



ACWA
AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY
WORKERS ASSOCIATION

Professional Practice Series



Professional and ethical use of personal social media accounts

If community work and community development are all about engagement and networking then surely social media was invented for community workers. Whether its Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn most of us now have at least one personal social media account. For community workers, particularly those in direct practice, this raises some dilemmas and ethical issues as professional responsibilities come into play. Here's our guide to managing your personal accounts, keeping in mind professional practice.

Understand your organisation's social media policy

If you are employed in the sector your organisation should have a clear social media policy. This will outline the do's and don'ts you are expected to follow. If your employer does not have a specific social media policy your contract may outline relevant requirements, for example, when, if ever, you are allowed to make statements on behalf of your employer.

Manage your account settings

Most sites allow a range of privacy settings and it's a good idea to familiarise yourself with these. Depending on your work having a public account may not be advisable, by making your account private you are in control of who can view your details and posts. If your account is public you can still control other elements of your privacy, such as not 'checking in' at locations or listing an email address, rather than your mobile number.

Don't overshare - your clients' privacy still applies

Social media allows us to share our lives and naturally recounting stories from our work day is part of this. However, it is important to keep in mind that your clients' right to privacy still applies and identifying or personal information should not be posted.

In the same vein, do not seek out your clients' accounts; tempting as it may be to do a quick search for a client's posts on Facebook or for their work history on LinkedIn this is an unacceptable breach of privacy.

Maintain professional boundaries and decline an inappropriate 'Friend' request

Protecting appropriate boundaries is a key element of ethical community work practice. If a client sends you a friend request on social media, take the risk management approach and decline the request. A request on social media may indicate that your client is unclear of professional boundaries and you should take this opportunity to remind them.

Remember: you are accountable for what you post

Social media accounts can be a fantastic way of connecting, sharing and procrastinating but always remember: it's a small world. You never know who may end up seeing your posts and if you participate in unethical behaviour or breach organisational standards of behaviour online, your employer can still hold you to account.

If you or your colleagues aren't already using social media to support your work, here are some ideas.

Use Twitter to:

- Keep up-to-date with what policy makers and leaders in your field are saying
- Put your organisation's views and policy positions out there quickly
- Contribute to debates on issues that are important to you and your organisation
- Engage with people who are following a particular issue by talking about and hashtagging the issue in your tweets
- Help build campaigns, and spread news and important information by following key people and groups and re-tweeting their tweets
- Promote events quickly
- Raise the profile of your project, your group, your network, your organisation
- Link people back to your website for more in-depth info
- Build relationships with new contacts by having online conversations with them.

Share your knowledge and information resources by using social bookmarking sites such as del.icio.us to create online collections of links to the policy, research and other websites that your organisation or network uses the most.

Use social networking sites such as Facebook to:

- Give people an alternate avenue into your organisation, especially people with disability or people in remote locations
- Make a place where your service users and your supporters/stakeholders can interact
- Launch and promote program initiatives
- Promote and co-ordinate events
- Get feedback on events and initiatives

- Give your networks dedicated spaces where they can meet, interact and exchange info online
- Organise your 'friends' into groups and to decide what material each group gets
- Grow your network and extend your reach by being automatically linked through your friends to other networks
- Communicate quickly with large numbers of people without emailing and getting caught in spam filters.

Or you can use a professional networking site such as LinkedIn to:

- Stay in touch with colleagues and professional contacts, and who is doing what
- Extend your networks by seeking introductions from your contacts to people you don't know but would like to work with
- Set up interest groups, and use the space to discuss issues, send emails and notifications, and attract others
- Your organisation can also use LinkedIn to profile itself, and to advertise vacancies and introduce new employees to its networks.

Instagram is a mobile app which is linked either to your Facebook account or your email. If you are using Instagram for work purposes it is advisable to set up a specific email account. Instagram is a great tool for organisations where speed and visual impact is important, however, as the name suggests, the posts are instant and sometimes non retrievable if a mistake has been made. Whenever photographs of individuals are used there are some privacy and ethical issues which must be considered. This is one social networking tool where you and your organisation would be well served by sound policy and guidelines.

All in all, social media offers community workers so many ways to engage with service users, supporters and others in the field, and so many avenues for organisations to increase their profile and impact that we cannot afford not to use it. The golden rule though is once a post is out there it can be there forever – so use just that little bit of caution.