

Cyberculture in the workplace: a beginner's guide

Demystifying the new world of therapeutic encounters in the workplace, **Dr Kate Anthony**, leading expert in the use of technology in therapy, takes us where many fear to tread

'As therapists you need to hold on to the thought that the digital natives who are seeking counselling now have grown up in a world where the concept of 'no internet' – particularly mobile internet – is unthinkable'



Dr Kate Anthony, FBACP, has trained practitioners and organisations worldwide in online therapy and related fields, and is a Fellow of BACP. She is co-founder of the Online Therapy Institute and Managing Editor of TILT Magazine (Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology).

In 1998, I broke my leg. Already an avid user of internet chat rooms for socialising, I found myself housebound and soon discovered just how therapeutic it could be to communicate with people all over the world. I figured that I probably wasn't alone in this. My interest in the therapeutic use of technology was born.

Now, here I am, addressing the often controversial field within our profession of using technology to deliver counselling services, particularly those delivered at a distance over the internet. It is an exciting and often challenging space to work in. We have to think about 'where' the counselling is taking place. Is it in our own workspace, our client's or somewhere inbetween called cyberspace?

Working in this field, I'm used to hearing strong views on the pros and cons. But whether you're thinking about implementing counselling services online or not, recognition of the change in society in light of technological communication (and therefore mental health issues associated with communication, such as relationships) is essential to all who work in the field of counselling. As therapists you need to hold on to the thought that the digital natives who are seeking counselling now have grown up in a world where the concept of 'no internet' – particularly mobile internet – is unthinkable. For this reason, my training organisation's central ethic is working with 'Work-life innovations in light of cyberculture', because that is the culture our clients hold, simultaneously with any geographically based culture they have.

One of the most exciting and fulfilling parts of my role as an educator about the use of technology in counselling is the moment when my colleagues' eyes light up, and they 'get it'. Traditionally, resistance has been the most prevalent response to the use of technology for counselling services. It's my hope to get you thinking about why that may be. What is holding you back from embracing non-traditional ways of working? Do you feel that the time for learning new communication skills has passed you by? Are you feeling overwhelmed by technology in day-to-day life already? I'm going to share with you the dynamic and innovative ways we can not only reach our clients, but touch them emotionally in new ways to better explore their issues.

But for now, I need to rewind. As far back as 1966 a computer scientist and professor, Joseph Weizenbaum, created the first simulated Rogerian computerised therapist, named ELIZA¹. ELIZA's reason for being was to see if humans could be fooled into thinking the

communication was between human beings. It most evidently wasn't! But that didn't stop Weizenbaum's secretary from developing a firm attachment to 'her' (much to his horror). You can talk with ELIZA at <https://apps.facebook.com/eliza-chatbot/> if you would like to meet her!

Fast forward to around 1995, and the first paid-for therapeutic services were offered via email. Chat rooms and forums grew in popularity, offering a global space for discussing personal issues. The concept of text as therapy was jump-started from journaling-type introspection to conversational-style communication between professional and client via text exchanges. And now we see mobile phone text emerging as a powerful tool in services – both as an adjunct to other ways of delivering services and also as crisis intervention in stalling active suicides. Research shows that the mere act of wanting to reply to a message received on such a personalised device as a mobile phone from a professional is enough to make a person think twice about acting on suicidal thoughts².

Human beings are natural communicators – and technology is just a way to facilitate that. We can see smoke signalling as an early technology, if you like. And we can look to the future and to the development of live holograms being transportable as technology, which will bring us a moving 3D image of a human beamed directly into the same room as us. What it boils down to is the relationship between people, however that is communicated. By embracing the technology and the cyberculture we all live in now, we can be effective, ethical, and flexible professionals. Throughout this column, I'll be taking you on a tour of this new world where therapy and technology merge, asking you questions and offering you an exploration of it. It may look rather different than it did in our core training, but rest assured, the essential skills and orientations are all still there.

References

- 1 Weizenbaum J. ELIZA – a computer program for the study of natural language communication between man and machine. *Communications of the ACM*. 1966; 9(1):36-45.
- 2 Goss S, Ferns J. Using cell/mobile phone SMS to enhance client crisis and peer support. In Anthony K, Nagel D, Goss S (eds). *The use of technology in mental health [applications, ethics and practice]*. Illinois: Thomas CC; 2010.