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Citation for published version (APA):

Rajagopal, K., Joosten-ten Brinke, D., & Sloep, P. (2010). Using personal professional networks for learning in social work: Need for insight into the real-world context. In M. Wolpers, P. A. Kirschner, M. Scheffel, S. Lindstaedt, & V. Dimitrova (Eds.), *Sustaining TEL: From Innovation to Learning and Practice: 5th European Conference on Technology Enhanced Learning, EC-TEL 2010, Barcelona, Spain, September 28 - October 1, 2010. Proceedings* (1 ed., pp. 572-577). Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-16020-2_56

DOI:

[10.1007/978-3-642-16020-2_56](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-16020-2_56)

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2010

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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Using Personal Networks for Learning in Social Work: Need for Insight into the Real-World Context

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Abstract. Professionals in social work practice depend on a high level of skills, intellectual ability and a wide knowledge base to find innovative solutions for the complex problems they encounter. They develop their career and build their own expertise through the experiences they gain along the way. As professional learning in social work happens very much in dialogue and discourse with colleagues and peers, they search for the most suitable and most relevant dialogue partner available in an extensive and high-quality personal network. This paper presents a literature review on the learning needs of these professionals and on some theoretical background to the use of technology as a means of supporting this type of learning. It argues for the need for more insight into the strategies used by professionals in building, maintaining and activating connections in personal network for *learning* purposes.

Key words: Personal Learning Network, social networks, dialogue and discussion as means of learning, expertise identification, usability

1 Introduction

Social work deals with issues of health care, poverty, homelessness, migration and integration in national and international environments promoted by government institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGO). Professionals involved in social work practice use, adapt and build a high level of skills, intellectual ability and a wide knowledge base to find innovative solutions for the complex problems they encounter [1]. By participating in various projects (specified by location, time, target group or community, and topics), they develop their career and build their own expertise through the experiences they gain along the way [2–4]. Therefore, they continuously need to independently acquire and create new skills and new knowledge to fulfil the jobs demands successfully.

To support these learning needs, social work professionals rely on two strategies: (i) individual and collaborative reflection, and (ii) sharing experiences and reflections with selected others in an extensive personal people network [2, 5–7].

It is clear from these two strategies that much of the learning in social work happens in dialogue and discourse with colleagues and peers. Moreover, the specific experience, expertise and interests of the dialogue partners will greatly influence the relevance of the discussion held and the resulting insights gained by individual professionals. In other words, it matters who the dialogue partner is. The learning need therefore becomes a search for the most suitable and most relevant dialogue partner available in an extensive and high-quality personal network and the creation and maintenance of such a high quality personal network, which includes potentially relevant dialogue partners at the time of the learning need).

This paper presents a literature review of the learning needs of professionals in social work and the considerations that need to be made when looking at technology as a means of supporting these professionals in their learning. In section 2, we will go deeper into the problem faced by these professionals in finding suitable dialogue partners and the role of technology in this. In section 3, we will discuss some theoretical background to this problem, and introduce the concept of a Personal Learning Network. In section 4, we will give some conclusions and indications of future work.

2 Problem Description

In order to have access to the right expertise and experience at the time needed, social work professionals build and maintain extensive personal people networks. These are the networks of people set up by an individual, which includes connections from face-to-face interactions (family, friends, colleagues, partners, neighbours, etc.) - that can be mirrored online through social networking sites - and possibly includes some connections made purely online.

As personal networks are only in recent years enjoying increased interest in the academic world ([8–11]), there have been few studies on this topic. One of these studies, conducted by Nardi, Whittaker and Schwarz, indicates that individuals need to perform three important primary tasks that form the basis for all other further activities within the network. These are [11]:

- ***Building a network***, i.e. adding new people to the network so that there are resources available when a learning need arises;
- ***Maintaining the network***, where a central task is keeping in touch with relevant persons;
- ***Activating connections*** with selected persons at the time the learning need has to be solved.

Any learning activities in the network will build on the results of these tasks. However, there is very little literature available on how professionals go about creating and using their personal networks for *learning* purposes. It is unexplored which strategies they use in building and maintaining their network to make it optimal for learning. It is also not known which strategies they employ in activating connections with relevant others in these networks when they need

support in their learning. More insight into this is necessary if we want to provide suitable supportive technologies.

Social networking technology is certainly used to support these primary tasks: the many online networking and resource-sharing platforms aimed at social work professionals and the many individuals and groups working in this field found on open social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn bear witness to this. These sites often include network visualisation technology and social matching systems to help users get more control over their personal networks. However, it is unclear how effective these technologies are in supporting professionals in their strategies for learning from these networks. In order to design technologies that support professionals in effectively and efficiently building and maintaining their personal networks for learning and finding suitable dialogue partners in these networks, it is first necessary to have a clear picture of the strategies and technologies they use to achieve this now.

3 Theoretical Background

The learning environment of professionals involved in social work practice is one of networked learning. To look into the role of technology in this form of networked learning, I will use the concept of a Learning Network (LN), which is defined as a “particular kind of online, social network that is designed to support (non-formal) learning in a particular domain” [12]. This definition is a functional definition: it describes what such a network does, but is silent on exactly how such a Learning Network can be or should be implemented into practice.

Implementations of Learning Networks (LNs) in practice show a myriad of underlying design options, concerning:

- **Pedagogy:** LNs can be used to support non-formal learning, informal learning and even formal learning, in diverse learning settings (formal education, adult education, etc.)
- **Organisational structures:** LNs can have various user roles (student, teacher, support staff, learner, peer, group, moderator, etc.) and different levels of user control
- **Supportive technologies:** LNs can include basic functionalities (such as profiling, forum, chat, feed aggregator, etc.) and more advanced services such as navigation services (recommendation of relevant and useful content) [13], positioning services (assessing the position of a learner with regard to content or peers in order to give appropriate advice) [14, 15] and communication and collaboration services (connecting learners who may be to collectively solve problems) [16]

When moving to practice, design decisions need to be made with respect to pedagogy, organisation and use and functionality of technology underlying a Learning Network. Also, the technical functionalities offered in a learning network seem to be very closely determined by the pedagogy and the organisational structure of the network. For example, a navigation service and a positioning

service presume a network with people and content, available on one technical platform.

The Learning Networks of interest here are the online and personal people networks, built and managed by individual learning professionals in social work to support their non-formal learning - a form of LN which I refer to as Personal Learning Networks. It needs to be investigated what the underlying pedagogy and organisation of such a Personal Learning Network are. As for technology in these networks, we take an approach to design that starts from the individual learners point-of-view. This approach is supported by the research on Personal Learning Environments (PLE) [17–19], where technologies give a high level of user control to the learner at the centre.

4 Conclusions and Further Work

Professionals involved in social work learn through dialogue and discussion with their colleagues and peers. They support this form of learning by building and maintaining extensive, high-quality personal networks. We think that studying these personal networks and how they are used in practice to support learning is a good starting point to discover these professionals' needs on supportive technology. We expect that professionals who have personal networks for learning will use particular strategies in building, maintaining and activating that network, with the forethought of increasing the support offered by this network for learning. These strategies might involve having connections with extremely diverse fields of expertise, or rather having connections with minimal difference in expertise and experience (network specialised in one field), etc.

An empirical study (i.e. an extensive survey and in-depth interviews) is planned, which will give us more insight into the strategies that professionals use to build and maintain their personal networks for learning and the strategies they employ in activating connections with relevant others in these networks. Such a study will also show how they use technology now to support these activities and the challenges they face in it. From this empirical data, principles can be extracted to create a theoretical framework on the concept of a Personal Learning Network, in relation to the concepts of Learning Networks and Personal Learning Environments. This data will also indicate the technological needs and requirements of these professionals.

Starting from this real-world context, existing technological solutions can be improved to offer professionals more effective and efficient support in creating and building high-quality personal learning networks and finding suitable dialogue partners in these networks.

Acknowledgements. This paper provides a theoretical framework that will be part of a PhD study conducted within the LtfLL project. The LtfLL project is partially supported/co-funded by the European Union under the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) theme of the 7th Framework Programme for R&D. This document does not represent the opinion of the Euro-

pean Union, and the European Union is not responsible for any use that might be made of its content.

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