

Guidance for students on the use of social networking and electronic devices – health, social care or therapy related awards

Introduction

Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter can all be great fun and they are becoming ever increasingly popular. Computers, laptops, mobile camera phones, iPods and various types of technology and electronic devices allow us instant and convenient access to the Internet and each other. Whilst communicating with the Online world can be enthralling; you must appreciate that it can also have its drawbacks.

It may seem difficult to believe but as a student on a professional award it is possible to do all of the following with just one click:

- disgrace yourself
- ruin your reputation
- upset your family, friends and colleagues
- lose your job
- break the law
- get sued
- contravene professional standards of conduct
- discredit the university
- compromise your fitness to practise
- destroy your career aspirations
- breach the policies of organisations where you gain work experience
- damage the reputation of the profession and public trust and confidence
- be discontinued from your studies
- jeopardise your future

In the mass media you can find numerous instances of people's indiscretions relating to the inappropriate use of social networking sites, the consequences of which for some have been very serious and even catastrophic. This has become an important issue for all individuals and levels of society, particularly employers, businesses, professions and organisations. Unfortunately, social networking also has a sinister side and there are examples of stalking, identity and data theft, racial hatred and bullying and harassment.

This guidance is provided to help prevent you from becoming a casualty of the new technologies. You are strongly advised to take note of the principles given below.

Personal privacy and safety

Social networking sites make it very easy for people to share information but likewise it makes it very easy for people to seek information as well. Most sites allow you to customise your 'privacy settings' therefore you should pay close attention to the permissions you set and who you allow to view your user profile.

Make sure that you fully understand how the site works before you begin writing about yourself. On most sites, users have to give permission before they can connect with other users or 'friends', however this should not be taken for granted because whilst social networking sites may share common principles they do not all operate in the same way. Some sites have 'public spaces' so thousands of strangers could view your information and anything that you post and even copy or misuse it. Once posted it can be difficult to fully retrieve or delete information.

Personal information

It is unwise to reveal too much about yourself. You must safeguard your personal information otherwise you could put your privacy and safety at risk. People with ill intent can be very clever at finding information. It is possible to find someone through shrewd searching and deduction. Details such as the town where you live, university you attend, date of birth, interests, likes, dislikes, habits, places you work or meet with friends etc can all assist if someone wants to find you, stalk you, steal your identity or access your bank account.

Private / intimate details

The general public invest a great deal of trust, confidence and respect in people in professional roles. For this reason, as a student on a professional award your behaviour and conduct both during your programme and in your personal life may impact upon your studies. With this in mind you need to be very careful about the appropriateness of the information you post and the style in which you write about yourself. It is not beyond the realms of possibility for a past or current patient or service user to try looking you up.

Over recent years there has been a growing trend for people to expose very intimate aspects of their lives in a variety of public forums such as television, newspapers and magazines and web sites such as YouTube. In fact, the more shocking or salacious a story is, the greater the interest it seems to evoke. The same thing is happening with social networking in that people are publicly disclosing a great deal of private information about themselves and activities in their lives, and at times the limits of common decency are exceeded.

Explicit photographs and discussions, recounts of sexual liaisons and drunken behaviour are all examples of conduct that could cause people to question whether that person is the right type for their chosen profession. It is not being suggested that you cannot have any fun; you just have to get the balance right between your personal and professional affairs. A lapse of judgement or moment of impulse could have far reaching consequences for yourself as well as others close to you. Most people are familiar with the phrase 'too much information'.

General advice

Language

Whether we like it or not we are constantly being judged, rightly or wrongly by others. The language, topics and style of writing you use on a social networking site can be highly influential in how others judge you and make assumptions about you. Coarse language, slang or text speak can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, people getting the wrong impression and people taking offence. In a private context you can express yourself in any way you like, but if your communications are to be viewed publicly then you are strongly advised to adopt Standard English (or first language conventions) and only use accepted abbreviations.

Legal issues – rights and responsibilities

All individuals are afforded protection in one form or another and very importantly this includes legal protection. This means that whereas you have a right to legal protection you also have the responsibility to ensure that you do not contravene the rights of others. In health and social care this especially relates to the patients or service users that you come into contact with as part of your studies as well as fellow students and staff of the university, hospital trusts and placement areas.

The right to privacy is enshrined in the Human Rights Act (1998) and there are other laws relating to data protection, confidentiality and defamation. It can be very easy to inadvertently break the law. However, the consequences for others may be harmful and such individuals would be within their rights to pursue a civil law suit against you and expect compensation. That is in addition to any other sanctions that you could face.

Professional issues

It is human nature for individuals to prefer gory details, interesting stories or unusual angles. Alfred Hitchcock famously said 'What is drama but life with the dull bits cut out?' In the course of your studies it is highly likely that you will experience aspects of life that many people will never see or be involved with.

The temptation therefore to share such experiences with other students and people outside your professional sphere can be very strong. Another element is dark humour which contrasts the morbid or unpleasant with the comical. It is common amongst health and social care professionals and can be viewed as a way of coping with the very difficult things that can occur. Humour is unique to each person as well as being culturally and contextually bound. However, what some people may consider to be humorous, others may find disgusting and offensive. It is highly inappropriate and unprofessional as well as unwise for you to post details of your course experiences on a social networking site.

If you experience any problems, need advice or wish to make comment / provide feedback about your course, or complain about anything relating to the university, hospital trust or placement, there are policies and processes in place for you to do so either within the university or our partner organisations. It is imperative that you follow the appropriate procedure. You could be subject to disciplinary procedures if you post disparaging comments about anyone or anything, or bring the university into disrepute. Similarly, if you feel that you are being harassed, bullied or defamed you should approach your personal tutor or the university student support services for help.

Patients and service users

All patients or service users have a fundamental right for all information about them to be kept confidential and safe. Disclosure is only justified on a need to know basis, or to protect someone from harm. You should never post any information or comments about patients or service users on a social networking site either privately or publicly.

Professional boundaries

It is vital that you maintain professional relationships with the patients and service users with whom you come into contact during your studies. You may find that you get on really well with some of them, but be mindful that it is not part of a normal social environment. There are issues of power and vulnerability between professionals and patients and service users. You must therefore uphold clear boundaries and not overstep them. You should not invite any of them to become part of your social networking circle. Likewise, it is not appropriate to accept an invitation from any of them either. If you find that you might have inadvertently put yourself in a difficult position you should discuss it with your personal tutor, mentor or the university support services.

Professional boundaries also apply to the staff you have contact with during your studies either from the university or placements. Whilst social networking can play an important role in university life through the provision of groups, societies and services, on an individual level it can be problematic, especially if there is a conflict of interest. Lecturers and mentors for example who make a professional judgement on your work or performance in placements are obliged

to do so objectively. This is not to say that you cannot or should not have contact with members of staff through a social networking site, it is important to ensure that no one's position or standing is compromised. Please be aware that university computers should not be used or monopolised for recreational activities.

Electronic devices

A large number of individuals have misused camera phones and/or other electronic devices and posted inappropriate photographs and/or comments on social networking sites relating to their professional lives as well as sometimes their private lives. Photography in hospitals and other private places is usually banned or must adhere to strict regulation and requires permission for use. The use of mobile phones by individuals must not interfere with the work being undertaken and full attention to tasks must be observed at all times. These types of incidents are understandably being taken very seriously because of the destructive and far reaching consequences that can arise from them. Individuals have thus been sacked, discontinued from their programme of study or been subject to disciplinary action.

Guidelines

There are some basic rules to follow to avoid being caught up in any kind of controversy whether it be with your family and friends or in an official capacity as a student on a professional award.

In relation to using social networking site(s) and/or electronic devices you should NEVER:

- Take photographs or videos of anyone or anything whilst in private places without proper authority and/or consent - this relates specifically to University premises, hospitals or placements
- Post photographs or videos on a social networking site of anyone or anything taken in private places without proper authority and/or consent - this relates specifically to University premises, hospitals or placements
- Post any photographs or videos of other people without them knowing about it and/or giving their permission,
- Make critical comments or complaints of any kind about your friends, peers, staff, patients, the university etc,
- Post any personal information about yourself that can be viewed publicly and/or which could put you at risk,

- Post any information about yourself that may call into question your good character,
- Use language that could be considered as being persecutive, abusive, racist, provocative or offensive, or use profanity, swear words or coarse language,
- Discuss patients, service users or staff no matter how trivial – details, vague terms or innuendo can all be enough for an individual to be identified,
- Discuss your course experiences that involve patients or service users,
- Post photographs of yourself, fellow students or colleagues in uniform and/or in the workplace,
- Post photographs of yourself that could compromise your position or standing as a student on a professional award,
- Engage in any activities that would demonstrate behaviour, attitudes and values that are incompatible with your chosen profession,
- Give your password to another person,
- Invite patients or service users join your social network.
- Write or present views on behalf of the University or your professional body,
- Use a social networking site to publish material which infringes copyright law
- Publish, forward or copy to other people the text of messages from individuals containing personal or confidential information without their prior express consent

Summary

Social networking is becoming ever more popular. It is enjoyed by many people and our lives have been transformed with the advent of technology and the availability of electronic devices. The aim of this guidance is not to spoil your enjoyment or to stifle free speech, but to help you use the technology safely, responsibly, appropriately and respectfully.

You should contact your personal tutor or student support services if you need any help or advice regarding any of the above.