

Social networking

The use of social networking is now very common in both home and work environments. The field is expanding continually and we have had some requests for a roundup of common platforms.

What is social networking and social media?

As these terms are quite new and the landscape is constantly evolving, there are no clearly agreed on definitions. They are defined over and over on the internet but with no clear agreement. At this stage it's not unreasonable to consider them interchangeable.

Some services are primarily one-to-one messaging services yet others are more about building multi-person networks. WhatsApp is a good example. In its core use, it is a person-to-person message platform (much like texting). This core use has evolved and the platform now supports group messaging. In fact, many companies use WhatsApp for rapid communication between groups of people. The boundary then between messaging services and networking services becomes blurred. For this article we include messaging-only platforms in addition to true social networking services. Unless mentioned the services described are free to use.

Facebook

The current king of social networking is Facebook. The service needs no introduction and is only mentioned here for completeness. Its use in the work environment is mostly for support groups and private practice advertisement.

Instagram

Instagram is a service where photos and images are at the core of the network. Individuals and business can post photos (and videos up to 15 seconds). Much like Facebook, users can have followers who can be notified when new postings are made. The service is of most appeal for home use, but businesses are using it more and more to post images and videos of their events and products.

Twitter

Although very popular, a brief explanation of Twitter may be helpful. Twitter allows its users to share brief (140 character) messages to their followers. The messages can be plain text or include links to images, videos or web pages. Typically, users will follow a number of Twitter users who post on topics they are interested in. Messages can also highlight particular terms to allow messages from many sources to gravitate around a topic. This is done by the 'hashtag'. For instance, #breakingnews is often added to breaking news stories by news outlets. This allows easy searching for content of interest. In the ophthalmology world, The College, @RCOphth, sends out topical tweets frequently. Most hospitals also do similar (as does the GMC and BMA). In fact, it's hard to find a large corporation that does not tweet these days. There is also nothing to stop a user having a personal (e.g. @johnsmith) and a professional (e.g. @drjohnsmith) Twitter account.

Periscope

Periscope is one of the newer media sharing apps. The service is owned by Twitter. Periscope allows live sharing of video from a smartphone. Other users can view the live video broadcasts. Socially, people use periscope to share video of events they attend and video tutorials (like cooking and building things). In business Periscope can be used for showing product demos or behind the scenes type videos.

Vine

Vine is another video sharing service owned by Twitter, but this one is only for six second clips. It's quite remarkable how much content can be communicated in six seconds of video. From news headlines to DIY videos, Vine has a lot of content.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn (owned by Microsoft) is a very work and business centric service. Users can build a CV of their experience in their LinkedIn profile and use that to interact with other

users and businesses. The profiles can be validated, to some degree, by colleagues and can allow a reputation of sorts to be established. LinkedIn is used a great deal by business to headhunt and recruit people.

Pinterest

Pinterest is for building shareable pin boards of mostly images on a theme. Users create these boards on various topics, such as arts and craft, food, travel and animals. There are also plenty of medical themed boards.

Yammer

Yammer (owned by Microsoft) is a fairly popular professional messaging service. It allows members of organisations to form groups and send messages within them. Individual networks are kept quite separate, meaning messages within a company are kept within the company network. Groups can access shared files and links, so it can be a good way to work on a project. Quite a few hospitals have Yammer networks. The payment model is interesting. Employees of 'NHS Trust X' can freely use Yammer for their work (using their 'Trust X' email address). From then on a 'Trust X' Yammer network can freely grow and evolve. If the Trust wants to organise control or ownership of the Yammer network, it can, but it costs money.

Google+

Google+ is Google's answer to Facebook. It allows posting and sharing in a similar way. The posts tend to be longer and in more depth. The topics also tend to be more technical and serious. Overall though, Google+ hasn't managed to compete well with Facebook, only having a fraction of the members.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a very popular messaging service among young people especially. Like Facebook and Twitter many users can follow individuals who post messages (or snaps). The key difference is that Snapchat is about right now. Instant messages (or videos) between

individuals are deleted a few seconds after being read. The other very popular feature is 'stories'. A user can post images, text or videos on a theme (for instance, their day). These exist for their followers to see, but only for 24 hours. After that they are deleted. Businesses are using the platform to create topical stories and current news items.

Security

Some of the above services can be joined with an existing user account (such as a Facebook or Twitter account). This is a good option as it avoids the need to create another account that is

vulnerable. If you are using a separate account, please use a unique password. Many passwords for these services have been leaked (most recently LinkedIn). If you use the same password on another site, you risk losing control of a lot of your online identity (especially if you use the same password for your email account).

Responsible posting

Although this area is beyond the scope and word count of this article, I do have one link to share. Please have a read of this very brief GMC article: <http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/28572.asp>



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Declaration of Competing Interests
None declared.

