Social media and nursing practice: Changing the balance between the social and technical aspects of work

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Summary   Modern communication methods are drastically changing the way people interact with each other. Professions such as nursing need to evolve to remain relevant as social infrastructure changes. In the 1960s, researchers developed a sociotechnical theory that stated workers were more motivated and productive if there was a good balance between the social and technical aspects of their work. Today's technology is blurring the boundaries between the social and the technical thereby transforming human contact and communication into a multi-method process. In Australia, people are adept at utilising social media technology to become more efficient, creative and connected; Australian nurses also need to embrace changing technology to capitalise on the professional opportunities offered by social media. This paper imagines a world where nurses integrate social media into assessing, diagnosing, planning, implementing and evaluating care. Discussion draws on a combination of real-world examples of best-practice and blue-sky thinking to demonstrate that evidence-based care must be combined with the adoption of future-forward technology.
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Introduction

Sociotechnical theory revolutionised workplace reality in the 1960s (Weisbord, 2012). The concept was coined by an ''unpretentious'' Englishman called Eric Trist, then enlarged by an ''anti-authoritarian'' Australian — Fred Emery (Weisbord, 2012, pp. 168—169). The pair studied an interesting phenomenon within a coalmine that introduced

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new practices during the 1950s. Workers who had been performing simple, mundane tasks with little or no contact with colleagues were introduced to a new method of mining. The new duties changed the tasks workers were performing, but also led to an unexpected shift in the culture of the mine. Workers began to operate and communicate in a different manner. Miners began working in self-regulating groups, collaborating on larger tasks and sharing duties. As a consequence miners began communicating extensively and became more flexible and adaptable in their approach to work (Trist, 1981).

Trist noted that, as the new system of work evolved, personal commitment of workers increased, absenteeism decreased, accidents were scarce and productivity was high (Trist, Higgin, Murray, & Pollock, 1963). Deciding that this phenomenon needed further investigation, Trist began developing and testing sociotechnical systems (Trist, 1981). During his investigation, Trist (1981) found that, under the old system, individual worker's tasks were ''dumbed down'' and creativity was suppressed. This was spirit-crushing for workers. Furthermore, previous types of work-related communication were limited because workers were encouraged to compete with one another rather than cooperate. Control was external and people were thought of as extensions of the machines they operated. The original intention of these old systems of work was to create efficiency through the simplification of tasks (Trist, 1981).

Trist and Emery developed a new system of work, based on their observations in the mines, that was said to ''flip the paradigm'' on previous systems. This new system, based on sociotechnical theory, brought fragmented, simplistic duties back together, encouraged the development of multiple broad skills and allowed for the autonomy of workers (Trist, 1981). The system also encouraged cooperative behaviour instead of competitiveness, increased communication networks, and brought an overall balance to the social and technical aspects of work (Trist, 1981).

Within the context of nursing, sociotechnical theory has been used to develop socially and technically-balanced workplace systems, resulting in higher efficiency (Tonges, 1992) and enhanced client care (Valentine & Behara, 2001). In contemporary society, however, social infrastructure is evolving rapidly, especially through the exponential development of technology. This type of social development appears to be occurring outside the nursing workplace at a far greater rate than it is within the workplace, causing an imbalance in the social and technical aspects of work. Such unrelenting social change calls for nursing as a profession to evolve in ways that keep it relevant to society. As evidenced by Trist et al. (1963), I argue that sociotechnical theory can be used to generate balance in the nursing profession by identifying shifting social infrastructures and adapting workplace systems accordingly. This paper presents an overview of social media, its types and uses, and describes how social media can be used within the nursing process to enhance client care.

Social media

Social media is changing the way humans communicate. The rapid emergence of social media will be fundamental to the evolution of nursing into the contemporary world of communication. A sociotechnical lens can be used to make sense of the changes needed within nursing in the future. Sociotechnical systems encourage flat organisational participation through multifaceted communication (Weisbord, 2012). Therefore, social media can be used as a means to heighten sociotechnical systems by facilitating communication between nurses and between patients and nurses. Health professionals have demonstrated some resistance to the integration of social media in their work due to concerns about its usefulness and compatibility (Lau, 2011). Moreover resistance has also been caused by the many accounts of punitive outcomes resulting from social media misuse (Spector & Kappel, 2012). Such concerns and malpractices should be addressed because social media has the potential to balance the sociotechnical systems of nursing and bring the profession into the future. Before this possibility is discussed, some of the key aspects of social media will be defined and described.

Types of social media

Social media is a collective term that takes in social networking (like Facebook), content sharing (Flickr and YouTube), web publishing (blogging) and wikis. Social media comprises ''tools for sharing and discussing information among people. It refers to user generated information, opinion, and other content shared and discussed over digital networks'' (DEECD, 2013). Basic knowledge of social media functions, specific to the forms in which it exists, is essential for appropriate use. The forms in which social media are available are extensive and distinct and each has many advantages and disadvantages.

Social networking

Social networking is one of the most commonly-used forms of social media and offers a convenient platform to share information and stay in touch with people (Fraser, 2011). Social networks can also operate like directories, providing a way to search for and connect with people, while sharing information and communicating in a structured manner (Fraser, 2011). One advantage of social networks is that they allow professionals to develop and maintain connections with colleagues and peers. Facebook is one social networking website dedicated to giving ''people the power to share and make the world more open and connected'' (Facebook, 2013). Facebook has provided an unequalled platform to connect with people and stay in touch and had 800 million users as of 2011 (Nelson, Joos, & Wolf, 2011). Facebook is focused on personal relationships; other social networks focus on professional relationships. LinkedIn, for example, states its mission is to ''connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful'' (LinkedIn, 2013). LinkedIn allows professionals to customise their user profile to include education, work experience, skills, and expertise. Through the development of a comprehensive profile, a professional may become an attractive employee or a sought-after peer. A professional can develop significant contacts through LinkedIn, which has more than 200 million users (LinkedIn, 2013). Social networks can provide