

ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL ADAPTATION PROBLEMS OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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Annotation

This article presents the adaptation problems of social workers who start their employment. Coming to work in a new place is a challenge for all employees, even for those who already have some experience: a new work place, colleagues, new order and “unwritten” rules among employees. A constant development of knowledge and skills is expected from young specialists. Therefore, in the process of getting employment general competences gain significant importance. These competences give basis for knowledge development and successful adaptation to constantly changing labour market requirements, i.e. adaptation in the work environment. The research results have revealed that the most common problems of professional adaptation are the lack of practical knowledge, the negative attitude of clients towards employees, workload which does not correspond to the remuneration.

Key words: professional adaptation, social workers, motivation.

Introduction

The relevance of the theme. The professional adaptation of social workers is relevant because an employee in this field is being assessed not only from the professional side. This occupation is based on communication and cooperation, creation of relations. Thus, the personality of the employee is of great importance. The process of adaptation is being aggravated by the lack of practical experience because the skills gained while studying are not enough to work in a professional manner. Social workers can work in different organisations, institutions, companies. In order to avoid the mismatch of definitions further in this article the concept of organisation will be used. There is a popular opinion among employers that a new employee will get acquainted and clarify new things by himself / herself. New employees apply the method of trial and error. In this way more time and energy is being wasted. It is highly likely that in organisations where the training of new employees is treated as their own responsibility, the staff turnover will be higher and the motivation of employees to work in such organisation due to everyday stress will be lower (Genys, Baltrušaitis, 2009). In order to improve work conditions and the ability to adapt in a new environment it is important to identify problems a person who has just started his / her professional career encounters. It is also necessary to create appropriate conditions for the employee to adapt in a new place.

The object of the research – professional adaptation problems of social workers.

The aim of the research – identify the problems of social workers’ professional adaptation. **Research methods and organisation.** In this research there have been eight informants (seven women and one man) who finished their studies not earlier than five years ago and presently work as social workers. The population of the research – targeted, people have been chosen based on the aim of the research. *Research methods:* semi-structured interview; qualitative content analysis.

Analysis of professional adaptation. There are a lot of definitions and types of adaptation (in Latin *adaptio* – adjustment). The concept of adaptation is used in different fields, nature and social sciences. Baranauskienė (2002) claims that staff adaptation / orientation is a process when a newly employed or transferred from another functional place person gets acquainted with his / her new responsibilities and colleagues. According to Leliūgienė (2003), adaptation is the ability of an organism to adapt to environment conditions. According to the scientist, adaptation determines normal development, optimal working capacity and maximum existence of the organism, the longevity under different conditions.

Authors Jonušaitė, Žydžiūnaitė, Merkys (2005) note that the professional adaptation is in progress when a person starts to understand his / her new role. It is acquiring new skills and competences, development of personal traits relevant for the profession in order to formulate a positive attitude towards one’s profession, increase motivation to work and alleviate person’s

identification with a concrete professional activity. It is possible to speak about the professional adaptation in a broader and narrower sense. In a broader sense it is understood as continuous socialisation of an individual. In a narrower sense – these are processes happening only during the period of a certain activity. The successful professional adaptation in the workplace has an impact on a productive work, implementation of the pursued aims, good interpersonal relations in the team. The unsuccessful professional adaptation manifests as dissatisfaction with work, truancy, negative social - psychological climate in the team; as a consequence of that, work effectiveness reduces (Robbins, 2006).

Scientists Martinkus, Sakalas, Savanevičienė (2006) claim that work has to be pleasant for a person, give him / her satisfaction, match his / her needs, allow to use his / her abilities to learn, reveal one's abilities. An employed person has to adapt to new environment conditions. If he / she is successful in adapting to new workplace and its members, the employee's mental health is affected in a positive way and the productivity increases.

The following types of adaptation are distinguished in the scientific literature: biological, social, psychological, personal and professional adaptation. Based on the aim of the research the article analyses professional adaptation. Stankevičienė and Lobanova (2006) state that the professional adaptation is a process allowing / creating conditions for new employees to adapt more quickly and easier in the organisation. According to Butkus (2008), the period of professional adaptation usually takes one year. Three stages of professional adaptation are distinguished:

- *Anticipatory socialisation* which starts during the selection process when the candidate can discuss expectations and doubts related to work performance, organisation's public image, present his / her competences, abilities and knowledge possessed.
- *Adaptation or encounter*. The aim of this stage is to help a novice employee enter the new work environment, reduce the usual "shock of the first work day", get acquainted with the work procedure, organisational goals, provide prerequisites for successful work in the future. This stage comprises professional orientation and social-psychological adaptation.
- *Integration or change*. The aim of this stage is to use management, social and technical measures to make personal and team interests compatible, acquire new competences, actively participate in the decision-making process and become a part of the organisation (Gražulis, Valickas, Dačiulytė, Sudnickas, 2012).

The adaptation process is individual and its duration for each employee is different. In order to shorten the duration of adaptation process, it is purposeful to apply certain measures. According to Stankevičienė, Lobanova (2006), these are the methods describing what support could be provided for a new employee:

- *Selection and induction*. This method comprises the assessment of employee's motivation, expectations, professional knowledge, provision of information about the organisational structure. The induction also includes the preparation of the workplace, showing around the premises, provision of the means / supplies necessary for work. During the adaptation process it is recommended to appoint a mentor for the novice who could help to solve any issues. It is advisable to show interest in how the new person is performing his / her duties, whether he / she has got necessary work equipment and everything is clear. The mentor should work together with the new employee at least for several weeks after the admission, help him engage into work, explain all difficulties and indicate where to go with one or another question (Osland, Joyce, 2007). Mathis, Jackso (2004) call this adaptation method orientation. According to scientists, orientation is a planned introduction of new employees to work, colleagues and organisation.
- *Concluding psychological contract*. Psychological contract – discussion and coordination of mutual expectations between an employer and an employee (Stankevičienė, Lobanova, 2006). Psychological contract means that each employee has an informal agreement with the employer. It is unwritten, informal agreement, subjective and dynamic, partially or completely indefinite (certain things may remain unspoken or uncertain), cover material and intangible things. The agreement continues as long as the employee is a part of the organisation. It is important because if its obligations are being implemented, the reconciliation of expectations help the employee to work more effectively. If conditions are not fulfilled the motivation of the employee decreases, he / she may leave the job. The psychological contract is concluded during the selection process or at the beginning of adaptation: exchange of expectations between the two parties, negotiations.
- *Motivation of employees*. According to the scientists, motivation is an important factor determining work productivity, profit, technical and organisational level, development rate and competitive capacity. Sakalas and Šilingienė (2000) claim that people are motivated not only by material reward but also by a lot of other social and psychological factors. Three main measures of employees' motivation are suggested: indirect motivation – the responsibilities of a new

employee are vaguely defined and only a minimal support is provided. In this case the employee has to learn by himself / herself using the method of trial and error. Direct motivation and the realisation of employee's expectations – rewards and punishments are used, the psychological contract which is being implemented not only by the employee but also by the employer. The training of employees – it is believed that a constantly learning employee learns what has been entrusted to him / her more rapidly. The learning employee helps not only himself / herself but also to the head of the organisation because the latter has an opportunity to deepen one's professional knowledge, analyse his / her behaviour in communicating with employees. Learning employees understand their tasks in a broader sense, gain new skills. They become more valuable for their employer. In order to have a good employee it is necessary to invest in him / her. Thus, by providing conditions for employees to learn, the level of their motivation is also increased. Consequently, the image and competitiveness of the organisation in the market is also improved (Šadrakov, 2004).

During the process of adaptation, the head of the organisation, the novice and the whole team should seek a common goal – a positive adaptation of the new person. It is undoubtedly more pleasant to work in the organisation where new employees are cared for, they are provided with good working conditions (Šadrakov, 2004). The author distinguishes typical mistakes which pose obstacles for the novice to fully adapt in the new workplace:

- It is not taken into consideration whether the new employee has adapted to the team. The author notes that the attention should be paid to the compatibility of the employee and the team. The colleagues may ignore the new person who in this situation does not feel full-fledged and this prevents from becoming a part of the team.

- The new employee is left stranded. There are quite often the cases when the head of organisation having introduced the new employee to the workplace and team, intentionally or not intentionally forgets him / her. The head of the organisation assumes that when needed the employee will come to him / her. In the author's opinion, the head of the organisation should devote enough time and attention to the new employee if he / she seeks positive adaptation.

- Too much attention the same as the insufficient attention may also be an adaptation problem. Too much pressure and the pursuit of quick results may also induce stress. The head of the organisation has to understand that in order to fulfil some tasks a new person needs more time than other employees.

- Insufficient competence of the head of organisation managing and organising work. The head of organisation has to know not only the aspects of the work done but also to create a positive atmosphere, devote some time for employees, improve relations among colleagues. The attention given to the new employee usually induces loyalty to the organisation, greater inner motivation and reaching high results (Rancova, 2004).

Research results.

Job interview. According to Butkus (2008), the first stage of professional adaptation – anticipatory socialisation – already determines the success of further work. The participants of the research were asked about their job interview, feelings they felt and what was discussed. It has been observed that the job interview induces stress, anxiety and fear. Questions asked by the head of the organisation, not knowing what to say are being feared the most. Often the head of the organisation decides to check their knowledge, speaks about personal traits which are necessary seeking professional results. Almost in all cases the heads of organisations explained to employees the provisions of employment contract, concrete responsibilities especially emphasizing the responsibility of the employee (“...clearly stated what is expected from me.” [1 – 2], “I was introduced with the working time, duties, responsibility and remuneration.” [1 – 1]). It was also observed that very often the heads of organisations while discussing the conditions of employment contract do not mention remuneration which is very important for the employee or during the interview they do not discuss the provisions of employment contract (“The remuneration was not discussed, only duties and responsibility.” [1 – 7], “...remuneration was not discussed...” [1 – 8], “...the work conditions and work specifics were discussed.” [1 – 8]). It is possible to make an assumption that social workers during their first job interview are so nervous that they do not ask about details related to work which are important for them.

First work days. The aim of adaptation or encounter is to help the new employee to enter into new work environment and reduce the stress felt during the first days (Butkus, 2008). The research results show that a brave person experiences positive feelings whereas a person to whom it is difficult to adapt to innovations it is more difficult to adapt in the new environment. Only a small portion of the interviewed felt good and confident during the first days, other respondents felt stress, tension and unconfident. The first days of the work cause negative feelings, some respondents felt unwanted in the work place, felt sceptical attitude from

colleagues (“I knew I was unwanted, they looked at me sceptically...” [1 – 3]). The adaptation in the new environment was aggravated because the practical work was completely different from the knowledge gained while studying (“...everything what I studied was different from the reality...” [1 - 8]). During the research it has been observed that social workers experience difficulties regarding the separate working place. Heads of organisations not always understand that for effective and quality work with clients a safe, separate room is necessary for social workers to communicate with clients.

Working conditions. A working place is important for all employees. It is useful that the employee would find a prepared working place. Then he / she would feel welcomed in the new environment. The results achieved by the employee and whether it will be pleasant for him / her to work in the new place depend on the environment. The results of the research implicate that working conditions depend from the type of work. Some social workers claimed that they are not satisfied with working conditions but this depends from the type of work. Other employees state that they are not satisfied with their working place because their office hasn’t been finished yet, but they have all necessary work equipment. It has also been claimed that appropriate working conditions are not created, there is a shortage of work equipment, therefore, it is necessary to work at home using personal computer. More than a half of respondents claim that they are satisfied with their working place, are glad that there are no difficulties related to that.

Provision of information. The provision of information in the stage of professional adaptation is very important factor determining employee’s adaptation (Dainytė, 2005). The information for the employee has to be provided in a clear manner, the optimal amount of information is also of great importance because too much or not enough information becomes a burden for the employee, causes confusion. Analysing the research results it has been noticed that the information is usually provided not by the head of the organisation but is heard from colleagues. Social workers claim that when they started to work the provided information was inadequate (“...it was not mentioned what exactly I will have to do.” [1 – 8]). The main information was provided but its excess made the beginning of employment relationships complicated (“...there was so much of everything (...) I thought how not to forget anything.” [1 – 3]). Thus the heads of organisations providing information make one of the most essential mistakes – provide too much information which the employee cannot process. Too much information conditions the fact that the employee is afraid to forget important things, fear to make a mistake.

Employee’s expectations. Each person upon starting a new activity has expectations and doubts. When expectations are not a newly employed employee can lose the motivation which determines his / her work effectiveness (refer to Table No. 1).

Table 1

Employee’s Expectations

Subcategory	No. of statements	Statements
Expectations have been met	3	“So far all my expectations have been met.” [1 – 1] “...all my expectations have been met...” [1 – 2] “...more or less my expectations have been met “ [1 – 5]
Expectations have not been met	4	“I thought I will be more successful here ...” [1 – 3] “I wanted more rapid results...” [1 – 4] “...I have neither possibilities nor competences to solve all clients’ problems.” [1 – 6] “The salary is quite small...” [1 – 8]

Less than a half of graduates who participated in the research have claimed that their expectations in work have been met. Others expected more rapid results, higher salary, felt disappointed that they had insufficient competence. Summarising it is possible to state that expectations related to work usually are not met rather than met.

Motivation to reach higher results. There are various motives to start employment – a possibility to express oneself, be financially independent, responsible for oneself. Very often graduates when starting to work are motivated and try to reach the highest results possible (refer to Table No. 2).

Table 2

Motivation to Reach Higher Results

Category	Subcategory	No. of statements	Statements
Motivating factors	Salary	4	“...higher salary would motivate to reach higher results” [1 – 2] “...salary would motivate more...” [1 – 4] “Higher salary would motivate...” [1 – 7] “Higher salary would motivate to reach higher results.” [1 – 8]

Analysing research results it has been observed that the most important motive to work is remuneration (salary). Most social workers mentioned that higher salary would motivate them to seek higher work results. Upon the encounter with more difficult practical tasks their motivation does not decrease (*“Motivation for work has not decreased...” [1 – 1], “Motivation has not decreased; on the contrary, it increased...” [1 – 6], “Motivation has not decreased, it even increased” [1 – 8]*). Despite the fact that the salary is comparatively low, they try to do their best to perform their duties. A small percentage of respondents claimed that their motivation decreased because they are not encouraged to seek higher results. Thus, it is possible to make an assumption that the motivation system within the organisation is mandatory so that employees would seek higher work results, would like to learn and develop.

The attitude of the head of the organisation towards mistakes. For a newly employed person it is important not only how other employees and the head of the organisation react towards well-performed tasks but also towards the mistakes. A possibility to make mistakes and learn from them contributes to employee’s motivation. The head of the organisation has to understand that the novice has to walk a long way of trials and errors in order to become the employee who is able to work effectively. It is very important that a new person would not be afraid to try because then he / she can express oneself, prove one’s abilities. According to most respondents, the reaction of the head of the organisation was positive, the attitude was calm, they were allowed to correct they work, were explained and advised how to avoid mistakes. An opportunity to make mistakes and learn is a prerequisite for gaining skills necessary in the practical work. Other respondents claimed that the attitude of the head of the organisation was negative, employees were criticised, felt pressure and moralisation (refer to Table No. 3).

Table 3

The Attitude of the Head of the Organisation towards Mistakes

Category	Subcategory	No. of statements	Substantiating statements
Reaction towards mistakes	Positive feedback	6	<p>“No one is infallible. He who makes no mistakes, makes nothing.” [1 – 1]</p> <p>“...the reaction was calm. I was given an opportunity to correct my mistake...” [1 – 2]</p> <p>“...there was always a possibility to correct mistakes...” [1 – 4]</p> <p>“The head of the organisation is very understanding – she is not angry about my mistakes.” [1 – 5]</p> <p>“The head of the organisation responded well – asked me to improve my performance...” [1 – 6]</p> <p>“The head of the organisation gives a piece of advice...” [1 – 8]</p>
	Negative feedback	6	<p>“...Of course, I was not given a pat on the back...” [1 – 3]</p> <p>“...it seems that you are doing them on purpose...” [1 – 3]</p> <p>“...you also get some critics.” [1 – 3]</p> <p>“Mistakes have been spotted” [1 – 4]</p> <p>“... I had to listen to moralisations...” [1 – 7]</p> <p>“The pressure from the head of the organisation could be felt” [1 – 7]</p>

Social workers have claimed to have addressed to the following persons: specialists from other fields, colleagues, an organiser of social care services, an organiser of social work in the eldership, a deputy director, a coordinator of social services, employees from the Department of Children’s Rights Protection. Here it is important to point out that employees when difficulties or mistakes arise try to avoid the contact with the head of the organisation and find other ways to resolve a delicate situation.

Workspace atmosphere. The atmosphere in the organisation and informal relationships with colleagues help the novice to become a part of the team and integrate easier into organisation’s activity. This constitutes the basis of psychological-professional adaptation stage. Most respondents have claimed that the workplace atmosphere is friendly and warm, they are contented (*“No pressure is felt...” [1 – 8], “I am very satisfied with the relationships with my colleagues [1 – 2]*). Whereas others state that the atmosphere in the workplace is tense and that the head of the organisation is to blame (*“If the management was different, maybe the relationships would be better.” [1 – 3], “The atmosphere is tense when the head of the organization is around...” [1 – 7], “...relationships are not developed” [1 – 4]*).

Employee and client interaction. The professional adaptation of social workers is different because it is happening not only on the organisational level but also in the interaction with clients. The results of the research have revealed that most employees constantly face clients’ problems and their troubles, experience negative feelings before first meetings – anxiety, fear, lack of self-confidence. In most cases at the beginning they felt mistrust from the client’s side, clients have been indifferent and not interested to achieve positive changes. How the work is

performed, whether positive relations are going to be established depends highly on the clients – social workers' relations (refer to Table No. 4).

Table 4

Employee and Client Interaction

Category	Subcategory	No. of statements	Statements
Contact with clients	Feelings	6	"A feeling of worry..." [1 – 1] "...I was anxious because a new person was coming..." [1 – 2] "At first I was worried..." [1 – 3] "...I was worried how I will be accepted and that I will not be able to provide proper help." [1 – 5] "The thing I feared the most was that I would not know what to say." [1 – 6] "I was worried because there were so many problems and I did not know how to help to solve them." [1 – 7]
Clients' attitude	Negative attitude of clients	5	"Young, does not have children of her own, knows nothing about upbringing and etc., weak and pliable." [1 – 1] "...they were worried about letting in a person whom they don't know..." [1 – 2] "...She's new, doesn't know anything, we will be able to do whatever we want." [1 – 3] "...How young I am (...), what do I know about a complicated life of adults?" [1 – 4] "...they used to say, "Although I can see that you are young...." [1 – 7]

To sum it up, it is possible to claim that the biggest problem social work graduates encounter is interaction with clients. Clients' attitude, mistrust regarding employee's age, negative attitude towards the social worker, attempts of manipulation – are essential problems preventing social workers from adaptation in a new workplace and working effectively.

Knowledge that was missing. The higher education system is committed to provide theoretical as well as practical knowledge necessary for a concrete job. It is more and more discussed whether graduates have enough knowledge for a successful start of the employment relationship (refer to Table No. 5).

Table 5

Knowledge which Was Missing at the Start of the Work

Subcategory	No. of statements	Statements
Practical knowledge	7	"Practical knowledge." [1 – 1] "How to behave in one or another situation." [1 – 1] "...Lack of knowledge about a concrete job, what we are going to do, what awaits us." [1 – 1] "... To develop practical skills not in a single organisation..." [1 – 2] "Maybe practical knowledge was missing (...), it wasn't clear what and how to do." [1 – 3] "...Practice was still missing..." [1 – 5] "Mainly the lack of practice..." [1 – 8]
Filling in documents	1	"How to fill in documents, forms, analyse laws..." [1 – 1]
Psychological knowledge	3	"...psychological knowledge was and still is missing..." [1 – 2] "Conflict management, stress management, recognition of emotions." [1 – 4] "...How to communicate with certain types of clients. How to communicate with aggressive clients." [1 – 6]
Legal knowledge	1	"Legal knowledge, insufficient knowledge of laws." [1 – 7]
Knowledge about different disabilities	1	"Lack of information about certain disabilities..." [1 – 6]

Most respondents mentioned that when they started their first employment they learned they were missing some practical knowledge, did not know what to do in one or another situation. The results of the research have revealed that they lacked practical knowledge which would enable to work faster and more effectively. Also very important subcategory is "Psychological knowledge". Despite the fact that higher education system provides some psychological knowledge, upon encounter with concrete situations they prove to be insufficient. A smaller proportion of respondents mentioned that they do not have enough skills to fill in various documents, forms, to work with laws, legal knowledge is missing as well as lack of knowledge about different disabilities. Having analysed the results of the research it is possible to make an assumption that higher education system should be adjusted and seek to provide their students with enough practical knowledge. None of the respondents mentioned that theoretical knowledge was missing. Therefore, it is assumed that theoretical knowledge is sufficient.

Conclusions

1. Professional adaptation has been achieved when a person begins to understand his / her new professional role, successful adaptation has a positive impact on a person's mental health, increases work effectiveness. The professional adaptation is alleviated by the applied adaptation methods – selection and induction within the organisation, concluding psychological contract, motivation of employees. The adaptation process is burdened by the most common adaptation mistakes: it is not taken into consideration whether an employee has become a part of the team, employee is left alone, too much or not enough attention from the head of the organisation, insufficient competence of the leader in organising work.

2. In the research it has been determined that the main problems encountered by social workers during the period of adaptation are as follows: negative attitude from clients towards a young employee, lack of practical knowledge, dissatisfaction with the remuneration obtained and workload. Successful professional adaptation depends on a positive interaction between the novice and workplace. The attitude of clients, competences of the head of the organisation, optimal amount of information, ability to learn and develop create conditions for the employee to become a part of the organisation and work successfully.

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