

Talking to the World: Using Online Identities for Professional (and Personal) Communication

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He tangata, he tangata, he tangata – it is people, it is people, it is people. Communicating with people forms a large part of most information professionals' daily lives. A high proportion of this communication with colleagues, managers, and customers now happens online. Librarians and other information and communication professionals are increasingly being encouraged to create, maintain, and negotiate online identities using not just email, but also blogs, microblogging services (Twitter), and social networking services such as Facebook and LinkedIn. As these online social networks become more pervasive, people in professional positions increasingly find that their networks include family and friends, as well as colleagues. This blend of personal and professional communication in multiple channels presents them with both challenges and opportunities. Most importantly, it provides a way for them to engage with people outside their immediate circles, but it can also make it difficult for people to know the identity of individuals they communicate with. This paper will contrast the results of a survey of information professionals' use of these services in mid-2009 with those of a similar survey carried out in early 2007. It shows that some people maintain a single online identity, used in all contexts, while others keep a clear distinction between their professional and private voices. A third group of people use a pseudonym to keep their identity secret. The paper will identify the benefits and drawbacks of these different approaches, and will also examine factors that affect people's decision to have one or more online personas. Interacting with people outside their normal social circle is seen as a key benefit, and the opportunity to have online 'conversations' with them leads to stronger interpersonal and professional relationships. Using social networking technologies can help address a sense of professional isolation, allowing people working alone or in rural areas to engage with their peers in new ways. The paper will conclude with a discussion of factors that should be considered when deciding which approach to online identity to use. The session will also feature the use of Twitter as a 'backchannel' to engage a wider, virtual audience in the discussions, and to provide a real-world, real-time demonstration of the use of these technologies.