
Major Uses of the Internet for Social Workers: A Brief Report for New Users

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How are social workers using the Internet? An effort was made to answer this question by surveying SOCWORK subscribers. A top-10 list was developed from this survey. The manner in which social workers employ the Internet provides insight to others who are less familiar with the Internet. The implications are far reaching for both social work education and practice. The education and practice gains that are made by exploiting the Internet are limited only by one's creativity.

In order to get a sense of the major uses of the Internet for social work practice and education, I completed a survey on SOCWORK, the Internet social work discussion listserv (a computerized system by which subscribers are able to communicate to all other subscribers by sending a transmission to one address) managed by Ogden Rogers from the University of Wisconsin—River Falls. The survey included one general question and was transmitted on May 14, 1995 (n = 27), March 23, 1996 (n = 41), and again on April 12, 1997 (n = 24): What is your top-10 list for the use of the Internet?

SOCWORK subscribers are social workers or social work students. Non-social workers who subscribe tend to unsubscribe within a short time. From the results of this query, I have compiled a top-10 list, which consists of a synthesis of the transmitted replies from the three points in time. Most interesting, little variation exists among the three years. In addition, the concepts derived from SOCWORK receive further elaboration with supplementary citations, which provide an in-depth commentary to the responses of the survey.

Over the past years of being on social work technology committees, I have learned that a commonly asked question among social workers regarding the Internet is: "How do social workers use the Internet?" This article represents an effort to paint a nonintimidating picture of the many creative uses of the Internet. The manner in which social workers employ the Internet provides insight to others who are less familiar with the Internet. Resnick (1994) illustrates that showing how some social workers use computers will enhance the use of computers by other social workers. The education and practice gains that are made by exploiting the Internet are limited only by one's creativity. In early social work textbooks (i.e., Richmond, 1911), we find that efforts were made to help social workers overcome

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their fear of using the telephone for social work practice. The contemporary social worker has no fear of the telephone. Maurer (1994) and Cnaan (1989) demonstrate that we cannot make that same statement about computers and the Internet.

Countdown of the Top-10 List

10. Keeping in Touch

Some SOCWORK subscribers indicated that they use the Internet to remain in touch with family and friends. E-mail becomes an asset when one needs to communicate with another in exotic places such as France, Australia, and New Jersey (New Jersey becomes an exotic place when one is transmitting from Poland). Although people used to write letters to stay in touch with distant family members and friends, soon E-mail will replace such correspondence. Replies from SOCWORK indicate that the use of E-mail for linking family and friends is a great morale booster.

Many SOCWORK subscribers commented that the world seems smaller because of the Internet. People from areas of the world as diverse as, for example, Australia, Israel, Italy, and New Zealand actively participate in discussions regarding social work issues. While providing E-mail instruction to a group of social work faculty and students, a professor coordinated with a colleague in Australia. Faculty and students participating in the workshop were impressed with the apparent "closeness." When using E-mail, communicating with a colleague in Australia is no different than communicating with a colleague in the next room. Interestingly, social workers are not alone with this experience. Anderson, Bikson, Law, and Mitchell (1995) note that E-mail is the most utilized resource available on the Internet.

9. Job Searching

Since most subscribers to SOCWORK are employed, job searching was not a frequent response. However, it is apparent that we will see an increase of notifications of social work positions on the Internet. Following are some recent comments:

First, SOCWORK subscribers often post available positions. However, one will be extremely disappointed if one subscribes to SOCWORK for only that reason. Most, but not all, announcements are faculty positions.

Second, two Internet services, America's Job Bank (<http://www/ajb.dni.us/>) and Online Career Center (<http://www.occ.com/occ/HomePage.html>), offer a wide variety of job listings and allow the user to search by job titles and descriptions. One respondent highly recommended CareerPath (<http://www.careerpath.com>) which lists Sunday classified ads from six major city newspapers (New York, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, San Jose, and Washington, D.C.). Once a user signs on, registration is required. A username and password must be submitted in order to search the database. Each time one invokes the service, the username and password are required.

Third, and perhaps most important, the New Social Worker provides an intuitive and user-friendly web page (<http://www.socialworker.com/career.htm>) that includes links to various web pages listing job opportunities for social workers. At the time

of this writing, 41 different links are included. Most of the links are from state employment agencies, but others include job listing services—for example, George Warren Brown School of Social Work offers a job listing service on this page. It is likely that other social work programs will offer such services to their alumnae.

8. Reducing Cost

Students and professors find that printing and duplicating costs can be reduced with use of the Internet. For example, a social work professor can distribute an extensive social history to his/her students; students can complete the assignment at a terminal without the use of a hard copy; and the professor comments and grades the reply onscreen and then returns it. Thus, no hard copy, which not only reduces the reproduction cost, but saves a tree. In other words, using the Internet for learning is good for the ecology. In addition, Huff and Edwards (1998) illustrate positive learning experiences when they required field work journals to be transmitted via E-mail.

7. Impressing Friends, Colleagues, and Supervisors

In these early stages of the Internet, people unfamiliar with the Internet can be easily impressed. Perhaps it is not important to impress one's friends and dangerous to try to impress colleagues, but one respondent to the survey indicated that her supervisor was very impressed with the proactive implications of the Internet. Her trail-blazing efforts are likely to lead to a raise in pay.

6. Speed of Communication

Two general themes regarding speed emerged. First, sending E-mail correspondence is much less complicated than writing a letter: simply compose the message and invoke SEND—no need to find an envelope and stamp. Second, if the U.S. Post Office does everything according to the book, a message from the East Coast to the West Coast takes three days. In a timed experiment with a respondent of the survey used for this article, a message was sent from North Carolina to California. After invoking SEND, the transmission appeared on the recipient's screen within seven seconds.

5. Phone Tag

One of the most aggravating problems in any institution is "phone tag." People make phone calls when it is convenient for them. The recipient of the phone call can only respond at his/her convenience. At most large institutions it is rare for two people to be available at the same time. We spend time saying, "I'm returning her call, please have her telephone me when she is free." E-mail allows both the sender and the receiver of a transmission to communicate at their convenience, but with more efficiency. The technology works equally well whether one is E-mailing to the next floor or across the globe.

4. Research

Three major themes regarding research through the Internet emerged from the sur-

vey: 1) seeking research; 2) doing research; and 3) collaboration and consultation. Effective tools for seeking research are open to anyone connected to the Internet. The list of material that cannot be found on the Internet is much shorter than the list of material that can be found there. With World Wide Web (WWW) I have noticed that highly specific and obscure information that would have been impossible to locate three years ago is readily available for downloading in minutes.

In terms of doing research, during the summer of 1993 Walter Hudson of Arizona State University was seeking a sample in order to calibrate the validity for an instrument he was constructing. He put out a call for assistance on SOCWORK and received a sample of 80 subjects from me as well as other samplings from around the country. Cathy Pike of the University of South Carolina was working to standardize a field work protocol. Many people, like myself, find such research suspicious. However, discussions on the Internet alleviated questions of security and encouraged other campuses to submit their field work protocols. Both Dr. Hudson and Dr. Pike were able to utilize the Internet to enhance the speed and quality of their research.

The final research theme is consultation and collaboration. One may have an idea for a research question, but with a seemingly missing variable. A researcher can seek out others who have worked with or have an interest in the area. Several options are available. One can consult with others or elicit another to co-author the manuscript. It is common for researchers to write with others whom they never meet face-to-face.

3. Referral Services

The various sources of information about and the acquisition of social psychological services of the Internet can be very helpful and sometimes a vital part of social work intervention. For example, an anonymous social worker had a client who was suffering from terminal lung cancer and was receiving hospice services at her home. The client's physical isolation made a dreadful situation worse. In an effort to assist with her last months, the social worker linked the client to UseNet's cancer support group, which provided her with the support vital for her morale.

Two types of useful groups are available via UseNet. Although UseNet NewsGroups change rapidly, support and recovery groups tend to be more stable than most. They include alt.recovery and alt.support, which are listed in tables 1 and 2, respectively:

Table 1
Internet Recovery NewsGroups

alt.recovery.aa	alt.recovery.compulsive-eat	alt.recovery.nicotine
alt.recovery.addiction.	alt.recovery.cow-fetish	alt.recovery-self-help
alt.addiction.gambling	alt.recovery.family+friends	alt.recovery.phonics
alt.recovery.addiction.sexual	alt.recovery.from-12-steps	alt.recovery.procrastinate
alt.recovery.adult.children	alt.recovery.lipbalm	alt.recovery.rational
alt.recovery.catholicism	alt.recovery.mlm	alt.recovery.religion
alt.recovery.christian.abuse	alt.recovery.mormonism	alt.recovery.unitarian-univ
alt.recovery.clutter	alt.recovery.na	
alt.recovery.codependency	alt.recovery.nettalk	

Table 2
Internet Support NewsGroups

alt.support.CalZ	alt.support.diet.fit-for-life	alt.support.musc-dystrophy
alt.support.abuse-partners	alt.support.diet.low-carb	alt.support.myasthe-gravis
alt.support.acre-shifting	alt.support.diet.rx	alt.support.non-smokers.
alt.support.addisons	alt.support.diet.zone	alt.support.non-smokers.moderated
alt.support.adoption.advocacy	alt.support.disabled.artists	alt.support.noncustodial.moms
alt.support.agoraphobia	alt.support.disabled.caregivers	alt.support.norplant
alt.support.aids.partners	alt.support.neurological	alt.support.obesity
alt.support.alzheimers	alt.support.dissociation	alt.support.ocd
alt.support.amputee	alt.support.divorce	alt.support.opp-defiant
alt.support.angioplasty	alt.support.divorce.jewish	alt.support.imperfecta
alt.support.anxiety-panic	alt.support.domestic-violence	alt.support.ostomy
alt.support.arthritis	alt.support.dwarfism	alt.support.with-custody
alt.support.arthritis.risgspondy.info	alt.support.dying-well.	alt.support.pco
alt.support.arthritis.moderated	alt.support.dying-well.moderated	alt.support.personality.schizoid
alt.support.artists-way	alt.support.dyslexia	alt.support.personality.post-polio
alt.support.asthma.support.asthma	alt.support.dystonia	alt.support.premature-baby
alt.support.asthma.buteyko	alt.support.eating-disord	alt.support.prostatitis
alt.support.ataxia	alt.support.endometriosis	alt.support.psoriasis
alt.support.atn-deficit	alt.support.epilepsy	alt.support.pulmonary
alt.support.attn-deficit.doesnt-exist	alt.support.ex-cult	alt.support.long-distance
alt.support.attn-deficit.mates	alt.support.ex-cult.siddhayoga	alt.support.road-rage
alt.support.autism	alt.support.food-allergies	alt.support.rsd
alt.support.big-folks	alt.support.foster-parents	alt.support.schizophrenia
alt.support.birth-parent	alt.support.glaucoma	alt.support.scleroderma
alt.support.boy-lovers	alt.support.grief.	alt.support.self-harm
alt.support.breast-implant	alt.support.grief-pet-loss	alt.support.short
alt.support.breast-implant.moderated	alt.support.headaches.migraine	alt.support.shyness
alt.support.breastfeeding	alt.support.hearing-loss	alt.support.single-parents
alt.support.brudershof	alt.support.heartburn	alt.support.sinusitis
alt.support.cancer	alt.support.hemophilia	alt.support.skin-diseases.hidradenitis
alt.support.cancer.breast	alt.support.herpse	alt.support.skin-diseases.psoriasis
alt.support.cancer.prostate	alt.support.hospice	alt.support.skin-diseases.vitiligo
alt.support.celiac	alt.support.househusbands	alt.support.sleep-disorder
alt.support.cerebral-palsy	alt.support.hypermobility	alt.support.social-phobia
alt.support.childfree	alt.support.ibs	alt.support.spina-bifida
alt.support.chronic-hives	alt.support.impotence	alt.support.srs
alt.support.chronic-pain	alt.support.incontinence	alt.support.stop-smoking
alt.support.crohns-colitis	alt.support.inter-cystitis	alt.support.stuttering
alt.support.crossdressing	alt.support.jaw-disorders	alt.support.survivors.prozac
alt.support.crossliving	alt.support.jock-strap	alt.support.tall
alt.support.crossposting	alt.support.kidney-failure	alt.support.thyroid
alt.support.dental-phobia	alt.support.learning-difficultie	alt.support.tinnitus
alt.support.depression.manic	alt.support.learning-disab	alt.support.tourette
alt.support.depression.recovery	alt.support.leprosy	alt.support.trauma-ptsd
alt.support.depression.seasonal	alt.support.loneliness	alt.support.tuberculosis
alt.support.depression.teens	alt.support.lupus	alt.support.turner-syndrom
alt.support.des	alt.support.marfan	alt.support.warez.recovery
alt.support.dev-delays	alt.support.marriage	
alt.support.diabetes.kids	alt.support.menopause	
alt.support.diet.Zone	alt.support.menopause.husbands	
	alt.support.ms-recovery	
	alt.support.mult-sclerosis.	
	alt.support.multsclerosis.alternatives	

The most recent NASW Code of Ethics (2.06) mandates that safeguards must be established when making referrals through the Internet, but the code is unspecific when the referral is made to a self-help group. Nevertheless, Casady (1994) offers guidelines for examining these NewsGroups, while Finn (1996) illustrates how they can be used by social workers. In addition to contacting recovery and support groups, some therapists use the Internet as a means to deliver services. Transmissions from both the therapist and client are encrypted, with the therapist having the decoding software. No two therapists have the same encryption. Clients pay for services via credit card. The information about credit cards is also encrypted. (For more information about how the Internet can be used for private practice see, Marson and Brackin, 1996a, 1996b, and 1996c.)

LaMendola, Glastonbury, and Toole (1989) provide an extensive examination of practice applications of computers for human services. Social workers at the Willow Senior Center in San Jose, California, sponsor Internet classes. Seniors find the experience uplifting. Many clients of the Center report comfort similar to sitting on their front porches and interacting with neighbors. In addition, many have found emotional support when facing the trauma of widowhood. When mobility and physical strength are limited but the mind is sharp, the Internet becomes the great equalizer. Age, race, ethnicity, gender, physical handicap, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation are all nonentities on the Internet.

2. Resource Material

When social work students replied to the query, they consistently noted that the Internet's most valuable asset was the location of information vital for a term paper. The point that students make is not merely that the information is available, but that desired information is easily accessible. Professors also find the Internet valuable for their needs. For example, Schmallegger (1991) reported speaking to the publisher of his textbook on the phone. The publisher required specific details of a crime that was committed two years earlier. While the publisher was outlining the list of required information, the author used the Internet to search for the crime in question. Within five minutes the author had found the required information, downloaded it, and faxed it to the publisher's office. The publisher had all the supporting data before the phone conversation was completed and was profoundly impressed. When one is seeking information quickly, it is hard to beat the Internet.

Social work academic programs use World Wide Web pages. In an effort to reduce printing costs, several academic programs have their Field and Student Handbooks available on WWW. To encourage computer utilization among students, hard copies are available only for field work instructors who request them. Listing of field agencies on the web is an up-and-coming trend. Not only will agencies on the web comply with CSWE standards, but experimental programming suggests that employing a campus web site for such a listing will provide a more intelligent selection of field settings by students. Some campuses give field instructors a computer account and training on how to use it, while others include a listing of social work journals housed in their library.

On what may appear to be a downside, WWW is rapidly accumulating nonscholarly information. David Mirsky, a Harvard graduate, manages a web page entitled

"Mirsky's Worst of the Web" (<http://turn-pike.net/mirsky/worse.html>). Included in this web page, one can find a translation of Hamlet in Klingon. Romenesko (1995) does a particularly good job of describing the quality of information on the WWW. The advantage of the WWW is that even when used extensively, it never gets cluttered.

1. Networking

Without exception, everyone who replied to the SOCWORK survey mentioned the concept of networking. The term *networking* has a long history of use in social work education and practice. In traditional social work practice, networking includes ties that are formed "spontaneously without professional intervention" (Pancoast & Collins, 1987). Lewis and Suarez (1995) stress that unlike practitioners in other countries, U.S. social workers rarely consider the utility of networks as a interventive strategy. In fact, they sum up their work with a section entitled "Directions for Social Work Practice in the 21st Century," in which they list ways to enhance a client's well-being through employment of "natural helping networks." When I first saw the phrase "21st Century," I felt sure the authors were going to address the vital importance of the Internet in community organization and natural network building, but they did not.

What does this lack of acknowledgment mean? The major thesis of Lewis and Suarez's (1995) position is that U.S. social workers have a tendency to fail to use networking resources that would have a positive impact on client treatment. The authors stress that social workers from other countries actively utilize such networks, while we have a habit of ignoring them. Perhaps the survey indicated the same phenomenon. Although all social workers who completed the survey noted that ties to other professionals are assets for professional growth, only one noted that such ties can be utilized to enhance client welfare. The most important point of this article is that social workers must begin to acknowledge the importance and utility of the Internet as a vital tool for client intervention. Our use of the Internet is limited only by our creativity.

Conclusions

From the SOCWORK survey, I was able to extrapolate ten major uses for the Internet. However, the Internet has an infinite number of social work practice and education applications. The utility of the Internet is limited only by our creativity, curiosity, and childlike enthusiasm. Our major problem with the Internet is the technophobia that permeates the profession. Almost on a daily basis I meet colleagues who demonstrate fear of computers. Resistance among social work faculty and students is well documented (Huff & Edwards, 1998; Lamb, 1990). From where do these fears emerge? One prime hypothesis guides us and emerges from the fear of "looking stupid." As a result, professionals who advocate computer utilization must be sensitive in their approach to others.

The history of social work education provides some insight into the fear of new technology. In the first social work textbook, Richmond (1911) writes a reassuring chapter on the importance of the telephone for social work practice. Richmond recognized that turn-of-the-century social workers were somewhat fearful of this new

technology. She writes in an encouraging and supportive tone in an effort to persuade social work students and professionals to use the telephone as a tool in social work intervention. She alludes to the fact that failure to use the telephone can be interpreted as disservice to a client. American social workers now face another turn-of-the-century with a new technology that can enhance services to clients. We see colleagues and students who are intimidated by the technology. While Richmond supported telephone use at our last turn-of-the-century, so we today need to use our creativity to employ the Internet as a tool for intervention. The use of the telephone is considered a vital part of daily social work practice and is used without discussion in contemporary textbooks. Just as we may be amused by Richmond's advocacy of telephone use, social workers in the 2000s will be amused by our intimidation by the Internet.

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