Technology and Social Work

BACKGROUND

The seminal contribution of Mary Richmond offers the first mention of technology and social work. Richmond (1917) noted the importance of using the telephone in social work practice. Turn-of-the-century social workers were somewhat fearful of telephone technology. However, they eventually accepted the telephone as an important practice tool. More recently, academic social workers have discovered the importance of computers and other technology advances as efficient practice tools.

Three unlikely technological streams of historical connections led to useful computer applications for social work practice. First, military applications were the impetus for computers (Burks & Burks, 1988) and the Internet (Marson, 1997). Although these applications were clear improvements for war and defense goals, they were neither user friendly nor affordable. Highly specialized university professors produced much of the advances in technological war and defense applications. Because of the second connection, academic freedom, the advances in military technology were spread throughout the academic community—including schools of social work. Although academic social workers were employing computer-related technologies to social service research, these technological advances were not user friendly and could not be efficiently applied to social work practice. Here enters the third connection—commercialization of technology. Starting in the early 1960s (Redin, 1997), technology entrepreneurs were motivated by profit to reduce costs and to make technology user friendly.

Even with such rapid advances in reducing cost and increasing user friendliness, resistance among social workers to use computer technology as a tool for daily practice is well documented (Huff & Edwards, 1998; Lamb, 1990). With his 1981 inaugural issue of a newsletter entitled Computer Use in Social Services Network Newsletter, Dick Schoech advocated for the integration of technology in social work practice. In 1985, Schoech’s newsletter evolved into a practice journal, the Journal of Technology in Human Services, and thus had a greater impact. However, unlike military and business uses of technology, social worker applications demanded understanding more than merely when it can be used and how it works.

The lack of formal regulations (LRN, MCI, & Benkler, 1996) is a critical issue for the delivery of social work via technology. NASW has taken the lead in establishing the groundwork in offering guidelines and protocols to protect clients by co-sponsoring technology conferences and publications from its members (Marson & Brackin, in press; Reamer, 1998; Vernon & Lynch, 1999). Two fundamental aspects of electronic information security dominate the theme of client protection. These include password protection and encryption. Client information stored on any electronic storage system must be protected by a password. As electronic storage systems become integrated into social work practice, social workers must use a procedure on the secure use of passwords (Marson, Cogswell, & Smith, 1994). The transmission of electronic client records on any computer system or network must comply with cutting-edge standards of encryption (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 1998), such as those developed and used by Kosuir (1998).

Several assumptions can be made given the current and projected growth of information technology:
Social work practitioners, agencies, and programs will increasingly use information technology.

Social workers need to understand that new cultural patterns are evolving, based on the consequences of the widespread use of information technology, and, as with earlier cultural revolutions, people experience problems because of the new cultural patterns.

Social workers must improve their practice, contribute a vision of values, and influence social changes as they understand and use evolving forms of information technology.

Social work practice must shape and be shaped by exponential growth of information technology. Social work values and ethics need to be applied to new areas, and new ethical issues are arising as a result of information technology developments. Social work values and ethics must shape the direction, functions, and consequences of the use of information technology by the social work profession.

**ISSUE STATEMENT**

The evolution and proliferation of information technologies has expanded the ways in which social workers provide services to clients, administer agencies, educate practitioners, and conduct research and evaluation. Accompanying these dramatic developments are a number of compelling issues for social workers that include direct practice, management, education, and research.

**Direct Practice**

Electronically mediated communication technologies make practice possible on a global scale and with all sizes of systems. With improving interactive technology, both direct practice and consultation can take place between people who are separated in space and time. This use of technology poses new challenges for social workers in establishing therapeutic relationships, making appropriate assessments and referrals, monitoring and evaluating interventions, and providing emergency assistance. Access to computer-driven decision support and expert systems is becoming increasingly available to practitioners, which raises ethical issues surrounding their use. Maintaining confidentiality with the use of technology raises new ethical issues and dilemmas for professional social workers. The current code of ethics urges social workers to “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 and computer technology” (NASW, 1996).

**Management**

Managerial uses of various technologies for clerical work, fiscal planning, scheduling, billing, and similar administrative tasks have long been a part of acceptable agency practice. Such information is valuable for program planning and informed decision making. However, information about client systems and employees can be accessed and used without the person’s knowledge or permission, and in ways that may not be in the best interests of consumers or the profession. Ethical and pragmatic decisions must be made about the collection, storage, retrieval, and protection of client and employee information data that are collected.

**Education**

New educational technology systems such as the delivery of complete courses and continuing education programs on a distance-learning basis are now realistic alternatives to traditional instruction. Collaborative educational programs among institutions are evolving, foreshadowing significant change in how social work curricula are constructed and delivered. Standards must be created for student competencies in the use of technology. The use of information technology must also be addressed when designing professional development and in-service trainings.
Research Issues

Outcome-based research efforts must be supported and conducted to assess the efficacy of technology-mediated practices. In addition, we must continue to develop research and evaluation methods for assessing and validating technology use.

POLICY STATEMENT

The field of technology is rapidly changing the way that many professions do business. Social work is no exception. It is important that the use of technology in social work be directed by the social work values and ethics that are the essential principles of the profession. This policy offers guidelines for addressing the use of technology by social workers:

It is imperative that the social work profession immediately develop a set of competencies for the use of technology in social work practice. These competencies are based in the areas of direct practice, management, social work education, and research. These competencies may include some that are unique to urban, rural, and remote areas.

Simultaneously, the profession should embrace the notion that technology competence is becoming integral to competent and responsible professional practice and encourage its members to actively seek opportunities for ongoing education and training in technology use. Education and training should include legal, ethical, and competency-based standards concerning the risks and benefits to clients and the profession.

It is equally important that NASW as our professional organization take a leadership role in utilizing various technologies, such as e-mail, World Wide Web, and long distance learning opportunities, to improve service to members and to further the goal and mission of the association.

Social workers must take the lead in researching the efficiency and efficacy of technology use on the profession and its clients.

Social workers must exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps to ensure the protection of clients’ rights, respect for comfort level, and choice on technology use, confidentiality, and privacy when technology is used in practice.

Social workers must inform their clients about the process, associated risks and benefits, and their rights and responsibilities when technology is used in practice.

The social work profession, dedicated to social justice and equal access to services for all, encourages the application of extra effort and resources to ensure technology by all members of society.

REFERENCES


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*Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 1999. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600; e-mail: press@naswdc.org*