



How are we using online tools and social networking?

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twitter



LinkedIn



MailChimp



Google

webex



flickr

Scribd

amazon web services



diigo

YouTube

Storify



vimeo

Adobe Connect

WordPress



Pinterest

NING

moodle

Eventbrite

yammer



What we did

In December 2012/January 2013 Urban Forum carried out a survey to find out how people in the community sector are using online tools, including social networking sites. For the purposes of this report we are using the term 'online tools' as an umbrella term for social networking sites (like Twitter) and tools (like Google Drive).

To design the online survey we used a free resource called Surveygizmo. We sent it out in our e-newsletter using Mailchimp, and through Urban Forum's Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Who responded

We had 100 responses to the survey, from Urban Forum members (95%) and member's networks (5%). 70% of respondents are from people operating at a regional, local or neighbourhood level, and 30% from people in national organisations.

We anticipated that the majority of those who responded to our survey would be demonstrably interested and engaged with the digital agenda. For a large majority – 87.5% - of those who responded - this is clearly the case.

Our working assumption is that this degree of digital engagement is **not** representative of the sector in general, or of Urban Forum's membership in particular. This assumption is based on the knowledge that 25% of the population is not online, let alone using online tools. It is also based on an assessment that people who are more interested in online working are more likely to respond to an online survey on that subject or, indeed, see it in the first place.

12.5% of our sample do not use online tools and are not planning to do so, but nevertheless took the time to complete the survey. They provide a number of reasons for this.

- Lack of money to get training
- Online tools not always being accessible to certain groups
- A preference for face-to-face contact
- Lack of time to use
- Not knowing where to start – so many tools available

"We need funding to understand better how to use online tools"

"Prefer face to face"

"We don't use online tools because so many are not accessible to disabled people who use assistive technology/software"

"We use Facebook...[but] with staffing so low and so many calls upon our time, we can't even make the most of that"

"There are so many tools out there and with different people using different tools, it is confusing"

Why we did this work

The basis for our interest in this is two-fold. First we think that the community sector is stronger if it is networked, and an important element of this is online networking. Second, we know community organisations are increasingly short of time and money, and believe online tools can offer ways of doing things that save both. So our purpose in carrying out the survey was to find out more about the experience of members working on line, what tools they find most useful and for what purpose.

We will use what we have learnt from the survey responses to shape our work at Urban Forum. We also hope that it will be of practical benefit for others, whether they are developing their own use of IT or supporting others to do so.

Most of the sites and tools that respondents listed as useful are free of charge. All of them are listed with links at the end of this report. Information on using some of these will soon be appearing on the Urban Forum website.

Key findings

- The overall picture of respondents' use of online tools is one of change and development.
- The predominant use of social networking by respondents now is to promote their organisation/services. This is followed by 'developing relationships', and 'forwarding on information from other sources'.
- Significantly behind these top three uses is 'influencing policy/having a collective voice'.
- People are using social networking sites so their organisations can reach new people.
- Most respondents found online tools of practical benefit, and referenced benefits in efficiency, and savings in time and money.
- The findings highlight the time commitment necessary to develop use of online tools, and ongoing activity (particularly around social networking)
- There is no uniformity in use of online tools – i.e. there is currently no one set of tools for particular functions used across the community sector.

Recommendations for action

- More information sharing across the sector about what free or cheap tools are useful for doing different jobs, including new facilities.
- Development of resources that help people new to using online tools to navigate what is on offer, and work out what will be most useful for them, based on what other's have found useful.
- Organisations developing their use of online tools need to integrate this into their planning and decision-making about use of time.
- Greater emphasis on the practical benefits of online tools in activity to support more use

The overall picture of use of online tools is one of ongoing change and development

A number of respondents referenced the fact that their use of certain online facilities was new, or something they or their organisation were developing for the first time.

"We have only just created the Facebook account so still have not used it fully but will try to use it for consultation in the near future"

"Twitter used to spread information and to start to build up networks...early days at the moment"

"... hopefully colleagues will use this increasingly too, and we'll stop using inferior internal systems for things"

"[name of organisation] is not yet on Facebook, but we are aware of other organisations that use it successfully. We will probably open a Facebook account"

"We have just started using Eventbrite to coordinate and publicise events"

"We currently make limited use of Twitter and none at all of Facebook due to the limitations of our website and how it integrates. Have pro bono support to improve this early in the New Year."

"We probably don't make us much use of tools yet as we could."

Others referenced ongoing development of their own IT use and web presence.

"Constantly reviewing purpose [of how to develop use of online tools]"

"We have a whole series of Wordpress blogs in the pipeline"

"[on planned use of social media] Communicating (not just blasting people with our info – it took me about a year to learn that that's not what Twitter is for!)"

"We have developed a Digital Organising course and will be promoting this more widely over the coming 12 months"

"Looking to increase feedback on issues where we represent the sector. Looking to raise awareness of ourselves and the sector outside of our usual circles"

"I want to grow the [name of site] into a community of people posting on this topic and spreading information and idea. A group of us plan to use Yammer across the organisation now that [name of organisation] staff have access to it. I want to use video and audio more to tell stories."

86% also said they expect to increase their use of online tools for work during 2013.

What people are using social networking sites for

The three most popular reasons given for using social networking sites were:

Informing people about their work (82%), building relationships and contacts (73%) and passing on information from other sources (71%).

The examples people gave of how they used social networking to inform people about their work included general profile-raising communication and specific service information.

“Informing clients and tenants about events and services available to them”

“Promoting [name of organisation], encouraging people to complete [name of organisation] surveys and sign up for events etc.”

“Publicity is the name of the game for such small and specialised areas as ours” [supporting people in housing crisis].

“We regularly use Twitter/Facebook messages to market and promote our existing services and provide thought leadership/enhance our brand”

“Raising our profile amongst new charities”

“We have a Facebook page to publicise our shop”

“Twitter we use mainly for marketing”

“We have a Facebook page, website and we use the Facebook to let young people know what is happening in the project. This is proving useful to give members up to date fast information.”

“Our young people run Twitter and Facebook sites, alongside staff. It helps us advertise course/training/employment opps etc.”

Some responses we received were from people from membership organisations. They talked about the role of social networking in both promoting the work of members and projects they support, as well as their own work.

“We promote our own news stories and celebrate good news from our funded projects”.

“We also use it to promote our members...it helps us cheaply and quickly amplify their footprint and impact.”

“I use our organisation’s Twitter account .. to share information, our news and what local groups and orgs are tweeting”.

“ [We] Use wide range of digital media to help raise profile, boost profile of member groups to aid networking”.

In the use of social networking to build relationships and make contacts, people gave examples that included relationship-building with beneficiaries, members of their organisation or network, peers, stakeholders, funders/customers.

“Tenants can stay in touch with us through Facebook”

“Facebook: we work with young people aged 13 – up and have a Facebook identity that is solely for communicating with them, and we use Twitter to communicate with other organisations and funders.”

“I also use it [Facebook] to talk to peers and customers through the immediate chat function”.

“We tweet regularly and have found it an excellent way of attracting new members and networking with peers.”

The information that people said they passed on from sources other than their own organisation was news, events coming up and reports from events, campaigns and resources/reports.

“Facebook and Twitter to enable information to be passed quickly to a large number of reps”.

“I use Facebook to share resources and links to articles”.

“ [I] pass on useful info about funding, reports, campaigns, events. Tweet at events for those who cannot attend.”

“Passing on and commenting on sector news or policy”

A further 20% also relied on the social networking site, LinkedIn, which they distinguished from how they used Facebook, using it less to raise profile, publicise or communicate with beneficiaries, and more to network, build contacts with peers/professionals. Some also mentioned using LinkedIn groups to keep up to date, find out what their peers are doing and saying, and taking part in online discussions on specific issues. However there was a suggestion that not everyone finds online forums useful enough to prioritise.

“We have a discussion group on LinkedIn for people interested in Social Firms”

“Facebook for promotion...LinkedIn for networking”

“I use LinkedIn to make professional contacts”

“I keep my LinkedIn profile up to date and add new connections, as sometimes it can be a handy way to make contact with people. I'm a member of a few LinkedIn groups but rarely look at them.”

Some respondents also referred to using specific blogs and community social networking sites to communicate externally and in collaborative projects. Some referred to facilities to set these up (Ning, Blogger, Blogspot, Wordpress).

Using social networking to bring about change

Less than half of respondents (45%) said that they used social networking sites to promote ideas about change, over a third (36%) that they used it to communicate with policy-makers, and around a fifth (21%) that they used to coordinate campaign action for change.

For those who did, their examples concerned raising awareness about local issues, building support for specific campaigns both national and local, showing support for causes, and ways of communicating with policymakers.

“Raising awareness of important public issues within the locality”.

“We will utilise social media tools to overcome fragmentation”

“Show solidarity with organisations or causes - likes, retweets etc.”

“Communicate...campaign messages around food waste reduction”

“[raise awareness] Around what is happening to health and city council around funding cuts reports”.

“Campaigns and events are quickly disseminated to a wide audience”.

“Opposition to building in the Green Belt.”

“Encouraging local and participatory democracy”

“Encourage dialogue between community groups and influential people (journalists, politicians)”.

“Direct, public conversations with decision makers”

Using social networking to reach new people

Survey respondents told us about the usefulness of social networking sites in enabling them to widen their reach to new audiences, and/or people they may not be able to reach otherwise.

“The younger audiences I work with...seem to be using Twitter increasingly and as such I will be signing up”

“Twitter gets organisations noticed by people who would not know you are there. Using Facebook you can sometimes engage with people who would not engage in other way.”

“Some [tools] are about enhancing what we do and communicating with new audiences”.

“Campaigns and events are quickly disseminated to a wide audience”

Responses show clearly how social networking and other online tools are being used to aid feedback and consultation. Respondents described the impact this has in terms of increasing transparency, helping them evaluate how well they are doing, and understanding the needs and views of who they are trying to reach. But the overall impression given is that tools are making it possible to do an existing task more efficiently or more often.

“SurveyMonkey used for annual survey as well as shorter specific surveys”

“We use SurveyMonkey to gather information about new learners and their learning needs”

“We use SurveyMonkey to help evaluate our work”

“We use social media to find out what our members are doing and to get a feel for their views”

“Transparency and governance - a cheap, easy and quick way to regularly tell members and wider stakeholders what we are doing”

It is not possible to see from the research if using social networking has resulted in a qualitative change in communication. A number of respondents highlighted the discursive nature of online communication:

“There are a lot of ideas out there that are stimulating and people are having all these interesting online conversations to push the ideas further. It is a really easy way to be inspired.”

“I join in conversations with other local voluntary groups”

“Most of what we do is trying to ensure people know about events and have the opportunity to discuss these and other issues.”

“The organisation uses collaborative tools such as Moodle to promote discussion and ideas and as this has been so successful we will continue to develop and expand these services”

“Twitter is great for seeing if anyone 'out there' cares as much as I do about particular events”

However, this was not a theme from the responses overall. The dominant theme from respondents was around the use of social media to create new ways to disseminate information to more people, more efficiently.

Online tools

Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents use online facilities to circulate newsletters, publish reports, or share videos, reports, photos, sound files, presentation slides, and used an array of different tools to do this (Mailchimp, Scribd, Issu, Youtube, Pinterest, Vimeo, Tumblr, Slideshare, Flickr, SoundCloud, Audioboo).

Some respondents mentioned their use of, or planned use of e-learning and teaching facilities (Webinars, Moodle).

Respondents also talked about their developing use of social networking through integrating Twitter and Facebook with website and blogs, and using tools to bring together communication using different forms of social media, such as Storify.

The majority of respondents use online tools to help with day-to-day work tasks and internal communication.

We asked people about their use of online tools other than social networking sites. Over half (54%) said they used tools to manage events and joint projects and a third (35%) said they used them to organise work with colleagues.

The tools people told us about helped them with a range of administrative and internal functions:

- 29% used services to store/back up documents (24% using Dropbox, the other 5% using Evernote, Cloud and Amazon s3)
- 27% for services to schedule meetings (25% using Doodle, the other 2% using Agree-a-date and Meet-o-matic)
- 14% used facilities for document sharing (i.e. so a group of people can collaborate on a document), mainly Drop box, Google Docs, Google Drive, Webex.
- 13% used online tools to carry out surveys (for research and feedback), with all those who mentioned this using Surveymonkey
- A number of people cited sites that support project management (tsheets, Basecamp)
- A number cited tools to help capture data – including 5% using Google analytics to look at traffic to websites, and others using tools for project management and events to collect information about participants.
- A number of people reported using tools to enable communication within an organisation or small network (including Skype, Google+, Yammer, Yahoo groups).

- A number also listed very specific tools – including services to make online links smaller (Bitly, tinyurl), to organise the information that they get online (bookmarks with Googlereader, highlighting with Diigo), and creating ‘word clouds’ (Wordle, Worditout).

The time and cost benefits of online tools

A clear theme running through survey answers were the perceived benefits online tools brought in efficiencies, saving time and money. For some this was an area of growing importance because of the lack of resources.

“Some tools are just about saving time and energy and being efficient and effective with little resources: Doodle, Eventbrite”

“Due to funding cuts use of social media will increase to share knowledge and information”

“In a rural area with limited funding and capacity we use social media and the website to extend our reach”

“We use blogs like websites ... cheap and easy to build and maintain”

“we use NING for our website as its flexible and easier to update than a conventional, more static website”

“I use Creative Commons image search to find pictures I can use freely”

“A cheap, quick and easy way” (to communicate externally)

“It helps us cheaply and quickly amplify their footprint and impact” (of members).

“We need to make the best use of our small resources and if we can link with other organisations to share costs then fine”

“As resources get more limited the potential to share information and ideas using social media gets greater”.

“possible e-learning/webinars rather than real events due to travel costs”

In describing how they used tools for internal communication and sharing documents, respondents described how they met a need to work effectively with colleagues and partners across different sites, and enabled working on the move.

“We use Dropbox to share files with off-site staff, trustees and when working in partnership with other organisations.”

“I have used Google Docs, now Google Drive, to share documents with colleagues both internal and external, to collaboratively develop project ideas.”

“I use Evernote to make notes on the go”.

“we’re on the Cloud and have access to our internal tools from pretty much anywhere”.

“[Google] Drive to share docs, Skype to talk to colleagues when they’re abroad”

“We use Google Calendar to coordinate staff for particular projects”

“We use Dropbox to collaborate in our partnership work”

There is little uniformity in which online services and tools people using

We asked people to list which social media and online tools they found most useful in their work. What is immediately evident from the survey results is the vast array of different services people are using, 61 are named in total.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, almost ubiquitous among respondents was use of social networking sites Twitter and Facebook, and to a lesser extent, LinkedIn. But what was unanticipated was that in looking at the pattern of use of the other 58 online tools, there is no pattern! Most services are only mentioned by one or a handful of other respondents, and many use the same tools in different ways.

Conclusions

The survey findings have confirmed many things we knew already:

Social networking can help organisations raise their profile, get in touch with new audiences, know these audiences better, and develop their contacts.

Online tools can make many tasks easier and quicker, particularly relevant to the sector as resources reduce, and joint work across organisations and teams becomes more prevalent.

It also told us some things we didn't know before:

With the exception of the main social networking sites, there is a clear lack of uniformity, or pattern of take up of most online services and tools. This undoubtedly reflects the fact that there are so many different products and services to choose from, and the fact that these are constantly changing. It may also suggest that we need more information sharing across the sector about what is useful for doing different jobs, and why. It also suggests there is a need for resources that help people to navigate through the array of what is on offer, based on what people have found useful in practice.

The survey responses underline the potential savings in time and money of using online tools within their work. 'Cheap', 'Quick', 'Easy', 'Fast' were frequently used words. What also came through clearly is that there is often a time commitment required to plan, develop and keep going online activity, particularly with social networking. For organisations developing their use of online tools, it needs to be understood not as something to bolt onto existing work, but integrated into plans.

"All of our communications have social media integrated. We put a lot of focus and time in to trying to develop conversations (proactively and reactively)."

For a proportion of people, social networking is a way of bringing people together to discuss ideas, have a louder voice, and influence policy. And for some it is a way of generating discussion and

dialogue. However, 'to forge a stronger collective voice' was ranked 4th by respondents when asked why they wanted to increase their use of online tools in the next 12 months, below sharing information and ideas, promoting services, and developing joint work. And it is clear from the answers about current usage, that the predominant use of social networking described by respondents is promotion and publicity, not dialogue.

Other research carried out by Urban Forum (forthcoming) suggests that many among Urban Forum's membership feel there is a lack of a clear voice representing the local community sector and opportunities to influence policymakers are disappearing. There may be scope to develop the sectors' use of social networking to address this. However, the fact that this isn't happening already suggests that online networking is one tool, but not a universal panacea for addressing the issue of voice and influence of the community sector.

Overall, the findings suggest that people in the community sector have a practical and pragmatic approach to new technology – that these things are tools to use, not ends in themselves. This should inform how the potential benefits of online resources are communicated across the sector.

The tools you told us about

Altogether you told us about your 61 most useful tools that you use at work/in community activities. Most of these are free, or elements are free. We have tried to organise these around what they are used most for. However some of them have more than one function or offer more than one service, and people use them in different ways.

Social networking sites

www.twitter.com

www.facebook.com

www.linkedin.com

Tools to create blogs and community websites

www.ning.com

www.blogger.com

www.wordpress.com

blogs and community websites – examples you gave

www.talk2croydon.co.uk

www.projectdirt.co.uk

<http://cambcommunityplans.wordpress.com>

<http://ousewashesips.wordpress.com>

www.cambsacres.org.uk

www.creativecollaborationdudley.wordpress.com

<http://www.rawm.org.uk/blog>

Online Forums - example

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network>

Tools for sharing and publishing

For publishing reports www.scribd.com www.issu.com
 For photos/images www.flickr.com www.pinterest.com www.tumblr.com
 For video www.youtube.com www.vimeo.com
 For e-learning/teaching www.moodle.org www.skillio.com
 For presentations www.slideshare.com
 For sound www.soundcloud.com www.audioboo.com
 For bringing together comments, pictures, videos from different sources on particular issues
www.storify.com <http://n0tice.com>

Tools for organising meetings

For managing bookings, administration, reminders www.eventbrite.com
 For scheduling meeting dates
www.doodle.com www.meetomatic.com www.agreeAdate.com
 For assisting groups of people with a shared interest to meet up in person www.meetup.com
 For setting up a social media surgery in your area <http://socialmediasurgery.com>
 Online calendar <https://www.google.com/calendar>

Newsletter and surveys

For e-newsletters www.mailchimp.com
 For e-surveys www.surveymonkey.com or www.surveygizmo.com

Internal communications

For video conferencing and group conferencing, and private social networking
www.skype.com <http://www.google.com/+> www.yammer.com
<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com> www.gotomeeting.com <https://groups.google.com>

Tools to share, store or back up documents

www.dropbox.com www.evernote.com <http://www.thecloud.net>
www.sugarsync.com <http://aws.amazon.com> <https://drive.google.com>
www.webex.co.uk

Tools to help manage projects

www.tsheets.com www.basecamp.com www.constantcontact.com

Some other tools

Web browsers www.googlechrome www.mozillafox.org

Online encyclopedia www.wikipedia.com

To get alerts when new content from the web, blogs, discussion groups match your selected interests www.google.com/alerts

To generate statistics about visits to your website www.google.co.uk/analytics

To create small url addresses (for links) www.bitly.com www.tinyurl.com

To organise the information that you get online and share this www.google.com/reader (bookmarks), www.diigo.com (highlights), IAnnotate PDF app (highlights, comments)

To create 'wordclouds' www.wordle.com www.worditout.com

To create online address book www.plaxo.com