



A Social Work Student's Guide to Social Media

Adapted in part from the University of Michigan School of Social Work's "Guide for Social Networkers"

Uses of Social Media in Social Work

The growth of the Internet and social media has been an important development for social workers in terms of being able to connect with others, share knowledge, and raise awareness about critical issues. Social media has also enabled social workers to help with advocacy, outreach, fundraising, and many other kinds of issues affecting their daily activities. It is important to understand how social media can be used to create a professional identity to support your career objectives while avoiding major pitfalls.

Knowledge Building

Social workers across the world share research and best practices, as well as raise awareness about policy changes, through various modes of social media.

Making Connections

Social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter enable social workers to learn about their colleagues' work, get the word out about events, and network and collaborate.

Building Conversations

Easy access to a variety of ideas and practices allow for productive debates and discussions that can improve the delivery of effective services for clients.

Tips for Safe Social Networking

Google yourself regularly to discover what information can be found about you.

Create a professional website and social media presence to build your online professional identity.

Understand each site's privacy settings and set them to the strictest settings whenever possible.

Familiarize yourself with your agency's social media policies or help them create policies.

Be mindful when posting to social media sites especially if it involves your agency or clients.

Protect your client's privacy by not searching for them online without their consent unless you have a clinically significant reason.

Carefully manage client information that you find online accidentally.

Create boundaries with clients and do not friend or follow them under any circumstances.

Notify clients that email or other online communications methods are not necessarily secure or private.

Keep your social work reputation in mind and use professional judgment when posting or commenting online.

Create secondary online accounts to separate your personal and professional life.

Remember that once something is posted online, even anonymously, the Internet does not forget.

NASW Code of Ethics and Ethical Social Media Use

Social workers should use ethical principles as outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics as a guide to practice.

- Social workers should avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment.
- 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. (1.06c)
- 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. (1.07a)
- Social workers should not discuss confidential information in any setting unless privacy can be ensured. (1.07i)
- Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities. (4.03)
- 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. (4.06a)

Questions for Your Agency

In addition to the NASW Code of Ethics, your agency may have their own regulations regarding social media. Check with your supervisor to ensure that you are practicing within your agency's guidelines.

- What should I do if a client "friends" or "follows" me?
- When/is it ok to Google a client?
- What should I do if a client inquires about personal information they found about me online?
- What is ok to share about my profession/agency online?
- How can we use social media to support our goals/clients?
- What privacy and confidentiality concerns should I consider when texting, emailing, or using Twitter or Instagram?

Questions for the Classroom

Discussing cases at your field placement is an essential part of Practice class, as it enables students to learn from each other. However, it is sometimes difficult to know what you can share, what you shouldn't share, and what happens to that information inside and outside the classroom. The following questions should be addressed by your field instructor:

- What information about a client can I share online?
- Can I write about cases on my social work blog?
- Can I post pictures of clients on any social media site?

Social Media Resources for Social Workers

Blogs and Websites:

- ifp.nyu.edu
- www.socialworkblog.org
- www.socialworkhelper.com
- www.socialworker.com
- www.socialworktoday.com

Social Media and the Social Worker - NASW

- www.naswnc.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=320

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