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Minding our own business

Heather Dale considers how information technology – such a huge asset in building our businesses – can also be a hindrance in some of its forms

I have worked in independent practice for over 25 years, and for 16 of those years I made my living by that, and by some hourly paid teaching. After 16 years I decided I would quite like a holiday, so I got a part-time salaried job. That shifted the balance of my life rather dramatically, so now I work three days for a local university, and two days in independent practice, leaving two days free for paperwork and building the business.

I enjoy the freedom of independent practice: of being able to choose my working hours, manage my own time and money, and being in charge of my working day. I also love working from home. Despite the inconveniences (mainly for the other people who live in the house), I love being able to potter if there is a gap between clients, or sit quietly in my own space to reflect on what has just happened in a session. These are the plusses of independent practice: there are no bosses, no one to tell me to fill out a report or a form, no one to notice if I have a long lunch break or take an afternoon off.

However, for many of us, there is also a downside. Independent practice is a risky business: it is lonely, poorly paid and you cannot talk to anyone about what has just happened. No bosses also means no colleagues to gossip with over the coffee machine or to talk over problems with. Also, if our living is dependent on working, we tend to take on more work than we should, as there is always the worry that next week there may be none.

When I first started out as an independent practitioner, all my clients came to me by word of

mouth. I never advertised, and because clients came via friends or friends of friends, there was a good chance that we would be able to develop a successful working relationship. However, with the growth in information technology, therapy has changed, and now my clients come partly by word of mouth but mainly through the internet. The growth of information technology has made reaching clients an easier business in many ways, but more challenging in others. On the one hand we are faced with wonderful opportunities to advertise our services and ourselves but the flipside is that we have no way of knowing what happens to that information.

I entitled the talk, on which this article is based, ‘Minding your own business’ because of the double-edged meaning that phrase has for those of us in independent practice: the aggressive keep-out-of-my-life meaning, and the second meaning, which is to do with caring for our businesses and ourselves. What I intend to think about are some ethical issues arising from this double-edged complexity, and how modern information technology – such a huge asset in building our businesses – can also be a hindrance in some of its forms¹.

Delights and dangers of the digital age

For those of us in the business of therapy, the growth of information technology provides us with an interesting dilemma. Whilst we need to protect our privacy (tell clients to ‘mind their own business’, if rather more tactfully), we may also need to have a public presence on the web in

order to ‘mind our own business’ in the sense of building and growing our work. This is particularly relevant in the current climate, where Generation Y – those born from the mid-70s onwards who are also known as the Net Generation or Digital Natives² – appear to live their lives in a public forum, where celebrities tweet their every move to their followers, and pictures of last night’s party may appear on Facebook the next day, with space for friends and strangers alike to comment.

‘We have to be very careful about what we post – the picture of the party where we got drunk may be Googled’

So I am going to look at the delights and dangers of information technology in independent practice, with an emphasis on how we take care of our businesses and ourselves. Whilst, for most of us, having an internet presence has become essential, there are hidden hazards to putting information out into the virtual world.

At this stage I should probably define what I mean by information technology. Here are some examples:

- an answering service (as opposed to a machine)
- telephone (landline and mobile)
- fax machine
- email
- instant messaging/Skype
- social networking sites.



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You will see from this list how important information technology is to us all. I would be surprised if anyone reading this does not use at least three of these on a daily basis. I will come clean here and say that I am completely in love with information technology. My first act in the morning is to turn on my computer and my last act at the end of the evening is to turn it off. With me now I have a laptop with wireless access, a mobile phone with internet access, an e-book reader that can access the internet, a digital photo frame and at least three USB sticks. That is my basic never-travel-without kit. When I go on holiday, I don't ask myself whether or not I should take a laptop, but how many. Information technology has changed my life. I researched my talk online; I typed it on a computer, and sent it electronically to BACP. I keep my client notes on a computer, I buy online, and I read on a Kindle.

Here are some of the delights of information technology for me:

- immediacy of information
- ease and reach of advertising
- I can keep a permanent record of information
- client work does not have to be face to face.

And here are some of the dangers:

- immediacy of information
- ease and reach of advertising
- I can keep a permanent record of information
- client work does not have to be face to face.

Let's have a longer look at each of these.

Immediacy of information

The wonderful aspect of the internet is that information is so readily available. For example, in researching the talk on which this article is based, I went first to the internet, and to book my train ticket to the AIP conference, I went first to the internet. All this and more is available from my armchair. However, for therapists, that can create some problems.

Ease and reach of advertising

One of the biggest advantages of the internet for those of us in independent practice is, of course, the ease with which we can advertise our services. This is a huge plus: for very little expense we can reach more people than ever before. However, once we have advertised, that information remains on the net forever. And so we need to be very careful about the information that we put out there. For example, some sites encourage a certain amount of self-disclosure, but be sure that you are happy for not just potential clients, but the whole world to know those details.

Permanent records can be kept

For me, one of the especial delights of a computer is the ease with which I can keep client records. Keeping records electronically, suitably protected, is a big boon. However, if electronic records of any sort are kept, it is advisable to contact the Information Commissioner's Office to enquire whether you should register or not.

Client work does not have to be face to face

One big plus of information technology is that client work no longer has to be face to face. In theory, and sometimes in practice, both client and counsellor can be anywhere in the world, and can converse via phone, email, messaging, Skype or some other format. This can be a tremendous advantage. Sessions can take place when the client cannot physically arrive, and some therapists use online contact as a way of helping clients make the transition as therapy draws to a close. However, working with a faceless client means you cannot use body language clues. It also means the client may not experience the supportive nature of the relationship³.

Out of these delights and dangers come some ethical issues that are only just being understood. I am going to discuss three issues:

- managing out of hours contact
- therapist privacy and client

confidentiality

- confusion regarding the nature of the therapeutic relationship.

Managing out of hours contact

This links with the 24/7 nature of the internet. Digital natives are used to being able to communicate at any time of the day or night. At my university, it is not uncommon for students to send emails at three in the morning, and to get increasingly desperate when they are not responded to. In addition, potential clients may go elsewhere if they do not receive an immediate reply.

So there is a decision to be made about how to reply to texts and emails¹. If you receive a message from a potential client at midnight, do you reply immediately, thus giving the impression that you are constantly available? If a client cancels a session out of hours, do you respond immediately? It's enormously important to have a rule that can be applied – and as so often, the substance of the rule is less important than having a clearly thought-through process.

Personally I have a rule that I will talk on the phone for a few minutes, but for longer than that I will charge pro rata at my sessional rate. My contract says that I ask that between-session contact is kept to a minimum, but obviously I do talk to people on the phone. Each of us must make our own decision, but that decision needs to demonstrate not only respect for the client but also respect for self.

Therapist privacy and client confidentiality

I cannot stress too strongly that the internet is not a confidential medium. Because we take for granted the use of information technology, it can be hard to remember how open a forum it really is. Indeed, writing an email or sending a text is about as confidential as sending a postcard – you can never be sure who else might read your text or email. There have been recorded instances of a baby monitor in one house picking up conversations from a separate

house that are being held on cordless or mobile phones¹.

Digital natives do not only expect instant response to messages, they also, as I said earlier, appear to live their lives in public, often on social networking sites. Consequently, inviting people to be friends on a social networking site, or searching for information about their therapist, is a way of passing the time. This means that we have to be very careful about what we post. All that information – the picture of the party where we got drunk, or talked to friends about our personal life – may be Googled⁴.

For example, some therapists use Facebook or a blog as advertising tools. That can be a useful and modern way to run a business, but be warned: the information on it needs to be information that you are happy to share. Those who have a Facebook page need to be absolutely sure that privacy rules are firmly set. Even better, be sure that there is nothing on that page that you would not mind your clients reading.

Confusion regarding the nature of the therapeutic relationship

In a world where virtual friendships are normal, it is very possible that a client will send you a friend request. As with any invitation into a non-therapeutic relationship, this needs to be treated with great care⁵.

There is a second issue that can lead to confusion regarding the therapeutic relationship and that is the informal language that emailing, messaging and texting seem to demand. I read a news item recently that said it was inappropriate to address people as 'Dear' when writing emails, but it did not say what was appropriate. There is a real problem with using an informal, as-you-speak approach to writing – the ear is more leisurely than the eye, and so writing as one speaks can be open to serious misinterpretation.

Using text-speak for clients can be misconstrued very easily. A tale that others and I come across these days in different guises, goes something

like this. A counsellor routinely allowed clients to text or ring him between sessions. This had worked well enough for a number of years. However, one particularly vulnerable client began to text with emergencies at different times of the day. The counsellor would text back quite short texts, and using text speak. In particular, he would sometimes sign off with a kiss, a very common way of signing off a text or email. However, the client misconstrued the texts and thought that he was being invited into a friendship. Consequently, he texted more often. The therapist realised that he was getting in over his head and, having consulted his supervisor, ended the therapeutic relationship. At this stage the client complained, offering as evidence the text messages that he had kept.

As I have said, this is not a true story, but a variation of several stories that I am hearing increasingly often, which demonstrates the need for caution in using texts and emails. The lesson here is to be very careful about what you commit to text or email, as it can come back to haunt you⁶. Remember, anything written down is a permanent record, so be careful that it cannot be misconstrued. My own policy is never to reply to a text, call or email for 24 hours. That way I give myself time to be sure about what I want to say and how I want to say it.

Information technology and ethical considerations in a nutshell:

- permanent records are not necessarily in a client's interest
- confidentiality cannot be assured
- confusion regarding the nature of the therapeutic relationship
- lack of physical availability of therapist (love not able to be shown)
- should you Google your clients and might they Google you?^{7,8}

Conclusion

We who are so used to working with boundaries, may find ourselves adrift in this Brave New World where privacy and confidentiality may not appear to be highly prized. To use new technology effectively we may

need to construct different markers and re-think essential issues. Remember, we are not generally a fourth emergency service, and should not be available 24 hours. I know of some therapists, more dedicated than I am perhaps, who allow clients to ring anytime of the day or night, and whilst I would not want to do that myself, I have no quibble with it. The issue, as I have said, is to make sure that you have a rule, which is applied equally to all clients⁹. ■

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