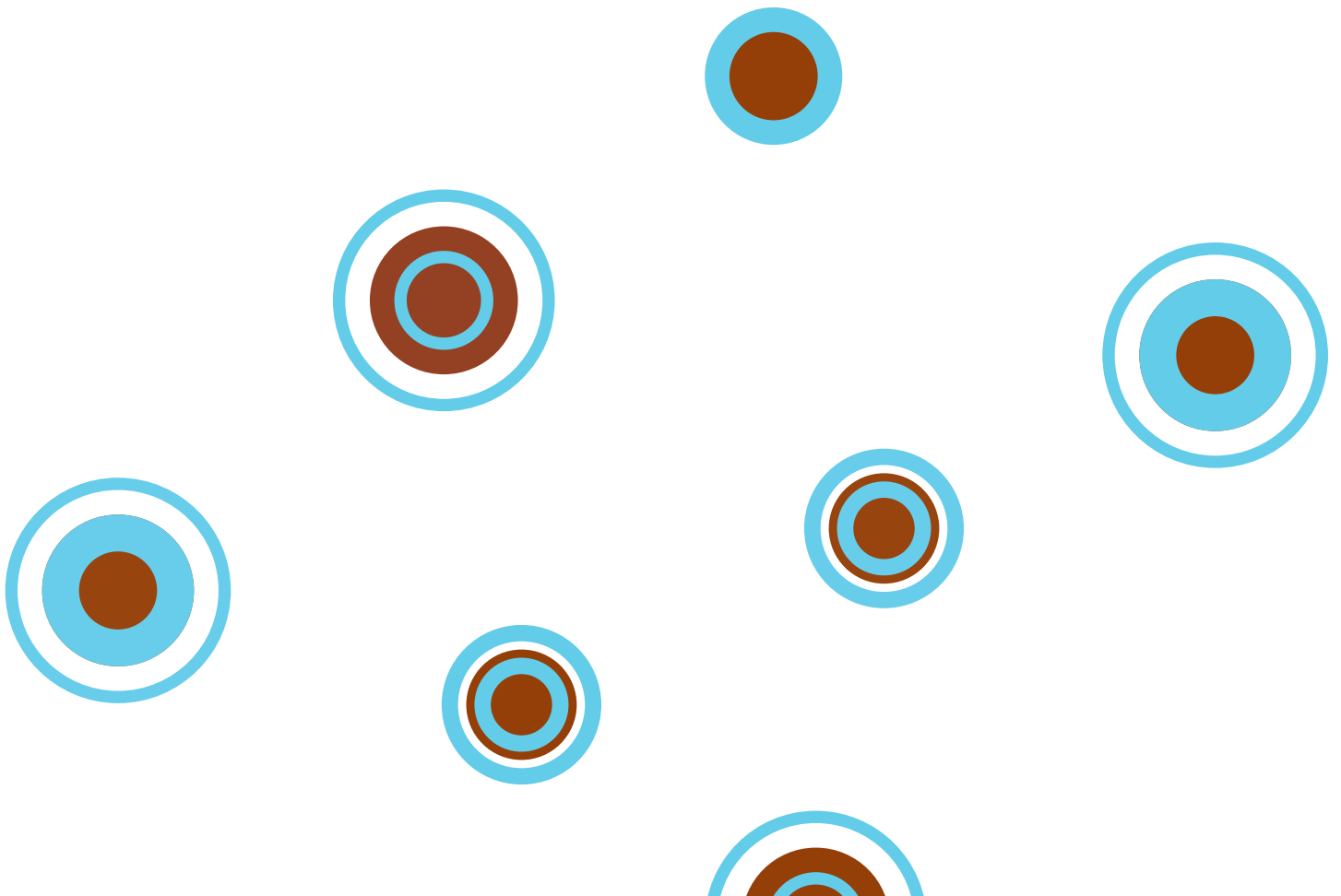


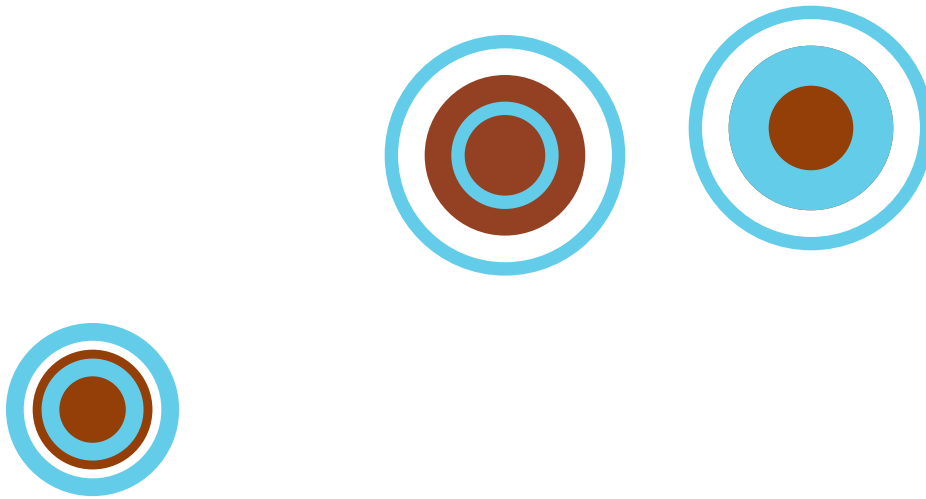


voluntary sector social services workforce unit

The Voluntary Social Services Workforce & Online Social Networks

What does this mean for you?





The Voluntary Sector Social Services Workforce Unit aims to support and promote the development of the voluntary sector social services workforce in Scotland.

For more information about the Voluntary Sector Social Services Workforce Unit (and the Workforce Development Network) please visit www.ccpscotland.org/workforceunit or contact Laura Weir: 01786 849752 or vswu.admin@ccpscotland.org

NB: This document contains complex hyperlinks. If you have a hard copy of this guide you can access these links by typing them into your web browser or by clicking on the appropriate link in the online version of this guide – available at www.ccpscotland.org/workforceunit/info/publications.php

The Voluntary Social Services Workforce and Online Social Networks

Time constraints, cost and geography can all impact on our ability to access face-to-face learning and networking opportunities. However, the evolving world of Internet communication - blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networking sites offer new ways to research, create, get together and learn.

For the social services sector, Social Services Knowledge Scotland (SSKS) is a new web based service, which provides the workforce with a single point of access to a wealth of knowledge and evidence. It also provides tools to support the sharing of personal and local knowledge and experience through “My Community Space”. This is the social network element of the facility and it highlights the importance of effective knowledge management, collaborative working, shared learning and accessing knowledge and evidence.

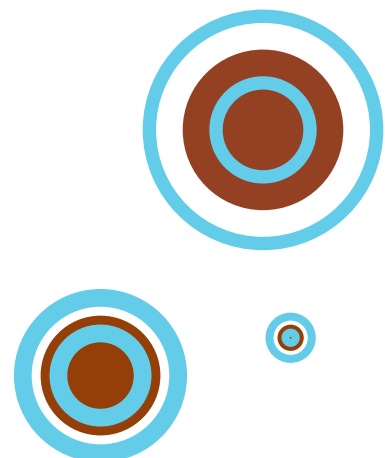
Social services staff are being encouraged to use the tools in My Community Space for these very reasons; with the ultimate aim of influencing and improving practice creating better outcomes for people who use services.

Social Networks – What are they?

The emerging landscape of how we learn and interact with others is changing. ‘Social media’ is beginning to play a significant role in altering how we think about knowledge, learning, networking and information.

The term ‘social media’, describes ‘a new set of internet tools that enable shared community experiences, both online and in person. In this context, a community is a group of people with common interests who connect with one another to learn, work, organize, play and socialize. These communities can be large or small, local or global’ (Blockwork, accessed 6 October, 2009). In other words it is equipment that allows us to become part of a virtual network.

So, is this new (or, in reality, not so new) world of virtual or social networks so different from what we are used to? Is this really just another new concept for us to try to understand? How can we use this as an approach to learning in social services?



Social Networks and their use for Learning

The concept of becoming involved in a network to learn or share information is not a new one. In our day to day lives, we all belong to a variety of different formal and informal networks.

Effective communication has always moved easily between electronic or digital media and physical spaces and in this way social media offers new opportunities for us to engage people at all levels (Cranston & Davies, 2009). But are we equipped to respond to this virtual shift? How might managers and frontline staff / practitioners respond?

With questions. Lots and lots of questions. Those most frequently asked include:

- ① 'What exactly is a social network?'
- ② 'What about people who don't have access to the internet?'
- ③ 'What do we do about people who don't like using the web to communicate?'
- ④ 'How can I find quality information online?'
- ⑤ 'What does this actually mean for me?'

And these are all very valid - however, the first thing to be clear on is that no one engagement method will reach, or suit, everyone. We should be seeking to integrate new online tools into our 'offline' learning activities; rather than to see them as separate distinct entities.

So, with that issue aside (and with a view to returning to it later), let's have a think about just some of the possibilities of using online social networks as a platform for learning and development including what this could mean in reality for staff....

(1) Access to a range of opinions

Imagine the scenario of a practitioner facing a particular difficulty or concern at work. There are many reasons why they might not feel comfortable sharing concerns with the colleagues around them e.g. confidentiality - colleagues guessing about the person involved; professional pride - I may not want to seem as if I don't know what to do; difficult relationships at work - I may not know who to talk to etc.

If this person was to choose to share (or 'post') this concern in a blog or network; the reality would be very different. The wealth and variety of responses would be vast and the collective resources of the respondents to help overcome this challenge would also be far reaching and significant. The beauty of access to a wide range of opinions in this form is in its openness - enabling direct communications, without constraint.

This will depend both on the "collective" responsibility of the network to reject inappropriate or inaccurate responses (Leadbeater, 2008), and the individual's own sense of what is good and bad practice. But, are these skills not similar to those that we use in any other off-line network?

(2) Potential for collaboration

Given the global economic conditions in which we are living and the increasing need to make more with less, it's worth highlighting that learning theorists have long supported the idea that sharing ideas increases the outcomes of new knowledge and innovation.

Research by Scardamelia and Bereiter (1996) in computer-assisted and mediated knowledge-building learning environments consistently suggested that new technology can support the knowledge-building process. This was true as long as there was evidence of commitment to learning and that contexts are relevant and applied for the learner; i.e. when staff are encouraged to start with the end goal in mind and bring various resources and participants into the process working towards their solution.

(3) Potential for creativity and innovation

Fundamentally, ideas grow by being articulated, tested, developed, modified and extended – activities that can rarely occur by one person. Online platforms allow shared creativity of this kind to involve more people, discussing more questions from varied angles and viewpoints (Bush, 1945). This is the essence of internet based social networking environments and this networking skill should be valued in learning.

That is, when staff realise the value in connecting with others in the learning process, the better their learning will be. Networking with experts, with peers, with additional sources of information etc can make the learning more interesting and also more legitimate (Raynard, 2008).

(4) Contributing directly to Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The SSSC commissioned a report called 'Continuing Professional Development for the Social Service Workforce' (Skinner, 2005) which sets out the objectives for CPD for the social service workforce in Scotland. It encourages both employers and employees to consider both formal and informal learning for CPD. Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL) requirements state the training and learning requirements that all registered social care staff must meet in order to ensure their continued suitability for registration.

Social networking and learning either in seeking (asking questions and implementing answers) or transmitting information (i.e. providing answers and mentoring) could be an extremely valid and valuable contribution to staff's CPD. Further, the SSSC is currently investigating the potential of developing a standardised e-portfolio for staff to record learning and CPD for each social services worker. The fact that this would be an online tool means that it should encourage greater uptake of compatible sources of information such as SSKS and My Community Space.

(5) Wider distribution of resources

Another avenue worth exploring is how using social networks for learning could lower the costs of engaging the learning enthusiasts free-ing up resources to be directed to those that are not so easy to engage. For example, those familiar to social networking sites could be encouraged easily to use these platforms for learning. This could leave trainers the opportunity to offer substantive support to others who need support to access information or to contribute online.

(6) Future social services staff

Social media and networking features are increasingly being introduced into school-based virtual learning environments (VLEs) – and these are increasingly widespread in schools, colleges and universities (Hunt, Parsons, & Fleming, 2007).

Essentially we need to remember that future social care staff are likely to already be familiar with social networking – they just need to be challenged to recognise and use these skills and see the benefit of their use at work.



Barriers to be Overcome

danah boyd, is a social media researcher who is principally interested in understanding how participation in social networks can affect sociality, identity, and culture. She notes the following key differences in interacting in social networks to ordinary networks:

Invisible Audiences:

We are used to being able to assess the people around us when we're speaking and we adjust what we're saying accordingly to account for the audience. Social media introduces all sorts of 'invisible audiences' e.g. there are people who read what we post or blog straight away, and there are others who will access it later in a different context and who might not fully understand what we were trying to say. As a result, we have to present ourselves and communicate without fully understanding the potential or actual audience. (boyd, 2009¹)

The idea that we are the stories we tell has never been more important than in the virtual world. We learn how to present ourselves through our interactions with others, in person. As educators, we now need to think about teaching new skills, allowing people to present themselves appropriately in an electronic context.

Collapsed Contexts:

Connected to this is the collapsing of contexts. In choosing what to say and when, we account for both the audience and the context more generally. Some behaviours are appropriate in one context but not another, in front of one audience but not others. Social media brings all of these contexts together and it's often difficult to determine what's appropriate and what can be understood (boyd, 2009²).

This presents social services front line staff with a variety of different quandaries. As a practitioner, I may not be comfortable explaining difficulties I am having, or sharing a piece of practice that doesn't follow standard protocol in a forum where my manager might see. For forums and online communities to become useful tools for sharing and learning, we need to ensure that they are supportive and not used to monitor performance. We also need to ensure that staff know that the environment is "safe" to thereby encourage usage.

Blurring of Public and Private:

It is not always clear what 'face' we are presenting, our 'public' or our 'private' face. This perhaps makes interacting online especially complex when using online networks for work. We normally base our distinction between the 'public' and 'private' around audience and context. However, these distinctions are not readily available to us online, and can be harder to manage (boyd, 2007).

Social Network sites encourage sociability and personal dialogue; this becomes more tricky when applied to work settings. Staff may find it difficult to know what is appropriate and inappropriate to share.

Access:

Whilst there is a clear move towards online information portals and websites such as Social Services Knowledge Scotland (SSKS); there are still a significant percentage of organisations that fail to recognize the value of social networking and online tools as either useful educational tools or even as effective communications tools.

One of the biggest barriers is that IT departments often block access to social networking sites - putting some social services staff at a distinct disadvantage to their peers. As educators and managers, we have to assume some responsibility for finding a way to provide access to those who seek it.

Conclusions

The way we learn should reflect the world we live in today.

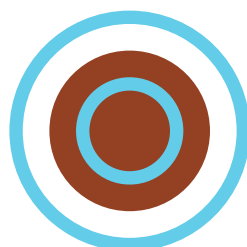
It is incumbent for us to remember the staff who do not have easy access to computers and other devices commonly used for social networking. Using these platforms won't suit everyone, thus it is important that it isn't seen as the ONLY method. It needs to be very good at signposting people to lots of different information sources and making links between the people, the practice and the information.

Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs) aim to ensure that public training resources and funding are directed at the priority skills needs of all sectors. The SSA for health and social care identified that developments in technology would pose a likely future skills need in the social care workforce. We do then need to focus our energies in ensuring that practitioners and managers have access to the wide range of resources available on platforms such as SSKS. Training courses for front line staff to understand the technology as well as the concepts behind this technology will need to be encouraged and more freely available.

There are a whole host of challenges ahead but we just need to learn how to be effective collaborators in this new world, how to use different types of technology to interact with people around us and how to be more effectively engaged and informed.

So, let's be positive. This is an opportunity to work on the basis of collaboration and creativity – the principles in which our sector was founded. We should take the time to get involved and try it out. If we don't its unlikely that we will be able to influence its development.

Now, surely that's worth thinking about?



Resources

The comments in this article are by no means extensive and are simply intended to start a conversation and to spark interest in the variety of online tools that are available for the social services workforce.

The foundation for this article was based on an international research symposium which brought together key international researchers and members of the social services community. If you would like to find out more and consider the issues in more depth, the Connected Practice Research Unit who hosted this symposium has created a Ning (online platform for people to create their own social networks) site which has a variety of forums for discussion. You can view the site here: <http://connectedpractice.ning.com/>

SSKS is a valuable tool to assist staff to find high quality information and learning resources, online journals, and a range of tools and guidance to help share knowledge and put it into practice. While published information and evidence is important, so too is professional knowledge and experience.

My Community Space (accessible from the SSKS homepage) provides an exciting way to link people and share resources, with the potential to create communities of people with a shared interest. The SSKS 'Shared Space' tool provides virtual workspaces where communities can:

- Share local and personal knowledge
- Work collaboratively
- Share dialogue and interpretation
- Keep up to date with developments

Working as a Community of Practice helps people to come together to identify and employ specialised personal knowledge more effectively. Other potential advantages are:

- creating a knowledge sharing and learning culture
- support organisational development
- reusing information
- learning from previous mistakes
- promoting Continuous Professional Development

Visit SSKS and My Community Space at: <http://www.sks.org.uk/home.aspx> and <http://www.mcs.scot.nhs.uk/home.aspx>

Internet for Health and Social Care (www.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/healthandsocialcare) is a free online tutorial to help students develop their Internet research skills. The aim is to learn how to make discerning use of the Internet to help find information for your coursework and assignments that will influence your practice. There is also a handy list of resources available to view at: <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/socialwork/?sid=704691&itemid=12033>

Lifelong Learning UK has produced a series of guides to help leaders, managers, teachers, tutors, trainers and learning support practitioners to apply the use of technology to their professional practice. These application guides are complemented by a series of case studies, giving good practice examples of how providers across England have successfully applied technology to their teaching and learning.

You can download the range of guides at: <http://www.lluk.org/techguides.htm>

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