

Perspectives on online youth information and counselling

by Jaana Fedotoff and Mika Pietilä

According to one definition, the principal tasks of the youth information and counselling field are the provision of information, guidance and counselling to young people. How does this work change when it goes online? Do the approaches and requirements change from face-to-face meetings? What professional skills are emphasised and what are the prerequisites for online counselling? In this article, we attempt to address these questions by comparing face-to-face meetings with online meetings, and by considering the principles of the European Youth Information Charter. In this context, "web-based" or "online" youth counselling comprises both real-time and non-real-time guidance and counselling as well as extensive Internet-based information resources directed at young people.



Requirements for workers in web-based youth information and counselling

Besides national legislation and strategies, youth information and counselling services follow the sector's European guidelines as found in the European Youth Information Charter (2004). In 2009, the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) adopted the European Principles for Online Youth Information. The provision of services is the act of providing access to information and counselling services for all young people. The aim is to guarantee the equality of access to information for all young people, regardless of their situation, ethnic background, gender or social category. Special attention should be paid to disadvantaged groups and to young people who may have specific needs. In addition, services should be easily accessible without any appointment being required, and the information available should be primarily based on young people's needs. Each young person should be treated and respected as an individual and the response to his or her question should be personalised. It is also important that the services are free of charge and that information is given in a way that respects young people's privacy.

In addition to the European principles, the heart of youth information and counselling services lies in children's and young people's right to access information, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Youth information and counselling services throughout Europe have also taken into consideration the European Union's proposed Youth Strategy 2010-2018, the objective of which is to improve access to youth information and help disseminate information through all possible channels at local, regional and national levels.

Besides provision of information, guidance and counselling, web-based youth information and counselling services involve producing informational content on various themes for young people. This information deals with topics that relate to young people's lives. Producing this informational content is challenging. Workers have to process all available knowledge and pick the relevant, usable and easily applicable pieces of accurate information. The skills of information management and handling of information and its deciphering will not necessarily have been in the curriculum during the youth worker's professional training.

Youth workers that we have met in various training events have, in many cases, stated that their skills and expertise in working with young people in various web-based environments are not appropriate. There is not enough knowledge on the possibilities of social media services, and their technical skills are inadequate for working in an online environment. There is also uncertainty about real-time online interaction. However, the quantity, quality or availability of web-based services targeted at young people should not be dependent on whether or not workers possess adequate skills and expertise for web-based work. It is not enough to know various forums and platforms of social media; such knowledge should also be supplemented by a deeper understanding of the meaning of digital operating environments and cultures and their impact on individuals and communities. An overemphasis on tools only gets in the way and prevents a deeper vision of the work's educational objectives.

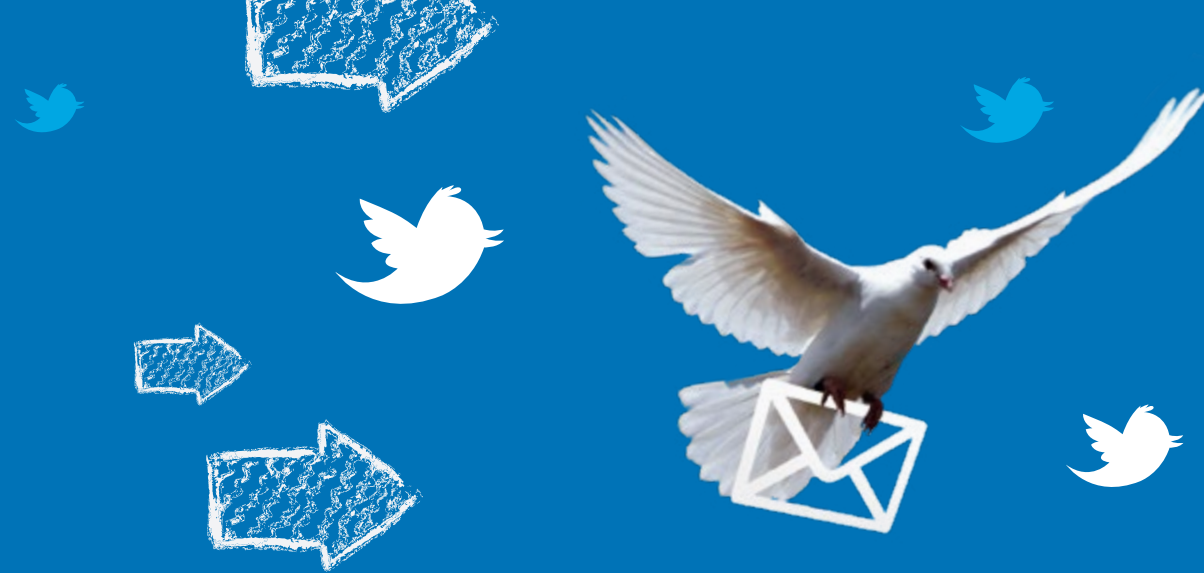


Two types of web-based information services: real-time and non-real-time services

In recent years, the tools and channels of web-based youth information and counselling services have become more diverse. In addition to websites, social media also present new opportunities, and they have made available an expanding, diversifying matrix of services and organisations.

In Finland, within the existing web-based youth information services, questions from young people are mainly sent to non-real-time Q&A services. However, there are also services with a real-time chat function. When answering questions sent to a Q&A page, the youth information and counselling worker makes an assessment on the basis of the nature and topic of the question and his or her own professional experience and decides whether the approach to be adopted should be a guiding or a counselling one. It is possible that the worker may have to act in a situation where additional questions cannot be asked. A challenging feature in these services is that the gender, age, home town or home district of the person asking the question are not always known. The answer, however, must be written in such a manner that the customer receives enough information and can make an informed decision.

A much-debated issue among people working in youth information and counselling services is whether web-based and face-to-face services are essentially different, and if they are, where the difference is. Participants in the basic training course on youth information and counselling in Finland, arranged by “Koordinaatti”, considered the question of whether face-to-face situations are more challenging, in one respect or another, than contacts made by young people through non-real-time online services. The participants concluded that a particularly challenging feature in face-to-face situations is that the worker is immediately thrown into interaction. A guidance situation begins instantly, and even a little uncertainty about the subject or the situation may cause young people to grow anxious or hesitant about asking their questions. The worker’s skills and professional expertise are immediately at stake, and a professional support network is not always available. A web-based, non-real-time service is more forgiving in this respect, as it gives the worker time to think about the answer. A non-real-time service is often free of external, disturbing factors that may have a negative impact on the worker–customer interaction. When the topic was discussed with the participants of the basic training course, they also insisted on the fact that a web-based service, whether it is real-time or non-real-time, makes it possible to ask even sensitive questions, such as those dealing with sexuality. This may be an issue particularly in small towns where “everyone knows everyone else” and asking face-to-face questions may be more difficult for privacy reasons.



Real-time service demands a lot from the worker

An example of real-time information and counselling services is a one-to-one chat service between the customer and the worker. Chat functions are provided in many web-based youth information and counselling services in Finland. Experience of one-to-one services has been encouraging. In these situations, well-functioning interaction is easy to achieve, and work can be based on a guidance approach. In this type of dialogue, the customer takes an active role in solving the problems under discussion. The worker then works to strengthen the recipient’s ability to function and avoids offering ready-made solutions. Factors that often limit the possibility of offering real-time online services are limited resources and the practical organisation of the service. A real-time online service needs specified business hours, and it always demands personnel resources and premises at certain times of day. The required IT facilities must also be available.

What has been perceived as challenging in real-time services is the dialogue with a young person in an acute crisis situation and the support and help provided to them. The worker’s experience and expertise and agreed courses of action contribute to a quick understanding of the situation and a

subsequent solution, as does a good knowledge of the youth support and crisis services. Also, the fact that support and crisis work specialists are available helps to shorten the time it takes to assist the customer. Emergency and crisis situations are always unique, and much depends on what information the customer provides for the worker to have an overview of the situation. The worker should ask further, tentative questions in order to assess whether the situation is genuine and how serious it is, where the person is, whether there are any other people present, what sort of mood the person is in and whether there are any adults nearby. The purpose of this is to offer the young person mental support, give confidence and advice for a possible resolution of the matter, as well as help to find the individual or the organisation that can provide the most appropriate assistance in the situation. Solving emergency and crisis situations is challenging and mentally strenuous for workers. Often there is no certainty that the young person has followed the advice given, and the case may haunt the worker for a long time. It is crucial that workers have the possibility of discussing such cases – for example, in regular, supervised sessions. Peer discussions relating to young people’s questions and situations are also necessary in the working community. Regular, high-quality training for workers guarantees high-quality dialogue and supports workers’ well-being at work.



What does quality mean in web-based youth information and counselling?

In web-based guidance and counselling, quality assurance is another challenging area. This is a particularly acute question if young people's questions are answered by several people, but common principles for answering questions do not exist or are not known. An example of this could, for instance, be where one worker thinks that an URL without any further information is an adequate answer, while another collects information from several sources, checks the accuracy of the sources, uses them to draw up a reliable, comprehensive answer to the question and, if necessary, refers the person asking the question to an appropriate specialist. Which answer is better quality and who should assess it?

As a rule, the quality is assessed by the young person who asked the question. It is, however, reasonable to ask whether young people are able to demand enough information and whether the worker is able to provide it without this being specifically requested. The objectives of web-based youth information and counselling services are young people's educational guidance and strengthening their social identity. Quality can also be measured by assessing how the counselling and guidance provided contribute to these objectives.

Workers' expertise concerning matters related to young people's lives and pedagogical skills play a key role in web-based work. All guidance and counselling, whether they take place online or face-to-face, should be based on the educational targets set for youth information and counselling so that they provide support for young people and guarantee equal opportunities for all of them. In addition to an educational approach, familiarity with the possibilities of the online world is important. These elements of professional expertise make up the foundation for high-quality work, in web-based services and elsewhere.



Future outlooks and perspectives

If Facebook pages are the only available youth information and counselling tool, this does not meet the criteria for high-quality provision of information, guidance and counselling. However, social media services can be utilised in supporting provision of information in youth information and counselling work. It is important that the provision of youth information and counselling services also takes into account local service points. Some youth information and counselling service providers have, often in co-operation with young people, developed new approaches to youth guidance and counselling. These services are suitably complemented by web-based services that help make guidance and counselling available even to young people who live in remote areas. In addition, they are available to young people who, due to one limiting factor or other, cannot use their local services. For them, web-based youth information and counselling services constitute an important source of information and support.

Web-based services – in particular, the utilisation of social media – have improved availability. In the future, multi-disciplinary and inter-professional co-operation will play a key part in the planning and development of web-based services. Mutual dialogue is important, if not crucial, in order to avoid the duplication and oversupply of services.

Development of the necessary additional services related to local and web-based services is important from the perspective of equal access. It is impossible to predict future technical progress and the associated possibilities, but it is likely that the development of web and mobile services will open up many new options. Society expects even young people to be critical media users and to be able to adopt new things quickly, solve complex problems and collect information independently, but in planning and implementing these services, a customer-orientated approach and interactivity should be kept in mind.

