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UTILISATION OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY:
COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Dijital Teknolojiden Yararlanma: Sosyal Hizmet Uzmanları İin İř Birlięi Fırsatları

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ABSTRACT

Today, digital technologies affect every aspect of our lives and transform the way we work, communicate, and collaborate. The field of social work can't avoid this change process. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the use of digital technology tools in the fields of expert-client relationships, social work education, communication, and cooperation between colleagues and institutions is mandatory in the social work profession. This study examines the use of digital technologies in social work through remote collaboration and communication, cloud-based document management, online collaboration platforms, data analysis and visualization, social media, and online communities. In the rapidly changing world order, professional integration of digital technology tools should be made a part of the process in a fast but effective way. In this process, social workers have both personal and professional reservations about using digital technology tools that are not in widespread use. Social workers have doubts about the adequacy of personal competencies in the use of digital tools, as well as the problems experienced by clients in accessing technology-based tools, the size of the relationship to be established with the client in the use of these tools, and ethical concerns. This study aims to emphasize the importance of the contributions of developing digital technology for social workers for themselves, their profession, and their clients in practice, and to discuss the necessity of adapting the ways of working, communicating, and collaborating in the context of opportunities and risks.

Keywords: Digital technology, social work, collaboration

ÖZET

Günümüzde dijital teknolojiler yaşamımızın her alanına etki etmekte, çalışma, iletişim ve iş birliği biçimlerimizi dönüştürmektedir. Sosyal hizmet alanının da bu değişim sürecinden kaçınması mümkün değildir. Özellikle COVID-19 salgını sosyal hizmet mesleğinde de uzman müracaatçı ilişkisi, sosyal hizmet eğitimi, meslektaşlar ve kurumlar arası iletişim ve işbirliği alanlarında dijital teknoloji araçlarının kullanımının zorunlu olduğunu göstermiştir. Bu çalışmada dijital teknolojilerin sosyal hizmet alanında kullanımı, uzaktan işbirliği ve iletişim, bulut tabanlı belge yönetimi, çevrimiçi işbirliği platformları, veri analizi ve görselleştirme, sosyal medya ve çevrimiçi topluluklar üzerinden incelenmiştir. Hızla değişen dünya düzeninde dijital teknoloji araçlarına yönelik mesleki entegrasyon da hızlı ancak etkin bir şekilde sürecin bir parçası haline getirilmesi gerekmektedir. Bu süreçte sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının çok da yaygın kullanımda olmadıkları dijital teknoloji araçlarını kullanmada hem kişisel hem de mesleki çekinceleri de söz konusu olmuştur. Sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının dijital araçların kullanımını konusunda kişisel yetkinliklerin yeterliliği konusunda şüpheleri olmasının yanı sıra müracaatçıların teknoloji tabanlı araçlara erişimde yaşadıkları sorunlar, bu araçların kullanımında müracaatçı ile kurulacak ilişkinin boyutu ve etik kaygıları da mevcuttur. Bu çalışma, sosyal hizmet uzmanları için gelişen dijital teknolojinin uygulamada kendilerine, mesleklerine ve müracaatçılarına sağlayacağı katkıların önemini vurgulamayı ve çalışma, iletişim kurma ve işbirliği yapma biçimlerini fırsatlar ve riskler bağlamında uyarılmanın gerekliliğini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital teknoloji, sosyal hizmet, iş birliği

INTRODUCTION

Today, digital technologies have impacted every aspect of our lives and transformed how we work, communicate, and collaborate. The field of social work can't avoid this process of change. Social work's adoption of technology has been delayed due to limited resources, ethical and legal concerns, lack of training, and the fact that social work has historically been based on face-to-face communication, but despite this, technology integration continues (Berzin vd., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has made the use of digital technology tools mandatory in the relationship between social service professionals and applicants.

With the spread of digitalization, the transformation in the field of social services has resulted in a new area of specialization within the framework of "e-social work" (Peláez ve Marcuello-Servós, 2018). With the emergence of technologies such as computers, smartphones, and tablets, the internet, cloud computing systems, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, social media, and digital cameras, social workers now have unprecedented opportunities to enhance collaborative efforts, streamline processes, and improve outcomes for their clients. This study highlights that digital technologies can revolutionize collaboration in social services and empower professionals to address societal challenges more effectively. It is argued that new digital tools complement face-to-face meetings, enhancing the therapeutic process by providing increased accessibility and flexibility for both social service professionals and applicants (Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino, 2023). Digital technologies have elevated the quality of professionals' core responsibilities regarding applicants, encompassing the collection, recording, and reporting of maximum information. This includes the adept management of applicants' financial transactions.

Consequently, digital technologies have evolved into effective tools for connecting applicants with the necessary resources (Karasoy and Yıldırım, 2023). Digital technologies employed in social work

practices offer advantages in alleviating potential workload intensities within social service institutions. They contribute to lightening the workload of professionals, enabling more efficient resource utilization to reach a broader audience, enhancing the accessibility of services, and facilitating close monitoring of applicants (Öngen, 2014). Using digital tools and online platforms has been shown to have many benefits, including providing services to a wider population and making social work more accessible and available (Afrouz and Lucas, 2023).

However, it should not be ignored that there are concerns about digital technologies. Social workers are hesitant to be a part of the process. For example, in a study conducted with social service professionals in Sweden, participants indicated that they had increased the use of digital tools in their interactions with applicants and had a more positive attitude towards their use. However, it was found that they also harbored concerns that the use of digital tools could potentially harm the relationship established with the applicants. It has also been determined that the stress level of social workers using these tools is high (Nordesjö and Scaramuzzino, 2023). Chan (2016) found that there was some uncertainty about the widespread use of technology in social work practices, including protection of professional boundaries and privacy concerns.

Technical problems arising from the information systems used by professional staff, infrastructural problems related to the computers in the organization, insufficient in-service training to use information technologies, and the fact that information technologies are not positioned in a way that all professional staff can easily access can increase the workload of professional staff. At the same time, it has been observed that the majority of professionals do not think that the data and statistics collected through information systems are reliable (Öngen, 2014).

This study emphasizes that for social workers, digital technology can contribute to their relationships with colleagues, supervision needs, professional development, and communication with clients. At the same time, it discusses the current situation of adaptation to digital processes in the context of opportunities and risks created by this process.

USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL WORK

With the increase in social media and technology-based communication, social workers' boundaries may shift as they attempt to create support networks, develop external support systems, and bring together multiple avenues of support. Professionals' activities now extend beyond the office or designated therapeutic environment. At the same time, social work roles may also change because access to more readily available information may lead practitioners to a role that gathers and legitimizes information sources. Immediate response to the crisis can be provided with artificial intelligence, mobile applications, and even robot technology. Applicants can benefit from integrating artificial intelligence into phone interviews. By analyzing incoming phone calls in real-time using algorithms, optimal response patterns can be determined, client satisfaction can be increased, and the match

between applicants and specialists can be improved. In addition, newly developing forms of communication enable the sending and receiving of texts between the client and the specialist, being accessible regardless of time and place, and making it easier to work with clients who have multiple problems. Thus, technology can also assist in more collaborative therapeutic problem-solving for both the specialist and the client by providing improved participation in prevention and intervention efforts (Berzin et al., 2015).

In this section, information about the use of digital technologies in social work is given under the headings “remote collaboration and communication”, “cloud-based document management”, “online collaboration platforms”, “data analysis and visualization”, and “social media and online communities”.

Remote Collaboration and Communication

Information communication technologies are factors that facilitate information sharing and interprofessional communication (Dellor et al., 2015; Peckover et al., 2008). In this context, the remote collaboration and communication capacity of digital technology now enables social workers to connect with colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders regardless of geographical restrictions (Harris, 2021; Chan, 2016). Video conferencing tools such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, which are among the most popular applications of recent times that enable remote connection, also enable face-to-face interaction, thus strengthening people’s connections and eliminating the need to be in a physical environment. This flexibility effectively minimizes delays and enhances efficiency by fostering more frequent and targeted collaboration.

Many studies are showing that the use of technology provides accessibility to a wider population in social work practice (Menon and Rubin, 2011; Mishna et al., 2015; Chan, 2016; Byrne et al., 2019; Owen, 2020; Harris, 2021).

Digital tools provide the opportunity to maintain relationships beyond the physical space, but this also creates pressure for social workers to be available 24/7 (Mishna et al., 2012; Mishna et al., 2019; Ramsey ve Montgomery, 2014; Stanfield and Beddoe, 2016).

Reasons such as not being together physically, discussing the effectiveness of non-verbal communication channels, and interrupting the naturally developing communication channels in communication with the client are also seen as reasons for reservations about technological communication (Menon ve Rubin, 2011; Mishna ve ark., 2012; Tranca, 2021).

Technology has provided different ways of communication with clients (Mishna et al., 2015), and the level of accessibility has been made more effective with online visits (Owen, 2020). Technology-based communication has transformed the relationship between interlocutors and social workers from a distinctive one to a collaborative and dialogue-based one. (Chan, 2016; Chan and Holosko, 2017). Chan and Holosko (2017) found that compared to outreach in physical settings, online outreach has

shown that interactions are more visible and involve closeness, but also involve a process that implies loss of privacy and changes in professional identity.

Cloud-Based Document Management

Physical document filing systems need to be included. Digital technology has given rise to cloud-based document management solutions that offer secure storage, easy access, and real-time collaboration on applicant records, progress reports, and other important documents. Platforms such as Google Drive, Dropbox, or Microsoft OneDrive allow social workers to share, edit, and update files in real time, ensuring that everyone involved is working with the most up-to-date information. This streamlined process saves time, minimizes errors, and improves collaboration between team members.

Harris (2021) and Mishna et al. (2015) stated social workers can record their meetings and conversations with clients and reflect on them later. There is research showing that incorporating digital technologies into social work practices in accessing online databases, connecting with colleagues, and sharing information helps the process (Brownlee et al., 2010; Chan and Holosko, 2017; Sitter and Curnew, 2016).

Online Collaboration Platforms

While online collaboration platforms are a fundamental element in the use of digital technologies, there are also ones specifically offered to social workers. These platforms offer a centralized space where professionals can collaborate, share resources, exchange ideas, and seek guidance from colleagues. Users can create discussion forums, ask questions, and become part of a vibrant community of social workers by sharing best practices. Examples of such platforms include “Social Work Helper,” “Social Work Toolbox,” and various social work groups on professional networking platforms such as “LinkedIn.”

In a study, social service professionals identified mobile phones as the most suitable and acceptable tools for remote communication and collaboration, as well as learning media, audio and video data storage (YouTube), conference and chat software (MS Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, Facebook Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, Board Connect, Telegram), social networks (Facebook, Messenger), technical tools (smartphone, computer, Internet connection) (Gudžinskienė and Mačiu Maikienė, 2022).

Digital professional co-operation networks (PCNs) are based on the application of well-established professional learning networks for learning and knowledge management in the field of teacher training. These networks are expanding the use of digital opportunities to develop professional relationships, cooperate, broaden their cooperation, and create formal and informal opportunities. For example, a researcher can connect and communicate with social service practitioners and researchers

from other disciplines to get feedback on his findings, while using social media platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn to share his research findings. Similarly, a practitioner can use their PCNs to extend their knowledge of intervention options for a researcher and other practisers to access the network. (Sage, etc. al., 2021).

Data Analysis and Visualisation

Digital technology also presents an innovative approach to data collection and analysis in social work, offering valuable insights into client needs, program effectiveness, and social trends. Advanced analytical tools enable social workers to make data-driven decisions, identify patterns in social problems, and more accurately predict outcomes. Visualization tools such as charts, graphs, and dashboards facilitate communication and collaboration between teams by helping to transform complex data into easily understandable formats. This information equips social workers to develop evidence-based strategies and interventions.

Data science supports data-based decisions to predict social problems. This can be both a limitation and an opportunity, depending on the context and needs of users and professionals, because the causes of social problems are not understood. Data science is an innovative approach to information gathering and generation. By using data science and other techniques such as big data, machine learning, visualization, and data mining, social workers will be able to achieve more effective results on complex social issues. This method will also save time and resources as it will provide real-time data collection and accurate analysis. Social workers, especially in managerial positions, can play an intermediary role in establishing deeper cooperation between organizations, consumers, and clients by conceptualizing data as a product (Cariceo et al., 2018). For example, in a study conducted in Sweden, an application and a web-based tool called “OmMej” designed to help organizations working in the childcare sector was implemented. Thanks to this tool, it was found that more effective results were obtained in social service practices with the active participation of families and children (Russo et al., 2022).

Social Media and Online Communities

Social media platforms offer important opportunities for social workers to engage with communities, raise awareness about social issues, and share resources. Using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, they can collaborate with colleagues, advocate for change, and connect with individuals in need of support. Online communities dedicated to specific topics or populations can serve as virtual meeting spaces for collaboration, information sharing, and mutual support.

In the field of social work, using the Internet as a platform for connecting with peers and colleagues is seen as a model for peer group supervision. For example, a study found that social workers are increasingly using Facebook to communicate about a variety of issues such as professional peer support, informal records, emotional support, and personal social connections (Gandy-Guedes et al. 2016).

The social networked form of practice has great potential to be accepted and developed among leading social workers (Chan and Holosko, 2016). Social media has been found to enable certain outsourcing practices in the conversation, such as initial search, first discoveries, ice-breaking, and networking. Traditional communication activities are often limited by geographic boundaries such as neighborhoods, communities, or organizations. Thanks to technological developments, it has now become possible to develop external link models based on social networks (Chan and Holosko, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Digital technology has unlocked enormous potential for collaboration among social workers, transforming how they communicate, share information, and address social challenges. Remote collaboration tools, cloud-based document management, online platforms, data analytics, and social media have become invaluable assets in professional toolkits. As the field of social work continues to evolve, professionals must embrace these digital tools and explore innovative ways to harness their power. By doing so, social workers can maximize their impact, improve client outcomes, and collectively work towards creating a more just and inclusive society. A collaborative process design should be planned between the social worker and the client, explaining the purposes, possibilities, and content of digital tools.

Some clinical social work professionals provide counseling services to individuals they have never met in person, communicating with them solely through video, email, chat room messages, text messages, and online avatars. Many social work professionals supervise their work without the opportunity for face-to-face meetings with certain supervisors. The remaining social work experts use technology to support in-person communication (Reamer, 2018).

One of the concerns of experts regarding the use of technology in social work intervention is ethical considerations. In recent years, significant changes in the ways social work professionals utilize technology have underscored the necessity for the development of new ethical standards within the profession. Some social work professionals express concerns that remote counseling options undermine the meaning of therapeutic relationships and alliances in clinical social work. They argue that such practices jeopardize social work professionals' abilities to adhere to fundamental ethical values and standards, such as informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, professional boundaries, competent practice, and service termination. These concerns highlight the potential risk of overlooking crucial clinical cues (Reamer, 2018).

Failure to adapt to changing social processes is a risk to societies. Therefore, the integration of technology and the social service profession should be carried out by monitoring ethical concerns and certain technology-based risk factors (possible technology failures, data security and governance, legal issues, etc.).

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