

New Information Technology and Social Work Education in South Korea

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Advent of New Information Technology

During the 1990s, people in Korea have experienced rapid changes in their work and home environments. It has been called the revolution of information technology, which is mainly led by the widespread use of personal computers (PCs) and networking.

Personal Computer Use. In the early stages of using PCs, a PC was merely a fancy word processing machine with printer. HanGul (meaning "Korean language") a software program has been widely used for that purpose, and still dominates the word processing market. The HanGul document format (*.hwp) is now a standardized protocol for exchanging computerized document files in Korea.

The next popular use of PCs has been in the areas of complex calculations, budget building and managing, and other data based management procedures. Graphics, pictures (still and moving), sounds, and other multi-media related applications, are now expanding into general use in PCs. Even more specialized use of PCs, such as CAD (computer aided design) or SPSS (a dedicated statistical application), seems to be increasing due to the vast increase of PC capacity in the country. For example, a survey research dataset of 52,000 cases with 40 variables could be smoothly analyzed using SPSS-Win 7.5 in a PC of Pentium 586-133Mhz with 32M ram (Kim, 1999). It was almost unthinkable even a few years ago to do this kind of job with a PC. Compared to the decade ago, this can be surely called a revolution. In 1999, 14 out of 100 persons in Korea possess a computer and the ratio is still rapidly moving up. By the year 2002, the rate would rise up to 32 per 100, as forecast by the Ministry of Information and Communication (Reporting to the Blue House by the Ministry of Information and Communication, May 1, 1999). By considering the normal size of 4 to 5 members in Korean family, one can say that there would be by 2002 at least one computer per household at average.

Networking. By the mid-1990s, the concern of connecting those stand-alone computers began to rise. At the beginning, academic and research institutions initiated networking, and presently most of the universities have established computer networks connected to the outer world by Internet. The phenomenon is rapidly expanding to government offices, private firms, SOHOs (small offices and home offices), and others. Personal users at home usually subscribe to an Internet vendor like DACOM, which is the largest service provider in Korea, to have access to Internet via telephone line.

The Ministry of Information and Communication expects the number of Internet users will rise from 3 million in 1999 to 10 million in 2002 (Reporting to the Blue House by the Ministry of Information and Communication, April 1, 1999). Considering a Korean population of 40 million, that ratio indicates one out of four people would have an access to Internet by then. As this new information technology spreads widely and rapidly, it must cause changes in various aspects of people's lives. The pattern of communications between people and organizations is changing, and the mode of doing business is not the same as before. In almost every social realm, people are experiencing the tremendous impact of this new technological development.

Use of Computers in Social Work

Compared to other fields, the use of computers in social work has seen slow progress in Korea (Park & Yoo, 1996). It does not seem to be unique only to social work in Korea. Reporting the use of computers in social work in the European community, Grebel and Steyaert (1995) found that the use of information technology (IT) in human services has seen a very slow movement, and its introduction in schools of social work has been even slower.

There have been some speculations about this delayed introduction of new information technology in social work. The most commonly discussed one is that social work, emphasizing person-to-person human communication, does not fit well with computerized communication. Some speculations even include the issue of gender, as social work tends to be dominated by women and emphasizes human communication and care. A case study of social worker's attitudes to computers actually shows that the issue of delayed use of computers in social work cannot be separated from the way that gender is embedded into professions (Lie, 1997).

With all the suspicions and controversies, computers continue their steady march into the realm of human services. At present, information technology is no longer a choice that social work should decide either to take or not. Regardless of whether we like it, it has already become a given fact. For us, as social work professionals and educators, the only tasks left are how to utilize those technologies properly for our purposes.

Second-Wave Information Technology

The development of information technology has already entered a new realm. Compared to the first-wave information technology used primarily in administration and research, the second-wave information technology seems to have greater impact on direct practice (Cwikel & Cnaan, 1991). This new information technology is characterized by modern databases, decision-support systems, expert systems, therapeutic diagnosis and treatment, and electronic networks. It still seems unclear whether and how this new technological development is being reflected in social work practice throughout the countries.

Findings show that social work in Korea still remains in the first-wave stage of information technology. In a study of computer utilization among workers of social work agencies (n=326, sample from metropolitan areas in Korea), respondents (91%) answer that they use the computer mostly because it provides convenience in their daily tasks.

Computers are mostly used for preparing documents (95%), collecting and sorting various data (38%), managing clients and volunteers (38%), etc. Only low responses are given to uses in diagnosis and treatment (13%), decision-making and problem-solving (4%), etc. (Rho, 1999).

There has been an increasing demand of efficiency and effectiveness for social work in Korea. Confronted by increasingly unfavorable public perceptions of social work, social workers are urged to prove the effectiveness of their work and show the ability to use scarce resources efficiently. Faster acceptance of new information technology seems to be promising for solving these problems. A main obstacle, expected in choosing that solution, is the weak manpower in social work to utilize those technologies. As a result, social work education seemingly has to take a part in this development.

Need for Continuing Education in Social Work

Educational institutions in Korea have performed particularly important roles in transmitting new ideas and knowledge. Even social work itself was once a new idea in Korea, and educational institutions, especially the university, took the role of inducting it into the country. Current development of new information technology again asks the university to take the same role for social work. Instead of inducting social work itself, this time inducting new information technology into social work is the task.

Continuing Education for Social Workers

Social workers, to be effective (or just to survive) in this age of technological revolution, need to keep learning or updating their knowledge about those new technologies. Information technologies are updated very rapidly, and the regular four-year educational model of the university cannot cover the ever changing nature of this technological development entirely. Nevertheless, small and medium sized independent agencies, which compose most of front line service delivery system in Korea, do not have enough resources to fulfill the educational needs by themselves. In this regard, the university

system, which is better equipped with educational resources, should provide the "continuing education" for social workers in Korea.

Educating with Information Technology

At present, most of the academic offerings and continuing education programs are conveyed in traditional manner. Named "seminar," "workshop," or "symposium," those programs make people gather physically in a certain place and offer lecture-type patterned presentations. In this traditional model of continuing education, problems are identified as following: (1) high costs related to work absence and travel; (2) limited subjects, due to limited time and space; (3) consumers' individualized educational needs not reflected properly. The traditional model can only offer an off-line, disrupted intervention model of education to the topic or subjects that are provided. It cannot provide "on-going" consultation type of education, which is demanded by the characteristics of modern technological development.

Some suggestions, either speculated or pioneered, have been made in social work continuing education in Korea (Han, 1996). (1) Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Lecture: Using networked computers, students have synchronous conference (i.e., IRC - Internet Relay Chat), asynchronous conference (i.e., Bulletin Board or Forum), and personal communications with each other through e-mails. (2) Team Teaching: In March of 1998, nine universities from various regions in Korea took part in a so-called "Korean Virtual University", which has offered on-line classes with credits. Even though various obstacles have been encountered and hampered the operation, the idea is still considered to be future-oriented.

(3) Industry-Academy Cooperation: Practitioners and academicians exchange information and knowledge. On-line system supported by IT will help to make easier connections between the parties.

Modern information technology is being rapidly developed, and, with traditional "off-line" educational systems, schools of social work can not guarantee to consumers the quality of their products. In order to perform our job of educating social workers on information technology, we need to use it in advance ourselves. Using those technologies increasingly in continuing education, we may soon find the concept of "on-line" and "upgrade" service system, borrowed from the computer software market, does not sound so exotic in social work education.

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