

Gathering career wisdom from Facebook and other social media

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Tristram Hooley (Head of the International Centre for Guidance Studies – www.derby.ac.uk/icegs) discusses why careers professionals and their clients should be interested in social media.

The careers world is slowly waking up to the fact that something quiet interesting is happening on the web. Clients expect to be able to transact with our services via the web: finding information; booking appointments; engaging with advisors and so on. There is clearly work to do here, but perhaps more interestingly there are a growing range of online communication tools which mean that people are constantly publishing information about themselves and others into the public sphere. Surely this has got some implications for their careers? I talk about social media quite a lot to careers professionals and over the last year or so the reaction has moved from “?????” to a low mutter long the lines of “we've got to do something with Facebook”. However the problem remains what...?

I use the term social media to describe a range of internet technologies which enable people to publish their own web content and to connect with other people. Social media encompasses different types of applications such as social networking software (e.g. [Facebook](http://Facebook.com)), microblogs (e.g. [Twitter](http://Twitter.com)) blogs (e.g. [Wordpress](http://Wordpress.com)), social bookmarking sites (e.g. [Delicious](http://Delicious.com)) and many more. What these different services all have in common is that they utilise the power of the crowd, enabling people to communicate and act together.

I'll borrow a story from James Surowiecki's brilliant *The Wisdom of Crowds* to explain what I mean by the power of crowds. Surowiecki describes how whilst attending a country fair in 1906 the scientist Francis Galton watched a prize bull being weighed. Visitors at the fair were asked to guess the weight of the bull, with the person who got closest winning a prize. Galton gathered up the 787 guesses and decided to perform some statistical tests on them (there was no X Factor in 1906 so I guess Galton had time on his hands). Galton noted that there were a number of experts in the crowd (butchers and farmers etc) and expected that their guess would be closer than the average of the inexpert crowd. However the average of the crowd's guess was 1,197 pounds and the bull actually weighed 1,198 pounds.

Surowiecki's book goes on to explore the power of crowds in more depth. I'll leave you go off and read it if you are interested. However, from the perspective of careers education and advice it is possible that there is a lesson here. If we can encourage our clients to search widely, to take account of a range of different opinions and advice and to have a process for aggregating these opinions (like Galton's averaging) it is

very likely that they will make better career decisions. Social media offers a way of quickly and effectively sourcing the opinions of many people and also provides some help in aggregating these opinions together.

So how might this work? Let's imagine a bored 17 year old considering whether to go to university. It is possible that he carefully considers his options in a rational manner, listing pros and cons, visiting a professional educational adviser and visiting a number of different universities to get a feel for the experience. However, this kind of proactive rational decision making is not always associated with bored 17 year olds, so it is possible he opens his Facebook account and posts "*I don't know if I should go to uni?*" In response to his question he's likely to get a mix of answers "yes", "no", questions "*what do you want to do?*" and resources "*have a look at this course www.redbrick.ac.uk/baswordjuggling*" and so on. The broader his network (e.g. if it includes parents, teachers, parents friends) the more diverse the advice he is likely to get. If he is able aggregate this information and sort through it, he will be likely to find lots of useful stuff.

The problem with this approach to career exploration is that at the moment you are unlikely to get any advice from a careers professional. This is a shame as careers professionals have access to more resources and ideas than almost anyone else. Given this, perhaps careers services should be making themselves available in the places where people are undertaking career exploration? I'm not suggesting that we should go around 'friending' everyone in case they have a career question. I think that we need to move into social spaces carefully and in non-intrusive ways, but I also think that we should be there if we are wanted/needed.

Social media isn't a computer application that you can take off of a shelf and ask to "do careers advice" for you. Rather it offers careers professionals a set of tools through which they can engage and communicate with clients and facilitate career learning to happen. As a sector we've got lots of learning to do in order to make sure that we get this right. I'd be really interested to hear about experiments with social media that people have been trying, but for now here are some ideas about where you and your service might want to start.

1) Start using social media for your own professional development. Before you start using social media with your clients you probably need to gain a greater understanding for yourself. Thankfully social media can be really powerful as a professional development tool. I'd start by getting a Twitter account – find me at <http://twitter.com/pigironjoe> and message me to say that you've read this article and I'll try and point you in the right direction.

2) Experiment with setting up a social media presence for your service. Writing a blog is an excellent way to make some of your advice and expertise more widely available. Try using Posterous <http://www.posterous.com/> as it is one of the simplest blogging tools out there.

3) Start seeing digital literacy as a career management skill. Universities are using social media and employers all have social media recruitment strategies. As careers providers we need to be helping our clients to maximise their opportunities through wise use of social media. There is probably value in starting to talk to clients about

how they are using social media and whether they are aware of the career implications.