

## Digitalization of the Professional Activity of Managers in Social Service Organizations

Mikhail V. Firsov<sup>1</sup>; Margarita V. Vdovina<sup>2</sup>; Anastasia V. Karpunina<sup>3</sup>;

Anna A. Chernikova<sup>4</sup>; Ludmila A. Kudrinskaya<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Russian State Social University, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>4</sup>Institute for Demographic Research, Branch of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>5</sup>Omsk State University named after F.M. Dostoevsky, Omsk, Russia.

### Abstract

*The article has been devoted to the study of forms, methods, and levels of use of information and communication technologies in the practice of social services. The relevance of the study has been justified by a comparative analysis of data on the implementation of information and communication technologies in different countries. The authors conduct their empirical research (the method is a questionnaire survey, N = 157) and identify problems with the use of digital technologies based on the opinions of employees and managers of social service organizations. The analysis of these problems allows drawing a conclusion about the differences in the use of information and communication technologies at three levels – macro, meso, and micro. The authors call the reasons for the contradictions factors of an objective and subjective nature. The position of the head of the organization in terms of the use of information and communication technologies and scientific approaches in the quality management system, which directly affects the efficiency of the institution, is of particular importance.*

**Key-words:** Digitalization, Information and Communication Technologies, Social Services, Social Service Organizations.

### 1. Introduction

Modern society is undergoing rapid changes. One of these transformations is the digitalization of all spheres of life, including the social sphere.

The integration of all segments of society into the digital space is of great importance in a changing world. However, not all people have equal starting opportunities for this. Significant attention

should be paid to supporting socially vulnerable groups of the population. This is what social work is designed to do.

However, there is currently insufficient research on the extent to which and how managers of social service organizations use digital technologies in their professional activities, what problems hinder the digitalization of their activities, and what is necessary to strengthen and increase the existing digital potential of social service management.

The processes of globalization and digitalization changed the vectors of social work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Modern humanity is increasingly entering the dimension of the global "Big Society" even though some of the countries are at the stage of an agricultural or industrial version of it, and others are approaching society 5.0, artificial intelligence, such as Japan, which has been living outside the digital society that the leading world powers are only approaching for a decade [1].

One of the indicators of the digital society is the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in everyday life and professional activities.

Thus, according to research conducted in the United States in 2015, 84% of households had access to the Internet, and 68% of the adult population in this country had smartphones [2]. According to research presented by the Higher School of Economics, 75% of households had access to the Internet in the Russian Federation in 2016, people aged 15 to 72 years, and 45% of the adult population used smartphones to access the Internet [3].

Looking at usage in 2015, smartphones were represented in 66% of UK households and laptops in 65% [4].

However, the transition from the "consumption level" of information and communication technologies to solving global problems of introducing them into all spheres of economic life requires decisions and actions at the level of the ruling elites.

In December 2016, the President of the Russian Federation proposed to implement a large-scale systemic program in his Address to the Federal Assembly, for the development of the economy of a new technological generation – the digital economy. The Strategy for the Development of the Information Society in Russia for 2017-2030 was published [5].

According to the data of the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), in 2018, the share of organizations providing social services and carrying out activities in the field of healthcare that used information and communication technologies was 97.1% in the field of personal computers, 78.9% of local computer networks, 95.5% of global information networks, and 75.0% of organizations that had their website.

Note that on average for all sectors of the national economy, similar indicators in the specified period, respectively, amounted to: 94.0%; 63.9%; 92.0%, and 50.9% [6].

However, the use of information technologies, especially in the field of social services, has its specifics.

On the one hand, information technologies should help social service institutions to integrate into the overall system of the market economy at all its levels, from the macro-level to the micro-level, from the state to the territorial, including the municipal system of assistance. At this level, not only the procurement system is carried out, document flow at all levels is implemented, but also interdepartmental interaction of social service organizations with other institutions that provide support to people in modern society is performed.

On the other hand, information technologies should improve the quality of management of the services themselves, carry out ongoing work on the exchange of information both within the organization and outside it, in the information space.

Finally, most importantly, information technologies should improve the management system of social services, their prompt and effective response to problems that arise in socially vulnerable groups of the population [7]. In this segment of the use of ICT, there is a lag not only in comparison with foreign countries in the field of social services but even with domestic industries, such as health and education.

From our point of view, the bottleneck in the modern practice of social work is here, which requires separate, both theoretical and applied research.

## **2. Methods**

In 2020, we interviewed 157 employees of the social protection system in Moscow (130 respondents) and Volgograd (27 respondents) to study judgments about the digitalization of social work.

Heads of departments (21.7% of the total number of respondents), deputy directors of psychoneurological boarding schools (3.8%) took part in the survey along with other employees of social service organizations. That is, every fourth person we surveyed is a manager (about every fifth is a mid-level manager) in their social service organization. They are primarily designed to solve the problems of the digitalization of social services in the field.

We assume that our respondents could not remember or for other reasons could not name any technologies or tools that actually work in their institutions, or name them not exactly, group them incorrectly, etc. However, we will proceed from the fact that, first of all, they identified the most

significant elements of digitalization for them in their questionnaires, which they use in everyday practice. Therefore, we will try to summarize the positions that the respondents noted.

### 3. Results

Thirty-two and a half percent of executives surveyed emphasize the importance of computerized customer databases. First of all, they call the register of recipients of social services (RRSS), which allows expanding information about customers, entering services and types of other assistance into the database, receiving information and sorting it according to specified criteria, reducing data processing time, making reports, working with numbers and tables.

Thirty percent of managers positively assess the programs of electronic interdepartmental interaction, which allow requesting and quickly obtaining the necessary documents about clients, checking the available information.

Every fourth manager surveyed notes the possibility of viewing educational films for service recipients using digital technology (for example, to master self-service skills, communication, healthy lifestyle), conducting virtual tourism, game therapy for clients, creating virtual clubs of interest. According to respondents, information from a digital medium for recipients of social services is more accessible, contributes to the formation and development of culture, updating knowledge about the surrounding reality, and the disclosure of creative potential.

Seventeen and a half percent note the convenience of smartphones for photographing the situation, transferring photocopies of documents, and negotiating with customers via video.

Fifteen percent of the surveyed managers point to the convenience of electronic document management (EDM) for the rapid and accurate possession of information. Twelve and a half percent write that due to the WhatsApp messenger, they can provide instant messaging and employment during the day (by the way, they immediately note that the almost round-the-clock flow of messages is pretty tiring). Ten percent attach a similar value to email, but it is devoid of this disadvantage.

Fifteen percent of the surveyed managers, whose subordinate social workers use a tablet in social services, positively assess its use: it makes it possible to geolocate the location of the employee, increases the speed of work, allows processing a large amount of information, makes communication available, the services performed themselves "flow" into the database, it is not necessary to keep and, accordingly, check the paper diaries of social workers, etc.

Digital tools are convenient because they allow moving away from paper media, handwritten documents. Seven and a half percent of the surveyed managers point to minimizing "manual work" (writing, counting, etc.), speeding up the process of providing services, and improving their quality.

This is partly why managers point to the convenience of using a scanner (10.0%), a printer (7.5%), a copier (5.0%). Five percent of managers note that with the help of a digital video camera, it is possible to shoot videos about the institution and post them on the Internet (for information openness of activities). Also, due to digitalization, the necessary information can be stored for a long time, the work of specialists is simplified, fewer employees are needed, more service recipients can be reached.

Five percent add that it is possible to search for methodological materials, expand social connections of clients, and provide social services through online communication with the help of digital.

The use of social networks, primarily Facebook, also contributes to the possession of official information. This is what 5.0% of the managers surveyed write in their questionnaires.

Seeing the undeniable advantages of digitalization of their daily professional activities, the interviewed managers note that they still face a certain amount of difficulties in its correct and effective application. This indicates the need to strengthen not only the material and technical base, but also to improve the skills of personnel.

What are the problems and limitations of using digital technologies and tools in everyday work that our respondents most often face? Consider the answers about the difficulties and limitations of digital technologies and tools as a percentage of the number of managers we interviewed.

Forty percent of our respondents point to unsatisfactory technical support; outdated equipment works slowly, and imperfect software crashes, "freezes", sometimes it is necessary to wait for a long time for a response via electronic communication channels, order documents several times. In addition, the electronic program does not always correctly calculate the amount of work performed; it is very difficult to make changes to it (for example, when changing a social worker). Therefore, a specialist is needed to connect equipment, configure programs, troubleshoot problems, constantly check for errors made by the "machine", etc., and such a specialist may not be in the organization or he/she is absent at this time (on sick leave, on vacation, etc.).

This is the origin of the problem that worries 10.0% of managers, namely: a large paper workflow is needed to duplicate information in case of technical failures and losses; there is unreliable storage of information in electronic form (such information can instantly disappear irrevocably; hackers can break into the system and steal information).

A significant disadvantage of digital technologies is also seen by every tenth manager in the inability to maintain constant communication, poor Internet quality.

The same number of respondents are not satisfied with the fact that not all employees have access to electronic programs, which is why it is impossible to correct erroneous information previously entered by someone.

Ten percent of the surveyed managers believe that digital activity is difficult for the elderly, disabled people, not all customers can master a computer, smartphone; equipment is purchased by recipients of social services, mainly at their own expense, which means that its condition and capabilities do not always meet modern requirements.

Seven and a half percent emphasize that the problem is the growing electronic document flow and the increased length of time spent at the computer, which affects, first of all, vision.

Seven and a half percent write in the questionnaires that the provision of remote services requires training of social workers in digital literacy because digitalization is hindered by the lack of special knowledge, skills, and abilities of subordinates.

The same number of managers point out that there are such important areas of work where the computer is powerless, for example, the development of an individual program for providing social services, which is necessary for the vast majority of clients and, accordingly, is one of the most common and key documents in social services.

#### **4. Discussion**

The contradiction between the effective use of information technologies at the macro level and their insufficient use at the meso- and micro-levels is due to objective and subjective factors. We will focus on the main aspects of this contradiction, reflecting on the problems in the context of the development of the foreign practice of social work [8].

The first group of reasons that objectively affect the "technological gap" in the use of ICT in practice is related to the historical conditions of the institutionalization of social work.

The emergence of the profession of social work in the Russian Federation in modern times was due to the socio-historical reasons for its formation in the 1990s. By this time, European and American social services had passed a certain stage of both their theoretical and practical development, including the use of ICTs in the daily practice of social work.

The first works justifying the need to use computers in the practice of social work appear, for example, in the United States in the 1980s. They gave meaning to the need to use ICTs exclusively as tools that help the social worker store information and organize activities in the institution. Solving the problems of a person in a difficult life situation was technologically impossible, because, according to

professionals, the client's problems "cannot be solved remotely" [9], and it is permissible to solve only directly "face-to-face".

However, by the end of the twentieth century, as studies show, there were already 250 private e-therapy sites in the USA, and in the early 2000s, from 5,000 to 25,000 messages were sent to service recipients daily in the course of online consultations [10]. This was made possible not only by the technical capabilities of ICT but also by the programs that allowed interacting with the client in various modes.

Reflecting on the use of ICTs in foreign practice, it should be noted that they have made it possible to change the technologies of customer assistance. However, at the first stage of their application, they were mostly aimed not at the client, but at the organization of the professional's working space, which coincides, as our survey showed, with the practice of using ICT in social work in modern domestic conditions.

The parameters of using ICTs to directly solve customer problems, and not just organizational tasks, were used by US social workers for a total of fifteen years, from the moment of their use in practice. It is possible that Russian specialists, taking into account information literacy and other technological equipment, will need less time to reduce the "digital divide" in this area.

The second group of reasons is related to the structure and system of personnel management in social protection institutions. The problem of managerial personnel, especially middle-level ones, is quite acute in the current Russian system of social protection of the population. Since the basic knowledge gained, for example, in the "State and municipal administration" direction does not allow fully navigating the issues of management and organization of social work, especially the introduction of ICT technologies into the daily practice of direct work with clients.

This is not facilitated by the professional standard "Specialist in Social Work", which sets requirements for a middle-level manager at the level of the user of the main methods and means of obtaining, storing, processing information, skills of working with a computer as a means of information management, including on the Internet [11].

The situation with the training of managerial personnel in other segments of the social sphere is more defined. For example, the head of an institution in health care, in addition to medical education, must have a specialist certificate in the direction of "Health Organization and public health", or special training in management in health care [12].

This situation, which has developed in the system of personnel training in the Russian Federation, does not contribute to the promotion of ICT in social service organizations.

A fundamentally different situation is observed abroad in the field of management of social security institutions and the promotion of information technologies in practice.

Firstly, middle-level specialists have managerial training that is directly focused on the social work segment, where ICT is given special attention.

A study of 361 field social work managers in Service Centers in three states (New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey) conducted by American specialists found that 90% of managers had a master's degree in social work, 1% an MBA (Master of Business Administration), 4% other master's degrees, 4% of managers had a PhDs degree, and only 1% of all managers had a bachelor's degree [13].

The high level of managerial education made it possible to introduce information methods of management and research in social work both at the level of the organization and at the level of management of the microsocial environment.

Thus, according to these studies, 99% and 83% of managers used e-mail and text message transmission (SMS) in a professional context, respectively, 70% of respondents used online surveys, 68% used electronic records management, 57% used cloud computing/file sharing, 54% used video conferencing, 52% used case management software, and 51% used social media [13]. As we can see, most managers used ICT resources to improve the efficiency of management processes.

According to American researchers, the decline in ICT was observed in such areas as online petitions (47%) and data management (44%), online voting (34%), fundraising (31%), and geographic information systems/mapping (26%) [13].

Secondly, training in the field of management allows managers of social institutions to implement information technologies in working with clients through the tools of administrative supervision.

Thus, for therapeutic areas of activity, American respondents said that ICTs are being implemented in such activities as mobile therapy – 12%, teletherapy – 18%, mobile game therapy – 11%, avatar therapy – 11%, online recruitment of volunteers – 21%, mental health therapy – 18% [13].

If we compare with the results of our survey, only 10.0% of the managers participating in the survey use e-mail, including corporate e-mail, 32.5% use the ASGUF interdepartmental data exchange program, 15.0% use electronic document management, and 2.5% use the websites of organizations.

## **5. Conclusion**

Thus, the problems of digitalization of the professional activities of the heads of Russian social service organizations are caused by the insufficient material and technical base and the difficulties of its continuous qualified support; insufficient digital competence of employees, who do not always have



the appropriate professional training; the need to restructure the organization of work taking into account the user skills of employees and the specifics of computer literacy and clientele security.

Unfortunately, it can be stated that ICTs are not yet fully applied in the management of the organization, and such tools for research on population problems in the subordinate territories, such as online surveys, are not introduced into the daily practice of institutions, which indicates that the approaches of scientifically based practice are not yet among the priorities of the management of heads of departments.

Managers use digital tools and programs to improve their skills and the skills of subordinates, as well as the digital awareness of the entrusted recipients of social services, to help them solve several problems (access to social networks, electronic communication with family and friends, virtual travel [14], self-service skills training, etc.). However, these techniques can not be called unambiguously leading in the use of digital technologies of social work management.

The solution of these problems involves a complex of efforts both on the part of senior personnel and from the point of view of regulatory and legal improvement of professional processes in the field of social services. The results of the survey of management personnel provide grounds for improving skills in the field of digital literacy and safety; occupational safety and health in the context of digitalization; mastering the skills of teaching digital activities to clients, taking into account their physical and mental capabilities and limitations.

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