Could your Digital Profile Damage your Career? –

Digital Professionalism – the next phase of online literacy?

Bernadette John

bernadette.john@digitalprofessionalism.com

"Digital Professionalism is the competence or values expected of a professional when engaged in social and digital communication." In an online world where private personas are merging with professional and public, it is fast becoming an essential digital literacy for the contemporary workplace and a key skills set for organisations facing up to the challenges and transformational benefits that social media has to offer. Employees need training and support in how to create, protect and even spring clean their online profiles. No continuing professional development portfolio can afford to ignore it, argues Bernadette John. But, with ever evolving smart applications, platforms and functionality, and a 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) culture in the workplace, it is a demanding challenge.

Bernadette John was the Digital Professionalism (DP) and Social Media Lead at King's College London until July 2014. She has over twenty-five years of experience in various professional roles from Midwife to Year Lead at a Medical School. Bernadette initiated the teaching of DP at King's College London's School of Medicine and was the driver for the adoption of this training across other disciplines including dentistry and law. She spearheaded the creation, evolution and evaluation of KINSHIP, King's trial internal social network and was the subject matter expert for the eLearning course on DP that was rolled out across Kings College London and to employees of the affiliated NHS Foundation Trusts: Guy's and St. Thomas', South London and Maudsley and King's College Hospital. This course is now compulsory for all undergraduate students at the Medical and Dental schools.

An early adopter, social media super user and accomplished blogger, Bernadette has worked extensively with prestigious brands, PR agencies and the private sector. Her satirical blog resulted in [a column in The Telegraph](#) in 2008, the blog was nominated as one of the [Top 50 websites for parents by the Independent](#) in 2008 and Bernadette was nominated as one of the [Top 40 Bloggers Who Really Matter by The Times](#) in 2010 – "the online writers, stars and commentators that everyone is talking about." She contributes on issues around social and digital communications at [The Huffington Post](#) and [The Guardian.](#)

Bernadette now consults and lectures internationally, providing pragmatic and accessible advice on social media crisis management for employees, employers and students. She is well versed in the detail of both the functionality of social media platforms and the guidelines published by the governing bodies of various professional groups.

"DP has become an essential skill, underpinning online literacy, and requiring technical fluency, regular training, relevant updates and clear policy and guidelines. It is no longer a level of behaviour an organisation can simply expect from its staff or students by parking a social media policy on an intranet or issuing a stern warning regarding what is said on social channels."

Our professional and private lives are converging. Sharing via social media has become so intuitive, so mainstream - providing us with access to feedback from friends and contacts instantaneously – that we seem to be becoming less and less self conscious, sharing more and more about ourselves in public, potentially impacting on our reputations and the reputations of the business we work for and those we associate with. DP is not just an issue concerning young people who use Facebook and Twitter, it relates to everybody who uses digital channels – from email to iMessage, from Google searches to LinkedIn, using images on PowerPoint slides for presentations, taking photos on a camera phone that are streamed to the cloud or shared on Instagram, online gaming, WhatsApp, even shopping on ecommerce sites, at home or at work.

Downloading free Apps for the instant gratification of the functionality and convenience they offer us is all very well, but how many of us have naively and thoughtlessly ticked on the terms and conditions acceptance without processing the fact that we have become the commodity not the customer, blissfully unaware that we are sharing our location, contacts and diaries? Do you know which of your Apps are permitted to send text messages or email from your device without notifying you? If you access your work email via your personal mobile, does this contravene any corporate email use policy?

The institutional risk is not only about what those in our organisation say and where they say it. The biggest problems I am seeing right now are less and less around what people actually say and share consciously about themselves and each other, but more to do with the consequences of private lives becoming public via functionality in plugins like [Rapportive](#) and platforms such as Tumblr accessing and making public, material that should be kept private.

For example, a student started an anonymous blog a couple of years ago where she described her battle with alcohol abuse and illicit substances. She didn't realise that because she'd registered the name of it using her Yahoo or Gmail email account, anybody else who registered with the blogging platform and had her email address in their contacts list, would be sign-posted to her blog, even a headhunter who was using the Rapportive email plugin. Yes, she had the right to free speech, but did she really want her work colleagues, clients or potential employers to be aware of her private issues?

Users are finding it increasingly difficult to mitigate for how current technology can accidentally [expose their private lives](#). Did anyone at Facebook or LinkedIn spare a thought for how difficult it must be for anyone wishing to obscure their whereabouts (those in witness protection or fleeing domestic violence, for example), when these platforms began suggesting that we connect with the siblings and friends of those we wish to avoid?

Have any of us fully mitigated for the consequences of our digital communications and online behavior? Brands, careers and reputations can be damaged – or enhanced – by what appears about us as individuals, our professions and our employers online. This could even be by mistaken identity, misunderstanding, naivety or lack of familiarity with the functionality of the technology in our pockets. Once we have over shared, even by mistake, it may not be so simple take the information back. Yes, you have the right to use Apps like Tinder, but once your colleagues or students have realised you are out there, you are public property.

Employees and employers, one hand constantly on the BYOD mobile enabled device in their pocket, must be clear about their rights and expectations if costly employment tribunals are to be avoided. Should, for example, offensive personal tweets justify dismissal? Public and private sector employers from the NHS to the financial services, keen to protect their reputation and bottom line, have been faced with avoidable issues due to careless use of digital and social channels by their staff. Deutsche Bank recently read the riot act when Colin Fan warned traders to measure what they said online:

"Exercise good sense and sound judgement, think carefully about what you say and how you say it."

- Increasing numbers of clinicians are using their phones to take medical photos, despite the fact that such clinical images should be encrypted and kept securely as part of medical notes. Has anyone raised the issues around information governance with these clinicians? Images are now routinely streamed between devices and platforms via the cloud. Some clinical images are turning up in the public domain
- A postgraduate student realises that the once fashionable Bebo is re-launching and may still have photos of her experimentation with drugs and alcohol. She desperately wants to ensure the images go away as they no longer accurately represent who she is today, before she returns to work in a country with far more conservative expectations of women
- A senior member of staff has his photo screen grabbed from his webcam when he is on an adult website and attempts are made to blackmail him with the threat of exposing his private life to his family, clients and employer

These are the issues I deal with every day of the week, raised with me by the staff and students I teach and mentor across universities and wider across financial institutions, health trusts and law firms across the UK and Europe. A level of digital fluency is essential is we are to protect sensitive data and the reputations of our clients and employers. But there is more to DP than engaging a filter regarding what we share and locking down our privacy settings! It provides staff and students with a tangible edge in the workplace. Shouldn't organisations help their staff actively develop and improve their online personas, making them masters of their own digital fate?

References
John B. (2014) Intellectual property and the Internet. Faculty Dental Journal, The Royal College of Surgeons of England. October 2014

John B. (2014) Could your iPhone cost you your job? The Telegraph, June 2014

John B. (2014). The dangers of social media. Aesthetics. January 2014

John B. (2013). Schools and Digital Footprints. TheHuffingtonPost.co.uk. March 7, 2013

John B. (2013). Students: how to be boss-friendly online. The Guardian. January 31, 2013

Bernadette has acted as subject matter expert on a new eLearning course, for Virtual College, a company with over 1.5 million e-learners on its system. This product is generic and available in a number of formats for integration with a range of VLEs and relevant to any industry. Entitled "Managing your Professional Digital Profile" the course aims to assist learners in establishing the skills required of a professional when using digital social communication tools, to realise the benefits, manage the risks and provide the skills to monitor and maintain your digital profile. Email richards@virtual-college.co.uk for further information.

Jisc Collections are currently assessing the level of interest across the education sector, with a view to licensing a new eLearning course on the issues of Digital Professionalism for the education sector. Email caroline.mackay@jisc.ac.uk for further information.