RESEARCH SUMMARY

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SERVANTS IN GEORGIA – SUPPORTING THE SHIFT TO ONLINE LEARNING

2021

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives are to examine the challenges that exist in the civil servants' professional development system, in general, explore barriers specifically associated with the shift to online learning, assess the readiness of civil servants for online training, and develop recommendations to increase the effectiveness of remote teaching.

The research methodology is based on a mixed-method design and combines qualitative and quantitative approaches: analysis of the existing documents, interviews with key informants, focus group discussions, and a computer-assisted telephone survey that is representative for professional civil servants working in the councils and town halls across the country. In order to provide in-depth analysis of the issue, the research draws on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including civil servants as well as representatives of the Civil Service Bureau, international organizations, and training centers.

KEY FINDINGS

The research identified the following major challenges existing in the professional development system for civil servants before the move to remote teaching, which remain relevant in the context of online learning: increasing the effectiveness of the system for assessing professional development needs of civil servants; strengthening the link between civil servants' professional development and career growth; implementing alternative forms of training; strengthening the mechanisms for the monitoring and evaluation of the professional development system; etc. Civil servants whose native language is not Georgian face additional challenges in the form of language barriers that limits their access to professional development training.

To assess the readiness of civil servants for online training, the study takes the following four criteria into account: basic technical skills of civil servants; access to computers and relevant equipment; attitudes towards online learning; as well as motivating mechanisms and the ability to study independently.

For the majority of civil servants, the main motivation for participating in the professional development program is to fulfil their work duties better and achieve career growth. Nevertheless, the linkages between professional development training, professional needs of civil servants and career advancement mechanisms are demonstrably weak.

Civil servants have named the possibility to save time and better combine work duties with learning as one of the main reasons why they may opt for online training. On the other hand, however, online training may be associated with certain obstacles, such as low level of interaction, the difficulty to concentrate on learning, etc. Furthermore, online training may represent an additional challenge for female civil servants who combine remote work with family duties.

Due to the scarcity of the relevant experience, Georgian civil servants lack the skills that are necessary for online learning: self-organization, planning and management of the learning process and preservation of motivation in the face of difficulties. Therefore, it is important that online learning be accompanied by orientation courses that will help civil servants plan and manage the online learning process.

The survey reveals that most civil servants trust in the effectiveness of online training. 63% of surveyed civil servants believe that online learning can be as productive as face-to-face classes. At the same time, the focus-group discussions revealed that many civil servants negatively assess past experiences of online training, and ultimately give preference to face-to-face training. Hence, although civil servants show readiness to engage in online learning, their willingness strongly depends on the quality of training courses.

Based on the survey, the vast majority of civil servants have access to adequately functioning computer equipment both at work (91%) and at home (83%). However, fewer respondents have access to a webcam and microphone (72% and 75%, respectively). It is also worth noting that stable broadband internet connection is available to 74% of civil servants at work and 77% at home. 10% of respondents believe that they require additional training to effectively use Microsoft Office programs, while 11% wish to improve their skills in downloading and installing computer programs. The need to enhance computer skills is considerably higher among the civil servants in the 40+ age group.

The successful rollout of an online learning platform for civil servants requires their active engagement. It is important to take the preferences of civil servants into account and ensure their access to a broad range of courses on the platform that will allow long-term planning of professional development and career growth within the Georgian civil service.