

## Conference Paper

# Challenges and Prospects for Digitizing the Social Service Providers' Activities

S.E. Gasumova

Perm State National Research University, Perm, Russian Federation

## Abstract

This article presents the author's definitions of "digitization of social service provision" and "digitization of social services" concepts and identifies the difference between them. It presents the results of an interview with 18 experts — the heads of institutions and organizations of social service provision implementing the rehabilitation of disabled people in Perm region. The research was conducted in 2019 and sought to identify problems and prospects for the digitization of the social services sphere. Interviewees rated their satisfaction regarding the convenience and time cost of automated systems that are currently being used in their organizations; characterized their needs in introducing various innovative interactive services, mobile applications, and other digital software; and expressed their attitude to various innovations. Social innovations were developed by the researchers and offered to experts by interviewees (for example, services for assessing the quality of work of specialists by service users, quick selection of the right social service, filing a complaint, referring a citizen to another organization, counseling in video mode, electronic appointment service, etc.). The research has shown how innovations can improve the performance of social service providers' work and the quality of their interactions with citizens, which will ultimately increase the satisfaction of social service users and will positively affect the level of social well-being in society as a whole. A number of problems have been identified that currently impede the development of digitization: they are related to staff resources, the level of computerization, the lack of motivation among managers and personnel of social service organizations to implement innovative IT, and a certain distrust that such technologies can facilitate the activities of the organization and increase its effectiveness.

**Keywords:** digitization, social service provision, social services, social institutions, social work.

Corresponding Author:

S.E. Gasumova

svetagasumova@ya.ru

Published: 21 January 2021

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the XXIII International Conference Conference Committee.

## 1. Introduction

Digitization today has affected all areas of public life. According to the Russian legislation, since 2010 "digitization" as a concept is defined as the transition from analog to digital form of transmitting information [8]. In the Explanatory Dictionary of the Information Society and the New Economy, digitization is described as the conversion of information into digital form; digital transmission of data encoded into discrete signal

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pulses [3]. Researchers of the digitization process (for example, V.G. Khalin and G.V. Chernova) propose to consider it in a broader sense — as a modern global trend in the development of the economy and society, which is based on the conversion of information into digital form and leads to an increase in the efficiency of the economy and improving the quality of life [5, p. 46]. In the framework of this approach, which we would call social and technological, attention is drawn to the digitization coverage of not only production and business, but also science, the social sphere, and citizens' daily life. It is very important that its results should be effectively used in society and be accessible to each individual.

Recently, more and more studies have begun to appear in Russia in the field of the social aspects referring to public services digitization (M.A. Avdyev [2], N.A. Simchenko, I.A. Troyan, M.V. Goryachykh, E.S. Andryushchenko [10], M. G. Janelidze [4] and others) and directly in the subject field of digitization of social services (A.Kh. Malikova [7], M.Z. Shogenov, T.B. Guppoev [9], N.V. Studenikin [11], L.D. Kozyreva, O.V. Shkurupei [6]). This will undoubtedly allow us to develop methodological approaches in this area and make the digitization process more efficient and uniform.

By digitization of social service provision, we propose to mean the process of increasing the use of information effectiveness in the organization of social service provision using digital technologies.

Social services digitization can be considered, in our opinion, as a process of increasing the use information efficiency while providing various assistance to citizens to improve living conditions and independently meet their needs, using digital technologies [6].

Consequently, the social service provision digitization (as an industry) includes:

- automation of activities, that is, the development and implementation of automated information systems that allow us recording and analyzing of information in digital form about the services provided, about the service users, and about the resources spent, to make a forecast of the social groups' needs in social services, form reports, and make management decisions;
- introduction of algorithmized electronic services in the field of social service provision for citizens (submitting documents for receiving social services, obtaining documents and reference information, making an appointment with the social service);
- installation of additional electronic forms of interaction with social service users based on Internet technologies (counseling, filing complaints);

- staff training in digital technologies.

Social services digitization implies the introduction of digital technologies at certain stages of assistance to citizens. The process of implementing actions to provide each social service should be algorithmized in order to identify those stages of assistance to the individual that can be digitalized. At each such stage of the specific service provision a person should be given the choice and the opportunity to receive this part of the help using digital technologies. For example, this may be the initial informing the client's specialist about the service: the client could choose whether they want to come to the social service for this or they would like to fill out the necessary forms on the website of the social service organization and receive a notification about what service they can receive. Or it may be the stage when the client has a need for additional advice on the service, etc. Foreign researchers of social work issues believe that even the stage of entering data on the recipient of services into the automated social service system should be digitalized and involve delegation of authority to the client — a person should be able to independently enter his data into the system and ask to delete it later.

Considering social services as the essential core of social service provision, then the digitization of social services is the core of the social service provision digitization.

Computer worldwide has become a must-have accessory for social workers. Computers are now not alienated machines, but friendly assistants, ensuring that employees fulfill their responsibilities to the organization and customers. At the same time, the specifics of social services imply selection and implementation of new information technologies for use with extreme caution in this area. These should be technologies that really facilitate the work of social workers, and do not create an additional burden and do not take up a lot of time.

## 2. Methodology and Methods

In August–October 2019 we conducted structured interviews with experts — heads of 18 social service institutions and organizations that provide rehabilitation for people with disabilities in Perm region and are included in the regional Register of social service providers, in order to identify problems and prospects for social services digitalization.

To conduct the interview, we developed a questionnaire that included 30 questions. 5 professors of the Department of Social Work and Conflictology of Perm State National Research University were interviewed, who participated in an independent assessment of the quality of social services in Perm region and went directly to institutions and

organizations that provide rehabilitation services for people with disabilities in the region.

### 3. Results and Discussions

The leaders of 9 out of 18 organizations note that at present, not all functions in their organization are automated, and most experts (10 out of 18) are convinced that the information system used, despite its positive assessment, needs to be improved. This clearly indicates the need for further development of automation in the field of social services.

Experts note that approximately a third of their working time, specialists working directly with clients, are forced to spend on the establishment of information in the computer program used. In our opinion, this is too much, because this is the time that they could spend on communicating with and helping a person. The American researcher of social work problems T. Wals argues that social services specialists are forming the so-called technocratic “bureaucrosis” because of the need to spend too much time working with computer programs instead of working with people who have asked for help. In the monograph “Beyond the borders of management: the humanization of the management process”, he writes “... social workers should be able to spend the main efforts on helping people, and not on maintaining databases, compiling reports, etc. One of the principles of the humanity theory proposed to solve this problem is the principle of personal communication. This principle assumes that communication should be based on personal contact, whenever possible. It is necessary to limit documentation, reports, directives, etc. Communication at the personal level should take into account all types of relationships: employee — clients, employee — supervisor (co-worker mentor), and even employee-leader” [1, p. 23–26].

In our opinion, there should be created automated information systems that would take no more than 10% of the working time to input the data. For example, this can be achieved by ready-made templates for auto-completion in most fields, thus, a specialist could just select the right options for filling out information about the client or the service provided in seconds. Or, ideally, it could even be voice input.

More than half of the experts participating in the interview (10 out of 18) note that most of their clients use the Internet and could receive some of the services using information technology. The research has revealed that it is possible to record a fact: heads of organizations have already felt the citizens’ involvement in need of help in the informatization process and their willingness to use digital technologies in the field of

social services. A number of interview questions were aimed at specifying the needs for digitization by social services regarding the introduction of interactive services on organizations' websites. For this, we compiled a list of possible services. Thus, the research has found that social service providers need the following interactive services to increase their activities efficiency (ranked in order of demand):

1. A service for assessing the specialists' work quality by service users on a 10-point scale, provided that it is a local service that is not available to regulatory authorities, only the head of the organization has access (12 out of 18 need and 0 already have).
2. Service for the quick selection of the social service necessary for a particular client (based on a brief survey) from the list of services provided by the organization and obtaining its full description (10 out of 18 need and 2 already have).
3. Service for filing a complaint to the head of the organization from clients about staff actions / inaction, conflicts that have emerged, considering that this is a local service, not available to regulatory authorities, only the head of the organization can access it (9 out of 18 need and 2 already have).
4. A service to redirect a citizen to another social service organization in the absence of the necessary social service in the organization or a large queue for its receipt (9 out of 18 need and 1 already has).
5. A video counseling service for citizens who have difficulty to arrive to the location of a social service (8 out of 18 need and 0 already have).
6. Service for electronic appointment with specialists (5 out of 18 need and 2 already have).

So far, nowadays, the experts who participated in the interviews have estimated the digitization level of the social services sector in Perm Region on a 5-point scale, mainly by 3 points (9 out of 18). 5 leaders of social services gave 4 points, 1 leader 2 points, the rest found it difficult to answer.

The experts identified the following problems referring to social service digitalization (ranked in order of relevance):

1. "Laptops and tablets are needed for each employee to provide digital services, but we don't have them" (7 out of 18 managers).
2. "I understand that digitalization is important, but I can't imagine what exactly can be done" (7 out of 18 managers).

3. “Employees have no knowledge and skills in the field of information technology to implement something” (5 out of 18 managers).
4. “There is a lack of time to think about it, there is too much work” (3 out of 18 managers).
5. “The staff of the organization is not psychologically prepared for this work” (3 out of 18 managers).
6. “I’ll think about this problem when there will be an order from higher authorities” (2 out of 18 managers).
7. “For this work we need enthusiast in the team, but we don’t have one” (1 leader out of 18).

7 out of 18 heads of social service organizations think that, unfortunately, the available information technologies so far do not so much help in work, but rather increase the workload on staff.

## 4. Conclusions

Thus, today it is necessary to develop automated information systems for the implementation of the listed services and software that can significantly improve the social services provision quality, the efficiency of social service organizations and the satisfaction of clients of social services, as well as reducing the number of conflicts between citizens and social service providers. Based on the analysis of the identified problems, the most important thing today is to computerize social services, instruct on the kind of automated information systems that can be developed and services that are implemented. Ideally, of course, it is necessary to provide ready-made integrated software products unified for the region for installation. This, of course, should be the function of the executive authorities (in Perm Region — the regional Ministry of Social Development). Innovations can benefit the performance of social service providers’ work and improve the quality of interaction with citizens, which will ultimately increase the satisfaction of social service users, expand the reach of those in need of assistance, and will positively affect the level of social well-being in society as a whole.

## Acknowledgments

We commend the heads of institutions and social service organizations — providers of social services for rehabilitation of disabled people in Perm Region, as well as to the Ministry of Social Development of Perm Region for this study.

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