

THE RELEVANCE OF ICT IN AUXILIARY SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are electronic tools used to convey, manipulate and store information. The exponential growth of Internet access and ICTs greatly influenced social, political, and economic processes in Africa, and globally. Regardless of the level of practice, ICTs will continue influencing the careers of social workers and the clients they serve. ICTs have received some attention in the social work literature and curriculum, but we argue that this level of attention is not adequate given their ubiquity, growth and influence, specifically as it relates to upholding social work ethics. Significant attention is needed to help ensure social workers are responsive to the technological changes in the health care system, including the health care infrastructure and use of technology among clients. Social workers also need ICT competencies to effectively lead different types of social change initiatives or collaborate with professionals of other disciplines who are using ICTs as part of existing strategies. This text tries to explore the potentials of basic computer appreciation and ICT skills in the curriculum of social work at all levels of training.

Keyword: ICT, Social Work, Social Work Education, Telehealth, Collaboration

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Introduction

Computer appreciation refers to the basic concepts and fundamentals of computers. Consequently, ICT is a truncation that means "Information and Communication Technologies". ICTs are an umbrella term that incorporates all innovations for the control and communication of all digital information (Suleiman, Muhammad Muhammad Matinja, Zakari Idris Gupta, Jjoti. Sani, Shitu Ukashatu, 2020). ICT considers all the vocations of computerized development that as of now exists to help people, businesses, and institutions (Suleiman, Muhammad Muhammad Matinja, Zakari Idris Gupta, Jjoti. Sani, Shitu Ukashatu, 2020). ICTs are broadly defined as technologies used to convey, manipulate and store data by electronic means (Open University, nd). This can include e-mail, SMS text messaging, video chat (e.g., Skype), and online social media (e.g., Facebook) (Perron et al., 2010a), (Brian, E. P. Harry, 2010). It also includes all the different computing devices (e.g., laptop computers and smartphones) that carry out a wide range of communication and information functions. ICTs are pervasive in developed countries and are considered integral in the efforts to build social, political and economic participation in developing countries. For example, the United Nations (2006) cited in (Perron et al., 2010a) recognizes that ICTs are necessary for helping the world achieve eight time-specific goals for reducing poverty and other social and economic problems. The World Health Organization also sees ICTs as contributing to health improvement in developing countries in three ways: 1) as a way for doctors in developing countries to be trained in advances in practice; 2) as a delivery mechanism to poor and remote areas; and 3) to increase transparency and efficiency of governance, which is critical for the delivery of publicly provided health services (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2001) cited in (Perron et al., 2010a), (Benedict et al., 2014).

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ICTs are making dynamic changes in society. They are influencing all aspects of life. The influences are felt more and more at schools. Because ICTs provide both students and teachers with more opportunities in adapting learning and teaching to individual needs, society is, forcing schools aptly to respond to this technical innovation. Tinio cited in (Mikre, 2011), states the potentials of ICTs in increasing access and improving relevance and quality of education in developing countries. Tinio further states the potentials of ICT as follows: ICTs greatly facilitate the acquisition and absorption of knowledge, offering developing countries unprecedented opportunities to enhance educational systems, improve policy formulation and execution, and widen the range of opportunities for business and the poor. One of the greatest hardships endured by the poor, and by many others, who live in the poorest countries, in their sense of isolation, and ICTs can open access to knowledge in ways unimaginable not long ago (Mikre, 2011), (Suleiman, 2021).

Social workers are making increased use of technology to deliver services to clients, communicate with clients, gather information about clients, communicate with and about colleagues, and educate students and practitioners. The advent of technology—including the Internet, text (SMS), email, video, social media and networking, cloud storage, and other forms of digital communication and software—has introduced novel and unprecedented ethical challenges. Very recently, these dramatic changes in the ways that social workers use technology have led to major efforts to develop new ethical standards in the profession (Benedict et al., 2014), (Csiernik, 2020). These efforts have occurred in three distinct, albeit related, domains: (1) practice standards, (2) regulatory and licensing standards, and (3) code of ethics standards. This article provides a synthesis of emerging ethical standards and consensus thinking related to social workers' use of technology. Today's social workers must be thoroughly familiar with these significant developments to ensure that their practice complies with prevailing ethical standards (Benedict et al., 2014), (Csiernik, 2020).

Overview of ICT in the Society

Computer technology is becoming more efficient, productive, and cheaper. Advances in technology are producing more powerful computing devices to create a dynamic virtual network that allows people all over the world to communicate and share information. The growth and importance of technology and the virtual network are underscored by two important laws. First is Moore's Law, which states that "integrated circuit technology advancements would enable the semiconductor industry to double the number of components on every chip 18 to 24 months" (Coyle, 2009, p. 559) (Perron et al., 2010b). Essentially, this means that the speed and productivity of a computer increase two-fold every 1.5 to 2 years. While such growth may not be sustained indefinitely, the exponential growth of technology realized thus far has reshaped our society and will continue to be a dynamic force in future generations. Social workers must understand the role that technology plays in shaping the lives of clients and the services that are delivered. The second law, Metcalfe's Law, states "the value of a network increases in proportion to the square of the number of people connected to the network" (Coyle, 2009, p. 559)(Perron et al., 2010b). These rapidly developing technologies, and the individuals that utilize them, are producing virtual networks of greater size and value (Perron et al., 2010b), (Suleiman, 2021).

ICT and Social Work Education

In the same way that ICT has been found to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in other disciplines, social work has also been benefiting tremendously from the judicious and appropriate use of it. The use of ICT is central to the field of social work and this is mainly concerned with exchanging information and sharing assessments with other students, lecturers and professionals. Information and Communication Technology as it relates to social work education and practice can be defined as “any electronically mediated activity” used by social workers in the administration and evaluation of social services as well as in social work education (NASW and ASWB, 2005) cited in (Benedict et al., 2014). Examples include computers, electronic mail (e-mails), landline telephones, cell phones, the internet, social networking websites (SNWs), facsimile machines, video teleconferencing brochures and fact sheets newsletters and other digital devices (Benedict et al., 2014).

Online mental health resources and services emerged as early as 1982 in the form of “distance” or remote self-help support groups (Kanani & Regehr, 2003; Reamer, 2013a; Skinner & Zack, 2004). In social work, the earliest discussions of electronic tools focused on practitioners’ use of information technology (Schoech, 1999) and how social workers could use Internet resources, such as online chat rooms and Listservs joined by colleagues, professional networking sites, and e-mail (Finn & Barak, 2010; Grant & Grobman, 1998; Martinez & Clark, 2000) cited in (Csiernik, 2020).

The most ambitious development and use of technology in social work have occurred in the clinical realm (Chester & Glass, 2006; Dowling & Rickwood, 2013; Lamendola, 2010; Mattison, 2012; Menon & Miller-Cribbs, 2002; Reamer, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Zur, 2012). It includes the use of computers (including online chat and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones and video technology) to (a) deliver services to clients, (b) communicate with clients, (c) manage confidential case records, and (d) access information about clients (Lee, 2010; Menon & Miller-Cribbs, 2002; Santhiveeran, 2009; Zur, 2012) cited in (Csiernik, 2020).

Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favourable to their goals (NASW, 2008) cited in (Benedict et al., 2014). Skidmore et al cited in (Benedict et al., 2014) define social work as an art, a science or a profession that helps people to solve personal, group and community problems and to attain satisfaction for personal, group and community relationships through practice (Benedict et al., 2014).

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What is Social Work?

According to NASW, 2008 Social work is the professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favourable to their goals (Benedict et al., 2014). “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work (Perron et al., 2010b). Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.” Social work professionals working with families and institutions have helped to provide and advance the following social impacts (Perron et al., 2010a), (Benedict et al., 2014), (Chan, 2018):

- Civil Rights
- Unemployment Insurance
- Disability Pay
- Worker’s Compensation
- Reduced Mental Health Stigma
- Medicaid and Medicare
- Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

Roles of Social Workers

Professional social workers assist individuals, groups, or communities to restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning while creating societal conditions favourable to their goals. The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behaviour, of social, economic and cultural institutions, and the interaction of all these factors. Social workers help people overcome some of life's most difficult challenges: poverty, discrimination, abuse, addiction, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, disability, and mental illness. They help prevent crises and counsel individuals, families, and communities to cope more effectively with the stresses of everyday life (Udeani, 2019), (*What Does a Youth Worker Do? Bachelor of Social Work Program, Azusa Pacific University, 2018*).

Professional social workers are found in every facet of community life—in corporations, elected offices, hospitals, mental health clinics, military, private practices, prisons, schools, senior centres, and in numerous public and private agencies that serve individuals and families in need. The following are quick facts about the social work profession (*What Does a Youth Worker Do? Bachelor of Social Work Program, Azusa Pacific University, 2018*). Professional Social Workers are highly trained and experienced professionals who have completed a minimum number of hours in supervised fieldwork, Over 40% of all disaster mental health volunteers trained by the American Red Cross are Professional Social Workers (*What Does a Youth Worker Do? Bachelor of Social Work Program, Azusa Pacific University, 2018*), (CSC, 1997).

Eight Ways Technology Enhances a Social Work and Social Worker's Career

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), technology has changed the social work profession—impacting those at the individual practitioner level to the agency level. Here are eight (8) ways social workers use technology (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice, 2017*):

- i. **Telehealth:** Video conferencing tools can now be used by social workers to provide consultations at distance. The issue, however, is that personal information has to be safeguarded under the provisions laid out by the HIPAA. However, telehealth is and will continue to be a powerful tool for social workers and clients (Bullock & Colvin, 2015), (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice, 2017*), (Chan, 2018).

No longer do workers have to drive miles for meetings, and people in underserved areas could have greater access to resources. They don't have to be limited by their geographic area. We could even see networks where clients will be able to work with the social worker that they want or be assigned one based on a series of criteria, without ever having to meet them face to face. Some of the biggest benefits of telehealth in social work can never be emphasized (Bullock & Colvin, 2015).

- ii. **Recruitment and Job Search:** Technology has also made it easier for students to find work once they leave school. They can find opportunities in a click, whether it's in their state or the other side of the country. They can take interviews at distance as well using tools like Skype. Sites like Indeed and Monster have tons of listings in sectors like school social work, medical social work and clinical social work. Technology has made it nearly impossible for professionals in a high demand field like social work to not find a position (Chan, 2018), (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, 2017).
- iii. **Education:** Online Master of Social Work (MSW) degree programs offer the opportunity to accelerate the training of future social workers who will provide essential services to help populations in need around the world (Bullock & Colvin, 2015). Increased access to online MSW programs can help improve the quality of life for individuals, families, and groups in underserved or at-risk populations. Earning an MSW degree online from a university that has Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation demonstrates the quality of education to employers (Chan, 2018), (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, 2017).
- iv. **Research:** There are several web-based resources for information to help ensure that interventions have positive results. Besides, the internet allows social workers to stay current in the field through numerous resources, including online webinars and training as well as peer-reviewed research, blogs, social media accounts, and newsletters published by social work agencies such as NASW and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) (Chan, 2018), (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, 2017).

- v. **Collaboration Tools:** Another area that has been greatly improved by technology is the dissemination and storage of information. Collaboration is easier than ever as well. People no longer have to jump from desk to desk to get important files, and can collaborate on one document from wherever they are. Important information can be sent in seconds between social service agencies and caregivers.
- vi. **Management:** Several software technologies help social workers organize and manage client data, review and examine provider performance, and determine overall eligibility for particular services.** As more than one social worker can work on a single case, digitally sharing notes via Google Docs and other collaborative platforms allow for ease of communication while securely and ethically protecting client information (Chan, 2018), (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, 2017).
- vii. **Online Fundraising:** Another area where technology could help is fundraising. The field is still using antiquated tactics such as newsletters, mainstream media, direct mailing, etc. A lot of it is done through volunteering work as well. Fundraising plays a central role in social work, and there is no better tool than technology to facilitate it (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, 2017).
While no software can help with fundraising for social work per se, we can see a future where fundraising events could be held completely online, and donations made directly through SMS for instance. Crowdfunding is still in its infancy, and platforms could be dedicated solely to matters of public health and services (*NASW, ASWB, CSWE, & CSWA Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice*, 2017), (*Computer Applications in Social Work and Allied Professions*, n.d.).
- viii. **ICT and Advocacy:** Phone calls and letters are still being used for advocacy, but are slowly being overtaken by blogs and other forms of new media. Email campaigns targeting lawmakers and interest groups are increasingly common, as well as the use of video talks to raise awareness of causes(Perron et al., 2010a).
Platforms like TED talks have become catalysts for social change. These platforms, when used the right way by the right people, can be incredible tools to raise awareness. Organizations should spend as much time trying to reach politicians as reaching the public if they want to truly spark change. Social media campaigns can also be powerful tools to push people to take action (Perron et al., 2010a).

Could We See Robots Take Over Social Work?

While social workers are not yet in danger of getting their jobs stolen by robots, robots could start being introduced to perform some of the functions that were reserved for social workers. For instance, robotic pets are already being used in the treatment of dementia, and allow social workers to help patients exteriorize their feelings. However, the usage of these robots to work with regular clients is already a cause for controversy and debate in certain circles (Poppy, 2012).

Professor and founding member of the International Committee for Robot Arms Control Robert Sparrow stated that the use of animalhood robots was unethical and misguided. The reason for this is that users have to actively delude themselves about the true nature of the robot and their relation with them (*Social Work in the ICT Age: How to Ensure Ethical and Competent Practice in the 21ST century and beyond*, 2011).

Still, robots are being used in healthcare in several ways and could change the future of assisted care. Robots can be used to remind patients to take medication, monitor vital signs, and help with a variety of home tasks such as cooking and cleaning for instance. It's only a matter of time before AI and machine learning evolves to a point where they'll be able to entertain some basic conversation and be used as tools for self-assessment.

The Limits of Technology

Another thing that is important to recognize is that there are aspects of social work that will never be able to be overtaken by technology. Social work remains one of the disciplines where full automation is the least likely. According to NPR, social work only has a 0.3% risk of full automation, since it is one of the most difficult positions for robots to fill. This also makes it a very promising field with great prospects for the future.

Technology is set to have a profound impact on the way clients interact with social workers, and how social workers approach their work. For the most part, these changes should be beneficial. However, social workers will also need to adapt and will need to acquire a whole new set of skills if they don't want to be rendered obsolete. Only those that will be able to stay on top of these changes and learn how to use them to their advantage will be able to thrive.

Challenges of ICT in Social Work Practices

However, while technology and social innovation could help, there is also a lot of concern around how technology is used. Some of these include:

- Data protection and privacy
- Lack of preparation and formation for new workers
- Lack of resources
- Reluctance from users
- Lack of evidence on the impact and effectiveness of new methods

The most important, however, is making sure that workers have the technological literacy necessary, and stay abreast of new developments and global policies in social work. This is why the ASWB and NASW have started working on standards for technology and social work practice. The goal of these standards is to:

- Be a guide to help social workers seamlessly integrate new tools with their services
- Improve and maintain the quality of services
- Allow for evaluation and monitoring of how technology tools are used
- Inform government bodies, agencies, and clients on the usage of new technologies in social work
- They cover things such as access, ethics, vulnerable populations and cultural competencies. Besides, they also cover risk, regulatory, and privacy considerations.

Conclusion

The field of social work education, research, and practice is surrounded by rapid developments in ICTs. To ensure that social work practice upholds the standards and values of social work ethics, social workers must be competent and literate in it. This will position social workers at all levels of practice to help advance the lives of disenfranchised and disadvantaged persons through greater access to education, knowledge and other resources. While numerous ICTs have failed to realize their expected potential, the ongoing rapid growth of ICTs has created a context in which social workers cannot resist technology, but must understand the role it plays in everyday life.

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