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# Career practitioners' conceptions of social media in career services

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This article reports the outcomes of a study, undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective, of career practitioners' conceptions of social media usage in career services. Fifteen Finnish career practitioners – representing comprehensive, secondary and higher education as well as public employment services – were interviewed in focus groups. The analysis of the interview data revealed five distinct descriptive categories reflecting the career practitioners' conceptions of social media's use in career services. Social media in career services was conceived as (1) unnecessary, (2) dispensable, (3) a possibility, (4) desirable and (5) indispensable. The results indicated associations between career practitioners' conceptions and their practice. Moreover, the critical aspects identified in this study can be used to support the career practitioners' understanding of new technologies in career services.

**Keywords:** career services; career practitioners; social media; conception; phenomenography

The use of social media in career-related activities has increased dramatically in recent years, leading the career service sector to acknowledge the need to expand its understanding of new technologies and to modernise its services. Several researchers have emphasised that it is important that career practitioners gain competence and confidence in existing and emerging technologies in order to consider their usefulness and potential for clients (e.g. Bimrose, Hughes, & Barnes, 2011; Osborn, Dikel, & Sampson, 2011).

Social media is a new area for career practitioners who vary considerably in their experience in use of technology in career services. Some practitioners are not convinced of the relevance of technology in delivering career services and others do not have the skills or confidence to be able to do this effectively. However, practitioners who are experienced internet users no longer believe that technology replaces them (Vuorinen, Sampson, & Kettunen, 2011), but rather accept it as a potentially valuable tool that can assist them in doing their work (Osborn et al., 2011). A consensus has emerged in that both the practitioner and information and communications technology (ICT) have an important role to play in the design and delivery of career services (e.g. Harris-Bowlsbey & Sampson, 2001; Vuorinen, 2006; Watts, 1996).

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Existing research has investigated the role of technology (e.g. Harris-Bowlsbey & Sampson, 2001; Sampson, 2008; Vuorinen, 2006; Watts, 1996, 2002; Watts & Offer, 2006) and the potential of new technologies in career services (Bimrose et al., 2011; Hooley, Hutchinson, & Watts, 2010a; Osborn et al., 2011). There is evidence to suggest that the latest wave of technologies, especially social tools, have considerable potential for career services (Hooley et al., 2010a), but more studies are needed to support professionals in their need for models that enable them to fit together existing guidance practices with new technologies (e.g. Bimrose, Barnes, & Atwell, 2010; Osborn et al., 2011). Furthermore, training and skills development needs have been emphasised (Bimrose et al., 2010, 2011). It is also very likely that practitioners need to be trained differently in this area than for the traditional face-to-face service mode (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2013).

Successful integration of technology and social media in career services is not only dependent on the skills or technical facilities available, but also on practitioners' willingness to accept the changes that new technology may bring to service delivery. A person's understanding and experiencing of certain phenomena are intertwined with his/her capacity to act, since 'you cannot act other than in relation to the world as you experience it' (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 111).

A broader understanding of practitioners' conceptions is needed because this will have an impact on the adaptation of new technology in their practice. An extensive body of phenomenographic research has examined conceptions of and approaches to teaching and learning (e.g. Åkerlind, 2004, 2008; Kember, 1997). Indications of the association between teachers' conceptions and their practices have also been confirmed (e.g. Trigwell & Prosser, 1996; Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). However, no research has specifically analysed career practitioners' conceptions of social media use in career services.

## Aim and research question

This study sets out to examine conceptions of social media in career services among career practitioners who are experienced internet users but inexperienced in using social media in career services. The main aim is to discover and describe the qualitatively different ways in which practitioners conceptualise the target phenomenon. The particular study questions were framed as follows: (1) What are career practitioners' conceptions of social media in career services? (2) What are the critical aspects that differentiate qualitatively varying ways of understanding the phenomenon? The ultimate aim of describing career practitioners' conceptions is to provide a basis for understanding the different ways in which they think about social media, as well as its character and purpose in career services. Such a description may contribute to expanding the understanding of aspects that are seen as critical in the successful use of new technologies in career services.

## Methods

This study examined the conceptions of social media in career services using a phenomenographic approach. Phenomenographic research aims to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which people at a collective level experience or conceptualise the target phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2005b, 2012; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Pong, 2005). A central premise of phenomenography is that it has a

non-dualist ontological perspective, where the world and people are considered inseparable (Bowden, 2005; Marton, 2000). This means that conceptions or ways of experiencing are seen as relations between the person and a specific phenomenon in the world. Consequently, the different ways of conceptualising or experiencing the same thing are seen as internally related, as they represent different meanings of the same phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2003; Marton, 2000). Phenomenography also recognises that individuals may possess more than one conception of a particular phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). The result of phenomenography is the identification of categories of description in which the different ways of conceiving the phenomenon are hierarchically and logically interrelated, and hence the establishment of a typology (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). Categories of description should meet three quality criteria (Marton & Booth, 1997): each category should describe a distinctly different way of experiencing the phenomenon; a logical relationship between each category should be hierarchically represented; and there should be a limited, parsimonious number of different categories that describe variation across the sample.

### *Participants and the context of the study*

The participants in the study were 15 Finnish career practitioners (14 women, 1 man, age range 30–57 years), who were self-identified experienced internet users but novices in the use of social media for career services. In phenomenography, participant selection is a strategic effort to maximise diversity in participants' experiences to enable an inclusive view within the aims of the study (Åkerlind, 2005a). The aim was to have a wide variety of career practitioners' accounts, and emails inviting practitioners who are experienced internet users were sent to mailing lists of professional guidance bodies and training units. The participating practitioners represented the Finnish guidance community with a lifelong guidance perspective. Comprehensive, secondary and higher education, as well as public employment services and both urban and rural settings, were represented in the sample. The data for the present study were collected during 2010–2011 as part of a follow-up study of the perceptions of Finnish guidance practitioners regarding their role and the role of the internet in meeting guidance goals and delivering career guidance services (Vuorinen et al., 2011).

### *Data collection*

In this phenomenographic study, the data were collected using a focus group interview methodology. The goal of the focus group interview is to interactively collect the participants' conceptions, ideas and different viewpoints, which then feed off each other and thus generate new, potentially surprising perspectives and observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Krueger, 1997a, 1997b, 1998). Since the intention of the interviews was to encourage career practitioners to reflect and talk about social media in career services from multiple perspectives, the use of focus group discussions as the method of data collection for this study was seen as appropriate. Furthermore, this was considered suitable because phenomenographic research aims at capturing collective rather than individual accounts of people's conceptions of different phenomena.

Three focus groups, each comprising four to six career practitioners from various contexts, were carried out in 2010–2011. The focus group interviews were conducted by two researchers and took a semi-structured form. Researchers had both individual and shared responsibilities. One acted as a facilitator and was primarily concerned with directing the discussion, keeping the conversation flowing. The other managed the recordings, logistics and occasionally probed the response of a participant in more depth. For quality control, the list of questions and the roles of the facilitator and assistant were discussed prior to the focus groups being run. To obtain answers about the target phenomenon, the respondents were asked, 'What is the role of social media in internet-based career services?'. The aim was to let the interviews proceed as freely as possible. Follow-up questions such as 'Could you describe/explain this a little further?' and 'Could you give an example of this?' were used to encourage participants to elaborate on or clarify their responses. When asking follow-up questions, facilitators were careful to avoid leading the practitioners' responses. The overall duration of each focus group interview was three hours. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### *Data analysis*

A feature of the phenomenographic data analysis method is variance in practice, which includes variance in data sorting methods (Åkerlind, 2005b, 2012). One approach focuses on quotations that have been extracted from data collected (Marton, 1986), while the other concentrates on whole transcripts (Bowden, 1995, 2000b). The approach taken in this study was to begin with the transcripts as a whole, in order to establish interrelated themes and meanings, and subsequently to consider the transcript in large sections and select excerpts that exemplify variation and meaning. The use of the entire transcript, or of large sections of each transcript, had the purpose of increasing accuracy in the interpretation of answers (Åkerlind, Bowden, & Green, 2005).

The first phase of the analysis focused on identifying and describing the meanings that career practitioners gave to the social media in career services in general terms. Transcribed interviews were considered as a whole and read repeatedly in search of the underlying foci and intentions expressed in them. During these several readings, interviews were read with a focus on similarities and differences in the conceptions expressed in order to find cases of variation or agreement and thus group them accordingly. Gradually, by comparing and contrasting identified similarities and differences, a draft set of descriptive categories were developed, defined and named.

Analysis of the structural relationship between the categories, as recommended by Bowden (2005), was postponed until the overall meaning of the categories had been finalised. This second phase of an analysis focused on critical aspects of variation, that is, aspects distinguishing the varying ways of experiencing the phenomenon being studied (Åkerlind, 2005a). The focus was not on all the aspects of variation, but rather on the critical ones. The aim was to reveal one way of seeing a phenomenon to another, more complex one (Åkerlind, 2005a; Marton & Booth, 1997), where more complex understandings are indicated by an increasing breadth of awareness of different aspects of the phenomenon being investigated (Åkerlind, 2008).

To ensure that a robust analysis of the interview data was conducted, the initial analysis was done by the first author and a second opinion was then given by colleagues with whom she met several times to discuss and revise the categories and their structures to confirm that the interpretations were validly delivered from the data.

Colleagues act as devil's advocates, probing the category candidates and their critical aspects and asking for justifications from within the transcripts for the particular formulation. This group process, emphasised by Bowden (e.g. 2000a, 2005), made it less likely that analysis would stop part way. Iterative re-reading and re-drafting was repeated until saturation occurred, that is, until the re-reading failed to produce any significant change in the categories of description (Bowden & Green, 2010). The steps described above were important in ensuring the reliability of the results.

## Results

The analysis of the data revealed five distinct categories of description reflecting the career practitioners' conceptions of social media in career services (Table 1). Social

Table 1. Career practitioners' conceptions of social media in career services.

| | CATEGORIES | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DIMENSIONS OF VARIATION | unnecessary | dispensable | possibility | desirable | indispensable |
| Attitude | negative | sceptical | unsure | positive | positive/ excited |
| Role in guidance | not relevant | passing fad | potentially useful means | complementary tool | way to extend service |
| Settings | everyday setting for young people's lives | setting for creating and sustaining connections | setting for discussions | setting for reflective thought | setting for people processing on their life |
| Perception | threat | Challenge | change | reality | positive potential |
| Guidance locus | supplier driven, time and space specific | supplier driven, time specific | demand driven, time specific | citizen/user-centred, time specific | citizen/user-centred |
| Guidance paradigm | individual face to face guidance | individual guidance | individual and group guidance | individual and group (with or without practitioner) | self-help approach group (without or with practitioner) |
| Role of practitioner | expert role | advising role | supporting role | reflexive role | one resource among others on individuals life |
| Nature of interaction | practitioner → individual | practitioner → individual | practitioner ↔ individual | practitioner ↔ individual individual ↔ peers | individual → practitioner individual ↔ community members |

media in career services was conceived as (1) unnecessary, (2) dispensable, (3) a possibility, (4) desirable and (5) indispensable. The formed categories were nested hierarchies expanding from the least to most inclusive understanding. The aspects of the phenomenon that differentiate the categories are called *dimensions of variation*, comprising the critical aspects for expanding a more sophisticated level of understanding. These dimensions were named: attitude; role in guidance; settings; perception; guidance locus; guidance paradigm; role of practitioner; and nature of interaction.

Each category is described in more detail below. Excerpts from relevant interview transcripts are included to illustrate the key aspects of the categories. It is important to keep in mind that this categorisation represents the collective rather than individual conceptions of social media in career services. Thus, at an individual level some practitioners hold more than one conception of a given phenomenon.

### *Description of the categories*

*Category 1: social media in career services is unnecessary*

In the first category, social media is conceived as unnecessary in career services. The practitioners express negative attitudes towards social media in general and consider it an everyday setting for young people's lives with no importance or relevance in career services.

> It gives the impression that one has to hang out there nightly, and I wonder who would want it that way?

> I, for example, am not in a Facebook, and I have no plan to get on there. I can be met in person in my 'booth' and everywhere and that may do it.

> Students suggested that I should establish some kind of Facebook system. I responded with 'what added value would it bring to this as I see you here all the time' and so on?

Practitioners appear to perceive social media as a threat to the profession and to the practice. They fear that a shift towards social media might replace and mechanise the human interaction and thus believe that the profession might also be under threat. They perceive social media to be uncontrollable and unsafe.

> I think it [social media] is a bit scary right now, so that the control, and also relative to guidance that we do not make a shift towards that . . . somehow it has a tremendously increasing power, but it is scary if services and human encounter take place only on the internet, so it is scary.

> So one of these days, am I going to be completely dispensable?

A locus on a supplier-driven model of guidance was identified in this category. This view was expressed in statements emphasising the individual face-to-face career services mode within an institution. From this point of view, service delivery is best connected to a specific time and space. The practitioner was seen

as an expert and the individual mainly as a recipient of the information or the services.

> I preferably meet face to face and in person.

> I have made a deliberated boundary. Even though we have a new e-mail system which could be used from home, there is no way that I would want to use that from home.

> Discussion gives unambiguous answers to unambiguous questions.

*Category 2: social media in career services is dispensable*

In the second category, social media is conceived as dispensable in career services. The practitioners express a sceptical attitude towards social media and are not sure that it is anything more than just a 'passing fad'. They question its necessity and role in career services.

> So this Facebook, it might historically be kind of a short phenomenon . . . maybe it has been given excessive significance . . .

> Maybe it is a fad.

Social media appears to practitioners as a setting where individuals create and sustain connections with others. Raising awareness of the potential and relevance of social media as a new means of building connections and relationships and disseminating information to individuals was acknowledged.

> Today has forced, for instance, the educational establishments to go into Facebook, 'cause it is the meeting place where, for example, the youth can be reached today, it is commonplace for them.

> This social media is without a doubt a place where youth could be met in their own environment.

Practitioners perceive social media as a challenge. In regard to its use and potential, they indicate that social media is difficult to comprehend. They feel overwhelmed with the real-time nature of social media and are worried about the amount and quality of its content.

> It [social media] is a challenge to guidance and to organisations as a whole because we have not gained an insight into how and for what we could utilise it.

> And at my work I have had to straighten up the perceptions that circulate like fire there in social media.

A supplier-driven locus of guidance was also evident in this category, with the distinction from the previous category that guidance is no longer formally bound to a specific space, only to a specific time. Preference for individual guidance was discerned, and the practitioner was seen as an adviser, whose role is to advise and help individuals to make the right choices. The role of the individual was seen mainly as a recipient of information or advice.

> Does this promise 24/7 availability? I don't want that. I want office hours.

> ...as there is a lot out there [social media] available, so to be there to guide them somehow to the right direction there too...

*Category 3: social media in career services is a possibility*

In this third category, social media is conceived as a possibility in career services. Practitioners consider social media as a potentially useful means of communicating, but the overall value of using it has not been established in their minds. The practitioners remain unsure about social media and how to approach it professionally.

> ...we don't quite know how we would take it...

> I was, about a year ago, on this course – meanings of social media in guidance, or how to utilise it in guidance. And, oh, I have to say that, it did not open up for me how to make use of it.

> It kind of brings us new channels and possibilities to be in touch.

> It might bring a possibility to make contact with someone who would hardly come in otherwise.

Practitioners in this category regard social media mainly as a setting where people have conversations. The volume and importance of these conversations among individuals, through the means of social media tools, are growing and observed by practitioners. Thus, they see new possibilities of reaching people and initiating communication with individuals by entering into the realm of social media.

> There must be a lot of conversations that are school related, or about training and about everything that relates to education, a lot which we are not aware of.

> It could be possible to open some topics for discussion, and then in there, I think, so it could be so that everyone could participate there.

Practitioners perceive social media as a change. They indicate that social media creates a need for career practitioners to change the way they are accustomed to doing their work. They mention that they have the skills to use social media, but are reserved and hesitant when it comes to reframing their practice. Of concern is the transparent and open nature of social media.

> We have become accustomed to an old way.

> We are more like that, so it is more like a change for us.

> We have the skills to use social media, but it is somehow so difficult, awkward, and strange for us; it is not so peculiar to us.

The locus of guidance shifted in this category from supplier driven to demand driven. A new aspect was the practice of group guidance. The practitioner's role was seen as that of a supporter who provides information on options rather than

direct recommendations to individuals. The role of the individual shifted from recipient to an active participant in the guidance relationship. A two-way nature of interaction was much more evident in this category than in the previous ones.

> The career practitioner has to be quite active so that it won't happen that they chance upon information and discuss it among themselves there.

*Category 4: social media in career services is desirable*

In this fourth category, social media is conceived as desirable in career services. The practitioners express a positive attitude and interest towards social media. They consider these new channels not as a substitute but as a complement to the other ways in which they obtain information and connect to people on a daily basis.

> So if it brings the practice closer to the people, it is for sure a good thing.

> There's a feeling that one needs to start finding more out about this matter . . . I see this as a big and interesting thing.

> I can imagine that it might, it may have, there could be developed, some kind of significant career services in there and for sure some already exists.

> There are many different channels, and this [social media] is not going to substitute the face-to-face guidance; even so, as such it will complement the traditional use of the internet.

Social media appears to practitioners as a setting for reflective thought. They recognise that these platforms facilitate the growth of peer support and encourage individuals to engage in ongoing meaningful dialogues, sharing their experiences with peers. Social support that individuals gain through these peer connections is observed and valued by practitioners.

> I say that in these different social media places, the youth reflect their future and other matters like that.

> Those different opinions wave in favour of or against, but it is kind of interesting per se as you reflect your own state of affairs.

> For a student, it is peer support, and I took a look at what they talk about in there; it was school matters and such which are then away from us, so that they do help our work when they reflect their thoughts over there.

Practitioners perceive social media as part of today's reality, including the field of career services. They see it simply as another factor in societal change to be put into service. However, they also puzzle over the lines between professional and personal life that might get blurred.

> This [social media] what is new now; it is a natural process.

A locus shift in guidance from a demand-driven to a citizen/user-centred service that follows up on individuals' needs was evident in this category. The practitioner's

role was seen as assisting individuals in understanding, exploring and overcoming their difficulties. Beside the practitioner-led groups, group guidance opened up to include groups without a practitioner. Practitioners recognise the value of peers and trust that some issues can be resolved, with or without a practitioner, through online collaboration utilising social media. The emphasis shifted from the previous category, where the practitioners' need for control was more obvious. In this category, individuals are seen as active meaning-makers interacting with practitioners and peers.

> When they talk to each other and among each other there, it is kind of so that it can not be controlled, nor is that the career practitioner's place/task/job to do so.

> [There are] different kinds of guidance groups that take place in virtual worlds, and individuals reflect on their issues there among themselves but also so that the career practitioner is with them.

*Category 5: social media in career services is indispensable*

In this fifth category, social media is conceived as indispensable in career services. The practitioners express an excited attitude towards social media and consider it an increasingly important way to extend career services.

> I myself am very excited about this.

> Career services should be there, in no conditional way, but career services have to be there.

Social media is seen as a setting for people processing their life. Practitioners see possibilities in social media through combining knowledge from peers with that of other individuals who may act as a possible source of information in guidance settings.

> We as practitioners should be present there where our clients and youth process their life questions.

> And to reflect it always to one's own life situations so that if someone says something then to think whether it means the same for me or if it means something different for me.

> And then, what kind of answers peers and other individuals could bring into to discussion, so this could bring something new to the table instead of just the single career practitioner and single student, or one's own situation.

Practitioners perceive social media as having positive potential. They indicate that the use of social media might be the beginning of a new phase in career services. Practitioners express willingness and need to use social media to extend their practice, to have a presence there where individuals – their clients – are today. Practitioners do not see the need or possibility to differentiate the personal 'I' and professional 'I'.

> It feels like this might be the beginning of a new phase in career guidance.

> I would like to move in this direction with career services.

> I am interested in digging into the world of games and taking a look at how something small could be built around, for example, further studies in Second Life.

> We are becoming active players in there [social media], producing material and being part of the interaction that is going on there all the time.

A shift in the locus of guidance from individual and group guidance to self-help and self-management approaches was evident in this category. The perspective also shifted from the service deliverer and career practitioner to delivery from the user's perspective – towards career services that enable delivery as an on-demand service. Practitioners recognise that they are not only the source of information or future directions, but, if necessary, they act as a means by which individuals discover a way forward with their questions. The practitioner was seen as one resource among others on individuals' lives.

> And as long as the individual gets his or her aims and goals clarified, it is not important from which channel she or he receives the guidance services.

> Not everyone has the perseverance to wait until the next day with their question; instead, when the questions appear in their mind, they wish to ask it right away.

### *Relationship between the categories*

The categories of description were delimited from each other and organised hierarchically through dimensions of variation that emerged from the data. Due to the structural hierarchy of inclusiveness, some conceptions can be regarded as more complete and more complex than others (Åkerlind, 2005a).

The career practitioners' *attitude* to social media changed in a more positive direction across the categories of description. Concurrently, the discerned *role in guidance* expanded. In the first two categories, where social media is conceived as unnecessary and dispensable in career services, the attitude was clearly more negative than in the last three categories. In category 1 the role of social media was irrelevant or not recognised, whereas in category 2 it was seen as a passing fad. Even where that attitude remained unsure or undecided, a shift from negativity to positivity was discerned in category 3, where social media is conceived as a possibility, since the potential usefulness of social media was articulated. In category 4, where social media is conceived as desirable, a clearly positive attitude and shift from a potentially useful role towards the actual use of social media was embraced. In the most complex category, where social media is conceived as indispensable, the discerned role of social media moved from a tool to a way to extend career services.

Social media *settings* appeared and were characterised differently in all categories. In essence, the difference between category 1 and the other categories was that social media was simply seen as a setting for young people's lives, whereas participation across age groups was presented in more complex categories. In categories 2 and 3, where social media is seen as dispensable and as a possibility, social media appeared as a social space in which individuals create and sustain connections (category 2) and interact (category 3). A turning point was category 4, where social media is conceived as desirable, as it marked a shift from a social space to a setting where individuals support each other and engage in reflective thought. A deepening engagement, a setting for people processing their life, was expressed in the most complex category.

Shifts in *perceptions* of social media, from seeing it as a threat to having positive potential, were distinguishable across the categories. Social media was perceived most negatively in the first two categories, where social media is viewed as unnecessary and

dispensable as well as being perceived as a threat (category 1) and a challenge (category 2). The most positive perception is in category 5, where social media is conceived as indispensable and as having positive potential. In categories that are in between, practitioners had a more neutral stance, perceiving it as a change (category 3) and a reality (category 4).

Shifts in *guidance locus* were the transitions from a supplier-driven service, formally bounded in time and space, to a citizen/user-centred service that is ubiquitous. The most distinctive difference in category 1, in relation to the other categories, was the notion that guidance was space specific, attached to the physical space. Guidance was discerned as time specific in all except the most complex category. Shifts from supplier-driven to demand-driven guidance were discerned in category 3, where social media is conceived as a possibility. In the most complex categories, where social media is conceived as desirable and indispensable, the locus shifted from structures and institutions to a citizen/user-centred approach.

In terms of *guidance paradigms*, the transition across the categories was from face-to-face guidance to self-help. An expressed preference for individual face-to-face delivery differentiated category 1, where social media is conceived as unnecessary, from other categories where enhancements to other methods of one-to-one interaction were discerned. The practice of group guidance appeared in category 3, where social media is conceived as a possibility. Group guidance opened up in the most complex categories to include groups without a practitioner. A significant shift where self-help took precedence over directed delivery by professionals was discerned in category 5, where social media is conceived as indispensable.

The *role of practitioner* varied across categories. In the least complex categories the practitioner was seen as an expert (category 1) and as an adviser (category 2). A turning point was in category 3, where social media is conceived as a possibility, as this marked a change from a directive expert role to a more supportive role based on dialogue with individuals. Not only a supportive but also a reflexive role with individuals was discerned in category 4, where social media is conceived as desirable. Greater emphasis was also placed on the individuals as active agents within the guidance process. In the most complex category, practitioners perceived themselves as one resource among others, available in need, during an individual's lifelong journey of independent career management.

Shifts across the categories regarding the *nature of interaction* moved from practitioner-led interaction to individual-led interactions. In the least complex categories, practitioner-led one-way interaction that positioned the client as a passive recipient was dominant. A turning point was again found in category 3, where social media is conceived as a possibility, as this marked a change from one-way transmission to two-way interaction. In the most complex categories, interaction shifted from point-to-point two-way interaction to many-to-many group interaction and collaboration, with or without a practitioner. In category 5, where social media is conceived as indispensable, individuals were seen to select and regulate the interactions.

## Discussion

This study revealed career practitioners' conceptions of social media in career services in five distinct categories of description that ranged from unnecessary to indispensable. Eight dimensions of variation were identified: attitude; role in

guidance; settings; perception; guidance locus; guidance paradigm; role of practitioner; and nature of interaction.

The findings showed that the conceptions were interrelated with practice approaches. The negative conceptions of social media in career services were closely linked to a directive approach in practice. A similar relationship seemed to hold between the clearly positive conceptions and the citizen/user-centred, holistic approach in practice. One can also see the relation of conceptions of social media in career services and the move from education and training to learning that changes the focus from structures and institutions to the development of individual lifelong career management skills (Watts, Sultana, & McCarthy, 2010).

As mentioned, it is possible to draw a dividing line between career practitioners' conceptions that are clearly negative and those that are clearly positive. This confirms Watts' (1996) prediction that technology in career services could result in either growing convergence or divergence between the two. The first dividing line is between conceptions 2 and 3, when the view of social media shifts from unnecessary and dispensable to a possibility. It is at this point that the potential usefulness of social media in career services was articulated, that the practitioner's role moved from directive to supportive, that the practice of group guidance was first mentioned and that a shift from supplier-driven to demand-driven guidance was discerned. In addition, in crossing this dividing line, one-way transmission shifted to two-way interaction.

Another dividing line lies between conceptions 3 and 4, where the ways of seeing social media in career services changed from possible to desirable. Here, the use of social media was embraced, and emphasis was placed on a customer-centred holistic approach that allows greater levels of self-help and that values the social support that individuals gain through their peers. With respect to this dividing line, one can see similarities with Watts' (2002) notion of moving towards a more open professional model. In addition, social media acts as an agent of change in relation to career services provision as a whole (see Watts, 1996).

The findings show that conceptions of social media in career services appear to be interrelated with practice approach. The findings support the results of other studies (e.g. Hooley, Hutchinson, & Watts, 2010b) addressing the need to re-evaluate some professional paradigms in the light of the opportunities offered by new technologies. Career practitioners need to remodel their practices and concepts of quality to take into account the needs not only of those clients who come through the door, but also of all citizens who need career services (Sampson, Dozier, & Colvin, 2011).

There are similarities between the attitudes expressed by career practitioners in this study and those described by Harris-Bowlsbey and Sampson (2001) concerning the initial use of computers in guidance in the 1970s, namely that computers were impersonal and therefore inappropriate in counselling. The findings also accord with Watts' (1986) earlier observation, which showed that ICT in guidance can be seen as having one of three roles: a tool, an alternative or an agent of change. Here, it should be noted that, as in the present study, career practitioners' attitude to social media changed in a more positive direction. The discerned role of social media concurrently expanded from a tool to a way to extend career services.

The results of this study show that if the career field is to develop career practitioners' understandings of technology and social media in a more complex direction, it has to take into consideration not only their practical knowledge, but

also their prevailing personal conceptions. This is of importance when considering the overall adoption and integration of new technologies in the careers field. In this sense, the findings of this study are relevant to the development of career practitioner training. We would argue that it is important to develop training and support for the expansion of career practitioners' understanding of new technologies using the critical aspects that were identified in this study.

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