

All of a twitter

Do you tweet? Are you linkedin? Do you worry about the widgets on your blog? In the first of two articles, **Alex Johnson** argues that social networking can be a vital tool in a mentoring or befriending project's armoury (once you get past the bewildering jargon)

Social networking sounds scary, but if you're quite happy to use email, surf the internet, or use a mobile phone, you'll actually find that within a couple of hours you can set up a nice looking blog for your project, establish a Facebook group, and search for likeminded project managers around the country – or even the world. Best of all, it won't cost you a penny and may even save you money. In simple terms, social networking is an exciting new tool that can help us communicate and share information with each other.

"Social networking allows people to more easily keep in touch and share the images, thoughts and events of their daily lives with those they know," says Robin Hamman, the driving force behind the BBC's blogs and experiments with online communities. "Most social networking sites, as well as photo and video sharing sites, allow you to find new contacts through your friends' connections."

This is, of course, very good news for projects with limited resources. It means you can keep volunteers, staff, mentors, befriendees, partners, sponsors and funding agencies updated with your news; but also keep them in touch with each other, while at the same time fostering a genuine sense of community.

Using new media is particularly useful when dealing with younger people, since social networking is very much the norm among



Social networking: a new tool

teenagers and twentysomethings. "The opportunities that online social networking sites provide to connect people are unique and novel," says Tessy Britton, director of Thriving, a platform for social and educational innovation and progress (www.thriving.org).

"Social networking helps people to share ideas and interests, creates a platform for first-stage introductions, leads to collaborative relationships and helps people who feel separated by shyness and distance"

"Not only does it help people to share ideas and interests, but it also creates a platform for first-stage introductions, which can lead to

collaborative relationships. This is helpful for people who feel separated by all sorts of things; shyness and distance in particular," adds Tessy. "Many people would argue that it's only when face-to-face contact is made that relationships of all kinds develop more meaningfully. I agree that, in the main, this is probably true.

"However, social networking also shortcuts social barriers making it easier to introduce ourselves to others and to serve as connectors by introducing others. The value of this cannot be underestimated," she adds. "There are many ways to trivialise social networking, but it's also a new way for people to fill a genuinely important need and be connected with one another."

Social networking options

So, here are three quick – and free – ways to start social networking:

- 1. Join Twitter (www.twitter.com)**
When you send a message (known as a 'tweet') from your computer or mobile, everybody who is 'following' you on Twitter can see it, enabling you to keep any group updated in real time. It could be used send quick updates on events, meetings or news to your volunteers.
- 2. Join Facebook (www.facebook.com)**



You can spend hours wasting time on Facebook, but it's also a place you can set up a group dedicated to your project where you can post news, videos and stimulate conversation quickly and easily. Universities have set up groups to recruit volunteers and increase awareness of their mentoring scheme.

3. Join Flickr (www.flickr.com)

You can get your programme's fundraising, promotional or case study photos and videos online to share directly with your community using Flickr.

“So long as you understand the need to protect your privacy and take steps to do so, using social networking sites can be a really worthwhile experience”

Blogging

But the big – and surprisingly easy – way to build up a social networking presence online is by setting up a blog, the equivalent of an online diary that anybody can read (although you can easily restrict it via a password system – see box out for details about how to get started). Blogs can provide an ongoing, support mechanism for volunteers allowing them to share experiences and benefit from being involved in an online community.

“Blogs are a great way to easily communicate with volunteers and supporters,” says social software consultant Suw Charman-Anderson.

Suw founded The Open Rights Group, which seeks to nurture a community of campaigning volunteers, including grassroots activists. “It takes five minutes to set up, will always be free, and offers a secure and stable online presence without requiring any technical skills.

“A blog gets a conversation going immediately and maintains your relationships easily,” she adds. “Lots of effort is required to keep up a face-to-face relationship and engage emotionally, but a blog allows light contact and helps you to maintain what might otherwise be a weak relationship. It provides that one-to-one feeling, but with lots of people at once.” Such a format obviously has considerable potential for group mentoring.

Suw points out another advantage of blogging. “Not only can you get to

know about other bloggers and groups in your field in a way that would be overwhelming offline, a blog adds the potential for international collaboration and makes every organisation global. You can never tell where help might come from.”

Considerations

As with all your communications, think carefully about what you want to say and to whom – the key is to know and understand your audience in the online environment. Before setting up any of these new tools, do your research. Consider any long term implications and explore what similar projects are doing in this arena. They can be a source of inspiration and learning about what could work well for your particular programme's needs.

How to start your own blog

Signing up to Facebook or Twitter is very easy. Setting up your own blog takes a little more time, but isn't hard and online instructions will hold your hand all the way. There are several companies offering largely similar services, the most popular of which are Blogger (www.Blogger.com), Typepad (www.Typepad.com) and Wordpress (<http://wordpress.com/>). Each has its own followers and critics – I use all three for work (<http://blogs.independent.co.uk/independent>) and pleasure (www.shedworking.co.uk and <http://bigmouthmusic.wordpress.com>) but prefer Blogger.

Don't worry about design. There are various templates, which mean you can start pretty much immediately with something looking pretty good. You can always start to customise the design a little later once you have become more confident, or include little add-ons called 'widgets' that make your blog more interactive with other sites.

The key to writing in a blog (each entry is called a 'post') is to have your readership clearly in mind and focus on their needs and interests. Avoid going off at irrelevant tangents because that will devalue its use and make sure the blog says something that your other communications don't. Once you start, make sure that you, or your team, write regular posts. You don't have to write something every day, but the more frequently you write, the more useful it will become.

Additional things to bear in mind are highlighted by Robin, "So long as you understand the need to protect your privacy and take steps to do so, using social networking sites can be a really worthwhile experience. They will help you more easily maintain friendships over time and distance, make new friends and create other opportunities for you socially and professionally."

Of course, your project will continue to run without being online but this is the 21st century – not the 20th – and the past few years have seen a fundamental shift in the way we communicate. Don't be left behind...

In the next issue of Rapport, Alex Johnson looks at how mentoring and befriending projects around the country have made use of social networking. If your mentoring and befriending programme is using social networking please email details to

Jeanette.boyd@mandbf.org.uk and we may feature your exciting scheme in our winter issue.

What to do next?

- **The Media Trust** runs courses on blogging /social media and has guides on using social media in the voluntary sector www.mediatrust.org
- **Charity Communications** runs a course on social media www.charitycomms.org.uk
- **ICT Hub** has social media information and links to further resources www.ictHub.org.uk
- **Lasa knowledgebase** has resources and links www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk
- **CharityBlog** has links to blogs covering issues of interest to people in the voluntary sector www.charityblog.org.uk
- **Volunteer Genie** has information on using social networking to recruit volunteers www.volunteergenie.org.uk
- **IT4Communities** links charities with volunteer IT professionals www.it4communities.org.uk

Have your say on our APS review ...

The Approved Provider Standard (APS) is undergoing a major review, set for completion by the end of October. **Salim Nazir** introduces the scope of the review, and the issues and questions to be considered. The review process involves consultation with practitioners and other stakeholders. We welcome your views

Background

In 2001, the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) launched the APS, with the support of the Home Office Active Communities Directorate, in response to the rapid growth in mentoring and the desire to establish a benchmark for safe and effective practice. In 2004, it was extended to include befriending. The current review is being undertaken to maintain APS as the national benchmark for organisations running mentoring and befriending programmes, and to ensure its continued relevance to the sector.

APS as a quality standard

The APS was originally designed to be inclusive of and for use by projects of any size. However, in practice, projects are often at different stages of development. Some projects are just starting out and want to achieve the minimum requirements, while others want to be recognised as providing best practice.

All review questions are numbered:

1. Would organisations welcome the introduction of a two-tier system, where some projects would be recognised for achieving the minimum

benchmark standard and others for achieving best practice?

2. What other options could be looked at for recognising projects at different levels?

Content and structure

Currently, the APS is structured around 14 questions within five areas:

- Project aims and structure
- Client group
- Recruitment and selection of volunteers
- Volunteer preparation and training
- Monitoring and evaluation