using them, what is needed to strengthen and increase the existing digital potential for the development of professional activities.

2. Methods

To study the digitalization of social work in 2020, we conducted a sociological survey of employees of state social service organizations. 157 employees of the social security system in Moscow (130 respondents) and Volgograd (27 respondents) participated in it. The sampling is accidental.

The questionnaire was answered by assistant directors of psycho-neurological institutions (3.8%), heads of the departments of social service organizations (21.7%), social work specialists (39.5%), rehabilitation work specialists in the social sphere (4.5%), family work specialists (1.3%), a psychologist at a care home for labour veterans (0.6%), cultural organizers of social service institutions (3.8%), social workers (24.8%).

About three-quarters of the respondents (72.0%) are employees of territorial social service centres, 16.6% of the respondents work in psycho-neurological institutions, 7.0% of the respondents are specialists from care homes for labour veterans. 2.5% of the respondents work in the family education assistance centres, 1.3% of the respondents are specialists from the centres of social services for families and children, 0.6% is an employee of the social adaptation centre for people without a fixed place of residence.

The respondents represent different departments of their institutions. More than a third of the respondents (35.0%) are employees of in-home social services; slightly less than a third of the respondents (29.3%) are specialists at the fulfilment centres of technical means for the rehabilitation

in territorial social service centres. 7.6% of the respondents work in the social and rehabilitation departments of the psycho-neurological institutions; 3.8% of the respondents work in the departments of social rehabilitation of disabled people in territorial social service centres, 3.8% of the respondents are assistant directors of psycho-neurological institutions, and 2.5% of the respondents work in general departments of psycho-neurological institutions. 1.9% of the respondents are quality control specialists for the provision of social services in territorial social service centres; 1.9% of the respondents work in the social and pedagogical service in family education assistance centres; 1.3% of the respondents work in different branches of the centre of social services for families and children; 1.3% of the respondents work in social departments of psycho-neurological institutions. 0.6% of the respondents are employees of the departments of social rehabilitation of disabled children, urgent social services, the administrative and management departments, the department of social communications and active longevity of the territorial social service centres. Another 0.6% of the respondents work in the department of social and medical care of the care home for labour veterans, in a semi-impatient care facility of the social adaptation centre and the department of complex rehabilitation of the family education assistance centres. The rest of the respondents did not specify their departments.

Speaking about the work experience in the social security system, 17.5% of the participants had been working less than one year; 29.3% of the participants had been working more than one but less than five years; 21.7% of the participants had been working more than six but less than ten years; 23.9% of the participants had been working more than 11 but less than 15 years; 7.6% of the participants had been working more than 15 years.

We admit that the respondents could forget or have other reasons for not naming any technologies and means that are operating in their institutions, or they could name or classify them incorrectly, etc. However, we will base on the fact that, first of all, they identified in their questionnaires the most important elements of digitalization, which they use every day, and named them in the way that they got used to. Therefore, we will try to present the items mentioned by the respondents. For this purpose, we used the method of the open-ended questions, which excludes the possibility for the respondents to choose ready-made answers in the researchers' questions, which requires writing answers by oneself.

Along with the results of our sociological survey, we apply the results of the secondary research (mainly by foreign authors, for comparative analysis).

3. Results

What are the *advantages* of digitalization for common specialists and social workers, who consist of three-quarters of the respondents (117 people, or 74.5%)? These strengths can become reference points for the further development of social work.

The respondents note the positive impact of digital technologies and funds on improving the efficiency of work organizations. 30.8% of the respondents mention that such technologies and tools make it possible to almost constantly "be in touch" with clients, with each other, and especially with the managers; to check some of the documents of customers with the help of special applications on a smartphone; to compile a list of work tasks and reminders in a smartphone; to create an algorithm for working with clients; to track the deadlines for completing tasks; to use a camera to create copies of documents, etc.

According to almost a quarter of the surveyed social workers and specialists of social service organizations (26.5%), digital technologies and tools make it possible to manage significant amounts of information, to receive it more quickly or, on the contrary, to provide information and documents, and simplify the interaction between organizations. Therefore, the need for repeated or multiple visits by clients to institutions is reduced.

For social workers, the possibility to access remotely and order via the Internet certain goods and services necessary for customers is very attractive, since it allows them to avoid queues. Thus, 23.9% of the respondents, or in other words, almost all surveyed social workers, use the Internet to clarify the schedule of the appointments of the recipients of services to the doctors. Every tenth respondent (10.3%) pays for services online. The same number of respondents use online transmission of the metered values to pay for housing and public utilities. 5.1% of the social workers use the opportunity to get remote access to Public Services Portal. The same number of the respondents order the medicines for the clients in the E-pharmacy. Still, the same number of the respondents order the household appliances for the recipients of services via the Internet and call a taxi. 2.6% of the respondents order groceries through online store applications.

It is important to note that these are indicators for the elderly and disabled people services before the introduction of the self-isolation regime in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. In this context, the indicators could have changed, but this requires a separate study and a comparative analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the digitalization of social services, and the understanding of this process after its completion.

The respondents also consider the use of Internet resources to be advantageous. 21.4% of the respondents point to the possibility of advanced search for data and almost any necessary information on the Web (for example, the location and opening hours of the required organizations or leisure activities scenarios and educational videos). 9.4% of the respondents highlight the use of Yandex maps, which is a navigator, for finding customers' location, as well as the use of the Google search engine for self-development, to clarify the meanings of terms, texts translations, etc.

Every fifth respondent (20.5%), accordingly, notes that the digitalization of the labour process has made the following tasks more convenient to complete: to write various kinds of requests to an organization, to process data, to automatically conduct certain statistical calculations, to form personal files of recipients of social services or other necessary documents in printed form, to prepare presentations and reports for colleagues and management, to plan work and to interact remotely.

18.0% of the respondents emphasize the possibility to quickly receive any information online; the opportunity to join groups of interests and receive information from colleagues, announcements of events, articles and other materials on work using, for example, Facebook; the ability to hold teleconferences and to communicate almost all over the world. The latter is sometimes important if the client's relatives are far away, and their participation in the process of assisting is required or urgent information is needed.

13.7% of the respondents added that computer databases are convenient for organizing and storing data about recipients of social services and work; they offer the possibility of quick access to the necessary information about clients, save time for collecting the necessary documents and make it possible to "monitor the situation".

Some of the respondents (9.4%) use the Internet to search and watch films about social work, or other content of the client's interest, for subsequent professional discussion or to get professional information from Internet portals ("Adopt, Moscow!", and others), as well as for computer skills training of the clients or the use of interactive equipment for rehabilitation activities with the use of visualization.

7.7% of the specialists point to positive dynamics during rehabilitation on digital simulators and adaptation to the environment, the development of cognitive abilities and logical thinking of clients during distance learning. 5.1% of the respondents notice increased self-esteem among those clients who, having mastered a computer, were able to self-actualize, to fill their leisure with useful and interesting activities (virtual excursions and so on) and to make new friends.

The WhatsApp messenger, as noted by 7.7% of the respondents, offers to the surveyed employees of social services quick access to the information, constant and non-intrusive

communication with colleagues, clients and their relatives, and work with the population in chats. Also, e-mail (noted by 1.7% of the respondents) ensures the distribution of information and the creation of a community of colleagues and clients.

3.4% of the surveyed social workers, who were involved in an experiment conducted in Moscow on the use of tablets in the organization of social services, mentioned the following advantage: their use frees the employee from keeping a paper diary of a social worker. The introduction of electronic terminals and electronic bulletin boards in the halls of many organizations was supported by 2.6% of the social workers since they consider it to be a source of additional information (including the information about the activities of the institution) and communication with the necessary services.

2.6% of the respondents point to the advantages of electronic document management, which allows an employee to see the exact wording of the task and the deadlines for its completion (oral information or a note, as it was mentioned by several respondents, can be distorted or lost in a huge unstructured flow of information).

Almost every tenth respondent (9.4%) concludes that in general, digitalization improves the quality of the provision of social services, their accessibility and the organization of employees' work, as well as increases the efficiency of professional activities.

To describe the views of the interviewed managers, we will indicate the percentage of the respondents from the total number of the respondents-managers (40 people).

32.5% of the managers emphasize the importance of computer customer databases. First of all, they mentioned the register of recipients of social services, which allows them to expand information about clients, add services and other types of assistance, receive information and sort it according to some criteria, reduce data processing time, make reports, work with numbers and tables.

30.0% of the managers consider the programs of electronic interdepartmental interaction to be an advantage. These programs make it possible to request and quickly receive the necessary documents about clients and to check the available information.

Every fourth manager notes the opportunity for service recipients to watch educational films using digital technology (for example, to master the skills of self-service, communication, healthy lifestyle), as well as virtual tourism, game therapy and virtual clubs of interest for clients. For recipients of social services, according to the respondents, information from digital media is more accessible, it contributes to the formation and development of culture, renewal of knowledge about reality and the disclosure of creative potential.

17.5% of the respondents note the convenience of smartphones for photographing a situation, sending photocopies of documents, communicating with clients via video communication.

15.0% of the interviewed managers point to the convenience of electronic document management for quick and accurate control of information. 12.5% of the respondents write that WhatsApp offers instant messaging and engagement during the day (they also note that the almost twenty-four-hour flow of messages is tiring). 10.0% of the respondents consider e-mail to be similar to messenger, but at the same time, it does not have such a disadvantage.

15.0% of the surveyed managers, whose subordinates use a tablet in social services, positively assess its use: it makes it possible to trace the location of a social worker, increases the speed of work, allows processing a large amount of information, makes communication available, the performed services are automatically added to the database, there is no need to keep and, accordingly, check the paper diaries of social workers, etc.

Digital tools are convenient because they allow moving away from paper carriers of information and handwritten documents. 7.5% of the interviewed managers mention reduced "manual work" (writing, counting, etc.) and the acceleration of the process of providing services and improving their quality. Partially, this is why managers point to the convenience of using a scanner (10.0%), a printer (7.5%) and a copier (5.0%). 5.0% of the managers note that with the help of a video camera it is possible to shoot videos about an institution and post them on the Internet (for informational transparency of activities). Also, digitalization made it possible to keep the necessary information for a long time, simplify the work of specialists, reduce the number of employees and reach more recipients of services.

5.0% of the respondents add that digital technologies can be used to search teaching materials, expand social connections of clients and provide social services through online communication.

According to 5.0% of the interviewed managers, the use of social networks, primarily Facebook, also contributes to the possession of official information.

Despite the undisputed advantages of digitalization of professional activities, the respondents note that they still face a certain number of *difficulties* in its correct and effective application.

Almost every fourth respondent (26.5%) mentions the problem of "freezing" of the devices and programs, therefore, the problem of the loss of working time and the duplication of information to protect it. It is important to note that 2.6% of the respondents are dissatisfied with the fact that, despite the presence of electronic document management, a significant amount of duplicate paper documents remains.

15.4% of the respondents indicate the absence of the Internet or its slow connection as a significant disadvantage that complicates work.

8.6% of the respondents are concerned about the imperfection of the software, incomplete information in the databases and missed for these reasons deadlines. At the same time, electronic interaction is possible not with all partner organizations.

6.0% of the respondents complain about outdated equipment and the resulting slow operation of devices.

The same number of the respondents indicate that there are not enough working computers and several employees have to work at one computer.

2.6% of the social workers are sceptical about ordering products for clients online: in their opinion, it is inconvenient, expensive (due to shipping costs), there are no discounts (which is important for older people), poor quality, little choice, it is time-consuming for both a social worker and a recipient of social services, etc.

6.8% of the respondents are conscious of the fact that the power cut or another malfunction makes it impossible to use digital devices and introduce the risk of losing data. At the same time, 0.9% of the respondents fear for the security of personal data stored in electronic form.

Also, 6.8% of the respondents note that the use of digital technologies takes a long time. The reason for this, according to the respondents is probably the fact that employees are not always confident in digital tools and technologies. They complain that programs are difficult to use and it is impossible to enter the file of one client from two personal computers, which does not allow a more experienced employee or manager to help someone who is experiencing difficulties remotely. They mention that they need the increase in not only the number of devices with electronic programs but also in the ability to work with modern technology.

6.0% of the social workers point out that not all recipients of social services have computers or smartphones, so it is impossible to create a personal account for a client to use electronic services. Sometimes, an employee has to use personal devices and spend Internet traffic for electronic customer service. Besides, many service recipients do not know how to use digital technologies, it is difficult for them to master them, which means that a social worker needs to train them. Such training can be very time-consuming and at the same time is included neither in the individual program of social services nor in time standards for customer service, and it is not paid.

5.1% of the respondents mention the following disadvantages which they consider to be significant: the use of digital technologies leads to a reduction in interpersonal communication,

inactive lifestyle, poor body posture and it strains eyes. Some respondents believe that it reduces the intellectual abilities of the user.

5.1% of the respondents mention another disadvantage: the digital environment is filled with too much information, there is a lot of unnecessary or incorrect information. There is no unified reference database for social workers. The content does not always have a positive effect on clients, it can cause negative emotions, delusions and aggression; clients are not always fully capable of perceiving digitalization for health reasons, etc.

0.9% of the respondents draw attention to the unsatisfactory updating of the content of the official sites, the discrepancy between the real situation and the one declared on the site or in social media.

Messages in WhatsApp are constantly distracting and irritate some respondents (3.4%).

Besides, 3.4% of the respondents point to the high cost of devices and expensive maintenance, which means that the employee has a fear of breaking it and being responsible, as well as material costs for its repair and exploitation. Social workers who work with tablets are concerned to a higher degree since they fear theft or loss of a tablet of the organization. All the above-mentioned point to the need to train workers in both user literacy and safety in a digital environment.

As for the assessments of managers, they also see the difficulties and limitations of the use of digital technologies and tools in the following (we will indicate the percentage of the respondents from the total number of 40 respondents-managers).

Every tenth manager mentions a significant disadvantage of digital technologies: not all employees have access to programs, which is why it is impossible to correct previously entered wrong information.

7.5% of the managers said that the remote provision of services requires training social workers in digital literacy because digitalization is slowed down by the lack of special knowledge, skills and abilities.

The same number of the managers indicate that there are important areas of work in which the computer cannot help, for example, the development of an individual program for the provision of social services, which the vast majority of clients need, and, accordingly, which becomes one of the most common and key documents in social services.

5.0% of the managers are concerned about the "computer addiction" of some recipients of social services, especially in the psycho-neurological institutions.

4. Discussion

There is no doubt that digitalization involves not only social work in modern Russia but also international experience. Comparative analysis of the results of other studies shows the following.

American studies of the impact of digitalization on the development of social work show that social networks are used to communicate with clients. It includes such actions as accepting requests from friends and subscribers on social media, message exchange with clients and liking the posts of each other [3].

So far, Russian specialists do not use such technologies extensively. However, many leading social service organizations create pages on social media and post useful information in the form of expert advice on the most frequently asked questions, photo and video reports and broadcasts of socio-cultural events, promotion of a healthy lifestyle (primarily COVID-19 prevention) and the organization of educational form of leisure, etc. At the same time, there is active communication in social media within the professional community.

In many countries, social workers use e-mail for work, and one-third of them use it to communicate with clients for non-therapeutic purposes. At the same time, several respondents mentioned difficulties connected when using email, including concerns about breaches of customer privacy. Another problem was the lack of consistent training and policies regarding the use of email in social work agencies [4].

The UK scientists' study also found that the majority of respondents used their smartphones to maintain communication with service users. Yet, even in this country, it is noted that social workers could better meet the needs of service users using mobile technologies only if the way social assistance organizations work changes. Special attention needs to be paid to ethical and organizational issues that it is necessary to overcome to introduce new methods of work in the digital age [5].

In particular, the concept of social presence in the context of computer communications was investigated, taking into account how technologies allow people to develop an awareness of each other and feel connected or involved in the client's problem [6]. There are three options for engagement: 1) related to the presence of a person, like a Facebook profile; 2) focused on the perception of each other, like a telephone conversation; 3) co-presence, which means that a

psychological connection is established and people feel that they understand the intentions and feelings of others [7-9].

However, new ways of working also face ethical and operational challenges. For example, the risk of the impact of blurred boundaries and controversial relations associated with online self-disclosure between practitioners and service users and the risks associated with accepting gifts and invitations is discussed [10]. Issues of image management and dishonesty among service users are highlighted, and the lack of physical contact can jeopardize the well-being of children who are perceived to be at risk of significant harm. There is also the potential for overdependence on virtual communication, especially in cases where problem families or parents may have a reputation for being manipulative, conflicting or abusive people [11].

The need and prospects for digitalization are also presented in the results of the opinion polls conducted by Russian authors in other areas of social work [12-16]. According to practitioners, digitalization allows working at any time and in any place, which in general saves workspace and time.

5. Conclusion

Naturally, the survey allowed collecting rather subjective views and judgments of employees of various social service organizations (managers and workers) than objective statistical indicators. However, the obtained data are of scientific and practical interest, since they allow us to understand better how the participants of the digitalization process perceive and interpret it. This makes it possible to determine the priority for the further development of social work.

The results of the study are limited to data on the digitalization of social work in large cities with a population of at least one million. In the future, comparative and cross-cultural studies are needed, which would touch on the generations and gender aspects of digitalization, the influence of ethnoreligious and territorial (small towns, villages) factors on its success. The study of regional features of digitalization, the role of basic higher education (technical or humanitarian) and advanced training of specialists in the social sphere seems to be promising. A comprehensive analysis of the impact of digitalization on the development of social work, carried out based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology, using also non-survey methods, are considered to be effective.

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