



# Information Behaviour of Social Workers: Needs, seeking, acquisition and use of information to support social work practice

## 1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2012) by Niamh Flanagan of the School of Applied Social Science, University College, Dublin, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.\*

## 2. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of this study was to elucidate the information behaviour of social work professionals in Ireland with a view to improving the provision of information to support practice. The specific objectives of the study were to explore:

- » Information needs, i.e. What prompts social workers to seek information and what information needs are ignored?
- » Information-seeking, i.e. What information-seeking strategies do social workers employ and what sources do they access?
- » Information acquisition, i.e. Do social workers acquire information solely by seeking or is information acquired by other means?
- » Information use, i.e. To what uses is acquired information put?
- » Influences and barriers on information behaviour, i.e. What are the practical facilitators and barriers that influence information behaviour.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, University College, Dublin.

## 3. How was the study undertaken?

The study employed a three-phase, mixed-methods strategy:

- » *Phase I* used audio-diaries for real-time data collection. Sixteen social workers made event-triggered diary recordings, reporting on their information behaviour over a 2-week period. Transcripts of the diaries were returned to participants and formed the basis of a semi-structured critical incident technique interview.
- » *Phase II*, which aimed to move beyond the limited timeframe of the preceding phase, involved a semi-structured interview with the same sample. The interview explored information behaviour from a retrospective perspective, identifying the universe of sources that diarists use to support their practice. Each source was examined in terms of its frequency of use, perceived usefulness and barriers encountered. Data from Phase II informed development of an e-survey questionnaire.
- » *Phase III* involved an e-survey aimed at informing a map of the social work information base. Over 450 social workers participated in the e-survey.

\* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

## 4. What are the key findings?

### 4.1 Social work information behaviour: A different type of information behaviour

It became evident at an early stage that the patterns of information behaviour that social workers engage in do not fit the dominant theoretical models of information behaviour. These models largely described an academic style of information behaviour involving exploration of a topic, differentiating sources, extraction of information and closure. In contrast, social work information behaviour is much more pragmatic, fast-paced and truncated, relying on familiar accessible sources. In order to adequately represent social work information behaviour, it was necessary to devise a *model of pragmatic information behaviour*, based on review of theoretical and empirical literature. This model encapsulated a broader range of needs, seeking, acquisition and uses, alongside contextual influences, thus offering a flexible framework within which to describe the nature of front-line and/or academic information behaviour.

While this study sought an aggregate overview of social workers' information behaviour, clear differences were evident within the profession. Some diarists engaged in considerable information behaviour, while others engaged in less. These findings point to the existence of an information-savvy cohort of 'information stars' who represent a key asset to the profession, acting as conduits to information for their colleagues.

### 4.2 Information needs

The principal information need experienced by diarists was the need for information to inform a case. The need for information to educate or to enhance practitioners' understanding (i.e. an 'uncertainty need') was less evident. Thus a clear dominance of reactionary needs arising from a case was identified, as opposed to routine information gathering/keeping up to date. The most common type of need was for a specific or defined piece of information, often from a specific source.

Information-need avoidance (i.e. acknowledgement of a need, but a failure to pursue it) revealed an interesting conundrum. Evidence of this was negligible in the diaries. However, during interviews, diarists almost unanimously indicated that they regularly experience information needs which they do not

follow up. These needs appear to relate largely to issues of understanding (uncertainty needs). Perhaps the benefit of acquiring this information is outweighed by its cost? Social workers are clearly aware of these gaps in knowledge. However, before these gaps are articulated as information needs, they appear to be dismissed or deprioritised.

### 4.3 Information-seeking

Delegation, or asking someone for information, emerged as the predominant search strategy. Active-directed searching, which involved accessing impersonal sources to pursue a specific goal, was less prevalent. Less-directed strategies, such as browsing, monitoring or opportunistic viewing, represented minority strategies.

This preference for interpersonal channels of information is well documented and it has been posited that the advantage of seeking by delegation is the flexibility and responsiveness of the source. Findings in this study also suggest that speed of response from such sources is a crucial factor.

Further exploration of the channels of communication showed a distinct preference for synchronous (i.e. real-time) interpersonal communication, pointing to features such as the orality, informality and immediacy of response associated with synchronous channels of communication.

### 4.4 Information sources: Mapping the information base of social work

In Phase III, an e-survey of 456 social workers facilitated mapping of the information base from which this cohort source information. E-mails, the Internet and team colleagues emerged as the mainstays of the social work information base. These reinforce the preference for interpersonal communication, but also point to an increasingly high profile role for impersonal sources, such as the Internet, adding further weight to the issue of rapidity of response. The informality of the mainstay sources further distinguishes them from less routinely accessed sources, such as books, journals, guidelines, legislation and meetings.

Less routinely accessed sources are dominated by documentary items, with journals topping the list. However, readership of journals continues to be an issue within the profession, with nearly 1 in 5 respondents reporting that they never access journals.

In the current economic climate, it is not surprising that all formal educational events remained firmly in the 'wish list' quadrant of the information base – deemed useful, but infrequently accessed. However, so too did the more malleable team-driven sources, such as resource folders, case presentations, interagency meetings and sharing of event documentation.

Skills deficits highlight a need for greater awareness-building. Knowing how or where to search for documents, or simply being aware that a relevant document or website exists, represents a barrier to social workers.

The information base also revealed polarisation of behaviours, including:

- » At grade level, principals were more likely to research, read and attend info-share sessions; team leaders tended to focus on standards and legislation; and basic-grade social workers rely on the Internet, team colleagues and supervisors.
- » At setting level, social workers working in child and family, fostering and statutory settings in general read less formal literature, conducted less research, encountered more information barriers and accessed fewer events. However, they used legislation and supervisory sources more, suggesting a more top-down approach to information. In contrast, social workers in medical settings accessed more local-level policy and procedures and more mutual-education resources and opportunities. Social workers working in probation represented another contrast, being characterised by an emphasis on training, training notes and conducting research.
- » Membership of a professional association emerged as a significant influence on information sources, with members engaging in more information behaviour.
- » Conducting empirical research emerged as an infrequent information activity among the sample. However, higher grades, voluntary sector employees, probation staff and members of professional associations were more likely to conduct research. The influence of time constraints, as a barrier to conducting research, overwhelms other barriers, making it difficult to draw reliable conclusions about other barriers.

#### 4.5 Information acquisition

While seeking information remains the principal mode of acquisition, unsolicited receipt accounted for a noteworthy sixth of all information acquired. Sharing practices also features strongly in the uses to which acquired information was put.

#### 4.6 Information use

Audio-diary records indicated that the level of search resolution among participants was high, with few searches remaining unresolved. In light of the issue of information-need avoidance identified in this study, and low readership identified both here and in the literature, this prompts the following questions – Do social workers only undertake searches that they consider resolvable within their existing time and resources? Do searches that are considered irresolvable within existing time and resources remain in the sub-strata of gaps in knowledge, which do not reach articulation as needs?

Commensurate with the highly functional nature of social work searching and the high resolution rate, half of all acquired information was applied directly to practice within the short timeframe of the study's fieldwork (2 weeks). Very little information sought by diarists remained unused or not stored for future reference. Moreover, storage without use was almost negligible. As such, it would seem reasonable to conclude that social work information-seeking is highly efficient.

High levels of conceptual use of information highlight the need for appropriate storage and retrieval systems to maximise the value of this information. However, as indicated above, team-driven sources (such as resource folders, case presentations, interagency meetings and sharing of event documents) remain in the 'wish list' quadrant of the information base.

A recurrent characteristic of social work information behaviour was sharing of information – both solicited and unsolicited sharing. However, the nature and frequency of sharing may not be common across the profession since some departments have more formalised and active systems for information-sharing than others. Moreover, the presence of an 'information star' is a clear advantage in this respect.

#### 4.7 A dual-track approach to keeping informed

Throughout the analysis, it became clear that social workers employ different strategies to address the two broad categories of casework and self-education.

*Case-related information searches* were characterised by a high level of specific, known-item searches, targeted at familiar sources, successfully resolved and applied to practice. In casework, the reliance on familiar, synchronous, human sources before more formal sources hints at a greater need for rapid responses and convenient, bite-sized information. This has the knock-on effect of placing an onus on colleagues, particularly supervisors, to be well informed and supported with quality information resources.

The profile of *self-education searches* is quite different from case-related searches. Firstly, as indicated above, this activity is not as widespread and is more likely to be resolved in a single-event action, suggesting few barriers, but also little follow-up. Self-education was not usually prompted by a self-motivated need to understand something; it is more likely to be acquired through learning on-the-job, routine information-gathering, passive or accidental acquisition of information. The approach to self-education would therefore appear to be somewhat ad hoc. Diary and e-survey results both suggest that usage of formal literature (either online or in printed form) for self-education is not prevalent. Moreover, it is perhaps of concern that two of the sources most commonly cited by e-survey respondents as a means of keeping up to date (i.e. conferences and seminars) are among the most problematic and infrequently accessed sources of information.

## 5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached 6 overall conclusions, as follows:

1. **Social workers engage in pragmatic information behaviour**, which is inherently different to traditional conceptualisations of information behaviour.
2. The **information needs that social workers address are predominantly case-related, reactive, functional and defined**. Information needs relating to understanding are less common and less likely to be pursued.
3. The fast-paced and truncated nature of social workers' information behaviour is characterised by **seeking strategies that rely heavily on interpersonal sources, such as e-mails and team colleagues. The Internet also features strongly** in the information base.

4. While seeking information remains the predominant mode of information acquisition, **unsolicited acquisition resulting from sharing of information is a key feature of social work information behaviour**. An information-savvy cohort of **'information stars' epitomise the sharing that is characteristic of the profession**.
5. Social work information-seeking appears to be highly effective, with **much of the sought information successfully acquired and applied directly to practice**. High levels of conceptual use did, however, point to **a need for good-quality storage and retrieval facilities for retention of information**.
6. **Social workers' responses to casework and self-education information needs are inherently different**. However, the literature typically addresses these two information needs as a single cohesive task.

## 6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the recommendations emerging from the study.

### 1. Time restrictions must remain centre-stage in any new approach to information

At a general level, availability of time is a key concern. Social workers, in this and other studies, have repeatedly reiterated that in practice, particularly crisis intervention, rapid action takes priority over information-seeking. Perhaps it is time to put the issue of time, and all its practical and cultural components, centre-stage and build a new approach to social work practice information around the issue of time. In the current economic climate, this will require profession-wide debate on innovative ways of promoting and integrating keeping up to date. Moreover, there may be merit in broadening the debate to include other, similarly young, allied health professions who share these concerns.

## 2. Build on features of existing information behaviour in the profession, such as sharing and information stars

Interpersonal sources dominate the mainstays of the information base and sharing activities feature strongly in social work information behaviour. These remain the most innate and promising avenues for development of quality information through promotion of information-sharing practices, which are currently underutilised. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind the potential that exists within the profession in the form of 'information stars', a feature that can be nurtured, promoted and developed within existing social work teams.

## 3. A dual strategy response to casework information and self-education information

This study suggests that provision of information for casework and self-education might be more effective if addressed by separate approaches. Information for casework is needed rapidly and immediately, therefore has to be convenient and bite-sized. In contrast, information for self-education would benefit from being manageable given limited time, but addressed by a more formalised structured approach, in addition to being encouraged and promoted.

Findings from all phases of this study suggest that a reading culture remains limited within social work, particularly at early career stages. Encouragement and facilitation of reading and review of formal literature is required in order to develop a culture where reading is valued and undertaken.

## 4. Quality IT resources

Electronic resources, particularly the Internet, hold much potential as an information hub for social work, both in terms of fast-paced case-related information and more formalised self-education information. However, this requires development and maintenance of quality hardware and online infrastructure, particularly in the statutory sector where more barriers are experienced. Surmounting barriers to this source also involves addressing the issue of web-filtering through, for example, organised negotiation with employers or profession-accreditation of particularly useful sites.

## 5. Increased awareness of available online resources

Efforts are required to increase awareness of accessible, useful, quality electronic resources. Evidence from this and other studies indicates low usage of dedicated websites. Given the value placed on sharing of information within the profession, practitioner-led reviews of available services, such as websites, webinars and other free materials, may help to bridge the gap between information and practice. Awareness of online seminars, webinars and lectures would undoubtedly go some way to addressing widespread barriers to educational events.

## 7. What are the benefits of the study?

The benefit of this study arises from its elucidation of the ancillary, but vital information behaviour that supports social work practice. The information behaviour of social workers has not been studied before and necessitated development of a framework for pragmatic information behaviour to describe the type of information behaviour that social workers, and probably other front-line staff, engage in.

The study highlights the practices and preferences of the profession in terms of information retrieval. Mapping the social work information base identifies the information sources that social workers use and find useful to support their practice, categorising them as mainstay sources, 'wish list' sources and other less useful or less frequently used sources.

The study explicitly highlights the need to consider time constraints in any efforts to promote information use among the profession. It concludes that the two broad information needs of social workers, i.e. for case-related information and for self-education information, cannot be effectively addressed with the same strategies.



For more information, please contact: **Dr. Niamh Flanagan**, School of Applied Social Science, University College, Dublin. E-mail: [niamhflanagan@eircom.net](mailto:niamhflanagan@eircom.net)