

Face-to-Facebook: a blended approach to careers work

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With youth unemployment rising and government cuts across the country impacting on support services for young people, the Youth Employability Service in Brighton and Hove has adopted a broad approach to engagement, offering services to young people in both an online and offline context. This article uses the Youth Employability Service as a case study, demonstrating the success that integrating face-to-face work with online engagement opportunities has had on the service, and arguing that a blended approach to delivering services for young people is vital for the future of careers work.



Introduction

The National Careers Service was launched at the beginning of April, promising a range of online support opportunities for young people aged 13-19, but no option for young people to access face to face information, advice and guidance (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012). Where face-to-face careers and support services exist for young people they tend to be provided by local authorities and aimed at 'vulnerable' or 'NEET' young people. Brighton and Hove's Youth Employability Service on which this case study focuses is one such service. However, cuts to careers services around the country have seen local authorities begin to adopt online technologies to support (and sometimes replace) services for young people (Hooley & Watts, 2011).

With the growth of online careers services, concern has developed amongst some professionals towards the use of new media within careers, with this sometimes being viewed as a cost cutting measure.

This article will use the example of the Youth Employability Service (YES) in Brighton and Hove to address this view and to argue that online technology can be used as an excellent way to enhance, but not replace, face to face information, advice and guidance.

YES was developed in Brighton and Hove in April 2011, replacing the city's Connexions service with the aim of providing targeted support to NEET young people (YES, 2012). The service focuses on working with young people (academic age 16-18) who are not in education, employment or training, and offers a variety of ways in which young people are able to engage with their adviser and access information, advice and guidance. YES also supports a team of LDD Advisers working with young people with statements of Special Educational Need.

The service offers support through one to one appointments, drop in access points across the city, as well as through home visits, telephone and text support. This is now also complemented by a range of online services, developed by YES to drive service recognition locally, boost young people's engagement with services, and provide new kinds of careers support to the young people of Brighton and Hove.

Using Facebook to deliver careers services – initial pilot

YES's engagement with online technologies started with an examination of Facebook¹. With over 31 million Facebook users in the UK, this is currently the most prominent online social network (SocialBakers,

¹ Facebook is an online social networking site. It is available from <http://www.facebook.com/>.

2012). The fact that 10.85 million of these users fall within the 13 to 24 age bracket means that this network is of particular interest to YES. Clearly Facebook is an important channel for communicating with young people and consequently there is a clear case for exploring how this tool can be used to deliver career development to young people.

YES sought to offer young people a way of engaging with an adviser through Facebook. The aim was to bring the service to them by enabling them to build a relationship with an adviser and engage with the service in a different way. With this in mind, YES launched its adviser pages, offering young people the opportunity to engage with the service on Facebook. Status updates (a Facebook feature which allows a user to send a short message out to all of their 'friends') allowed advisers to promote new opportunities to all of their clients at the click of a button; whilst communication through private messages (allowing for private conversation with one or more clients) allowed confidential exchanges to take place online.

This was a move which required a great deal of consideration as the internet can be viewed as a dangerous place (Siegle, 2010; Mishna, et al 2012). Consequently the pages were built with the aim of engaging with vulnerable young people in mind. It was vital that time was spent ensuring the pages were set up securely, and that policies were in place for safeguarding and child protection. In order to do this effectively, considerable time was spent examining Facebook security settings; in order to find an appropriate balance that allowed advisers to be visible, searchable and contactable via Facebook, but without putting young people at risk. Security settings on Facebook make it possible for the user to determine the level of access that each connection has to each individual piece of content that they have posted, and so the service was able to adapt these settings appropriate to its needs.

Ensuring that online services would be set up securely and operate in a safe way also involved developing a simple and clear confidentiality statement. This was included on each adviser's page along with the understanding that advisers would remind their online

clients of this statement, and the implications of linking with an adviser online, on a monthly basis. This statement echoed the confidentiality agreement which would be present in a face-to-face situation.

A concept that underpinned YES's work was the understanding that there was no situation that could occur during guidance delivered on Facebook, which could not also feasibly happen in real life. For example in a private message conversation on Facebook a client may disclose something which requires immediate action, just as in a face-to-face interview. Messages posted publicly, but not aimed directly at you (via the Facebook 'NewsFeed'; a stream of messages that your connections have sent out publicly) can be seen in a similar way as information overheard rather than disclosed to you. A child protection issue would require an adviser to follow the same procedures that would be followed in a face-to-face meeting. By relating each online situation to an offline context, YES advisers were able to see how issues encountered online and offline could generally be dealt with within a similar framework of ethical professional practice. When thought of in this way, it was far easier to determine appropriate action that should be taken if difficult circumstances arise through the use of Facebook with young people.

Initially the Facebook service was piloted with two advisers who developed a presence on the site and began engaging with their clients and other young people locally. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Although some researchers have argued that young people view Facebook as 'their space', and that it may not be somewhere that they would wish to engage with support services (Madge et al, 2009; Barnes et al, 2011), YES did not find this to be the case. Having a presence on the site enabled the advisers to engage more effectively with their current client base, increase the regularity of contact with clients, provide information in real time, and facilitate access to harder to reach young people.

Before the launch of the Facebook service the vulnerable and hard to reach group of young people were frequently missing appointments and consequently it was this group who benefitted the most from the online service. There may be a range

of reasons why young people chose not to engage with services, but it is unsurprising if turning up for an appointment or for a 'drop-in' service at a location they may have never been to before, to see someone they have never met, to gain support from a service they know little about, constitutes a substantial barrier for some.

Facebook allowed YES to work to address this barrier. By engaging with this client group through Facebook, advisers were able to make a connection with young people and allow individual young people to take their time to review and respond to the connection (unlike a telephone call). The young person could find out more about the service through accessing information from the adviser's page, and through private messaging, and could begin to build a relationship with their worker. This approach breaks down the barrier the young person faces in accessing face-to-face support and over time can ensure that a client who may never have accessed the service feels comfortable to attend an appointment or 'drop-in'.

Feedback from young people was overwhelmingly positive, with strong agreement that being able to talk to their adviser online made contacting the service easier and simplified accessing opportunity information:

'It's good for me to be able to contact my (...) worker on Facebook because it's free, I check it regularly so I never miss out on anything and is [sic] a good way to find out about new courses and job vacancy's [sic]'

Client A, 17

'I think the way (...) uses facebook I'd [sic] very interactive and inspired, because to [sic] allows people to connect with (...) more efficiently, and quicky [sic]. Not only that, it also makes it easier to view job vacancies that may be relevant and any opportunities that may benefit [sic] them 😊'

Client B, 18

Mainstreaming the Facebook service

This work proved popular with the young people of Brighton and Hove. However, it soon became unmanageable for the two advisers running the pilot, as young people across the city (and beyond) sent requests to link via Facebook. YES then rolled out the pilot to all advisers across the city. Each professional was given a training day, designed to teach practical use of Facebook as well as addressing important issues such as safeguarding online.

Practitioners were invited to think about the ways in which a Facebook page could be used to creatively engage young people and this led to a raft of service innovations. A range of online tools was discovered that could be integrated with Facebook such as appointment booking systems², online publication programmes³, and interactive quiz creators⁴. Online campaigns were developed such as interview technique week, CV surgeries, career days, and apprenticeship information sessions.

Facebook offered the YES advisers new ways of communicating with their clients. The Facebook live chat facility offered young people the opportunity to engage with their adviser online in real time. This service proved to be particularly effective post-GCSE results day, where advisers made themselves available on the live chat facility all day for young people who had not achieved the results they had expected. Group chat enabled group advice sessions to take place online allowing advisers to discuss a topic online with a group of clients. This supported group work sessions which had taken place face-to-face, helped to motivate continued engagement and allowed advisers to track progress upon completion. The ability to 'tag' clients (linking a client's profile to a status update) enabled advisers to publicly congratulate clients on their successes: for example, when securing a job or college

² There is a range of services for free appointment booking programmes online. An example is available at <http://www.clickbook.net/>

³ Online publication programmes allow you to publish word and PDF documents online as magazines or booklets. An example is available at <http://www.issuu.com/>

⁴ Online quiz creators enable you to publish interactive quizzes using picture, text and video media. An example is available at <http://www.quizrevolution.com/>

place, thereby boosting morale amongst other young people and helping that young person to recognise their own achievement.

This kind of work also encouraged a more social way of engaging young people in career thinking. As young people made their interactions with their advisers and the service as a whole public, it enabled their friends to view their engagement and involve themselves in it by 'liking' or commenting on status tags. It also encouraged young people using the online service to help others with their career goals for example by identifying job vacancies and posting these to their adviser's wall for others to view. This was particularly effective where young people had successfully moved into employment or education and were able to advertise opportunities within their own organisation through their adviser's page.

These innovations offered a range of new services for the young people of Brighton & Hove, but they also offered important benefits for advisers in engaging, tracking and managing clients. Young people who they had never been able to contact were in touch and attending face-to-face services, young people who continually missed appointments were able to maintain support and contact online (and get quick and simple real-time reminders), those who had fears about meeting new people or going to new places were able to meet their adviser online to build a relationship first; and check out the venue they would be attending through a linked, personalised Google Map and photo tour.

These tools also supported recognition of the changes to the service city-wide. The map was created using My Maps⁵, a Google application which allows you to pin-point specific locations on an online map and add information on these locations. This enabled the service to create an accessible map, detailing each service access point and its opening times. Photo tours were created using a camera and taking photographs of the route a young person would need to take in order to access each 'drop in', and what they could expect when they arrived. These photographs were then uploaded into an album on the Facebook page, supported by text for young people to view.

Combining online with face-to-face work

Ultimately the online work enhanced the existing face-to-face and provided support for young people who may not have engaged at all without the online service. Existing clients were able to access a greater level of support through the online service and some young people who had refused support, both face-to-face and online, were later able to re-engage through Facebook. This system of allowing a detached way of asking for help, that did not require young people to remember a phone number or 'drop-in' day proved to be highly effective.

For many young people, being able to connect and form an initial relationship with their adviser online and in their own time helped them to feel safer in accessing support face-to-face. Online work in some instances could take young people all the way, enabling them to access opportunities successfully without meeting their adviser in person. However, more often than not, the online work provided a gateway for young people to access face-to-face work. There were many instances in which by the time a young person felt safe to meet their adviser in person, they already felt a good level of familiarity, enabling the face-to-face work to take place more successfully.

Facebook also supported face-to-face work by allowing for more regular sustained contact with their adviser. Young people were able to send messages and connect on their own terms, in their own time and for free, which had an enormous impact on the level of communication being upheld between adviser and client in between appointments. This supported continued engagement in the service ensured that young people did not slip through the net. In the same way, maintaining online contact with a client helped the advisers to track and monitor progress; this was particularly helpful for clients undertaking temporary work with an undetermined end date, or for pregnant young women: for example, for whom Facebook allowed a platform for advisers to monitor and offer support when appropriate, without being intrusive or losing contact.

⁵ Available from <http://maps.google.co.uk/>

Further developments

In November of last year the service decided against keeping its website, instead moving all of its information into Facebook. The service worked with a local agency to set up a fan page to represent the service online, providing information for young people, parents and employers in the city.

A fan page⁶ is a space on Facebook which represents an organisation as a whole. A user can view a fan page from their computer regardless of whether or not they are logged into Facebook, making this a good way to ensure information is available to everyone online, and not just those who are Facebook users. A fan page also allows the page owner to set up a specific web address to direct traffic to their page, making it far easier to publicise. Other features of a fan page, that are not included in a Facebook profile page, include the ability to customise the page (much like a website) and the ability to have multiple administrators managing the page.

This enabled the service to grow virally, both with the public in Brighton & Hove and beyond. One advantage was that it facilitated the sharing of information with other services locally and nationally, and increased the opportunity awareness of the advisers and their clients. The new page was custom built, in order to make it more visually attractive and useful for clients. The page included a news bulletin, promoting up-to-date, relevant opportunities for young people, a frequently asked questions section for parents and carers as well as numerous links to useful websites.

Soon, the service developed into other online channels. A Twitter⁷ profile was created, enabling the service to reach out virally to the community and organisations locally⁸. Advisers also worked with local young people to develop 'YESTV', a YouTube⁹ channel providing fun and informative episodes all focussing on an employability theme. This was fantastic for the

young people involved, who were able to develop skills in filming, acting, editing and producing, as well as being involved in generating ideas for the films which would be relevant and interesting to young people in the local community.

The first episode filmed¹⁰ was an introduction to the service, giving young people an idea about what they could expect from the YES, and showing the community what the service was all about. This grew into a number of episodes around interview skills, using the telephone to speak to employers and going to college. These are used independently online, but also as a tool to support face to face work; for example, during appointments to support an interview practise session. YESTV proved an exciting way to blend face-to-face engagement and online work. It allowed the service to engage local young people in the film making process and empowered them to produce content which was relevant, interesting and useful to them and their peers. The opportunity to publish this online then amplified its value by making the content accessible to young people across the city and beyond.

The Youth Employability Service is now engaging with in excess of 800 young people living in Brighton and Hove online, and continues to develop creative ways of using technology to build on careers services. The service has built a successful online reputation within the city that not only enhances the face-to-face work which takes place, but also works alongside it to ensure the best possible service for young people.

The developments within YES demonstrate that a blended approach to careers work can be successful and that the internet provides substantial opportunities for careers services to rethink how they deliver their work. The model developed by YES suggests that delivery is most effective where it offers a blend of online and face-to-face approaches. Whilst it is true that careers services can be delivered with some success through either channel on their own; in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for young people, using both methods in harmony is vital for the future of careers work.

⁶ The Youth Employability Service's Facebook Fan Page is available from <http://www.facebook.com/yesbrightonhove/>

⁷ Twitter is an online social networking site. It is available from <http://www.twitter.com/>

⁸ The YES twitter channel is available from <http://www.twitter.com/yesbrightonhove/>

⁹ YouTube is an online site designed for sharing user generated films. It is available from <http://www.youtube.com/>

¹⁰ YESTV is available from <http://www.youtube.com/yesvrbrighton/>

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Youth Employability Service (YES) (March 2012)
Briefing for Partners. Brighton: Brighton and Hove City Council.

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