

# PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF SOCIAL WORKERS' QUALIFICATION IMPROVEMENT

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Social work is oriented towards activity of client nowadays. Client isn't treated as passive consumer of social services or their receiver but as active participant in dealing with problems. Social worker has to become the guide in this variation process of client's social situation, to show the ways of meeting the needs and reduction of troubles.

*Social worker, qualification improvement, reasons, possibilities and strategies of qualification improvement.*

## Introduction

Social work is considered as interactive performance of social worker and client, who is realized in particular circumstances (political, legal, material, human resources, in attitudes of community and society).

Social workers are often both strong and weak link because the individual results of every worker are the performance effectiveness of all institution providing social services. In pursuance of work efficiency the qualification improvement of social workers is important because of these reasons:

- Society is raising bigger requirements for social workers, which can be met only with improved professional abilities;
- The process of integration to EU demands from social workers to be aware of the social sphere peculiarities not only in Lithuania but in other EU countries too;
- The speed of organizational and technical reorganization of social institutions is growing up continually and this demands from social workers to assimilate new theoretical and practical abilities.

**The aim of the paper** – to identify the practical possibilities of social workers' qualification improvement.

**The tasks of the paper** – to identify the methods of social workers' qualification improvement; to analyze the practical possibilities of social workers' qualification improvement.

**The research methods:** analysis of scientific literature was applied on purpose to identify methods and strategies of social workers' qualification improvement, to review the research of Lithuanian and foreign scientists; questionnaire was applied in investigation of possibilities of social workers' qualification improvement in social security divisions in Alytus, Marijampole, Lazdijai, Prienai and Birštonas municipalities and sub-districts (the 75 social workers were polled); statistical analysis was applied for processing the research results; logical analysis was applied on purpose to analyze the practical possibilities of social workers' qualification improvement.

## **Practical analysis of social workers` qualification improvement**

Prevailing opinion is that social work is new multiple profession. It requires continual perfection of social workers: to widen and deepen knowledge, to develop skills and to refer to work values.

There was established that qualifying trainings for social workers were organized since 1997 and the attestation of social workers is running since 2002. These are the first efforts to enable social workers to improve in professional field (Varzinskienė, 2003).

In accordance with the data of Statistical department (Socialinis pranešimas, 2005) there was no one worker, who had qualification certificate of social worker in 1992. 825 certificated specialists of social work (social pedagogic) were prepared in 2000: 395 graduates obtained professional qualification (the main university studies) and master degree at universities, 430 – at higher schools. The 2500 persons were studying social work and social pedagogic in different social work programmes in 2000/2001 academic years.

In the joint project of Lithuania and Finland in 1998 the preparation of social workers was recommended to divide to social work (organizational aspects of management) and social services (provision of particular social services at stationary institutions and centers). The university education is necessary for social work, and higher non-university education for provision of social services is needful.

The base of knowledge in social work is the totality of accumulated information, scientific data, values and skills, also searching, usage, evaluation of methodologies of what is already known. This base is being shaped from the research, theories development and important phenomenon studies of social worker personally and from the direct and indirect experience of other social workers. It is compiled from the information obtained from clients and other professionals, and from knowledge of all society too (Socialinis pranešimas, 2005).

According to D. Collins (Collins, 2002), social worker needs knowledge of ternary nature because social worker is intermediate person between individual and his environment, and he helps client to deal with different difficulties and problems:

- 1) knowledge about behavior, adaptation means of individual, and about all what is related with adaptation;
- 2) knowledge about situation – community, its institutions and different types of interests;
- 3) knowledge of compensatory nature, which helps to understand bargains between people and environment, encourages or smothers growth, development, realization of human potential and ability of the environment to maintain variety of human potential.

It could be stated that the importance of professional education is determined by the continually changing market demands, implementation of new technologies and sharp competition in the world and in Lithuania too. Every institution should pay attention to the workers` education and qualification on purpose to meet the

level of these days because this guarantees its success. With reference to research only 37 per cent of respondents (Fig. 1) have necessary education. There was established while analyzing emerged situation that the main problem is coordination of non-university and university studies. There are not recommendatory attitudes, which can help to find out ways how person could who is successful through with colleague not to waste his time for the fourth year's studies of the same trend at university. Part-time studies both in high schools and in colleagues are fee-paying (fee per semester vary from 500 to 1500 litas). Due to this reason persons working in social sphere are supposed to care about finances by themselves. The salary of social workers has varied from 620 to 1000 litas per month in 2004 (Socialinis pranešimas, 2005). It's difficult to devote part of salary for education while receiving such incomes.

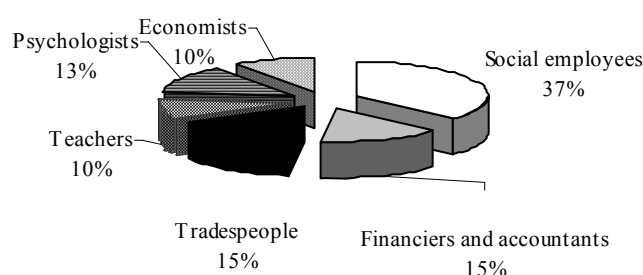


Fig. 1. Structure of social workers' professions according to education (compiled by the authors)

Considering the data gained by authors underlying possibility of social workers' performance is to apply professional abilities (45 per cent). There can be stated that above mentioned choice guarantees the creative self-expression, helps to identify possibilities in performance (which can be attractive in its novelty, uncertainty and riskiness). Application of professional abilities at work increases personal experience and knowledge. The main driving motive in the foreign institutions providing social services is workers, their professional abilities and willingness to work efficient and rational.

According to the data of Statistical department, the financial resources for civil servants' qualification improvement were 0.5 per cents of salaries' assignments in counties, 1.5 per cents – in ministries, and 3.0 per cents in municipalities (Valstybės žinios, 2002).

The respondents have to rank the motives of qualification improvement while analyzing the attitude of social workers towards qualification improvement. According to importance these motives were as follows:

1. To be aware of their specialty (50 per cent).
2. To be good organizer of social work (25 per cent).
3. To keep in step with science and information progress (25 per cent).

According to M. Kubr (Kubr, 1996) opinion, the abilities of social workers can be divided to four separate spheres: abilities of information accumulation and

evaluation; abilities of professional growth and adaptation; abilities of practical performance with individuals, groups and communities; abilities of evaluation.

Aside from above mentioned abilities, social worker that is willing to perform properly his work, should acquire these abilities too: self-perception, empathy, relations, especially attitude towards persons of other race, culture, sex, age, sexual orientation and disabled persons. Abilities are improving while applying practical knowledge, different techniques and methodic. Applied knowledge, values, personal features and working style of social worker have impact on these abilities.

Social workers take care of their qualification level by themselves today. They should take unpaid holydays and finance their training expenditure by themselves.

According to the research data there isn't paid necessary attention to the qualified social workers' training in Lithuania. Workers of lower qualification perform tasks of higher qualification often. This has negative influence on the quality of social services (Beresnevičienė, 2000). Unsolved problems are conditioning increasing skepticism of clients in regard to social services' providers.

The system of social workers' training and qualification improvement is establishing since 1995 in Lithuania. Centers of social workers' training and institutes of social work organize qualification improvement courses for social workers since 1997. The Ministry of social security and labor started implement programme of social workers' qualification improvement, which is obligatory for attestation, in 2001. The main aim of this programme implementation – to allow the social workers practitioners the possibilities to model situations of demands' establishment, planning, organizing and evaluating changes and to develop abilities of searching of purposive information and its effective appliance.

In 2002 new Law on civil service came into force (it includes social workers too), the legal regulation and financing of civil servants' training and qualification improvement and common principles of organization were defined, analysis of training demands was fulfilled.

In the implementation of civil servants' training system the main two problems were identified, which are limiting the qualitative and quantitative development of this system: insufficient financing and unsatisfactory motivation of social workers. Considering research data social workers embrace basically earlier on acquired experience because workload and social conditions don't permit of active interesting in the novelties of social services' extension area.

Funds of professional training in every institution can effective solve above-mentioned problems. Workers could have individual holidays of professional training, which can be paid from above-mentioned fund.

Researched institutions have prevailing strategies of human resources qualification improvement (65 per cent). According to respondents viewpoint institutions only partially get in supply of suitable workers' education however the necessary condition of above-mentioned strategy – well developed system of professional qualification improvement – are not fully satisfied. Scarcities are conditioned by appliance of ineffective qualification improvement methods. There was

established that the main methods of qualification improvement for social workers are applied as follows: seminars (55 per cent), lectures (40 per cent), discussions (3 per cent) and training dialogues (2 per cent). There are not applied trainings of special purpose, analysis of particular situations, procedures of work performance and imitation learning.

With reference to research data there can be stated that training of social workers is oriented to specific requirements of workplace and position. However there is known that the faster qualification is getting old the closer workplace it is acquire. Besides such improvement methods don't guarantee training of individual general abilities. Though respondents have mentioned in their answers self-sufficient learning however there was established that social workers in practice don't have time for self-sufficient learning and are embracing formerly acquired experience. Workload and social conditions don't permit of taking actively interest in the experience of foreign specialists (58 per cent).

The remarks of workers according shortage of time and workload are grounded on practical evidence because while investigating importance of psychosocial factors (stress and bad climate) at work there was established that 74 per cent of respondents getting tired and evaluate their work as difficult from the nervous tension viewpoint. There can be made the conclusion if social workers complain about nervous tension at work their work and recreation schedule isn't properly coordinated. Such a situation has negative influence on psychophysical shape of workers.

The regimes of work and recreation in the institutions providing social services should be designed according working capacity dynamics. The main aim – to reduce the time of involvement in work and working capacity decrease, to enhance the time of permanent working capacity while improving the working capacity for all working hours. On purpose to prolong the time of permanent working capacity there should be done breaks, which should continue from few seconds to ten minutes (they can be longer too) in order to sustain sufficient working productivity.

There was established that the main desirable knowledge are in law (48 per cent), management (30 per cent), psychology and information technologies (by 10 per cent). The answers of respondents working practical social work about the lack of knowledge revealed multiplicity nature of social work. Practiciants directly working social work distinguished a lot of areas, not only knowledge of social work, besides which they couldn't properly help clients.

Considering the opinion of some respondents they need specific knowledge of social work with particular groups of individuals: teenagers, old people, deaf and dumb people, etc. Other respondents stressed that they need more specialized practical knowledge and analysis of particular situations. There can be ascribed to this group answers that respondents are willing to visit the places of practical work and to see how social workers work.

The separate group comprises the answers there respondents are not in set terms decided what they need most of all and what knowledge they lack. They pointed out that they need useful knowledge and they trust in competence of courses organizers. The variety of answers shows that social workers could and

should improve knowledge of common nature of theoretical studies, then move to particular, specific abilities improvement. Unanswered question (25 per cent) allow raising the assumption that some respondents who has comparatively little theoretical knowledge in social work and practical experience can be in ignorance of the knowledge lack.

On the basis of theoretical analysis professional interests and working activity was closely related to the pursuit of economical welfare in 1980-1990 (because possibilities of salary had preconceived limits) and was grounded on the guarantees of elementary living standards, acquisition of social legality, self-realization and self-consolidation. Professionalism and pursuit of qualification that is interest to improve in special area, to be strong in it, to perform work qualified and creatively was relevant but not truly necessary concern. Absence of social guarantees, competition and economical incentive conditioned that professional working activity could be not intensive and not subordinating all strivings. It was incidental negligible physical strain almost equal material domestic conditions and assurance of minimal sufficient living level. This disembarasses workers of creative tension. The part of workers, for which working activity was only subsistence source, were pursuing self-expression and inner plenitude in other occupation that render spiritual fare. The part of specialists, which realized themselves in professional activity the scarce working intensity, let pretty wide space for meeting other different dispositions and needs while actively participating in social cultural life (Žalimienė, 2003).

Wider discussing about possibilities of social workers' qualification improvement there should be stressed that Lithuania attains the help from foreign countries in preparing and retraining specialists of social work. This help includes seminars, lectures and disputes of foreign professors and lecturers. Not inconsiderable resources are allocated for these travels from foreign funds and agencies. Unfortunately the efficiency of these means is not sufficient. Coming lecturers are reading elementary theoretical subjects, and missing real situation in Lithuania they trying to suggest impractical and unrealizable decisions in social work. The resources of foreign funds could be applied more effective if they would be disposed to foreign enterprises and latter would admit to work on probation our specialists. For 300 thousands dollars 15–20 specialists form Lithuania could work on probation in West countries.

The reasons singled out (according qualification improvement) such as undemanding administration (10 per cent) and routine unvarying working nature (20 per cent) suppose the conclusion that social workers are not plenty motivated enough. On the basis of respondents answers there can be stated that in their work any motivation means (material or psychological), which have influence on qualification improvement, are not applied. While analyzing experience of foreign countries there can be noticed that orientation of social workers' education is towards self-sustaining learning, which is devoted to conscious worker, therefore in education process the learning stimulus is especially important.

Analyzing the shift of work particularity of social workers after qualification improvement courses, 50 per cent of respondents maintained that there weren't

changes in work, 10 per cent – that courses enabled them to work more creative, the positive changes emerged in attestation (10 percent) and 30 per cent of respondents can apply new information technologies. With reference to research data, there can be concluded that social workers' qualification improvement doesn't assure more responsible position and increase of salary. The salary should be one from main means of qualification improvement traditionally, while situation is different in Lithuania. De-motivation and nonconcentration emerge due to the need of increasing incomes.

On purpose to get more money (to meet the bills and physiological needs) social workers indiscriminate work nature, don't apply abilities or qualification, and they become indifferent executives, which see only one objective point – salary. Such a viewpoint is evil because after particular time, while emerging low image of knowledge and qualification, Lithuania can become only workforce provider.

The practice shows that in institutions, which are coordinating social work, there are no possibilities to finance partially or full studies, to omit planning of social workers' demands or their career, therefore above-mentioned reasons demotivate workers to improve qualification. The performance of institutions, which are providing social services, should be oriented towards long-lasting perspective and preparation for work.

According to respondents opinion essential suggestions for more rational organizing of social workers' qualification improvement are as follows: particular practical trainings and analysis of situations, work with foreign specialists, work with specialists from universities, incentives for qualification degree, regular information about professional novelties, announcements about achievements in internet.

On the ground of theoretical and practical analysis there can be singled out the possibilities of social workers' qualification improvement: establishment of knowledge demand; drafting of planned and desirable qualification improvement schedules; organizing of qualification improvement courses, seminars, trainings; consistency of qualification improvement and salary, and registration, accumulation and spread of information about received trainings.

The keystone of suggested possibilities – meeting of social workers' demands for qualification improvement. Qualification improvement should be closely related to salary because social workers will be more interested in their knowledge level unless and until this will be taken into account. Systems of salary should be organized in the way that qualified work fulfillment become instrument and mean to get bigger salary. Qualification level isn't combined with salary nowadays therefore a lot of specialist are willing to move in private enterprises. Especially important is information spread among specialist; heads should inform inferiors about changes in particular.

## Conclusions

1. The attention to qualified social workers' preparation in Lithuania is insufficient. The workers of lower qualification are performing works of higher qualification often and this has negative influence on social services' quality.

2. Following the attitude that social workers embrace possibility of applying gained abilities and possibility of continuing professional training, the institutions providing social services should frame programmes of professional education. There was established that above-mentioned programmes are not applied at present because heads of institutions have not enough knowledge about such a programmes.

3. As effective variant of this problem solving there can be singled out the funds of professional education, which could be framed in every institution. The workers would have the right to individual professional training holidays, which would be pay from above-mentioned fund. Social workers are taking care of their qualification by themselves nowadays. They should take unpaid holidays and finance by themselves their learning and training expenses.

4. Finances of foreign funds would be applied more effective if they would be assigned to foreign enterprises and latter admit our specialists to work on probation. For 300 thousands dollars 15–20 specialists form Lithuania could work on probation in West countries.

5. Social workers' qualification improvement doesn't assure more responsible position and salary increase. The salary should be one of the main means of qualification improvement, while workers' de-motivation and nonconcentration in Lithuania emerged due to the demand to increase incomes.

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## **PRAKTINIAI SOCIALINIŲ DARBUOTOJŲ KVALIFIKACIJOS TOBULINIMO ASPEKTAI**

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### **Santrauka**

Socialiniai darbuotojai dažniausiai yra ir stiprioji, ir silpnoji grandis, nes kiekvieno darbuotojo individualūs darbo rezultatai yra visos socialines paslaugas teikiančios institucijos veiklos veiksmingumas. Siekiant darbo efektyvumo, socialinių darbuotojų kvalifikacijos tobulinimas svarbus dėl šių priežasčių: visuomenė kelia vis didesnius reikalavimus socialiniams darbuotojams, kuriuos įvykdyti galima tik tobulinant profesinius gebėjimus; Lietuvos įstojimo į ES procesas reikalauja, kad socialiniai darbuotojai išmanytų ne tik savo šalies socialinės sferos, bet ir ES šalių funkcionavimo ypatumus; socialines paslaugas teikiančių institucijų organizacinių ir techninių pertvarkymų tempai nuolat auga, o tai reikalauja, kad darbuotojai nuolat įsisavintų naujas teorines žinias ir praktinius gebėjimus.

Šiandien, socialiniai darbuotojai dažniausiai patys rūpinasi savo kvalifikacijos lygiu. Jie turi išeiti nemokamų atostogų ir patys finansuoti savo mokymosi ar tobulinimosi išlaidas. Tyrimų duomenimis, kvalifikuotų socialinių darbuotojų rengimui Lietuvoje, dar neskiriamas toks dėmesys, kokio reikalauja mokslo ir technikos pažanga. Dažnai žemesnės kvalifikacijos darbuotojai atlieka aukštesnės kvalifikacijos darbus.

*Socialinis darbuotojas, kvalifikacijos tobulinimas, kvalifikacijos tobulinimo priežastys, galimybės ir strategijos.*