

Stony Brook University
School of Social Welfare
Office of Field Education

Social Media Guidelines for Students

In the 21st century social work professionals are constantly faced with new challenges: budget concerns, elimination of client services, increased liability issues, HIPPA regulations and violations, and the increased use of social media. Social media has grown tremendously over the last 15 years with the increased use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and ever increasing blog sites.

Approximately 46 million individuals 12 years and older now check their social media sites and services several times a day. The majority of these (52%) have a profile on one or more social networks. This figure is driven largely by Facebook, which is now used by over half (51%) of Americans over the age of 12.

(<http://www.edisonresearch.com>). In the United States Twitter is as well-known as Facebook with 15% of American internet users active on Twitter (<http://www.mediabistro.com>).

As a social work intern placed in a human service organization you will come into contact with many individuals that utilize social media for various reasons. You must be aware of the ways that people can get information about you, connect with you and learn about your family and friends. It is important that you begin at this point to look at social media not only from a personal perspective but from a professional one. Your professional image extends beyond the physical setting of your field agency. Clients and staff of the agency will be able to view you as you are presented through social media. Your professional self must be guided by social work values and ethics and this responsibility extends to the virtual world and technological world.

There are issues that you should always remember when using social media (Judd and Johnson 2012);

1. Socializing with peers in a social setting may result in pictures and references taken within the context of a relaxed and friendly atmosphere that are posted by a friend who has not set his or her profile to private.
2. Identity relevant information can be easily disseminated through social network sites and then shared with large and unknown numbers people and groups – including clients, employees (current or future) colleagues and professional peers.
3. Sharing content and statements on-line may fall into the category of unprofessional behavior and can reflect poorly on the student, affiliated institutions, and the profession, as well as damaging client relationships.

As social work students you should follow the NASW Code of Ethics. The Code responds to some of the issues we face as we use social media.

- Section 1.06 “Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client.” - This may apply to “friending” or accepting friend requests;
- Section 1.07(a) “Social workers should respect clients’ right to privacy. Social workers should not solicit private information from clients unless it is essential to providing services or conducting social work evaluation or research. “ – This may apply to conducting online searches about clients;
- Section 107(m) “Social workers should take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through the use of computers, electronic mail, facsimile machines, telephones and telephone answering machines, and other electronic or computer technology. Disclosure of identifying information should be avoided whenever possible.” – Ensure there is confidentiality at both the sender and receiver end;
- Section 4.06(a) “Social workers should make clear distinctions between statements made and actions engaged in as a private individual and as a representative of the social work profession, a professional social work organization, or the social worker’s employing agency.” – Clearly separate your identity as an individual from your identity as a professional, or in connection with your placement as appropriate when commenting/posting on blogs, social media sites

What Can You Do

Below are some suggestions that a student can do to protect their clients, their agency, their school and themselves:

- Set your personal information, pictures on private setting;
- Use a pseudonym as your identification on social media sites and connected to any comments you may make on blogs;
- Google yourself to see what comes up;
- Keep your social work student status in mind when commenting on any sites;
- Keep your agency, client population and the School of Social Welfare in mind when commenting on any sites;
- Know the person you are “friending” and don’t “friend” past or present clients and their families.

Social Media may also be used in exciting ways to connect with other social work students, social work professionals, social justice issues and human service causes. Your placement site may have a webpage or a blog. These sites can and should be utilized by you. Use them appropriately and with your future social work professional status in mind. Talk to your field instructor about the following issues:

- Does your placement agency have a policy about the use of social media?

- How much and what type of personal information is shared with former and current clients
- How much and what type of personal information is shared with agency staff and colleagues
- Should I look up a client on social media? Should I do a Google search on a client at the agency?
- Is there any type of agency related information that should not be sent by email? If there is how should I convey that information ?

References

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<http://www.edisonresearch.com/>, The Social Habit 2011, Entry by Tom Webster Sunday, May 29th, 2011 | Permalink