




Social workers' job satisfaction in public institutions




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Orientation: The effectiveness of social service delivery depends on the motivation of social workers to perform their work well. Motivation is directly related to social workers' job satisfaction.

Research purpose: The study aimed to determine the factors of job dissatisfaction among social workers and identify ways to address them.

Motivation for the study: The research tries to solve the existing problem of low job satisfaction among social workers, given the low wages in this area, the great complexity of the work (associated with emotional tension) and difficult working conditions.

Research approach/design and method: The study relies on a qualitative approach – a subjective approach to the research from the social worker's point of view.

Main findings: The research found that social workers, being a rather specific category of employees, consider the issue of job satisfaction in a rather complex symbiosis. Factors such as relatively low pay or paper records and documentation keeping are of little importance. Instead, the irrational fear of losing a job influences social workers' perceptions of work and their job satisfaction the most.

Practical/managerial implications: Social workers value and are satisfied not with the job in the sense of their performance or the result obtained but with the actual availability of the job (the workplace).

Contribution/value-add: Compared with other international studies, the study opens a new vector of scientific inquiry – the elimination of the fear factor from the model of job satisfaction assessment for social workers.

Keywords: fear of job loss; personnel management; social work; work efficiency; work motivation.

Introduction

Labour efficiency depends to a large extent on employee satisfaction. This is especially relevant for social workers in public institutions whose work results are not a specific physical product but a social service. Dissatisfaction with working conditions affects the reduction in the number of social workers. The Department of Social Development report states that the shortage of social workers further exacerbates the lack of capacity to implement policies and programmes related to social problems such as substance abuse, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), chronic poverty, food insecurity and other related social problems (Department of Social Development, 2009).

Farmer (2011) argues that since the Seventies, the question of job satisfaction and motivation of public sector social workers has been asked countless times, sparking much controversy in the social work profession. The results of studies on job satisfaction have proven that the more satisfied an employee is with their job, the less likely he or she is to leave their position (Gleasonwynn & Mindel, 1999).

There is a direct link between the quality of services provided and the degree of satisfaction of a social worker. Butler (1990) argues that institutions that strive to provide quality social services will also strive to increase the job satisfaction of their employees in the long run.

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Many studies prove the importance and relevance of social workers' job satisfaction. Social services are a noncommercial activity (Parvanova & Kriviradeva, 2019). Therefore, market incentives to increase labour efficiency cannot always be applied here. The main factor of quality social services provision is the personal motivation of social workers (Akeson et al., 2016; GASW, 2016), which directly depends on their job satisfaction. This study aims to identify ways and means to increase job satisfaction of social workers in state institutions. The study is also relevant because job satisfaction and employees' motivation of state social workers in Russia are not as commonly explored as in other countries.

Literature review

There are many studies on the job satisfaction of social workers. Most of these studies aim to identify why social workers quit, which leads to a shortage of employees in public social institutions.

Whitaker et al. (2006) concluded that social workers' job satisfaction is negatively affected by increased paperwork, the severity of client problems, workload, lists of people waiting for social services, distribution of non-social work tasks, level of supervision, coordination with community agencies and availability of professional training. For the most part, increased workload leads to reduced job performance. Van Wyk (2011) states that job-related stress can be caused by internal and external factors or the nature of work. High staff turnover in social work institutions is a severe obstacle to quality social service delivery.

Earle (2008) also considers staff turnover concerning job dissatisfaction. He argues that job attrition exacerbates the adverse effects of a decline in social workers' numbers since there is a growing need for their services. However, the authors do not look at the causes of job dissatisfaction among social workers. The main emphasis is on identifying the negative consequences of job dissatisfaction.

Weaver et al. (2006) note that retention of social workers is an urgent professional and practical task that must be addressed by improving their job satisfaction. Again, the main emphasis is on the consequences, not causes of dissatisfaction. Thus, Earle and Weaver miss the fundamental component of the problem, which is why social workers are dissatisfied with their jobs.

Strolin et al. (2006) classify the causes of turnover in social work agencies into three categories: individual, supervisory and organisational factors. Individual causes result from personal characteristics such as education or professional commitment. Organisational factors are the size of the workforce, job satisfaction, organisational climate and culture, salary, benefits, promotion opportunities and administrative burdens. The authors view job satisfaction as an essential factor in social services provision.

Eborall and Garmeson (2001) argue that the stressful and demanding nature of the job's time constraints burden social

workers' personal and professional survival strategies and lead to staff turnover. Ultimately, job dissatisfaction leads to the resignations of social workers.

Cole et al. (2004) studied how to increase job satisfaction among social workers. Salary, job autonomy, opportunities for promotion, quality of supervision, good working conditions, peer support, encouragement and social support all contribute to increased job satisfaction among social workers.

Elpers and Westhuis (2008) surveyed social workers to determine which factors improve job satisfaction. These factors included salary and benefits; career advancement opportunities; a supportive and inspiring work environment; clarity of job responsibilities; recognition; shared decision-making and adequate resources that allow employees to create positive outcomes for clients. A group of researchers also investigated the role of leadership in increasing social work employee satisfaction. Stoesz (1997) concluded that most social workers who move into leadership positions often have less adequate training and mentoring, making them prone to changing jobs. Rank and Hutchison (2000) found that 75 people at leadership positions at the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) said that the education and training they received did not meet their expectations. The level of training is another factor that affects the job satisfaction of social service workers.

Thus, one can summarise that burnout, stress, work engagement, turnover and job satisfaction are five aspects that are mentioned most often in studies about retaining social workers in the profession. It is important to note that the studies mentioned above were primarily conducted in countries with developed state institutions that allocate significant budget funds to the social sphere (Ravalier et al., 2021). At the same time, the issue of social workers' job satisfaction in less affluent countries is not considered at all (Jorgoni & Ymeri, 2016; Kerimi, 2016; Matkovic, 2016; Miluka, 2016). Nevertheless, in less wealthy countries, such as Russia, the quality provision of social services is critical since many citizens use these services.

Problem statement

A literature review showed that the causes of social workers' dissatisfaction in nonaffluent countries are rarely considered, although these are the countries where many citizens use social services. One of the main ways to improve the quality of social services is to increase the satisfaction of social workers with their job. This study explores the issue of social workers' job satisfaction in public institutions in Russia, a country where social services are in high demand (Nita, 2017; Partsakhaladze, 2017; Rama, 2016). The country was chosen because it has a large population, and many people use social services, which makes the issue of job satisfaction among social workers very important. This study aims to identify the causes of job dissatisfaction among social workers and ways to overcome them. To answer this question, firstly, the

authors examine the job conditions of social workers and ask them about how they perceive their work. Secondly, the study looks at what functions and what kinds of activities social workers have and do to determine their list of responsibilities. Thirdly, the authors determine what interventions can eliminate the mismatch between the functional responsibilities of social workers and the work they do.

The primary research method is interviews with social workers in public institutions. The interviews are then analysed, and conclusions are formed. The research hypothesis is that social workers' job satisfaction depends on working conditions and level of remuneration. Finally, the authors provide recommendations on increasing social workers' job satisfaction at public institutions. The results can solve the current problem of low job satisfaction among social workers, which is caused by low wages, difficulties, emotional tension and challenging working conditions.

Materials and methods

The study was conducted in several stages. The *first stage* used a qualitative approach based on extensive research and a phenomenological paradigm. The approach was chosen because it allows one to identify the state of the study rather than measure frequency or establish correlations between variables.

The qualitative method is also appropriate because the desired outcome of the study is to create a narrative and examine the perceived factors and barriers to social workers' job satisfaction. A subjective approach highlights the social workers' perspective and which factors they consider to be the main contributors to job satisfaction. A social worker is thus the main subject of research.

The *second stage* of the research included developing the study's design, identifying dependent and independent variables or regressors. An exploratory, descriptive design was chosen because the dependent variables were qualitative. Such variables included functional responsibilities, working experience in a state institution, nature of duties performed, team atmosphere, relations with the management and the absence or presence of duties not directly related to social worker duties. These factors help determine the degree of social workers' satisfaction with their job.

The *third stage* of the study was devoted to finding solutions to the problem of low job satisfaction. A problem-solving method was applied to determine possible ways to increase employees' satisfaction at public institutions. Improved work satisfaction depends on the solution of problems employees face during their professional duties.

This study follows a nonprobabilistic, purposive sampling methodology. Purposive sampling is based entirely on the judgement of the researcher. The sample is collected to

represent the most distinctive or typical attributes of the population that best serve the purpose of the study.

This study's sample consisted of 206 social workers who agreed to participate in the study. Respondents were selected through e-mails sent to the addresses of state institutions providing social services with a request to fill out a respondent questionnaire. Those workers who agreed to take the survey filled out the questionnaire in the Google Form (Alphabet, Inc., Mountain View, California, United States) at the provided link. The determining factor for becoming a respondent was the desire of a social worker to take the survey. Thus, the authors were limited in their ability to form the sample. Overall, 80% of respondents work in medical social services, and 20% provide educational, social services. The questionnaires contained questions to identify a respondent's attitude to their work. The obtained data were analysed by statistical data processing methods, such as moving average and central tendency methods. If a particular answer was found in more than 50% of cases, it was significant. The study considered all answers that occurred in more than 50% of answers to be important, because this factor is essential for half of the respondents. Based on the data obtained, the results of the study were formulated.

Results

The results achieved by people in the work process depend on more than just their knowledge, skills or abilities (Fofanova & Mamedova, 2018). Effective performance is achieved only when employees are properly motivated, that is, willing to work. Positive motivation activates a person's abilities to realise his or her potential, while negative motivation inhibits the manifestation of abilities and prevents the achievement of one's goals.

In the course of the study (using the method of moving average and coefficient estimates), four groups of factors determining the social workers' attitudes towards the performance of their duties were identified: (1) content and organisation of work; (2) working conditions and remuneration; (3) work and rest mode; and (4) relationships in the team (see Table 1).

In the first group of factors (18.1%), the most significant scores were given to the indicators of labour intensity, labour content, labour organisation and the amount of work performed. Thus, in this category, the respondents highlighted the importance of what they do rather than the environment in which they do it. In other words, respondents have an unsatisfied need for personal fulfilment and recognition from others. It is essential for them that their work is of value to others. Overall, 75% of representatives of the educational sphere and 60% of representatives of the medical sphere gave such answers.

In the second category (16.2%), the most significant factors were digitalisation, sanitary and hygienic working conditions, general working conditions, basic needs satisfaction and

TABLE 1: Factor loadings matrix of work satisfaction.

Factors	Factor loadings after processing the factors (coefficient)			
	1	2	3	4
Work in general	0.414	0.289	-	0.231
The essence of work	0.665	0.122	0.191	0.121
Labour organisation	0.673	0.187	-	0.104
Labour intensity	0.687	0.078	-	0.092
Hours of work	0.214	0.118	0.678	-
Work volume	0.464	0.128	0.389	-
Number of days off	0.132	0.134	0.768	-
Shift start and end time	-	-	0.672	0.305
Lunch break time	-	0.105	0.153	0.311
Size of wages	0.280	0.686	0.139	0.097
Digitalisation of labour	-	0.765	-	0.089
Sanitary working conditions	0.211	0.589	-	0.210
Relations with management	0.234	0.253	0.093	0.743
Relations with colleagues	0.112	-	0.143	0.675
Basic needs satisfaction	0.111	0.653	0.121	0.258
Working conditions in general	0.322	0.685	0.112	0.346

remuneration. It is worth noting that the remuneration issue concerns 100% of respondents of both medical and educational services. Sanitary and hygienic working conditions were mentioned as important by 100% of respondents from medical services. Thus, this indicator is primarily determined by the nature of one's work. In this group, the respondents' emphasis is shifted to working conditions, which they perceive as the attitude of the management and society as a whole. The need for comfortable working conditions can be traced in all answers.

In the third group of factors (15.1%), the most significant scores were given to the number of days off, the length of the workweek and the start and end time of the shift. These factors were mentioned by 75% of respondents from both medical and educational service institutions. At the same time, the most significant factor for employees of medical institutions was the beginning and the end of the work shift (60%), while for employees of the educational sphere, it was the number of days off (50%).

One can assume that medical and educational sphere employees perceive working time duration differently. For medical workers, it is crucial to have a clear start and end time of the shift, which, for specific reasons, is 'floating', which leads to overtime. At the same time, educators need to have certain days off. Apparently, on their days off, teachers are engaged either in preparation for lessons or checking pupils' works, which they perceive as a working day. The responses show the value for social workers of their time and the possibility to spend it at their discretion. Respondents feel the need for rest and rationing of working time. In the fourth group of factors (9.2%), the relationship with coworkers and management was the most significant. The highlighted factors account for 58.6% of the total variance of evaluations.

Thus, in the first group of factors, which described the content and organisation of work, the most popular indicators were the organisation of work, labour content, labour intensity

and amount of work performed. However, this group also included satisfaction by relations with the management. The second group of factors was related to working conditions. The third group of factors concerned salary and work-rest regime satisfaction. The fourth group of factors was about relations in the team.

The analysis of the average shows that the most informative factors are those related to the content and conditions of work. Salary is not decisive for social workers' job satisfaction (if that were the case, it would be separated into a factor on its own). In the factor matrix, the importance of remuneration is even reduced (the assessment in the second matrix moved from the second to the third factor). On the other hand, the importance of such indicators as work-rest regime and relationships inside the team has increased. Social workers' job satisfaction is also significantly influenced by the fear of losing a job, which has become an integral part of everyday life for most citizens, along with other social fears (criminalisation, drop in living standards, impoverishment, etc.). It increases the general state of anxiety and alarm among people.

This fear plays a vital role in the job satisfaction of social workers. The fear of losing one's job is reflected in exaggerated assessments of satisfaction with some aspects of work and environment and decreased criticism and insistence on improving working conditions. This problem was relevant for 54% of respondents who were afraid of losing their job (slightly higher among those with lower wages) and 72% of participants who said they were not afraid to lose their jobs. Thus, the value of the job itself 'suppresses' claims for higher wages and better working conditions.

The study results show that social workers, being a rather specific category of employees, consider the issue of job satisfaction in a rather complex symbiosis. Along with relatively low wages, keeping all records and documentation in paper format, these factors are surprisingly insignificant, although they should be the ones that have the most impact on the satisfaction indicator. Instead, the irrational fear of losing one's job strongly influences social workers' perceptions of work and job satisfaction. The mere fact of having a job and the presence of fear of losing it distorts workers' perceptions of work. Consequently, having a job as such is already perceived positively and is mixed with feelings of perceiving the job in a positive aspect, despite the presence of many unfavourable factors.

Thus, creating a sense of social security should help overcome the fear of job loss and positively impact social workers' perceptions of job satisfaction. It is necessary to increase social workers' sense of value to feel their importance to the institution they work in and society. At the same time, it is important to digitise work processes (so that social workers spend less time filling out documents manually) and ensure that the salaries are increased (Ponomareva & Nikitina, 2019).

The identified factors of social workers' job satisfaction differ significantly from similar studies in more affluent countries. Social workers in Russia emphasise the societal significance and importance of their job among job satisfaction factors. This feeling outweighs even the wages and working conditions, which are in second place. According to the respondents, working time rationing and the need for rest were in third place.

Discussion

In general, the obtained results confirm the findings by other scientists. Similarities pertain to the dependence of employee satisfaction on the results of their work (GSSWA, 2017; Marmo & Berkman, 2020; Mrhálek & Kajanová, 2018; Zegarac, 2016). At the same time, this study outlines a new cross-section of social workers' job satisfaction research, namely the fear of job loss. The fear of losing a job makes social workers appreciate it more (if not overestimate it) and perceive it more positively in the context of the possibility of losing it.

This new aspect brings scientific and practical novelty to job satisfaction research and finding solutions to the problem of low work satisfaction. Considering the obtained result and the fact that studies considered in the literature review do not mention the fear of job loss as a significant factor of job satisfaction, it is necessary to revise the study approaches (although the fear factor was mentioned by several studies) (Bureyeva et al., 2017; Kaveshnikova & Agafonova, 2016; Kibanov et al., 2016). If the fear of losing a job were present but statistically insignificant, it would not affect the results obtained. However, if this factor were not identified or not part of the hypothesis, then there is a possibility that the presence of this factor could significantly distort the outcome. In this research, the fear of job loss significantly influenced the evaluation of the other factors. In particular, it significantly reduced the importance of salary (which is a fundamental factor in job satisfaction) and social communication factors. People are ready to tolerate bad relations with their colleagues and insufficient wages if only they get to keep their job (Krasinskaya, 2017; Podolyan, 2019; Sokolov, 2016).

The reviewed studies highlight the stress factor. In economically developed countries, social workers note that their work is associated with much stress, leading to emotional tension and burnout. The stress factor is actively discussed in the research, and scientists are looking for every way to reduce it to improve social workers' working conditions. In this study, the stress factor was not detected. Respondents did not indicate stress as a factor that influences their job satisfaction. This suggests that in Russia, stress at work is not considered a form of dissatisfaction with working conditions. Most likely, it can be explained that people constantly live under stress and do not distinguish it as an independent factor that affects satisfaction. This conclusion is also confirmed by the general tension in society generating the fear of losing one's job.

Essential factors of social workers' job dissatisfaction in developed countries are related to personal motives – job involvement or staff turnover. This study found that in the conditions of a constant budget deficit of the social sphere and low salaries, the main factor of dissatisfaction with social workers' jobs is the nonrecognition of their work as meaningful (even though the importance of social work has been repeatedly argued in United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] reports) (UNICEF, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; UNICEF ECARO, 2016, 2018; UNICEF ECARO ECD Section, 2018). The second most important factors were the wage sizes and working conditions, partially discussed in other studies (MLSD and MOES of Kyrgyzstan, 2018; Rogers, 2018; Rogers & Sammon, 2018). It can be concluded that a country's economic development directly affects social workers' job satisfaction. In fact, in economically developed rich countries, wage size, irregular working hours or insufficient free time were not among the dissatisfaction factors. These differences in factors are of scientific value and are a subject for further research in this area.

The studies highlight promotion (career advancement), less management oversight and more autonomy for social workers, higher wages and increased social security by providing a better package of social guarantees, among the factors that increase job satisfaction. In this context, this study strongly contrasts with the other findings (Cole et al., 2004; Elpers & Westhuis, 2008).

Focusing on the problem-solving approach to increase social workers' job satisfaction, one can conclude that the fundamental problem – the fear of losing a job – should be solved first. Even the presence of a social package, a decent salary level and social guarantees do not adequately affect the perception of a social worker's job satisfaction (as argued by Rodionova & Dominyak, 2019) because there is always the possibility of losing the job. Moreover, the more these kinds of benefits are available to the worker, the greater the fear of losing it all.

The study has shown that social workers are satisfied not with their work in the sense of their activity and outcomes but with the availability of work (the workplace). These are entirely different things that need to be evaluated differently.

In the context of the obtained results and comparison with the results of other studies, the relevant issue for future research remains the elimination of the fear factor from the model of assessment of job satisfaction by social workers. The complexity and relevance of this question are how to eliminate the fear factor when interviewing respondents, as they give their answers under the influence of this fear. The conclusion confirms the value of the study results, opening new aspects of the unsolved problem of social workers' job satisfaction.

Another critical area for future research is the influence of the socio-economic development of the country on social workers' job satisfaction. The overall standard of living in the

country affects the number of people in need of social services and the level of material well-being of social workers. As the economic well-being of the country and social workers in particular increases, the factors affecting their job satisfaction will also change.

Conclusion

Social workers' job satisfaction is the most important factor of workforce stability, but it is an ambiguous characteristic. Decreased satisfaction harms the effectiveness of the employee, leading to negative consequences in the staffing of the institution: an increase in staff turnover, deterioration of labour and production discipline, absenteeism, the facts of unfair attitude to the property. At the same time, the obtained results contrast with this view of the consequences of job dissatisfaction. The prevailing fear of losing one's job suppresses the will of social workers to improve working conditions. They agree to work under any conditions as long as they keep their jobs.

There is another side to the issue of employee job satisfaction. A fully satisfied worker is a bad worker since he or she has a weak desire to improve (both professionally and personally). The tension of motivational energy decreases, and the interest in the work effectiveness deteriorates. Thus, labour satisfaction should not be maximum but optimal. In order to increase labour efficiency, a certain level of employees' dissatisfaction (especially in the sense of work) must be present.

This study indicates the presence of the third option, in which the dissatisfied employee is so afraid of losing the job that he or she perceives it in a positive aspect, which improves their perception of satisfaction with such work. At the same time, latent dissatisfaction prevents and does not contribute to awakening the motives to improve the quality of work or demand improved conditions because of the fear of losing the job, which overwhelms the perception. Thus, a social worker is afraid of losing his or her job and therefore holds onto it, but he or she does not show dissatisfaction with the working conditions and the level of pay because he or she is afraid of losing the job. At the same time, increasing wages and improving working conditions will not significantly increase social workers' job satisfaction because they will be even more afraid of losing it. In the end, it may have the opposite effect. The root cause of this situation is the fear of losing one's job. This fear should be eliminated, and only then it will be possible to solve other problems of increasing job satisfaction of social workers in state institutions.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size of respondents and their stratification depends on the region, which can change job satisfaction factors. Secondly, the study was built primarily on a subjective approach. If another approach is chosen (for example, objective economic indicators of living standards of social workers or quantitative indicators of their working conditions), the results may also change.

The practical value of the article lies in the possibility of using the results obtained to directly improve the level of satisfaction of social workers in public institutions of developing countries, for which low wages and insufficient funding are common factors. Further research could focus on exploring ways to eliminate the fear factor in the surveys (since it affects the answers) and studying the impacts of a country's socio-economic development on job satisfaction of social workers.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

S.G. was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, writing of the original draft, supervision and project administration; T.N. contributed to the methodology, formal analysis, writing of the original draft and visualisation; S.R. contributed to the software, data curation, review and editing of the manuscript, supervision and project administration; S.M. contributed to the validation, investigation, resources and the review and editing of the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclaimer

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