

Social Work, Systems Thinking and Digital Technology

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Digital social work – an emerging practice?

- DSW as ‘hybrid’ practice (Pink et al., 2021)
 - Digital encounters informed by physical – never purely ‘virtual’
 - Anticipatory practice – SWs engaged with digital technologies while ‘thinking ahead’ to future in-person visits
 - Pandemic accelerated uses of digital technology
 - Potential for anxiety, e.g. about risk, but also ‘digital intimacy’ and benefits of certain technologies, e.g. Whatsapp
- Concerns about inequalities and digital exclusion, e.g. older people (Seifert, 2020), and impact on relationship-based skills (Golightley and Holloway, 2020)

Social care as a system

- A system of what?
 - Thresholds
 - Interactions/relationships
 - Prevention
 - Regulation
 - IT
- Work system: *'...a system in which human participants and/or machines perform work (processes and activities) using information, technology and other resources to produce specific products and/or services for specific internal or external customers'* (Alter, 2008, cited in Wastell, 2011, p.10)

A notional work system

1. What matters to the people contacting (or referred to) our service?
2. How quickly and accurately can we understand what matters?
3. How fast and flexible can we be in finding the right expertise and resources?
4. How will we know if we have addressed what matters?

These questions have implications for DESIGN

The same work system

1. What information should people be giving us?
2. How can we screen for eligibility?
3. How can we match people to what we have to offer?
4. How can we manage demand and control cost?

These questions also have implications for design!

Get help for any health problem

Are you completing this form on behalf of:

- Yourself
- Someone else (e.g. a child or dependent)

Your First Names: *

Your Last Name: *

Your Date of Birth: *

Your Phone Number: *

Your Email: *

About the Patient's Problem

Please tell us about the problem. If the practice is already aware of this problem, please tell us what has changed. *

How long has this been a problem? *

Do you have any ideas about what is causing the problem? (Optional)

What are the concerns? (Optional)

How would you like us to help? (Optional)

How would you like us to deal with the problem? *

- Online message sent through your email
- Telephone
- Face to face appointment

Video Consultation

- I am willing to accept a video consultation

Video consultations require you to have a smartphone, tablet, laptop or any computer with camera and microphone or headset. You will also require access to the internet, preferably over WiFi. If the practice decides on a video consultation you will be sent an email containing a link for the video consultation, so it's best if you can receive your emails on that same device.



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Form Unavailable

This form is currently unavailable. If you have a medical problem needing treatment, please use the NHS Symptom Checker which will help guide you to the right place for help. Alternatively, please ask at your local pharmacy to see if they can help, or call 111. If it is a life-threatening emergency, then please call 999.

The ICS debacle

- Long history of failed IT projects in public services – ‘computerized systems are more likely to have problems if they are ambitious and complex, and if they fail to engage their users or understand their needs’ (Shaw et al., 2009, p.622)
- Design features of ICS:
 - National specification for ‘business process’ workflow – based on electronic forms (‘exemplars’)
 - Rigid, complicated and repetitive sequence of tasks for referral, assessment and review
 - Multiple approvals, rigid timescales, tick-box reminders, all enforced by audit and QA.
- Project led by steering group that did not include SW practitioners
- Almost universally considered unfit for purpose (Bell, 2008; White et al., 2010) and substantially modified in subsequent years (Wastell, 2011)
- Project escalation (Keil, 1995) – large scale projects that are ‘doomed to succeed’

‘Digital by default’

- Specifying the means through which a service will be delivered
- Experience with universal credit – huge rise in ‘failure demand’ (Seddon, 2008)
- Tendency to blame implementation (‘doomed to succeed’) or people (‘resistance’)
- Influence of large consultancies
- Problems with digital services often reflect underlying problems with design (i.e. services are not working effectively)

Socio-technical systems design

- Erik Trist's study of post-war coalmines (Trist and Bamforth, 1951)
- 'New paradigm of work' – complex interaction between people, technology and other factors in the environment
- Systems ideas turned into design principles, e.g. multi-functionality, minimal critical specification and information flow (Mumford, 2006)
- Operational applications: decentralised work groups with more responsibility for decision-making; managers focus on system performance rather than individual compliance with task specs
- Influential in field of accident prevention (Woods et al., 2010) and in the analysis of child protection systems (Munro, 2010)

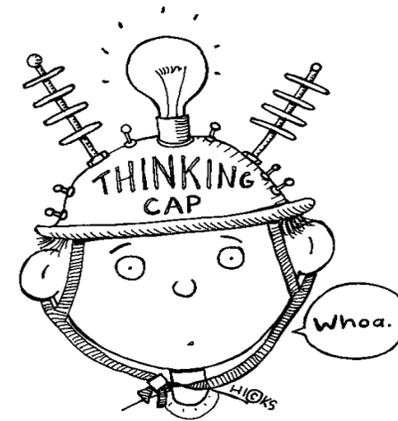
Design issues in social care

- ‘Front door’ to services heavily focused on triage and information gathering
- Multiple contacts, handovers and assessments
- Screen and intervene - rapid response for acute need/high risk cases
- ‘Contextual demand’ often overlooked
- High levels of failure demand

Back to digital social work

- Design eats technology for breakfast!
- Fundamentals of practice – how do digital tools support these?
- Beware ‘default’ approaches – requisite variety (Ashby, 1952)
- If you want people to do a good job, give them a good job to do
- Work systems geared around the changing needs of citizens

Questions or thoughts?



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