

POSITION STATEMENT

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Introductory statement of purpose and definitions

The purpose of this paper is to state the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' (WFOT) position on the use of social media for continuing professional development and networking.

This statement is intended for all member organisations and occupational therapists who have a presence within social media and for those who are considering using social media as part of their role in occupational therapy. The position statement identifies the definition of social media and clarifies the benefits of using social media in one's professional role. The statement outlines principles for safely engaging with social media to reduce risk and enhance one's professional reputation online.

The term 'social media' is applied to a specific set of technologies and their application (UK Government, 2014). Social media refers to online technologies that facilitate information and opinion sharing, that promote discussion and can be used to build online networks. The technologies include a variety of media, including text, picture, video and audio and may include the following:

- Facebook – Currently, the most powerful social networking website with over 400 million active users.
- Twitter – a social networking and micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read messages known as tweets.
- WFOT member-only discussion forums – for professional exchange and debate.
- YouTube – Video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and view videos.
- LinkedIn – a business-oriented social networking site mainly used for professional networking.
- Flickr – image hosting website and online community.
- Slideshare – Powerpoint presentation and document sharing website on which users can upload, view, comment, and share slideshows.
- Blogs – for sharing knowledge and skills
- Pinterest – for sharing visual resources

Statement of the position being taken

The WFOT's mission to develop occupational therapy worldwide presupposes access to services that are contextualized to local culture, resources, and occupations.

Occupational therapists using social media should comply with all relevant jurisdictional, institutional, and professional regulations and policies governing the practice of occupational therapy.

Social media guidelines for professional use should be defined in consultation with occupational therapists, educators, member associations, and other societal stakeholders and be informed by best practice.

Statement of the significance of issue to occupational therapy

Occupational therapists are using the Internet to gather information, to enhance evidence-based practice and to assist in their knowledge development (Bodell, Hook, Penman, & Wade, 2009; Hamilton, 2015). They are doing this by harnessing the power of online networks, and the most useful networks ("real" world or online) are those that are diverse and have low density (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005). A diverse network is one which has great range, reflecting a variety of strategically chosen professions, perspectives, or personalities. Network density relates to the area over which a network is spread, with high density meaning that the contacts are placed closely together for example in one hospital, and low-density networks being more widely dispersed, for example covering a national or international geographical area.

It is unlikely that most occupational therapists will have immediate access to a real world diverse, low-density network, as it requires considerable investment in terms of time and resources and as a result, using mainstream online technologies for professional networking has emerged as a viable option (Kashani, Burwash, & Hamilton, 2010).

Online social media affords a platform for developing diverse, low-density networks free of charge and with reduced cost in terms of time and effort. Bodell and Hook (2011) assert that networking is a necessary element of professional roles and a supportive strategy. They suggest that the power of the online environment can facilitate the development of global professional networks without the onerous burden in terms of time, cost and energy associated with traditional networking strategies.

Using social media is not without risk, particularly with regard to confidentiality, professionalism and personal safety. Boon and Sinclair (2009) caution against embracing online social media tools naively, citing potential difficulties in relation to engagement, identify, depth of learning and issues relating to authenticity and trust. This position statement seeks to ameliorate some of these risks.

Challenges and Strategies

The WFOT affirms: Occupational therapists using social media should meet the same standard of professionalism identified by the WFOT Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics and comply with all jurisdictional, institutional, and professional regulations and policies governing the practice of occupational therapy.

Principles of good practice for using social media (in addition to compliance with all relevant regulations and policies as stated above): These are expanded in the supporting guidance document

1. Recognise that the personal and professional roles cannot always be separated.
2. The image you present online reflects both you and your profession – be ethical and proactive.
3. When interacting online be clear when you are speaking for yourself and when you are speaking for your employer or your profession.
4. Treat others with consideration, politeness and respect.
5. Network, connect, and share your expertise, insights and experience.
6. Facilitate the use of social media by modelling ethical conduct online and supporting others to do the same.
7. Learn how to support others to use social media ethically.

Conclusion

Whilst careful consideration of risk is required, an over-cautious approach to this technology may limit its potential and that of occupational therapists and member organisations. Although there is limited training currently available to those who wish to develop their skills in this area, there are a number of best practice codes and guidelines (in addition to this one). These principles seek to build on existing guidelines, and provide a comprehensive approach to facilitating the use of social media for occupational therapists, and managers within organisations.

References

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Further Guidance to support the Position statement on the Use of Social Media.

THE PRINCIPLES – in more detail

1. Recognise that personal and professional identities cannot always be separated.
2. The image you present online reflects both you and your profession – be ethical and proactive.
3. When interacting online be clear when you are speaking for yourself and when you are speaking for your employer or your profession.
4. Treat others with consideration, politeness and respect.
5. Network, connect and share your expertise, insights and experience.
6. Facilitate the use of social media by modelling ethical conduct online and supporting others to do the same.
7. Learn how to support others to use social media ethically.

1. Recognise that personal and professional identities cannot always be separated.

Some people prefer to cultivate separate personal and professional identities in the online environment, for example by having two Facebook pages or using different tools for different functions. This can be very successful, however one should be aware that it is very difficult to entirely separate personal and professional identities, particularly in relation to the way our values and beliefs are enacted online. It is recommended that this is acknowledged and managed and in this way the user remains in control of their online identity.

2. The image you present online reflects both you and your profession – be ethical and proactive.

Each online activity can leave a virtual footprint, and a combination of activities that creates an online identity for the individual involved. This identity may be revealed via simple methods, for example by 'Googling' or by more sophisticated methods that allow the searcher to amalgamate pseudonyms. Online identity is closely linked to reputation and reputation may be fundamental to professional practice and career development. It is suggested therefore that online identity should be acknowledged and managed rather than ignored.

3. When interacting online be clear when you are speaking for yourself and when you are speaking for your employer or your profession.

Knowing who you are representing online is critical to ensuring you keep yourself and other people safe. It is usually quite clear if the purpose of your social media presence is to represent an organisation.

To do this well you will need to understand their social media policy (if they have one), including the scope of use and the way in which the organisation prefers to present its brand online. This may require discussion with your manager or the relevant department in the organisation as it is important to know that you are not breaching employer policy. Many organisations offer training and guidance, realising how powerful this channel of communication can be.

4. Treat others with consideration, politeness and respect.

Connecting online requires the same level of courtesy and etiquette (sometimes called 'netiquette') afforded to interacting in the real world. This means respecting other people's views and being courteous in the online environment. Meeting these expectations can help build a positive online reputation and contribute to building online networks

Not everyone adheres to this all of the time and sometimes you may be required to address online content you feel is either inappropriate or critical. All online posts to, between and about individuals or groups are traceable and can have negative consequences if they are inappropriate.

What is considered to be inappropriate material is often outlined in the terms and conditions of the websites. Examples of disrespectful and unprofessional online behaviours are outlined here:

- Libels, defames, or is obscene, pornographic, abusive or threatening.
- Infringes the intellectual property rights of any other person including (without limitation) infringing any person's copyright or trademark.
- Is illegal.
- Advocates illegal activity.
- Advertises or solicits funds or is a solicitation for or offer to supply goods or services unless approved by the owner/s of the website

It can be difficult to control or censure the posts of others, however if you feel their behaviour is impacting on your professional reputation you should feel free to delete the post with or without contacting the individual to explain why. It can be useful to do this, and to remind all users of social media that posting something inappropriate may expose them to criticism and censure by a wider audience of other users.

5. Network, connect, and share your expertise, insights and experience

Effective networking is based on a balance of giving and receiving. This is as true in the online world as the real world. You might want to start by quietly making connections and following conversations; this is called 'lurking'. At some point though, it is good to reach out and contribute. Everyone has something to give, for example pointers to interesting things to read, reflections, or even just encouragement. You might want to take this to a more formal level, and offer yourself as a mentor or to lead on a topic on a particular platform such as hosting a discussion on Twitter. Do be careful to make explicit any disclaimers though, to ensure it is clear that you are not offering professional advice to individuals (unless of course this is exactly what you are using social media for).

6. Facilitate the use of social media by modelling ethical conduct online and supporting others to do the same.

Successful online professional networking relies heavily on the 'human' element. In order to make connections with people we need to know a little about them, and this may involve sharing some personal information for example photographs or interests.

It is important though, to remember our professional boundaries and adhere to our codes and standards of practice. Whilst there are some elements of online behaviour that are clearly considered to be unprofessional, such as misrepresenting one's qualifications, using images of patients/clients/consumers or service users without consent, and inappropriately contacting patients/clients, others are more open to interpretation including showing alcohol use without intoxication and providing clinical narratives without breaking confidentiality. Be aware of any social media policies you may be expected to adhere to, and find your own comfort zone by seeking feedback on your posts and contributions from trusted peers and role models.

7. Learn how to support others to use social media ethically.

If you are a manager and feel anxious about your staff using social media then you may find the following section helpful since it offers some guidance and tips for supporting social media use whilst recognising and addressing potential risk:

- Set up a profile on relevant channels present: this is the quickest and best way to understand the benefits of social media and analyse any risks.
- Incorporate social media as a standing item on one-to-one meetings.
- Discuss relevant sections of any guidance document with the staff member.
- Encourage reflection on social media activity e.g. 'what worked well in the last month? What would you do differently next time?'
- Discuss any concerns as soon as possible in order to ensure inappropriate usage is avoided and managed swiftly.