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## Opportunities and Challenges of Using ICT in the Professional Practice of Social Work-An Analytical Study

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### *Abstract*

*The research paper attempts to discuss the most important literature related to the opportunities for the use of information and communication technology in social work practice, characteristics and components, importance, methods and tools of use, and professional, cultural, technological, and ethical challenges to enrich the knowledge aspect in this field and develop the professional practice of social work to deal with contemporary technological changes.*

**Keywords:** *Opportunities and Challenges, Information and Communication Technology, Social Work.*

### **Introduction**

The formal use of ICT in social work is widespread in some countries, such as England, Australia, and the United States, and informal in many countries. Both practitioners and clients are starting to connect to ICTs. Now, the talk is not about the beginning of use but the importance of increasing interest in using ICTs in the ancillary professions. Social workers need relevant knowledge and skills. Using ICTs in a particular practice to maximize benefits and minimize challenges, and given the frequency of informal use of ICTs in social work practice, it is necessary to pay greater attention to research, education, and practice. It is important to consider the context of the ever-changing digital world and the development of practice, education, knowledge, and policies (Faye Mishna et al., 2019).

Accordingly, in this research paper, we try to theoretically address several variables and issues related to information and communication technology in the practice of social work by trying to answer the following questions:

1. What is the concept of ICT?
2. Why is ICT important?
3. How do social workers use ICT in professional practice?
4. What are the most important criteria for social workers to use ICT in practice?
5. What are the most important factors for the optimal use of ICTs in professional practice?
6. What are the challenges of the limits of social work practice in the digital age?

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7. What are the main opportunities and challenges of social workers' use of ICTs in social work practice?

### **ICT Concept**

Although there is no single and universal definition of ICT, the term has been broadly defined to mean "all devices, network components, applications, and systems that collectively allow people and organizations (i.e., businesses, nonprofit agencies, governments, and institutions) to interact in the digital world" (Margaret Rouse, 2019).

Information and communication technology (ICT) also refers to "all technology used in handling communications, broadcast media, intelligent building management systems, processing systems, audiovisual broadcasting, and network-based control and surveillance functions, which is the use of computers to store, retrieve, transmit, and process data or information, often in the context of another business or organization.

This broad definition encompasses a wide range of tools and services, highlighting the integral role that technology plays in enhancing connectivity and efficiency. As a result, ICT has become essential for driving innovation and streamlining operations across various sectors, ultimately shaping how we communicate and collaborate in our increasingly digital society. In general, an IT system is a communication system, an information system, or more precisely, a computer system with all of its components—hardware, software, and peripherals—that is used by a small number of people. Although computers and computer networks are frequently referred to by this word, they also include other information dissemination technologies like television and telephones. A subset of information and communication technology is called information technology. (<http://europeyou.eu/es>).

ICT includes both the available domain of the Internet as well as the mobile domain supported by wireless networks. It also includes obsolete technologies, such as landlines, radio, and television broadcasting—all of which are still widely used today—along with the latest ICT pieces, such as artificial intelligence and robotics. General To represent a more comprehensive list of all computer-related components and digital technologies of information technology, the ICT component list is comprehensive and continues to grow. Some components, such as computers and phones, have been around for decades. Others, such as smartphones, digital televisions, and robots, are newer entries (Margaret Rouse, 2019).

### **Components of the ICT System:**

These include cloud computing, software, hardware, digital transactions, digital data, and Internet access through Internet connectivity using personal computers, laptops, or mobile devices by users or businesses. Internet access is subject to data transmission rates, and users can connect at different internet speeds. Internet access enables individuals or organizations to take advantage of Internet/web-based services.

There are many different ways to access the Internet, including wireless connection, mobile phone connection, hotspots, dial-up, broadband, DSL, or satellite (<http://europeyou.eu/es>).

### **The Importance of ICTs Today**

The world now employs information and communication technologies in all educational, professional, social, economic, political, scientific, space, and other fields, and this importance is all the more important. <https://pcdreams.com.sg>

- Ease of business Lack of timely and appropriate information can lead to low productivity, low-quality research work, and wasted time to follow up on work.

- It enabled us to read our local newspaper using the online newspaper, and we were able to communicate with our family, relatives, or colleagues even if we were abroad using email, Yahoo correspondence, call conference, or video conference.

- Thanks to ICT, digital computers and networks have transformed our economy into one that transcends time and location. It has several benefits for economic growth by making it possible for millions of transactions to occur quickly and easily.

- One of the cornerstones of economic growth for gaining a competitive edge as a nation is ICT. Because it may be utilized as a tool for education, learning, and mass communication to organize and promote essential and practical topics like health and the social sphere, it can enhance the quality of human life. It offers a wider range of knowledge and can facilitate information access and acquisition.

- By increasing learning effectiveness or by giving learning a previously unattainable dimension, the use of ICTs in education enhances teaching and learning.

- In fact, we live in a digital world that is constantly evolving. ICTs have an impact on almost every aspect of our lives—from work to socialization and learning to play. The digital age has changed the way young people communicate, ask for help, access information, and learn. We must realize that young people are now inhabitants of the Internet and that access is through a variety of means, such as computers, televisions, and mobile phones.

Some have identified the importance of ICTs for fields as diverse as human, business, industrial, health, educational, and environmental relations as follows (Terry Brown, 2020):

- ICT has improved relations between individuals, groups, and institutions; created new and fast ways of buying and selling electronically; introduced a new type of trade; contributed to changing the ways and shape of modern industry; raised the quality of health care; and made a qualitative leap in modern education where speed and comprehensiveness For schools and colleges, ICT provides students with attractive and interactive self-learning styles that increase their autonomy and participation in the learning process while also increasing the levels of digital development and computer literacy. ICT-driven learning projects enable teachers and educators to contribute their input while continuously analyzing and monitoring their students' progress. ICT-based school management systems allow administrators to use digital software and tools to automate various tasks, including research library management, and public documentation. ICT reduces the need for paper documents, waste, and bureaucracy that traditionally create them. ICTs also positively impact the environment and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

### **Characteristics of ICTs:**

ICT has a set of characteristics, including (Adalah Al-Ajal, Nadia Ghawal, 2019):

- **Interactive:** It is both a sender and a receiver, as participants in the communication process can exchange roles, allowing for the creation of a kind of interaction between individuals, groups, and organizations.

- **Decentralization:** The independence of this technology and the continued functioning of the Internet globally.

- **Scalability:** The scalability of the network to include more and more unlimited areas of the world so that it gains its strength from this systematic spread of its flexible system.
- **Global and cosmic:** It is the environment in which this technology spreads, where information takes different paths, spreads globally, and gives space for electronic flow.
- **Complexity and intensity of use:** especially advanced ones, as they lead to their monopoly due to the density of invested capital.

This is in addition to the innovation brought about by ICTs related to (Muhammad Fazil, 2018):

- Introducing technology to help and facilitate human activity, which then develops and becomes part of their lives.
- The ability to leverage ICT with various applications allows people to run their business easily and smoothly, such as using email, social networks, even teleconferencing, etc. It gives an opportunity to institutions and governments to start developing technology-based programs such as e-government, e-learning, and e-commerce.
- Access to information and its delivery to heterogeneous communities with distinct backgrounds and diversity requires innovation that is in line with the development of society itself.
- ICTs provided by some governmental organizations provide other forms of exclusivity that create economic and social improvements for their communities.
- Socio-economic welfare development: to address regional gaps to improve a better system; to improve access to information and knowledge; to promote human capacity building; to support democratic processes and bureaucratic transparency; and to establish an information-based society.

### **How Social Workers use ICT:**

The usage of technology by social workers begins with their schooling and continues throughout their careers, even throughout their job search. These are a few more particular instances of social workers using technology (<https://onlineprograms.ollusa.edu>):

- **Education Access:** Accredited higher education institutions offer online undergraduate and graduate social work degree programs.
- **Job search:** Nowadays, a lot of people begin their job search online, and if they want to relocate, they may also participate in video chat interviews.
- **Gather and save client input** using a variety of technologies, from basic spreadsheets to sophisticated project management systems.
- **Conducting counseling sessions:** Because they eliminate the need for the social worker to travel as much, online tools and live chat platforms like Facetime and Skype greatly simplify and expedite client encounters.
- **Widespread information dissemination:** Social service organizations and caregivers can now more easily share information thanks to innovative communication methods. In addition to keeping social workers organized, smart apps also assist groups of individuals who share resources but are not necessarily places to communicate with each other.

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- Search for resources: By following blogs, social media accounts, and newsletters from social service organizations like NASW and ASWB, social workers can stay up to date on peer-reviewed research, social issues, and other social workers' activities.
- Business Operations and Management: With the aid of technology, social service managers oversee staff, develop programs, deal with organizational funding and budgets, and interact with stakeholders, other professional associations, and governmental entities.

### **Standards For the Use of ICT By Social Workers in Practice:**

The purpose of technological standards is to make sure that social workers continue to adhere to ethical guidelines that safeguard the confidentiality and integrity of their clients even as they utilize technology increasingly. In particular, the following is stated in technology standards (<https://onlineprograms.ollusa.edu>):

- Social workers are required to communicate in accordance with the code of ethics, regardless of the channel they use.
- Social workers need to make sure that clients, particularly those with impairments, have access to technology.
- Social workers need to stay up to date with contemporary technologies, stay mindful of cultural and social circumstances, and follow the rules governing their work regardless of the communication channel they use.
- Social workers are required to authenticate themselves and the people they speak with.
- When storing and transferring client data, social service organizations will adhere to regulations that safeguard client rights, perform electronic transactions, secure data and passwords, etc.
- Risk management procedures and assessments that adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics will be put into place to safeguard the organization and guarantee the security of client information.
- Communities must be informed and their well-being promoted through the use of technologies. Social workers who utilize technology in place of in-person contacts will also take the appropriate precautions to guarantee confidentiality and safety.
- Social workers need to be able to assess the pros and cons of technology-based interventions and whether additional steps are required. Social workers should use technology to stay up to date on the latest research and professional support resources, attend webinars and workshops, and remain knowledgeable in their disciplines.

### **Factors for the Optimal Use of Icts in Professional Practice**

There is a set of factors that must be taken into account to achieve appropriate support for information and communication technology to develop different professional practice trends for social work to enable it to achieve its goals effectively, the most important of which are the following (Barakat, 2011, 9-10):

1. The preparation of practitioners in the social work profession should include the

acquisition and development of skills and abilities that enable them to deal with and employ well the various technologies and applications of communication technology.

2. Selection of techniques and applications appropriate to the nature and objectives of the professional practice of social work.
3. Mixing traditional communication patterns with their simple techniques with advanced forms of communication technology commensurate with the nature of the professional practice of social work.
4. The use of specialists to design communication programs that suit the objectives of the profession according to its field of practice, as well as the nature of practitioners and beneficiaries in this field.
5. Determine the objectives of the profession of employing communication technology and the nature of the problems that this technology helps to solve before using these techniques in practice.
6. Choosing inexpensive technology and at the same time achieving the goals and objectives to be achieved from the development of services for the profession.
7. One of the objectives of employing communication technology in the professional practice of social work should be to improve the level of practitioners and exchange professional advice with others, whether at the local or international level, and not only the administrative development of various professional practice organizations.

**The following are also required** (Andrew Hill & Ian Shaw, 2011):

- Gaining access to information and knowledge for practice

The Internet is full of information sources, including bibliographic databases, magazines, news services, government and semi-government agencies, educational materials, research centers, projects, and mailing lists.

- Developing an understanding of evidence for practice:

We noted that SCIE has a wide range of research-based knowledge downloadable at no charge. This is perhaps the most extensive social and welfare site of its kind in the world.

- Enhancing or acquiring practice skills

The proportion of social workers wishing to acquire or enhance research skills will almost exceed the number of those who wish to utilize ICT resources to develop their practice skills. However, the resources available so far are probably underestimated in terms of volume and utility compared to ICT-based research skills.

- Engaging in networking

In moving through different forms of knowledge learning, we have moved from the most passive forms to those most effective in dealing with ICT. One of the oldest forms of networking is that presented through discussion lists. The best starting point for discovering lists available in the broad field of social work is the National Academy Mailing List Service, known as JISC mail. While this service is once again a service to the university and research communities, it hosts the largest collection of practice-related lists and is free (<http://jisc.ac.uk>). There are more than 60 lists under the heading "Social Service." For example, there are lists on alcohol abuse, adult

protection, the Child and Adolescent Psychological Health Service (CAMHS), the Caregiver Forum, and the Child Engagement Network.

### **Challenges of the Limits of Social Work Practice in the Digital Age:**

Social professionals are aware of challenging border issues and have been for the duration of the profession. Social workers have been able to overcome the challenges of boundaries for many years. These challenges include but are not limited to, self-disclosure of personal information about clients, living and working in small communities, responding to social invitations and gifts from clients, hiring former clients as employees, and providing services for vulnerable clients. The field has developed more thorough ethical guidelines concerning dual connections and possible conflicts of interest throughout time. The relatively recent rise of digital and other types of technology has presented social workers with a wide range of unique frontier concerns. The way social workers provide services to clients has changed due to digital technology. Some of these changes include: storing sensitive information (e.g., in the cloud) and enabling remote access to electronic records; being the subject of online searches by clients (e.g., when customers search for personal information about service providers online); communicating with clients via social media and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook); and searching online for information about customers (e.g., Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn). Social workers from earlier generations could not have predicted the new types of border concerns that were brought forth by these events. Here are a few instances. (Reamer, 2019):

A private (independent) clinical social worker used email and text messaging to interact with some of his clients. Clients began emailing the social worker more frequently after regular office hours, including on the weekends and occasionally late at night. The social worker asked whether speaking with clients outside of regular business hours caused him to have border issues with them.

Monthly meetings with local citizens who participated on the Agency's Advisory Board were led by the Community Action Program's Director of Social Work. One of the advisory board members, with whom the social worker has a close working relationship, sent the social worker a friend request on Facebook. He questioned if accepting such an internet application was proper.

In the Substance Use Disorder Treatment Program, the social worker was actively involved in an online support group while in recovery. The social worker occasionally shared information regarding her recuperation. She discovered that one of her clients, who was also in the recovery stage, had been able to read several social worker posts regarding the practitioner's personal life and attend this online support group.

These challenges can be overcome today by the commitment of social workers practicing social work based on information and communication technology to the ethical standards that were developed to guide practitioners by ASWB in 2013 and then adopted in 2015, as well as the unified standards governing this type of practice, which were developed and agreed upon by several organizations interested in social work education and practice, namely NASW, ASWB, CSWE, and CSWA, in 2017.

### **Models For the Use of ICT in Social Work:**

There are various examples of the uses of ICT tools in social work education and practice, some of which can be presented as follows:

## **Training to Work with Individual Cases Using ICT**

This example comes from the USA, where students are enrolled in a module that requires them to make individual contributions online to the "case files" of "virtual customers." The entire chapter worked on six cases related to domestic violence, child care, elderly care, substance abuse recovery, and medical care. The class was divided into "treatment teams" made up of therapists and case managers. Students were required to complete a "Customer Service Plan," multiple sets of "progress notes," and a "regular case review" in the role of their team. One of the hallmarks of this module is that the primary objective is to improve students' ability to use ICTs in their role in social work. This was not general ICT training but specifically targeted students' ability to use case-planning and registration ICT systems used in social service organizations. While students were able to see and discuss each other's work, instructors were very active in providing feedback to students and answering students' questions. Their assessment of the unit suggests that students have become more confident about the use of ICT for social work practice, despite the difficulties the online practice has raised for boundary difficulties for committed teachers who have found themselves working outside of formal hours (Andrew Hill & Ian Shaw, 2011).

## **Contributions of Digital Tools to Community Development**

Digital tools have been used in the practice of social work for community development in several countries in a variety of ways, including (Adedoyin & Christson, 2016):

The use of digital tools to support community development initiatives and practices such as community assessment, community mobilization, information dissemination, needs or asset assessment, prevention, research, planning, and evaluation has been extensively documented in the literature. For example, GIS has been identified as an integrated and important tool for assessing community development resources, planning, and auditing in social services.

## **IT and Project Management Across Virtual Organizations**

What has happened and is happening today from the almost complete use of technologies and ICT tools in dealing between local, regional, and international organizations and bodies with the crisis of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic shows the importance of that technology in communication and human interaction at all levels.

Among other things, the information and communication revolution has produced what are known today as virtual organizations that have become a reality practiced (Timothy C. Bagwell et al., 2018).

**Using ICT tools during the COVID-19 pandemic**(<http://nscsw.org/social-work-practice-covid19>):

Nova Scotia noted that when a pandemic hits, COVID-19 will show an impact on our collective well-being. The pandemic will affect not only our physical health but also our mental health. In these difficult times, specialists from various disciplines are required to participate. Crisis social workers aim to solve problems holistically through social intervention.

The goals of an emergency social work specialist, according to Herrero (2012), are:

1. Provide information on opportunities for social groups.
2. Motivate people to access those opportunities.

3. Help victims manage their feelings and emotions.
4. Help people learn new ways to face their problems. Show them how to think about their new situation in a different way.
5. Help victims regain their psychological balance.
6. Address the event with those affected so that they can move on with their lives.
7. Create or facilitate communication between people in crisis.
8. Help individuals or families understand the situation clearly.
9. Restore one's balance with one's surroundings. In other words, help them adapt to their new situation.

While individuals, organizations, and communities practice social distancing, it remains clear that people will need to access the professional support of social workers. We must remain empathetic and in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable.

Integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into social work practice offers numerous opportunities to enhance service delivery, client engagement, and operational efficiency. However, it also presents several challenges that require careful consideration.

### **Opportunities:**

1. **Enhanced Communication and Accessibility:** ICT tools, such as video conferencing and messaging platforms, facilitate real-time communication between social workers and clients, improving accessibility, especially for those in remote or underserved areas. (VCU Social Work Online Program)
2. **Improved Data Management:** Digital systems allow for efficient collection, storage, and analysis of client information, leading to better-informed decision-making and personalized care plans (NASW).
3. **Remote Service Delivery:** Telehealth services enable social workers to provide support and counseling remotely, ensuring continuity of care, particularly during situations like pandemics or for clients with mobility issues (VCU Social Work Online Program).
4. **Professional Development:** ICT provides access to a vast array of online training and resources, supporting continuous professional development and keeping practitioners abreast of the latest research and best practices. (PMC)
5. **Collaboration and Networking:** Digital platforms facilitate collaboration among social workers, multidisciplinary teams, and external agencies, enhancing service coordination and resource sharing. (NASW)

### **Challenges:**

1. **Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns:** Handling sensitive client information digitally necessitates robust data security measures to prevent breaches and unauthorized access. (Agents of Change Social Work Test Prep)
2. **Digital Divide:** Not all clients have equal access to technology or digital literacy skills, potentially leading to inequities in service delivery and engagement. (Agents of Change Social Work Test Prep).

3. **Professional Boundaries:** The use of ICT can blur the lines between professional and personal interactions, challenging traditional notions of professional boundaries in social work. (Bristol University Press Digital).
4. **Technology Reliability:** Dependence on technology means that technical issues, such as system outages or software malfunctions, can disrupt services and affect client care.
5. **Ethical and Regulatory Compliance:** Social workers must navigate complex ethical dilemmas and ensure compliance with regulations governing the use of technology in practice, including informed consent and data protection laws. (Perron, 2010).

Incorporating ICT into social work requires a balanced approach that leverages technological advancements while addressing potential risks and challenges. Ongoing training, clear policies, and client engagement are essential to maximize the benefits of technology in social work practice.

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