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Career practitioners' conceptions of ethical practice in social networking

By Jaana Kettunen

This article offers a summary of an article published in the International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance.

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A growing number of career practitioners and career centres are expanding their services to individuals and community members by integrating social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn in their professional practice. Social networks are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; to list other users with whom they share a connection; and to view and traverse their own connections and those of others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This relationship and community building emphasis in social networking encourages two-way communication, in which people share information about themselves, view information about others, and store information for future reference. For those seeking career assistance, social networking is seen as an efficient tool that provides convenient access and builds community and social support among individuals with similar interests and needs. Employers are also very active on social media and social networking platforms.

A number of studies have explored the ethical issues around the use of existing and emerging technologies in career practice (see for example Sampson & Makela, 2014), and professional associations have begun to develop ethical guidelines in this regard. As one example, in an update to its ethical guidelines, the International Association for Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) states that 'members are responsible for monitoring and maintaining their professional competencies and for ensuring that they are able to provide competent services to diverse clientele effectively using contemporary assessment

processes, theories, intervention techniques, and technology and social media resources' (IAEVG, 2017, p. 6).

As social media and social networking continue to gain in popularity and influence, career professionals must reflect critically on the associated ethical issues. While many of these issues are well known, practitioners are not always sure how best to deal with them, and a more nuanced understanding is needed. This research illuminates practitioners' varying understandings of ethical practice in the context of social networking in career services. To that end, 24 career practitioners with some experience of using social networking in their professional work were interviewed in focus groups at the global conference of the National Career Development Association (NCDA). Phenomenographic analysis identified four categories showing that ethical practice in social networking in career services was conceived stemming from: 1) an information orientation, 2) a networking orientation, 3) an educational orientation, and 4) a development orientation.

From information orientation to collaborative orientation

A first category related to ethical practice in social networking from an information perspective. In this category, practitioners' use of social networking was viewed as experimental, seeking to explore the phenomenon, its utility and its functionality in the context of career services. Practitioners also expressed ethical concerns about the *accuracy and validity* of information, especially when presented and shared online. They employed *private* social networking strategies and used social networking in a closed way.

A second category of ethical practice in social networking was conceived from a networking perspective. Practitioners in this category used social networking *occasionally* rather than on a regular basis and emphasized the positive *potential* of social networking for professional practice in general. Practitioners expressed ethical concerns about the blurring of *professional boundaries* by social networking. For that reason, they adopted a *selective* social networking strategy, connecting thoughtfully and using social networking in a semi-open way.

A third perspective on ethical practice in social networking focused on educational issues. Practitioners highlight the importance of supporting and educating individuals; one aspect of this is helping clients to make effective use of social networking for career development. These practitioners used social networking technologies in their *daily practice* and perceived social networking as highly *useful*. Practitioners' concerns extended beyond professional boundaries to issues of *privacy* and *confidentiality*. These practitioners adopted a *targeted* social media strategy, connecting for work purposes and using social networking in a semi-open way.

Finally, ethical practice in social networking was conceived in terms of collaboration issues and a systemic focus. Practitioners in this category no longer viewed social networking as an alternative tool but as a workspace that is itself an *integral* part of *career services* and an effective means of enhancing their direct and indirect *influence*. Here, practitioners' ethical concerns shifted from issues of privacy and confidentiality to *professional proficiency* in social networking. Practitioners highlighted the importance of ensuring that work-related activities in open social media settings were seen as professional, and they adopted an *open* social networking strategy in seeking to expand their network.

Social networking competency in career guidance

This study illuminates practitioners' varying understandings of the ethical use of social networking in career services. The findings serve to clarify the different perspectives that inform career professionals' reasoning regarding ethical concerns and potential strategies for using social networking. By making career practitioners aware of these qualitatively different conceptions of ethical practice, the present findings promote individual reflection on one's own practice, highlighting issues that one may have previously avoided or failed to notice.

As social media and social networking skills and competencies are often viewed as secondary concerns, training remains poorly developed. There is, then, an urgent need to update both pre-service and in-service training curricula to take

account of the critical issues identified in this study if career practitioners are to adjust successfully to the paradigm shift from *delivering* career services to co-careering in the emerging context of social media (see for example Kettunen, 2017). With appropriate training, career practitioners can become more aware of their current ideas about ethical practice in social networking and so envision ways of moving forward.

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