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Challenges on Utilizing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) In Counselling  
and its' Implication for Capacity Building

By

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper addressed the potential benefits of utilizing Information Communication Technology (ICT) in counselling in Nigerian. Among other things ICT in counselling will help extend counselling services to homes, work places and even community locations. The avenues through which ICT can be employed in counselling were also discussed. These include the use of internet websites, telephone help-lines and the electronic mail system. While these have been used effectively in different nations of the world, they are yet to take root in Nigeria. One of the potential problems in ICT application in counselling is the lack of computer literacy among counselling professionals. Adequate infrastructures are also not available. In the light of these, it was recommended that counselling professionals in Nigeria be made to up-date their knowledge and skills through in-service programmes. They should be made to acquire computer skills, thereby enhancing capacity-building of counselling personnel in Nigeria*

**Keywords:** Guidance and Counselling, ICT, Nigeria, Capacity Building.

**INTRODUCTION**

The world indeed has become a global village. One of the many challenges facing developing countries today is preparing their societies and governments for globalization and information and communication revolution (Tinio, 2002). In today's world, tailoring services to differing needs is essential. Guidance and counselling system and other educational forces have to respond proportionately to changes and challenges posed by knowledge explosion as well as the increasingly rapid development in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Also, in a world of ever-rapid change, social conflict and economic difficulties, guidance counselling help bring peace to troubled minds. Nigeria is increasingly wracked by crises of youth violence manifesting in hostage-taking or

kidnapping, armed robbery, ritual killings and more recently, bombing of public places by the "Boko Haram" (western education is a sin) religious sect in northern Nigeria. In the wake of these overwhelming changes and instability, the guidance counsellor is to mobilize the individual for personal and vocational development. Some people require advising where to get information and how to use it, while others need counselling, how to explore, examine and clarify thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and behaviours, to arrive at plans for action (Naouel, 2008). Guidance programmes and the counselling service within them usually deal with situational and environmental conditions (Odeck, 1999). Both services stress rational planning, problem-solving and support in the face of situational pressures.

Information and Communication Technologies include radio and television, as well as newer digital technologies such as the computers and the internet. They are potentially powerful enabling tools for educational change and reform.

This paper is premised on the fear that the full realization of the potential benefits of ICT use in guidance and counselling is not automatic. It thus behoves on education policy makers in Nigeria and indeed other developing countries to define a framework for appropriate and effective use of ICTs in their educational systems by first providing an overview of potential benefits of ICT in counselling. Implication of this policy for capacity building will also be highlighted.

### ***The Concept of Guidance and Counselling***

Ordinarily, guidance refers to something that provides direction or advice as to a decision or course of action. It is seen as a pervasive activity in which many persons and organisations take part. (Naouel, 2008). Aluta (2007) asserts that professionally, guidance is conceived as an educational service geared towards assisting individuals to understand themselves and their world based on accurate and valid information. Thus, guidance aims at assisting the individual to have a clearer view of him/herself to enable him/her adjust to the environment and events hereof.

Counselling has been variously defined by many practitioners as a helping relationship. Osareren (1993:195) defined counselling “as a process by which a troubled but normal person is helped in a more satisfying manner by an uninvolved person who provides information and reactions which can help the individuals develop behaviours in order to enable him deal effectively with himself as well as

others”. Hoxter (1998:39) sees counselling as “a method of relating and responding to others with the aim of providing them with opportunities to explore, to clarify, and to work towards living in a more personally satisfying and resourceful way”. Okorodudu (2010:15) however, says that the term counselling “refers to a process involving a professionally trained individual in the application of psychological principles and practices in assisting individuals and groups to cope with their life adjustment needs in the society”.

It can be inferred from the above that the thrust of counselling is to help individuals to understand and accept their potential and support them to develop it to the best of their abilities. It behoves of counsellors as helpers and human resource builders, to improve on their services through application of modern technology within the framework of their professional ethical standards to systematically assist their clients to develop skills, knowledge and competencies for coping more effectively with their clients needs.

### ***The Concept of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)***

Information and Communication Technology consists of a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information (Blurton, 2002). Darnton and Giacolleto (1992) defined Information Technology (IT) as the systematic study of artefacts that can be used to give form or description to facts in order to provide meaning or support for decision-making, and artefacts that can be used for the organisation, processing, communication and application of information, while Sansanwal (2000) defined IT as the use of hardware and

software for efficient management of information, i.e. storage, retrieval, processing, communication, diffusion and sharing of information for social, economical and cultural upliftment. ICT has opened new avenues like online learning, e-learning, virtual university, e-coaching, e-education, e-journal, as well as third generation mobile phones. The ICT brings more rich materials in the classrooms and libraries for teachers, counsellors and students.

### ***Potential Benefits of ICT in Guidance and Counselling***

It is obvious that many people have acquired skills and knowledge that are no longer adequate to deal with the situation that life now presents to them (Mayor and Bindé, 2001). This situation has arisen as a result of the globalization that is taking place in a new economic and social context (Grantham, 2002). Indeed, new technologies are being introduced changing traditional production processes and labour relations. It is pertinent for us to create this awareness and make people respond to these changes. There is the need for the constant up-dating of skills and knowledge through a flexible process of life-long learning. This mode of learning will be better pursued through on-the-job training for counselling practitioners rather than within the education system. According to Okorodudu (2010), it is possible to receive education and counselling from our homes through modern communication technological facilities like the computers, internet services, skype devices, cell phones, amongst others. Specialist service providers abound who would most often have no contact with the person seeking help. They likely work in specialised areas independent of the client's environment.

At present, computer technology has affected virtually all domains of life, including the way people communicate ideas, conduct business and provide education (International Journal for the Advancement of Knowledge 2004). Currently, there are on-line journals and newsletters that allow more convenient and accessible assistance regardless of time and space notions. The ease of developing websites has produced a massive increase in e-guidance users (Anthony, 2003). According to Tinio (2012), ICT-based career guidance is now available, not only on a selected number of locations, but on a vast range of other online sites too. According to him, counsellors can make profit from the service at homes, work places and community location.

Even though computers have been in use in counselling for more than three decades now, in Nigeria, it is yet to take root. More diverse computing applications have been developed over time. According to Anthony (2003), these applications form an essential component of guidance and counselling practice. These applications include assessment, career guidance, storage and delivery of client records, preparations of case notes, reports and correspondence, delivery of public presentation and practice management amongst others (Bloom, 2000). More recent applications include cyber-counselling and distance guidance (Sampson, 2000). Amazingly, higher education extension of guidance into online student affairs and services is already in vogue. This includes orientation, academic advising and counselling, judicial services and student activities.

Indeed, the potential effectiveness of the computer for school counsellors is being expanded. Technological skills are necessary to support students' academic

achievement and enhance counsellor's role.

According to Casey (1995:34):

*Today's clients have changed the way they learn, and today's counsellors must change the way they communicate on behalf of student academic success... If learner outcomes can be better achieved through technology, it is incumbent that counsellors adapt their strategies accordingly.*

One recent innovation in this regard in many countries of the world is the open-access-model of counselling. A more diffuse approach has been conceived to replace the concept of counsellors working with individual clients in a psychological vacuum. Thus, guidance services have departed from the old tradition to the model where ICT information rooms and brief informal interview resources are provided (Watts, 1997). The concept of "distance guidance" by telephone or through internet, makes it possible to deliver guidance services to remote locations, with or without direct staff assistance. Thus, ICT has the potential to significantly increase access to guidance services freeing it to constraints of time and space (Naouel, 2008).

### **The "How" of ICT in Counselling**

A lot of approaches to ICT counselling have been devised. One approach is the creation of counselling websites. Sampson (1999a) distinguishes between *independent* websites and *integrated* website. Independent websites, according to him are free-standing and may be developed by a wide variety of commercial, governmental and other agencies. Integrated ones on the other hand are developed by career centres themselves and occupy a strategic significance in such settings. Through their

websites, career centres can identify the "global" resources they wish to utilize and then, intertwine them with their own "local" provision.

Watts and Dent (2002) observe that apart from websites, there has been growing interest in the use of telephone helplines in delivering career information and guidance services. Though helplines have witnessed a massive growth in recent years, in Nigeria situation it is still at the toddler stage. The current extensive availability of mobile phones in the country is a potential boost to ICT in counselling. Indeed, the telephone can be used for a wide range of service provision. There are now services comprising menu of pre-coded messages or direct contact with prescribed scripts. There are also highly interactive engagements with skilled professionals (Huws & Denbigh, 1999). The anonymity this process brings to counselling interaction is motivating to clients. Indeed, the use of the telephone in counselling has been so effective that Tait (1999:114) argues that:

*"The telephone has become normalised as a medium for guidance and counselling in ways which have yet to happen in the case of the computer-mediated communications"*

Probably, the largest telephone helpline in career guidance and counselling is the "learndirect" service in the UK which was launched in February, 1998 and has responded to 2.4 million calls by the end of 2000 (Watts and Dent, 2002). In the USA, there was the most ambitious effort to provide telephone career counselling. It was called the "home-base career education model" of Rhodes & Island which aimed at home-based women. Similar outfits abound in Canada and New Zealand.

The electronic-mail (e-mail) system can also be used to access guidance and counselling services. Greater use of e-mail should make it possible to sustain contact over a period of time.

All in all, the concept of flexible usage of the telephone, website and e-mail, linked with the face-to-face facilities opens up new opportunities for the delivery of career information and guidance. It means that individuals can initially access help in the form which is convenient to them and with which they feel most comfortable. While some clients could feel at ease visiting a career centre, others might just be satisfied with a telephone or e-mail counselling. Clear models based on users' experiences, regarding strengths and weaknesses of different media and the way they are combined could provide a stronger basis for planning coherent service delivery (Naouel, 2008).

### **Prospects**

The application of ICT in diverse ways in guidance and counselling is a phenomenon whose time has come. This is because, it affords freedom of access by individuals. With the evolution of the internet into the information "high way", access will become possible by the ongoing improvement of computing and information capabilities.

Secondly, distance learning through the National Open University programme and other outlets has become popular in Nigeria. It has been recognised as a cost-saving mechanism of providing higher education to the increasing number of qualified Nigerians who cannot access the conventional university programmes. This programme will certainly increase the demand for guidance and counselling through computer-application. In other

words, distance learning will surely necessitate distance guidance.

In Nigeria, the extent to which counsellors apply "cyber-counselling" or "webtherapy" is not certain. The development of internet chat rooms direct online contact between counsellors and client while reaching remote areas that are without access to counselling.

### **Problems Associated With the use of ICT in Counselling**

ICT application in counselling and guidance suffers from myriads of problems. It is apparent that the level of development and industrialization differ from country to country. There is widespread concern that internet is worsening the inequalities between the information rich and the information poor, between industrialized and developing countries and those who are inept (OECD, 2000). This gap is indeed substantial (Watts, 2001).

Also, telephone counselling suffers from the drawback of lack of access to visual cues such as the risk for differential environmental distractions that can lead to miscommunication. Also, telephone counselling suffers from its inability to offer in-depth guidance which is one of the major benefits of face-to-face counselling and guidance.

Counsellors today are not receiving the technological training they need to survive and excel in a technological oriented world (Mcfaddam, 2000). There is also the appalling situation of ICT facilities in schools in Nigeria. In a study on the ICT needs of secondary school teachers in Delta State, Iyeke (2011) reports that schools lack computer laboratories, internet services and reliable supply of electricity. This situation is bound to scuttle the effort of counsellors to employ ICT in counselling in Nigeria.

Another problem of computer-related technology in counselling is that its efficacy in therapy has not been adequately researched. Counselling professionals are yet to establish standardised means of evaluating outcome effectiveness of services in order to justify the high cost of provision (Naouel, 2008).

Also, computer-assisted guidance raises ethical concerns about the adequacy and appropriateness of online forms of therapeutic intervention while treating sensitive issues (Maheu and Gordon, 2001). As social-emotional concerns are so often brought to the attention of school counsellors, the potential for misinterpretation through cyber-communication may pose a challenge to the provision of optimal counselling services. Online counselling also tests the bounds of professional competence, confidentiality and informed consent. The confidentiality of clients' records and data transmission can be breached when inappropriate individuals gain access to client's data (Bartram, 1997).

Above all, irrespective of the innate quality of computer software, the ultimate effectiveness of computer applications in counselling and guidance is constrained by the quality of the process used in implementation. Whereas more persons need no assistance while using a computer, others need and might not receive it effectively. In cyber-counselling, the counsellor might be unaware of important location – specific circumstances in remote areas.

### **Conclusions, and Implication for Capacity Building**

It can be deduced from the study that ICT is a revolution with immense benefit to guidance and counselling. It was also revealed that the use of computers in

counselling has not yet taken root in Nigeria. Nigerian counsellors lack the requisite technological skills needed to employ ICT in counselling. Above all, there is lack of relevant ICT facilities in most parts of Nigeria, thereby making ICT use in counselling impossible.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Arising from some of the issues raised above, recommendations are hereby posited to enhance the quality of service delivery via ICT in counselling.

- a. The introduction of ICT in counselling is bound to broaden the scope of operation of counsellors. Telephone guidance should not be seen as a distinct field of specialization but an integral part of the traditional careers counsellors' job. There is therefore the need for continued up-date of the counsellors' knowledge and skill in order to remain relevant in this modern age of science and technology. Counsellors should be computer compliant for as the saying goes: "the illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn"
- b. Counselling professionals should be made to acquire computer skills. In fact, the issue of computer literacy within counsellor education programmes is of major significance for the counselling profession. Counsellors need greater knowledge of technology and its implications for counselling practice. It is a fact that in Nigeria counsellors and even teacher counsellors are not receiving the technological training they need to survive and excel in a technologically-oriented world. Computer technology remains the most powerful and yet

neglected skills in our preparation and in-service programmes in technology. However, in order to prepare counsellors with the necessary skills in using technology, it is important that training programmes implement mandatory competency standards in the use of computer-related technology. Indeed, there is a serious need for more computer skills training of counselling professionals.

- c. Television and Radio should be used for dissemination of educational and vocational guidance. This programme should be carried out by the federal and state governments. They should work in concert with the Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) which is the professional body dispensing guidance and counselling services in Nigeria.
- d. Finally, telephone helplines should be funded by the Federal Government of Nigeria as it is done in New Zealand. Indeed, all counselling helplines and call centres should be free considering the level of poverty in the country.

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