

How social networking can work for you

In the second part of our look at the importance of social networking, **Alex Johnson** examines how projects are using the latest tools to improve their services

Orang-utans selling ice-cream? Environmental updates from friendly pandas? Not so common in the real world, but surprisingly familiar on the World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) own island in the virtual online world of Second Life. Second Life is a 3-D virtual world accessible via the internet where users interact with each other and participate in individual and group activities.

And it's not a stunt: WWF has used the potential of Second Life to promote awareness of key campaigns and is planning to use the 'island' for long-term awareness raising and community building (see www.panda.org).

This kind of activity may be beyond the capabilities of most mentoring and befriending projects, although it is not that difficult to set up something similar but smaller: the Royal British Legion set up a virtual cenotaph in Second Life as part of its Poppy Appeal. What it does underline is that the internet offers many new ways of making personal connections.

New technologies and e-mentoring

The Brightside Trust (www.thebrightsidetrust.org) is using these new technologies rather imaginatively. It has built up a successful e-mentoring programme, which raises the achievement levels of disadvantaged students by pairing them with undergraduates and professionals. The trust's flagship scheme is Bright Journals, which concentrates on health-related professions.



Dominic Wood

Two would-be mentors search Twitter for an appropriate project

"In a sense it's not really social networking since it's a private site," says Nikki Whiteman, the trust's web editor. "But there are certainly plenty of online resources where mentees can have virtual conversations with mentors and find out more information about careers." As well as a simple information source, it includes interviews with professionals, quizzes, polls and blogs.

"Anyone wondering about new ways of working should go online and explore"

"We went down the e-mentoring route because it's efficient to deliver and it's effective," adds Nikki. "Many mentors don't have a block of time they can set aside on a regular basis, especially in some professions such as the law. But it's much easier to dip in and out online and develop useful relationships." She says this results in shorter, but

more frequent, periods of contact; that it is easy to measure site visits and produce a record of exactly what's been achieved: making the use of e-mentoring easy to justify.

"Sometimes there are offline meetings too, which complement the online work," says Nikki. "For our ten-week business mentoring programme with small groups of children in year 8 and 9, there were meetings at the beginning and end, but the ideas during the project were all developed online. A group spokesman often emerged, but that didn't prevent other children from having their say in terms of input. The mentors could see if somebody was shy about contributing and leave them individual messages of support and encouragement."

Increase awareness

Putting the technology in place is not too complex, but a customised mentoring or befriending service must ensure that it is secure, robust, private and easily checkable for

unsuitable content. In this regard, free services such as Facebook (www.facebook.com) can sometimes be inappropriate platforms for actual mentoring. However, Facebook is a great opportunity to increase awareness of a project's work. Schemes such as The Inspire Project (which creates educational opportunities for young Muslims in deprived inner city areas) and Chance UK (which works with five- to 11-year-olds at risk of developing anti-social behaviour) use Facebook as a place to post news or updates. For example, people were able to add poppies to their Facebook profiles to raise awareness of the Royal British Legion's poppy campaign.

Sharing photos

For similar reasons, the photo-sharing platform Flickr is not a perfect area to share certain photographs. But some mentoring projects do use it and there is no reason why it could not be useful for some schemes in the right circumstances: see www.flickr.com/search/?q=mentoring&w=all for some good examples.

Moving images – rather than still photos – are a further option, with YouTube a useful resource. For example, the “Friends in Deed” entry on YouTube (http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=TjBsQfc_0qw) is a documentary commissioned by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation that looks at five very different mentoring and befriending relationships. In two years, it has been viewed more than 1,500 times. The beauty of YouTube videos is that they can easily be ‘embedded’ on your blog site. Other organisations using this method include The National Autistic Society, which launched its Think Differently About Autism campaign entirely online and uses short films – as well as blogs –

to get its messages across (www.think-differently.org.uk).

Whatever you choose, your plan should be to select what is right for your project. It certainly doesn't need to be as wide-ranging as The Brightside Trust's set-up, which has also experimented with using Twitter (www.twitter.com) to generate alerts to updated content.

A mentoring blog

Rob Chappell is the volunteer co-ordinator at Smash (Swindon Mentoring and Self Help at www.smash-youth-project.co.uk), which supports vulnerable young people. Despite being a self-confessed, “non-techie”, Rob set up Smash's blog via the wordpress platform and maintains it with help from other team members.

“We had no web presence a year ago,” he says. “We experimented with a chat forum but people weren't contributing and it didn't appear ‘living’. The blog was customised by a friendly local web designer and is enormously helpful. It is easy and cheap to look after and it's a pretty painless operation.” He says the blog represents an “extra shop window” and a way of communicating within the project. “It's certainly attracting volunteers and mentees,” he adds. “It's also improved our Google ranking so we appear higher up search pages, which contributes to more hits to our main website.”

But does it work?

The Brightside Trust's evaluation of its physics project – Big Bang Blogs – showed that it had a positive effect on mentees' views of physics, their confidence, motivation and decision to study physics after GCSE level. In total, the trust links more than 3,000 students to around 2,000 higher education and NHS mentors, with more than 40 higher education

institutions paying an annual subscription fee for its services. The website also includes numerous examples of e-mentoring and in-depth evaluation of e-mentoring.

“We're always keen to look at new ways of working,” says the trust's Nikki. “My advice to anybody wondering whether they should too is to go online and explore. There's a huge amount of free information out there.”

Other sites of interest

SagaZone (www.sagazone.co.uk)

Shows you don't have to be a teenager to get the most out of social networking. The site is an online social community for people over 50. It allows you to chat in online forums, write your own blog and share photo albums with other members.

Horsemouth

(www.horsemouth.co.uk)

Claims to be the first dedicated site for e-mentoring and offers free one-to-one mentoring for potential and existing entrepreneurs, allowing them to share their experiences on various topics. Business owners can also register as a mentor.

Wild Apricot

(www.wildapricot.com/blogs/newsblog/default.aspx)

Based in the USA. This is a blog for volunteers, webmasters and administrators of associations, clubs, charities, communities and other groups. It focuses on issues and trends in web technologies in a readable way.

Scribd (www.scribd.com)

A place where you can upload documents – including pdf, word, powerpoint and other file formats – and automatically turn them into a readable web format so anyone can see them, wherever they are.