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Social work in the digital age: secure tech tools for social good

What you need to know:

New technologies can increase mobility and efficiency in the field of social work, while keeping data secure. Harnessing these efficiencies is a chance to focus resources on vital in-person services for clients. To take advantage of this opportunity and avoid difficulties, match the technology to the demands of your practice, include clients and staff in the process, and look to existing models for insight.

What is this research about?

Historically, social workers gather information by taking written notes in the field and then return to their office to enter those notes into a secure database. This can be time-consuming and doesn't provide the real-time data which is sometimes needed. While social workers in British Columbia (BC) may be using multiple applications and devices, most of these have been implemented without consideration of work outside the traditional office, and may not have appropriate protective measures to keep information secure.

This research determines the industry-specific best practices for providing secure technologies supporting social work outside the office, to ultimately improve mobility and productivity by enabling staff working outside the office to spend

more time delivering face-to-face services and doing outreach work.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers reviewed best practices and interviewed people in social work field. They used this data to help the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) give social workers access to secure mobile technology suiting their client assistance needs. These research questions guided the review:

- How is secure technology successfully implemented to improve work mobility, productivity and social work practice?
- How has technology implementation been unsuccessful in enhancing mobility and productivity in social work and why did it fail?



Mobile tech like tablets can give social workers a productivity and mobility boost. That way they can spend more time on face-to-face interaction with clients.



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What did the researchers find?

The findings revealed that without thorough engagement of stakeholders, technology use in the field can encounter resistance. This is a barrier to increased productivity. However, if the plan to implement mobile technology includes all relevant people, these barriers are much less likely to occur. Careful planning to match technology to the needs of the practice is key.

Given that most groups face strong reluctance among social workers to using mobile technologies, necessary engagement with social workers and clients is not yet happening among many institutions.

In a constantly evolving digital context, these are significant findings deserving further attention and research.

How can you use this research?

This research is relevant to anyone seeking to benefit from mobile technology for social work, including governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, and policy makers. The findings give helpful context for other groups transitioning to using mobile technology when working with clients and out of the office, especially for those with concerns about securing data. The intent of this research was to give MCFD information to effectively facilitate using mobile technology for social work in BC. The research recommendations give useful insight on engaging people with new technology and tracking the efficiency of new technology use.

About the researchers

Andrew Elliott and Leila Mazhari are graduate students in the University of Victoria's Graduate Studies 505 multi-disciplinary research internship course.

Drs. Gord Miller and Wayne Mitic of the University of Victoria (UVic) [School of Child and Youth Care](#) both supervised the research project.

Facilitated by [Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization](#), this project is a partnership between MCFD and UVic.

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Keywords

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