Social work in the digital age

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the problem of changing the content and formats of social work in the digital age. The authors analyze the topic in the context of changing content of the concept of "social well-being". In modern times, this concept has subjective and objective aspects, so the quality of life is assessed not only by economic quantitative indicators, but also by the degree of satisfaction with life, which includes emotional fulfillment, the level of happiness, inclusion in network streams. The problems of providing social services to the population today are determined by digital technical parameters, as well as the level of competence of social workers in the transition to a digital format of work. However, the state of modern society is characterized by a digital divide, in which older people are not always able to use all the opportunities that digitalization provides. And this, in turn, leads to an intergenerational (functional and ideological) gap not only in the situation of using digital services, but also in the formation of common ideas about the life of different generations. Keywords: Social Work, digitalization Model of social Development, Precariat, Generation Gap

1 Introduction

Social work is a professional activity to organize assistance to people in difficult life situations, their psychosocial rehabilitation, integration, resocialization. Social work is a complex social phenomenon, an independent field of scientific and practical knowledge, a profession and an academic discipline.

The object of social work in the broadest sense is people, in a narrower sense - "a person in a difficult life situation". A person who finds himself in a difficult life situation becomes, as social workers say, a client. A person, a social group, an organization, a community (for example, a sect) can be considered a client. The social worker, on the other hand, acts as a "facilitator of change", manages the processes of providing assistance, but not the client themselves. Social work institutions include a range of social services and institutions in which assistance is provided to the population (official, unofficial, state, non-state, voluntary, public). The institutions of social assistance are state institutions of social protection, education, health care, the church, charities, foundations, etc. Direct social assistance can be provided by specific organizations and their structural subdivisions (trade unions, schools, university departments, etc.) and individual representatives of organizations (members of charitable foundations, teachers of educational institutions, scientists, etc.).

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It does not matter who provides assistance, in any case, the task of social help is to increase the level of social well-being. The task of social assistance is to increase the level of social well-being, i.e. achievement of “a calm, happy life in abundance and complete security”. This implies the sufficient level of material basis, social status, and the degree of spiritual comfort. Social well-being is a universal category that reflects the relationship between people's daily living conditions and their social expectations. It implies the integration of three components: material well-being, political stability and social security. In the scientific and legal literature these components define the concept of “welfare state”.

2 Materials and methods

There are three paradigm models to view the way of achieving the well-being of the population and assessing its level: traditional, modern, innovative. In the traditional theory of social welfare management, social development is reduced to an increase in the standard of living through the maximization of production and consumption, measured by GDP per capita. The key concept of the model is the concept of a “living standard” - the level of well-being of the population, the consumption of goods and services, a set of conditions and indicators that characterize the measure of satisfaction of people's basic vital needs.

The modern model of social development, corresponding to the level of transition to a post-industrial society, is an assessment of the growth in the quality of life. It is understood as the level of happiness, which, in addition to the degree of life satisfaction, also includes objective indicators of well-being: life expectancy, income level, education, and so on. Work in the field of social protection and social innovation forms the quality of life on a par with the protection of human rights, concern for the environment and ensuring access of humanity to basic benefits.

The understanding that the development of the economic system does not coincide with social development has become firmly established in the social sciences. This understanding is underlined by the UN Human Development Index, which has been published since 1990 and includes GDP per capita, life expectancy, and years of education. Combining indicators of consumption volume and availability of social services (health care, education) makes the development model more complex, but it lacks the third component - the comfort of the environment (natural and social), which is achieved not only by the effective functioning of institutions, but also through (inter)actions of individuals, communities, social movements. The values of the human development index are measured relative to the average indicators of life expectancy, duration of education, quality and completeness of life.

Fig. 1. Making people more secure though investment, insurance and innovation [10].
On this basis, the “Better Life Index” was developed. In addition to income levels, education and health the Index is focused on considering such dimensions of social development as the level of subjectively assessed satisfaction with life, the amount of free time from work, environmental well-being, gender equality, civic engagement, level of trust between people and public institutions. Social change studies in the 2000s show that new alternative structures to traditional institutions and interactions are intensively developing. These are network structures that create a selective and dynamic sociality. A new model of social development, which will take into account the fact that social development is determined by the growth of new structures, can become a model of growth in the fullness of life.

The fullness of life is achieved by combining a high level and quality of life with inclusion in the networks and streams of the new society, with spatial and socio-cultural mobility and creativity. In this model, indicators of the level of income/consumption, the availability of social services and the comfort of the environment are supplemented by indicators of the fulfillment of people’s lives with activity in new communication networks, the development of public spaces, and engaging in artistic or technical creativity.

It is important to take into account the mobility of people from their private spaces of everyday life to public spaces. The degree of mobility is measured by the volume of visits to public cultural events. At the moment, even in super-urbanized centers with a developed infrastructure, intensive socio-cultural mobility, the transformation of life into a stream of bright events and impressions, is not a characteristic of the lifestyle of the majority of the population.

Involvement in new network structures is an indicator of the fullness of life, since intensive exchanges in communication networks open access to new social and cultural resources, increase people’s social capital, fulfill their lives with the sociocultural experience of obtaining and creating symbolic products. The “fullness of life” model, an innovative model, displays creativity not as the potential for creativity contained in talent or technology, but as the daily creation of real and virtual objects by one’s own activities.

3 Results and discussions

After World War II, out of the depths of Fordist society in the West the Welfare State came into existence. It was social, democratic, and egalitarian. This society, associated with mass labor in industry and agriculture, was characterized by a high rate of economic growth, which also determined the corresponding social structure. On the one hand, class stratification (bourgeoisie/workers) was reproduced, and on the other hand, since there was an increase in
incomes and an improvement in the living conditions of the population, there was a relative reduction in social inequality. Stabilizing component in this structure was the growing middle class, socially secure, and therefore politically loyal. Another deterrent was the political activity of the masses, for the worker filled their free time with consumption, entertainment and politics, i.e. “began to claim a share of power”. Finally, all these basic and social factors have formed a kind of labor morality, according to which one must first work in order to earn, and only then enjoy.

At a certain stage in the development of society, the growth of the post-industrial sector begins: high-performance platforms, computerization, technological replacement of the living labor force. The depletion of resources and technological substitution lead to the fact that less and less people are directly involved in the production of innovations and wealth.

This entails a reduction in mass labor and the “erosion” of the classical class structure occurs, new leading social groups appear - the creative class, technocracy, a sharp increase in service workers, IT workers; new forms of employment are also emerging (freelancers, remote work, project communities). Turned into service workers, workers live on a share of the rent from the exploitation of the working people of developing countries, while there is a reduction in incomes for all groups of the population (except for the highest elite). This is especially true for the last two generations (millennials and generation Z): due to high inequality, decreasing mobility and low economic dynamics of the last decade and a half, today’s young people may be the first generations to live worse than previous ones.

The era of digital technologies has also affected the spiritual sphere of society. New technologies have literally split everyday life into virtual and real worlds that compete for the time an individual spends in them. Virtual space is easily formed and managed: it provides high speeds of movement, colossal geographical coverage, neutralization of borders, which ultimately gives rise to a new form of identity - electronic nomadism[1]. Research data show that almost half of the period of active life a person spends on digital communications and being on the Internet [2]. In this new space, the individual works, communicates, spends leisure time, gets education and other social services.

But the situation has a reverse side: digital technologies reduce the degree of human adaptation to socio-economic and political changes. New terms have appeared in the scientific lexicon: information poverty, information inequality, information diseases, information idiocy, etc. All this indicates that the digital revolution has its “pluses” and its “minuses”.

The most important trend is the emergence of a “disorganized workplace”. In his work “The Disorganized Workplace: The Temporary and Moral Orders of Flexible Capitalism” B. Snyder raised the issue of transforming the perception of working time. Working time is a quantitative unit regulated by statutory documents, work schedules. But now working time is interpreted as a period of an employee’s life, which he must spend as efficiently as possible, showing flexibility of thinking to maneuver in difficult situations [3].

Employment within the framework of “quantitative” time, where the employee’s income is determined by the norms of output, is losing relevance. A modern successful employee must treat time and circumstances of the external environment as a resource. With positive trends: the qualitative use of an employee’s working time, the redistribution of resources in a situation of rapid response, there are also negative phenomena: the insecurity of employees. An increasing number of employers are switching to hiring workers on temporary contracts or outsourcing some of the work. This leads to socio-psychological tension among employees and forces them to accept and follow the conditions of increased competition, devoting more and more time to work.

The transition to the information society gave rise to such social theories as the theory of the creative class by R. Florida and the theory of the precariat by G. Standing. R. Florida proposed a model of social structure in which, along with the working and service classes, a
creative class appears, which representatives dominate in terms of income and power. The new class includes individuals with the ability to create new forms and professional affiliation to creative fields of activity. Within the framework of the Florida theory, the responsibility for moving up the social ladder is assigned directly to the person. For example, students and migrants who do not move from the service class to the creative class, but remain in it forever, are to blame for their situation, because they do not use the opportunities provided to them [4].

G. Standing in his work “Precariat: a new dangerous class” distinguishes seven classes: the elite (small, but the most influential and wealthy class), salariat (representatives have full stable employment, social guarantees and benefits, influence decision-making in the company), professionals (contracted consultants and high-income independents), working class, precariat and underclass. Among the main characteristics of the precariat, he singled out temporary employment, the instability of income received, the lack of social security and professional self-identification. Thus, the precariat is a class that includes individuals who do not have permanent employment, stable income, social guarantees and professional affiliation [5], therefore, representatives of the precariat have the smallest amounts of cultural, economic and social capital [6].

Russian sociologists give a different definition, arguing that “the precariat includes groups of individuals who, regardless of their income, education, self-identification and other characteristics, do not have stable formal employment, i.e. this group is employed informally, does not have a stable position in the labor market, and has no job security.” O. Shkaratan and co-authors believe that about 27% of the population of modern Russia can be attributed to the precarization risk zone. The development of the digital segment of the economy has led to the emergence of a number of new professions: "network lawyer", "moderator of work with government agencies", "IT preacher", "digital curator", etc. [7].

All this requires a revision of the content of educational programs, standards and legal foundations of social relations in general. The main challenge of digitalization is that in key sectors of the economy and the social sphere, in state and municipal administration, the systems based on the dominance of hierarchical relations are becoming uncompetitive. Thus, the digitalization of the economic sector makes significant adjustments to the social structure of society, creating a serious threat to the mental health of an individual and destabilizing the state of entire social strata.

The transition to a knowledge economy creates a need for a qualitative improvement in the human resource, both through retraining and raising the level of knowledge of existing employees, and through the influx of young professionals. The development of a professional path by young people is the work of both the young people themselves and the institutions for training specialists at all levels. Career planning is a stage in building a professional future for representatives of the younger generation. As Generation Z (digital generation) professionals enter the labor market, business leaders, HR professionals and academics are faced with the question of how to learn to understand them.

The digital economy and social isolation caused by the pandemic raises questions about building work activities in general and planning the professional and career growth of young people. The sociological analysis of the transition to the information society includes the study of behavioral preferences, value orientations and social attitudes of young people towards the implementation of personal development through professional and career growth.

There are a number of signs of the impact of the booming market paradigm and the Internet of things, or “connected production”, robotization and unconditional basic income on the self-determination of young people in the labor market. In particular, young people have high expectations from the employer, while employers see young people as a “labor resource” or “labor force”. “Advanced” employers operate with the concepts of “human
capital” and “talent management” as a resource for creating value: young employees should be useful and make a profit [8]. It is evident – there is a serious gap in the worldview attitudes of the younger generation, who are now entering the labor market, and the representatives of employers who form this market.

The modern “risk society” [9] determines the actual behavioral characteristics of the individual, due to its integration into society. Unfortunately, there are more and more people in need of social assistance and adaptation in a rapidly changing environment. The digital transformation of society causes the threats associated with the instability of the value system and society as a whole, with the distortion of sociocultural identity. The risks of “digitalization” include the phenomenon of “digital idiocy”, which gives rise to deadlocks in everyday routine processes, if they deviate even slightly from the standard situations, the characteristics of which are embedded in the digitized system model. Traditional hierarchical institutions have the potential for self-correction: the rule is interpreted and applied in a particular situation, taking into account common sense. “Digitalization” implies formalization that reduces the informal component of institutions, while the use of digital technologies that compensate for this lack is not always possible. If in “non-digital” relations a non-standard situation can be resolved informally, at the level of common sense, then in digital reality one may encounter the impossibility of such actions.

Digitalization significantly changes not only the economic and social parameters of the life of society, but also the practice of social work: the scope of assistance provided to people in need is expanding, the accuracy of forecasts and assessment of difficulties and ways to overcome them is increasing, although new difficulties arise.

Technical means were previously considered in the focus of systematization and storage of information about the recipient of social services, and not as tools of social care. Now electronic counseling and network practice (online therapy, cyber-rehabilitation) have become part of the daily routine of social workers. It requires to develop the following skills of social workers:
- the ability to carry out a professional dialogue and send documents online;
- the ability to understand the specifics of self-expression of service recipients and their identity through avatars;
- the ability to comprehend the specifics of web development and hosting plans;
- the ability to critically assess the productivity of online therapy methods, their potential and implementation difficulties; the ability to eliminate viruses, spam, and spyware that may violate the confidentiality of the online therapeutic relationship;
- the ability to control the authenticity of the service user’s request based on the navigation of his place of residence, etc.

Social care institutions are far from always being ready for the full implementation of services in a digital format. Professional standards do not always encourage the introduction of IT to customer service. A separate group of problems in the development of digitalization of social work is associated with psychophysical, mental, social, economic difficulties that limit the elderly, the disabled, low-income families, rural residents in the acquisition and use of technical and software tools. There are people who fundamentally avoid digital technologies - first of all, these are elderly consumers of social services, although recently the circle of people who deliberately minimize the presence of technical devices in their lives is growing.

A characteristic feature of the digital technologies use is the modification of the subjective role of the client: one can choose help online or offline. The recipient is free to give preference to various modes of treatment, which are not limited by the routine of the functioning of the social institution. A virtual social diagnosis can be verified by the client themselves through triangulation models of digital technologies: by analyzing the sites of other organizations or “user opinions”, which, based on likes, will have no less significant
information and a social and therapeutic function than direct communication with a professional. Another feature of the implementation of digital care may be the uniqueness of the life situation, which stands out from the general line of customer needs. Thus, the formats of social work and the complex of problems faced by social workers are constantly growing, and customer requests may not always be adequate to the level of specialist training and the technical level of communication equipment.

4 Conclusion

The digital revolution aims at moving technological countries towards a super-intelligent society. The economy, social system, lifestyle and the very format of a person’s personality are changing. The sphere of social care receives new and promising tools of assistance. However, there are alternative channels that “nullify” the results of official resources; there are risks of a digital divide of different social groups, since the effectiveness of the use of digital resources directly depends on the age of consumers, and, consequently, their digital competencies and the level of equipment of the social services system. These features can manifest themselves differently in different countries and regions of the world. Today’s society is faced with the necessity to develop new theoretical tools for the analysis of social work to optimize the social sphere and improve the quality of life.

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