Socio-psychological problems of the transition of university teachers to distance employment during the Covid19 pandemic

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Abstract. The challenges of higher education that the world faced during the pandemic led to an emergency temporary transfer of faculty to a distance learning format. The article reveals the results of the analysis of socio-psychological problems that university teachers faced during the transition to remote employment. The work is based on a content analysis of previous studies of the issue, as well as data from a formalized online survey of faculty members of universities. The formalized survey was attended by 169 representatives of the teaching staff of universities in 10 cities of Russia. The article presents the main opportunities and disadvantages of remote employment and distance learning in higher education from the point of view of teachers. As a result of the study, the authors formulated the key opportunities and disadvantages of distance employment and identified the key social and psychological problems that require attention when organizing the activities of teachers. The labor market is changing, the requirements for the competencies of university professors are changing, it is necessary to systematically, strategically introduce changes by the administration when switching to a remote work format with a focus on the social and psychological well-being of employees.

1 Introduction

Currently, a large layer of research is devoted to the issues of automation and its influence on the change in the forms of employment of the population [1, 2, 3]. The onset of the economic era of knowledge and innovation, technological modernization and scientific advances provide a wide range of intelligent technologies and opportunities for their use in a new work format [4, 5]. Distance employment is one of the relatively new forms of work. For the first time the concept of "telework" was introduced by J. Nilles in 1973 [6]. Distance employment (telework) implies a form of employment in which the employee is outside the stationary workplace, performing work using modern means of communication, information and communication technologies (ICT) [6]. Currently, there are three main types of remote work - telework, work at home, and self-employment [7].

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With the onset of the spread of the coronavirus pandemic to the present, the recommendations of the world health organization to counter the consequences of the pandemic regarding the avoidance of social contacts lead to an increase in the number of people employed at home via the Internet and distance employment. So, according to Google Trends, the number of requests from 36 in January 2020 for the definition of "Remote work" in Russia increased to 100 at the end of March 2020. Serious changes have occurred during the pandemic and in the field of higher education. The organization of the activities of universities and teaching staff was transformed, all full-time education in the offline format was transferred to a distance form in a very short time [8, 9, 10]. Distance education as a form of providing educational services is not new and appeared in the 18th century [11]. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, distance learning acquired a new significance [10, 12, 13]. So, in the work of Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. the transition to distance learning during a pandemic is considered as "emergency distance learning", a temporary solution, poorly thought out and planned, which does not imply the creation of an effective educational environment. The authors note that the transition to truly distance learning should be strategically planned and justified [12]. Pesha, A. V., & Kamarova, T. A., having studied the feedback data of students on the rapid transition to distance education, revealed a number of problems they faced and low satisfaction with the quality of education during the pandemic [10]. The psychological problems caused by the transition to distance learning among teachers, students and their parents are revealed in the review and analytical work of Churiyah M. et al. [13].

Indeed, the transition to distance learning in a few days proved to be a real challenge for the higher education system and for all its stakeholders around the world. The article analyzes the advantages and disadvantages, as well as socio-psychological problems that teachers face when switching to a remote work format. The purpose of this article is to analyze the socio-psychological problems faced by teachers during the rapid transition to a remote work format.

This article complements the previous literature by (a) providing results of socio-psychological problems analyze that affect the implementation of teacher's remote work; (b) gives a list of opportunities and disadvantages of distance employment during the period of forced rapid transition to it for teachers.

Research methods: the research is based on modern concepts of science and practice of higher education, the concept of technological didactics, as well as labour economics. In particular, the authors applied the methods of content analysis and data interpretation in their work, an online survey of teachers about their satisfaction with the educational process and problems caused by the transition to distance learning during a pandemic.

2 Distance learning during the global challenge

In recent decades, remote work has become a trend in the labor market and is in great demand among subjects of social and labor relations. Even before the spread of the COVID-19 virus pandemic, which affected the health of a huge number of people around the world, the response to the development of ITC and the Internet was the spread of distance employment in many professional fields. The fact of amplification of this form of employment is associated with a number of its advantages: mainly - saving time (spent on the road to work and back) and money (travel costs, meals, etc.), independent distribution of working time and arrangement of the work space, combining work with caring for family members, and, importantly, the observance of the "work-life-balance", which in turn requires such competence as self-organization. Research results of employees working on flexible working hours, incl. remotely, show an increase in the level of job satisfaction and growth in labor productivity [14, 15].

In general, despite the advantages of telecommuting, a number of its disadvantages can be noted as social, for example, such as the absence of the usual offline communication, lack of feedback from colleagues; not being involved in the corporate culture of the company [16]; and organizational, for example, difficulties in self-organization during the working day [17, 18]; and health problems [19, 20].

Dictated by the challenge of the present, the widespread transition to distance learning requires the use of telecommunication technologies that can provide the necessary interconnection between all participants in the educational process and the bandwidth of data transmission networks [8, 10, 12].

Distance learning is training based on a learning management system (LMS) of a university using a wide range of ICTs. Here there is a transfer from teachers to students of the material on the course being studied, control over the assimilation of this material (checking control points, tests, credits and exams), as well as interactive interaction between teachers and students. Moreover, all participants in the educational process are at a distance from each other. The main elements of distance education are shown in Figure 1.
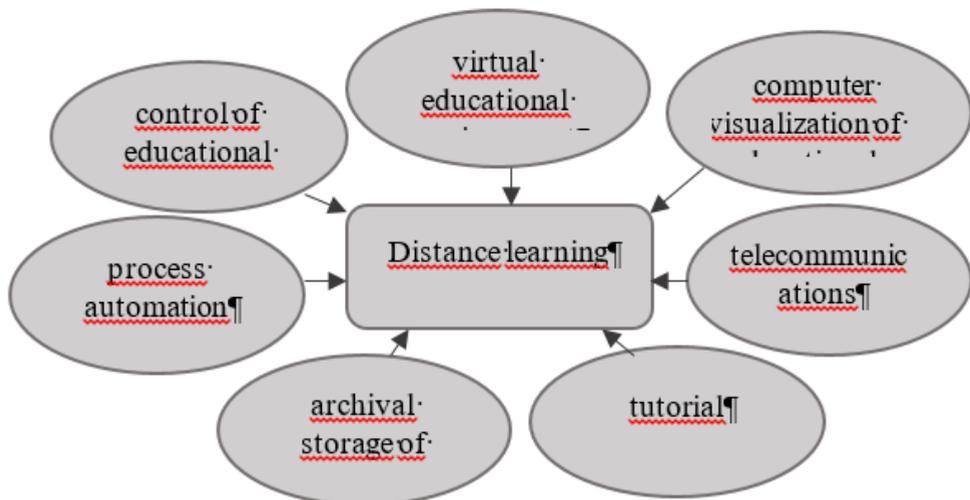

Fig. 1. The main elements of distance learning.

Experts everywhere predict that after the end of the pandemic, education will cease to exist in its traditional form [21]. Online technologies will allow replacing traditional lectures with their online counterpart. It can be noted that the online course is a mobilizing form of learning, which involves a greater number of control elements, allowing a more sustainable mastering of the material covered.

Global changes are taking place in the field of education in the current conditions. It is necessary to consider the "crisis" as an "opportunity", it gives impetus to the creation and development of innovative educational technologies and programs aimed at the synthesis of fundamental science and practice, opening up access to modern educational resources, systemic retraining of personnel and other, and will also contribute to the abandonment of the obviously outdated forms of teaching.

It should be noted that the transition to distance education for those teachers who already had the practice of teaching in a distance format did not cause any particular difficulties. Universities that have long been using this practice coped best with the organization of remote work.

The transition from classical full-time education to distance learning presupposes its own characteristics, new functions appear for participants in the educational process. Thus, the

teacher acquires new functions of a tutor, coordination of the learning process, adjustment of the discipline being read, counseling and others, the range of necessary competencies expands [22, 23]. The interaction between the teacher and students is carried out using e-mail, social networks, telephone communications, from him. Distance learning requires a high level of self-organization and learning motivation from the learner.

In the context of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, with the forced widespread transition to a remote work format, the technical, cultural and organizational difficulties of many universities were noted to work in new conditions [24, 25]. Teachers had to master in a short time new forms of conducting classes, develop control points using digital tools, master digital resources, which in turn resulted in an increase in teaching staff workload. Socio-psychological problems are also not uncommon. Including a feeling of social isolation, a lack of habitual live contact with students, colleagues and management.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Materials and procedures

Within the framework of this article, we conducted an online survey with university professors in order to analyze the existing socio-psychological problems affecting the performance of teachers' official duties in the format of remote work.

The survey was conducted in April 2020 during the period of urgent transition of universities to a remote work format.

The survey was conducted using the Google.doc application.

To analyze socio-psychological problems and the impact of the emergency transition of teachers to a remote format of work, during the survey, we asked the teachers several questions:

1. What problems did you face when you were forced to switch to distance education?
2. What impact do the changed working conditions have on your performance?
3. What impact do the changed working conditions have on your overall health?

In the course of the online interview, we also collected the opinions of the participants regarding the possibilities and disadvantages of teachers switching to a remote work format.

3.2 Participants

The authors conducted a survey among the teaching staff of Russian universities, where 169 respondents from 10 cities of the Russian Federation took part. Among the participants there were 47 men (27.8%) and 122 women (72.2%). The distribution of the number of respondents by age and experience in teaching is shown in Figure 2. As can be seen from the data, the overwhelming majority of respondents who took part in the survey have more than 15 years of teaching experience (68.6%), while the age of 40% of respondents is in the range 41-50 years old.
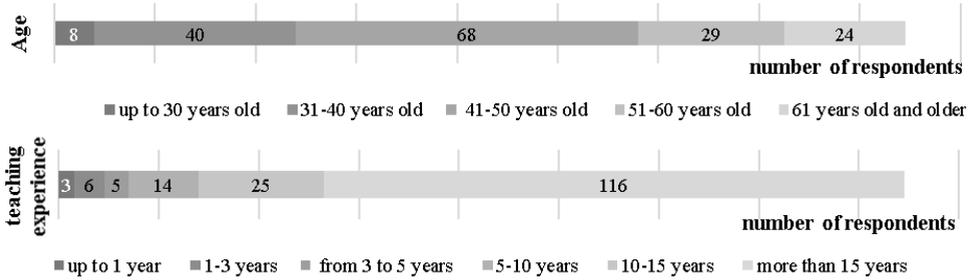
Fig. 2. Distribution of survey participants by age and pedagogical experience.

4 Results

The main opportunities for teachers during remote work, highlighted by the participants:

- distances are leveled. There is no need to move through space. You can conduct any kind of class from a comfortable place using ICT;

- financial savings. Costs for travel, meals, purchase of tools for offline classes with students are reduced;

- "paradise for the introvert." Teachers who are more focused on the inner world, receive energy from within themselves and are weighed down by a large amount of communication, get an "ideal" environment for effective work;

- assessment and development of emotional intelligence. Unfortunately, not all teachers were ready for an emergency transition to a distance employment format (which we will show below), however, the advantage is that teachers saw the zones of development of emotional intelligence and paid attention to their psycho-emotional well-being;

- coverage of a larger audience of listeners. Borders are being erased and conducting classes has become possible in parallel over a wide territory of the country and the world.

In addition to opportunities, respondents noted a number of disadvantages:

- lack of off-line interaction between students and teachers, which narrows communication;

- some students need a live explanation of the subject, because hardly perceive information on electronic media;

- with distance learning, you need to have such qualities as independence, self-discipline, focus on the final result;

- the complexity of the technical support of all participants in the educational process, ensuring constant access to the Internet;

- teachers need to quickly master a large number of tools of technological didactics, new regulations for working with the classroom, set by the university, to restructure the content to meet modern trends and conditions;

- infinity of the working day. The working day, according to the survey participants, increased significantly and amounted to more than 6 hours a day for 66.3% of the respondents;

- difficult control of reactions, mood and educational motivation of students during classes, exacerbated by the lack of technical capabilities to enable video by students.

As a result of studying the data of respondents' answers to the first question, it turned out that the absence of a problem in terms of the socio-psychological impact of the transition to distance education is noted by slightly less than 20% of respondents (19.72%). Most of the respondents note the presence of one or two socio-psychological problems. Including: 49.54% singled out social isolation as the main problem (lack of "live" communication with

colleagues and students), 21.56% talk about signs of emotional burnout and 7.34% as a negative consequence of switching to a remote work format called procrastination. Since this question provided an opportunity to give your answer, which was not included in the choice of options, we were able to collect additional problems noted by teachers, including:

- one of the respondents in the age group "31-40 years old" noted the presence of emotional burnout, which is associated in general with work, and not with the forced transition to a remote form of employment;

- increased nervousness on the part of the management, additional functions that are not related to educational activities assigned to teachers were noted by 2 respondents from the 41-50 age group;

- in the 51-60 age group, the respondents noted that people need not just psychologically support, but in some cases psychiatric care associated with threats of job loss, significant changes in working conditions, job cuts, additional responsibilities, and so on;

- the oldest age group of respondents "51-60 years old" also named one of the problems the presence of anxiety for the current generation of students, which will be deprived of direct contact with the teacher as a bearer of not only knowledge, but also mood and culture.

Figure 3 shows in more detail the distribution of the answers of respondents of different age groups to the research question. The diagram clearly shows that respondents in the age group under 30 and survey participants over 61 more often than others indicate the absence of any socio-psychological problems in the current situation, which may be associated with a fairly high level of mobility and readiness to work in digital educational environment of the first and retirement age and a high level of professional skills of the second. The problem most frequently mentioned by all age groups of respondents is social isolation associated with difficulties in communication through online technologies with colleagues, management and students. This problem, as noted by the survey participants, is often associated with the ICT used by universities and the settings of university LMS. In the current environment, respondents are least likely to encounter procrastination, which is associated with the high intensity of the process of switching to a remote form of work and the need to transform the pedagogical tools of disciplines and with a high level of personal discipline of teachers, as well as increased control from the administration of universities. At least one-fifth of all age groups of respondents identify signs of burnout, which revealed links with an emergency transition to a remote work format. The highlighted problem was aggravated, according to survey participants, by an increased level of control from the administration, poor technical support of the educational process and a lack of socio-psychological support from the leadership. And here the problem of "emergency distance learning" [12] can be traced in the answers of the respondents.
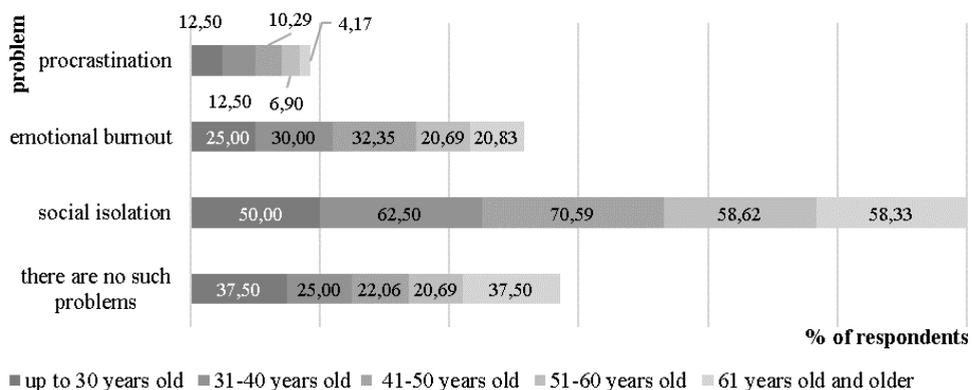
Fig.3. Answers of respondents to the question of what problems they faced during the forced transition to distance education (in%, by age groups of respondents).

Figure 4 shows the results of respondents' answers to the question about changes in the efficiency of teachers during a pandemic in 5 age groups. It should be noted that across the entire sample, 65% of the respondents answered that the changed working conditions had no effect on working capacity (65%), and 14% noted an increase in the ability to work due to the fact that it is more comfortable to work at home, and the university can do additional work. At the same time, about 1/5 of the respondents answered that the transition to a remote work format leads to low efficiency, apathy and laziness. The smallest changes in working capacity in the period under review were indicated by representatives of the oldest age group of respondents (91.7% of participants over the age of 61). Among the youngest age group, on the contrary, the smallest number of respondents noted the absence of changes, but the opinions on the increase and decrease in working capacity among the respondents under the age of 30 were equally divided (37.5% each), which demonstrates very different influence and different levels of readiness to work in the format of distance employment of young people. If you look at the data on the scale "performance has not changed", it can be noted that with age, the change in performance is less and less dependent on external influences.
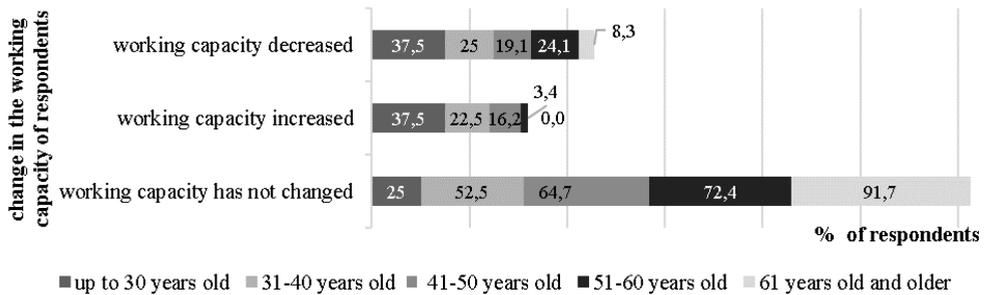

Fig.4. – Answers of respondents to the question about how the new working conditions affected their performance (in%, by age groups of respondents).

The last question asked to the respondents was aimed at clarifying the impact of the changed working conditions on the health of the respondents. As it turned out, the opinion of the respondents across the entire sample was divided practically evenly among the options "had a weak negative impact on health indicators", "had a serious negative impact on health indicators" and "did not have any effect on health" (32.5%, 30, 8% and 31.4% of the respondents' answers, respectively). 5.3% of respondents noted some improvement in the state of physical and mental health in the new working conditions. Figure 5 shows the answers of respondents to this question in different age groups of respondents.
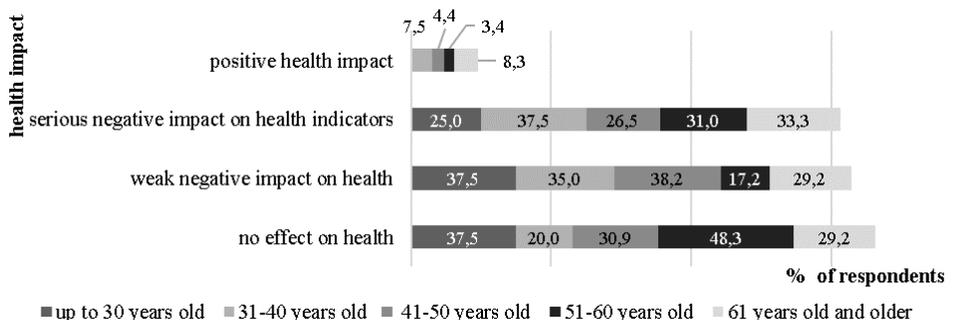
Fig.5. Respondents' answers to the question about the impact of the changed working conditions on their health (in%, by age groups of respondents).

Based on the analysis of the data presented in Figure 5, we can say that remote work had the greatest positive effect on the health of teachers over the age of 61 (8.3%), while respondents under the age of 30, on the contrary, did not notice any positive changes. The greatest serious impact on physical and mental health is noted by respondents aged 31-40 years (37.5%), which is significantly more than in the other four age groups of respondents. Almost half of the respondents aged 51-60 expressed the opinion that the changed working conditions had no effect on their health (48.3%). At the same time, it must be said that more than half of the respondents in each age group (slightly less in the group of respondents from 51 to 60 years old) note the negative impact on health of the emergency transition to a remote form of employment.

According to the results of the study, it can be noted that for an effective transition to a distance learning format, it is necessary to perform a number of actions by the university:
- a strategic approach to building a digital educational environment;
- the formation of a new corporate culture of the university;
- putting in order the regulatory framework and workflow for the implementation of the tasks of switching to a remote work format;
- taking care of the mental and physical health of employees.

Conclusion

Automation had a great impact on changing forms of employment, and the challenges of higher education that society faced during the coronavirus pandemic accelerated these transformations in this area of life [8, 9, 10]. The need to minimize social contacts and the importance of continuing the educational process have led universities to an emergency temporary transfer of teachers to remote work. Having studied previous studies of the problem of "emergency", "quick" transition to distance higher education in the world, we must agree that this has caused quite a few problems, difficulties and shortcomings in the quality of the educational process for all stakeholders [10, 12, 13]. In this paper, we analyzed the possibilities and disadvantages of the remote work format, which are expressed by teachers of Russian universities, as well as the main socio-psychological problems and possible ways to smooth them out in the subsequent organization of work of higher education workers.

In the course of the online interview, we also collected the opinions of the participants regarding the possibilities and disadvantages of teachers switching to a remote work format. For the large number of problems that teachers had to face, there is a wide range of opportunities associated with both the creation of a favorable working environment, financial and time savings, and with the personal and professional development of teachers, which are noted by respondents.

Our goal was to analyze the socio-psychological problems faced by teachers during the period of rapid transition to full distance employment, as the basis for the qualitative performance of basic duties. As a result of the study, we can say that the biggest socio-psychological problem of teachers of all age groups of respondents is social isolation, associated with the lack of communication with all stakeholders of the educational process. This problem is aggravated by the presence of technical difficulties that exist in the LMS of the university and among students and teachers, which often leads to situations of communication with "invisible" students who cannot start not only video, but also audio communication during classes. A third of respondents aged 41-50 note the presence of emotional burnout caused by the current circumstances, about 10% of this group of survey

participants also speak about the presence of procrastination. The two least influenced by the rapidly changing working conditions are the groups of respondents under 30 and over 61, which can be caused by a number of factors, from the mobility and flexibility of the generation of "digital natives" to the skill and accomplished personalities of representatives of the older age group of retirement and pre-retirement age. It is noteworthy that the smallest changes in working capacity occurred in the age group of respondents older than 61 (91.7%), while the remaining 8.3% of teachers note an increase in working capacity. At the same time, the most significant changes affected the younger generation of teachers under the age of 30 (37.5% note an increase in working capacity, and 37.5% of its decline). But the answers of the respondents regarding the impact on mental and physical health cause anxiety, since it cannot be said that any of the age groups felt the least negative influence on it from the changed conditions. This fact indicates the need to draw the attention of the administration of universities to providing a comfortable environment, creating conditions and support to minimize the negative impact on the health of teachers.

The results of our research show how important it is to plan and think over the transition to a remote form of employment, not only from the point of view of creating a digital educational environment and developing the competencies of teachers and students in the use of ICT, but also the development of socio-emotional competencies of all participants in the process of professional training at a university. and creating a comfortable social, psychological, supportive environment.

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