# 4. Guidance for Digital Networking

4.1 Why Digital Networking? The Benefits

Building connections through traditional networking (face-to-face) will always be a more natural form of social interaction, allowing you to easily and quickly build a rapport with people and develop mutual trust. However, digital networking is an equally useful tool for maintaining and building on these relationships, and being able to engage with the wider community, individuals, organisations and potential customers both locally and across a much broader geographic context.
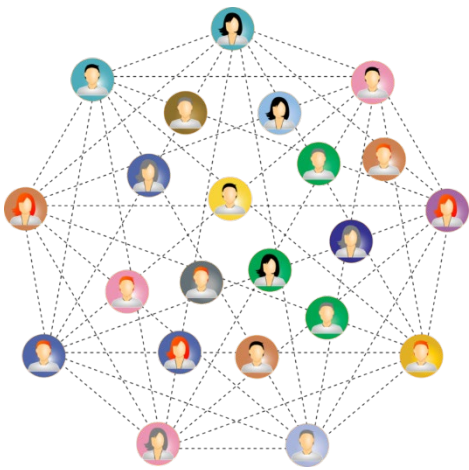
> Digital networking is a particularly useful asset in the rural context, where in-person networking can be less accessible due to challenges of geography, transport and associated cost.
>
> Social media platforms and digital communications will enable you to connect with a huge diversity of people, share learning with peers online, and deepen your social network despite these challenges.
>
> However, digital networking can sometimes seem like quite a broad and unwieldy task, making it difficult to know where to begin.

How will this guide help me?

This resource will provide a guiding framework for improving your digital networking skills, explain how to use video conferencing and give an overview of the main social networking platforms, including when and how to use them effectively.

We also provide 'how-to' guides for creating and publishing online blogs and vlogs. These tools can help you to reach a wide-ranging audience, and can drastically improve your online presence in search results. Within the local context, they will allow you to reach more people, and may also help you to engage with younger people who use digital media more frequently.
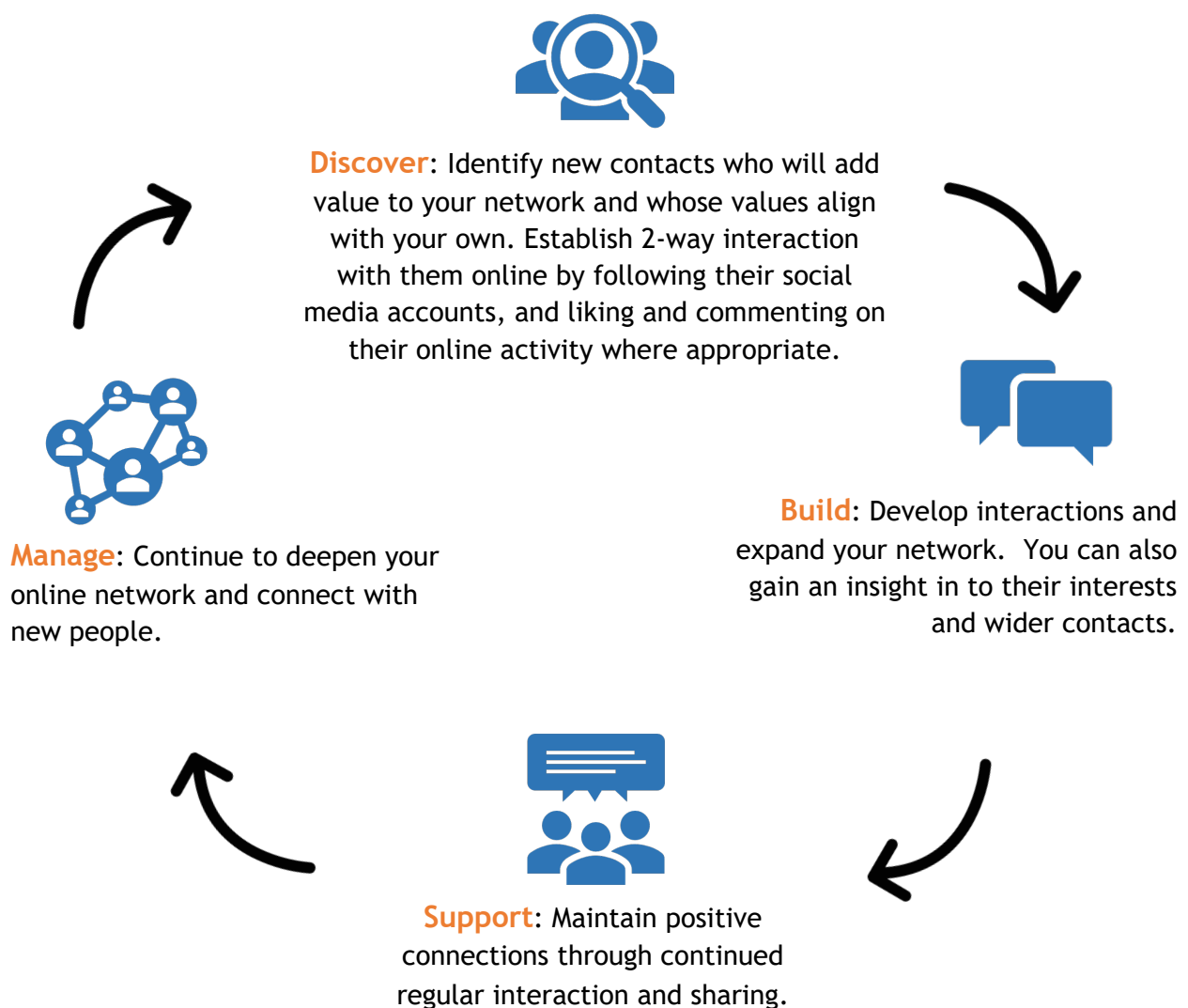
> Within the community context, the benefits of digital networking can be diverse and far-reaching if used appropriately and with the consideration of all members of your community. **An over-reliance on digital networking can exclude community members who may already be marginalized or isolated by factors such as age or household income.**
>
> Digital networking should be used a supplementary tool to in-person social activities and interactions. The challenges and risks associated with using digital networking within the community context are explained in Section 4.7 The Challenges of Digital Networking, along with advice on how to consider these potential barriers.

4.2 A Framework for Digital Networking

The framework for successful digital networking is the same for all social media users, regardless of which platform you are using, or whether you are a complete beginner or seasoned expert.

The framework shown below is a circle of continuous actions, which you should try to repeat even after they have been completed – to stay up to date. This will add value to your digital networking, and allow you to continue to improve on your skills and digital presence.

Discover: Identify new contacts who will add value to your network and whose values align with your own. Establish 2-way interaction with them online by following their social media accounts, and liking and commenting on their online activity where appropriate.

Build: Develop interactions and expand your network. You can also gain an insight in to their interests and wider contacts.

Manage: Continue to deepen your online network and connect with new people.

Support: Maintain positive connections through continued regular interaction and sharing.

4.3 A Guide to Social Media Platforms

Social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp allow users to share media and user-generated content (including images, links and videos), to join groups and to engage in personal communications.

Learning how to use these platforms has the potential to scale both the breadth and depth of your social network, helping you to create many community and enterprise benefits for your organisation, from job referrals, to work collaborations, driving sales, sharing best practices, reaching a broader market, gathering feedback and learning from your peers.

In digital networking, understanding the nature and key characteristics of different tools and social platforms is important to successfully build and develop your online social network. In the section below, we outline the key characteristics of major digital networking platforms.

> ## Twitter

Twitter is a short message communication tool that allows you to send out messages (tweets) containing up to 140 characters to people who subscribe to you (follow your account). Tweets can include a link to any web content (blog post, website page, PDF document) or a photograph or video.

Twitter is a social networking platform used by individuals and organisations as a way of communicating opinions and ideas, and sharing and circulating news and current affairs. Most organisations have a Twitter account to enable them to:

- Connect with their target audience (customers, business partners, competitors, peers, other local businesses, professional networks)
- Promote their business and drive traffic to their website/blog
- Stay in the loop with events, news and developments within their sector/locality

For a more detailed how-to-use guide for Twitter, follow the link below:
https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-use-twitter-for-business-and-marketing/

➢ Facebook

A Facebook page is like a digital shopfront, allowing other users to discover your social enterprise. Setting up a Facebook page is free and simple, and can increase your online presence in internet search results.

You can share information on your Facebook page, including your location, contact details and also receive reviews from customers. It is easy to create and share events on Facebook, which has the facility to link with Eventbrite, although (as with most social media platforms), sharing is only effective if you have a large base of followers, who will also share your event within their own network – and so on (works in the same way as word of mouth).
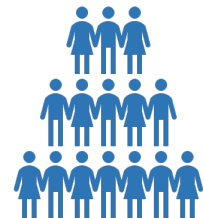
- Therefore, it can be helpful to engage with Facebook pages which have a large following, so that as many people see your post as possible. This could include a local 'things for sale' page, or a 'community notice board' page, as these forums will reach many people locally.
- This approach can be useful when reaching out to specific groups, for example: A survey of Gaelic-speakers in Scotland was carried out by engaging with a range of Gaelic Facebook groups. The following link takes you to this ICCI case study.
  https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26566_download&client_id=hfwu

Facebook groups allow members to interact and share with other members within the group. Groups are themed around a specific topic, whether it is renewable energy or a community group to discuss local affairs. Common protocol is that posts, discussions and contributions should relate to the overarching theme, and irrelevant materials or posts will be removed.

An example is the ViSENet Facebook Group, which you can join by following this link:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/282745289271832/

➢ LinkedIn

LinkedIn is designed for professional and career networking, and functions as an online directory of individual professionals and organizations. Your personal LinkedIn account acts as an online billboard, to highlight your talents and experiences to prospective recruiters, employees or collaborators.

Creating a LinkedIn company profile is useful, as you can increase the visibility of your organisation to other like-minded individuals or organisations working in the same sector.

Having a public profile will enable others to learn more about your organisation, and might potentially tip the balance between them connecting with you (about work collaboration, peer learning etc) or not.

For more information on LinkedIn **personal** profiles, follow the link below:

https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-use-linkedin-2062597

For more information on LinkedIn **company** profiles, follow the link below:

https://www.thebalancecareers.com/how-to-use-linkedin-company-follow-2062324

4.4   Which platform will reach your target audience?

It is important to be mindful that many groups will not have extensive capacity for updating several social media accounts, especially if they are a volunteer-run group, with a timetable or rota which is subject to change. It is therefore important to identify which social media platform will most effectively reach your target audience.

If this is the wider community, then consider what platform is most widely used locally. There may be established groups, such as a Community/Village Facebook Group, which could provide a platform to a much broader audience locally via Facebook. It may be worthwhile to consider recruiting someone locally (for example a local young person with social media skills) to assist with this, where their knowledge and skills of digital networking can be used to promote your social enterprise online.

This can be a way of involving local skills as an asset to assist you in your work and can also act as a vehicle for succession planning, encouraging young people to be interested and invested in social enterprise. Young people may also be able to transfer their skills to volunteers or employees within your social enterprise who don't have the same knowledge of digital technologies and platforms.

4.5   Making a plan and schedule for social media posts

It can be helpful to identify the key messages and posts that you want to get across via social media and make a schedule for getting these out. You can set up scheduling so as you plan in advance.

This can assist and remind you to post regularly on your social media accounts, and will improve your online presence. It is also useful when planning, to outline the content of your posts, so that they vary in subject matter and focus on promoting upcoming events and news.

Posts would include subject matter such as:

- Promoting awareness of your organisation and the enterprising activities you are involved in: Location, what goods or services you offer, what your social and or environmental objectives are and goals you have achieved so far.

- Promoting relevant upcoming events, hosted by you or others.
- Posts to promote goods or services, and introduce staff members or your workspace.
- To update and refresh existing information, and replace old photos with new versions.
- To promote awareness of an upcoming sales or special offers.

Some real-life examples of social media posts by community cooperatives are given in the Plunkett Foundation's 'Beginners Guide to Social Media', which can be accessed below:

https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Beginners_guide_to_social_media_-_for_community_co-operatives.pdf

You can create scheduled posts within Facebook so as they are posted at specific times. There is guidance and a how to do this within Facebook available at:
https://www.facebook.com/help/389849807718635/

You can easily create a schedule for social media posts by using an online calendar, such as Google Calendar, which allows you to schedule tasks, events and reminders for specific dates and times on a blank calendar template. This can be useful if it is a shared task as can be a prompt for different people to upload content at the relevant times.

Click on the Adobe Acrobat Document icon to the left to see an example of the Google Calendar above, which has been colour-coded to highlight the different types of social media activity:

Adobe Acrobat
Document

- Checking social media accounts for activity or to respond to messages.
- Posting on Facebook to promote upcoming events, including sharing community or local events.
- Informing of upcoming sales or offers.
- Uploading photos to Instagram to promote goods or services, introduce staff members and your workspace. Promoting awareness of your social enterprise overall.
- Updating and refreshing information and adding recent photos to social media accounts.

Another option which requires less technology, is simply to handwrite your social media schedule onto a physical calendar. This is only effective if the calendar is placed in a prominent place, where it is visible to anyone who needs to view it and is checked regularly for upcoming tasks. If you chose this method, it is also recommended that tasks are ticked off and initialled once completed, so that you know both that it has been carried out, and by who.

It is also important to schedule periodic updates to your social media account(s), such as updating and refreshing information and pictures, to keep your account up-to-date and informed. This will make it clear to people visiting your social media platforms that you invest time and effort in sharing relevant information, and can create more visibility for your social enterprise.

If your social media account(s) sit dormant for long periods of time, or the information available is not updated, people will be less likely to follow you or share your posts, reducing your online visibility. Having a schedule of posts and updates will prompt you to stay on top of social media, and is particularly useful for social enterprises where social media is not managed by one single person.

For example, if a community group has a Facebook page which is run by multiple volunteers, having a social media schedule will make the task of updating it less complex. Instead of relying on people who might volunteer sporadically to remember to update or post to Facebook, they will simply have to follow the social media schedule which is already outlined.

4.6   A Guide to Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing is an element of digital networking that can facilitate communication and the exchange of information between two or more participants from geographically dispersed locations via audio and video connection. Videoconferencing enables different partners in different locations to communicate effectively, share information, knowledge and experience without the costs in travel or time of meeting personally. This is particularly relevant in the rural context.

Learning how to effectively use videoconferencing as a tool to share, learn and interact with others is a particularly advantageous for people in geographically rural or remote locations, where travel is more costly in terms of both time and money. The link below takes you to our *Guide to Videoconferencing*, which answers frequently-asked questions, and provides top tips to improve your videoconferencing skills and confidence.

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26567_download&client_id=hfwu

Issues to consider include broadband capacity, which platform to use, confidence and tech skills. It is much easier to start with a one to one videoconference, and then expand from there. Example of ViSENet planning all done via video conferencing and sharing document versions.

4.7 A Guide to Vlogging and Blogging

Vlogging and blogging – similar sounding technical jargon, but what do they actually mean?

A blog is a regularly updated website or web page, typically run by an individual or small group, that is written in an informal or conversational style. Blogging is an effective tool to build awareness and help you to reach your target audience online. By posting regular blogs, you will increase your visibility in internet searches, driving traffic to your site and attracting potential customers.

Video + Blogging = Vlogging. A vlog is simply a platform like a personal web page or social media account where an individual regularly posts short videos. The growing number of videos on the internet, and the popularity of sites such as YouTube for media sharing makes vlogging a great way to share information about your enterprise.

There are a few reasons why you should consider vlogging:

1) **Everyone loves videos.**
   Videos are an easy way to take in information in an engaging way, and is more accessible for many people than reading a block of text.

2) **Videos make you more human.**
   Speaking directly to your audience through video makes you seem more human and trustworthy, which will appeal to potential customers or collaborators.

3) **Search Engine Optimisation loves it too!**
   Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the process of optimising search engine results, so that the most relevant results are ranked highest. The more web pages which link to your web page or social media channel, the more likely your vlog is to rank higher in search results. Since a large majority of google searches now include video content, by creating vlogs, you have a greater chance of ranking higher in search results.

It's worth noting that video content doesn't always have to be filmed in an informal vlog style, which can be difficult to get used to. Having a *'who we are and what we do'* video is just as important, to explain your enterprise and social mission to a viewer. A How-To Guide for Blogging, which gives an overview of structure, length and images is available here:

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26568_download&client_id=hfwu

- Vlog Examples

Brewgooder, clean drinking water: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vn1XEjRNds

Company Shop, reducing food waste: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pV0vDqh-6CQ

Below are some good practice examples below from social enterprises across the UK.

- Blog Examples

Blog about rural learning exchange to Holland: https://www.ruralyouthproject.com/single-post/2019/06/19/Can-innovation-bridge-the-ruralurban-divide

Blog about rejuvenating rural communities through social enterprise: https://sewfonline.com/news-2018/rejuvenating-rural-communities-through-social-enterprise/

- Other Useful Links

How to start a blog: https://www.bloggingbasics101.com/how-do-i-start-a-blog/

Benefits of blogging: https://www.cbo.me/blog/5-powerful-benefits-of-blogging-for-your-small-business

How to start a vlog: https://vloggerpro.com/how-to-start-a-vlog/

Top tips for vlogging using your mobile phone: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akWS2KhTEiQ&feature=youtu.be

4.8   The Challenges of Digital Networking

Whilst the benefits of digital networking are plentiful, there are also some challenges associated with an over-reliance on technology to form and deepen social networks. This is especially apparent in the context of rural community enterprise, where participants generally come from a range of different generations, occupational brackets, household types and other isolating factors such as remote geography, which can limit access to high-speed internet.

It is therefore vitally important to understand all of the ways in which using digital networking make participation inaccessible for some people. Consider what changes you could make to enable everyone in your community to engage in digital networking.

Below we have compiled some of the key challenges associated with digital networking, and explained how they can manifest in the rural context.

	Cost associated with some technologies.	Technologies, especially mobile devices, which provide access to social media and networking sites can be prohibitively expensive for those in poverty or outside broadband access.

	The skills required to be social network-savvy can be overwhelming.	Particularly for older generations, who are at a technological disadvantage. Educational classes to teach IT literacy to elderly people in rural areas are a great solution – local young people often have the skillset required to help.
	The potential alienation of people through virtual technologies, especially those who are already marginalized in communities.	Over reliance on digital interaction and a lack of personal human interaction can alienate and exclude already-marginalised community members. In rural or remote areas, where people may already be isolated, physical interaction is the best way to include everyone and promote social and mental wellbeing.
	The digital divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' is neither easy to address nor uncomplicated to overcome.	In rural areas, ubiquitous and equal access to high speed internet connectivity is still an aspiration for many. The disparity between those who have technological devices and those who do not can be exacerbated in rural settings where virtual communication is preferred due to challenges of geography and/or distance.
	Social media and social networking can actually exacerbate divisions or perspective.	It is important to be mindful about the values and views that you share online, and what message it sends to your followers. If your social media profile is available to be viewed by community members, potential business partners, employees or clients, then take special care not to isolate or offend them by what you post or share online.
	Becoming lost in a sea of data .	With the amount of seemingly immeasurable amounts of information available through social networking, it can be overwhelming to navigate. A concerted effort to continuously manage and organise information will reduce a backlog of information.

For more information about the challenges of digital networking, see Resource (37): *The Use of Social Networking in Community Development*.

4.9 Case Studies and Tools

➢ **Case Study: Digital Villages**
- https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/enrd/files/tg_smart-villages_case-study_de.pdf
  - Case study of the Digital Villages project in Germany, where local residents, local authorities and local industry collaborated to develop digital solutions for the rural area. The partnership created a series of apps to encourage and enable community networking and participation via an online marketplace, local news app and a rural delivery service operated by volunteers.
  - Highlights how digitisation can open up rural areas and connect isolated villages and communities separated by remote geography. Importance of local knowledge recognised in project design and ongoing resident feedback central to development.

➢ **Tool: Guide to Videoconferencing**

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26567_download&client_id=hfwu

  - Videoconferencing is a highly useful tool for social enterprises and social entrepreneurs operating in rural or remote locations, allowing them to network virtually without the associated costs of time or travel.
  - This resource is a how-to guide for videoconferencing, including the basics of camera set-up, lighting, sound and etiquette and tips for videoconferencing and calling.

➢ **Case Study: Finland Website Ohoy! Social Media Learning for Rural Elderly**

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26556_download&client_id=hfwu

  - Case study from rural Finland where inclusion is the key focus of the project. Young people and volunteers were trained to use their own knowledge to co-teach elderly people in IT literacy and use of social media sites. Poor mobility, lack of transport links and remote rural geographies of rural communities often limit the participation of older people in community activities.
  - Participants gained new communities and networks after involvement in the project, and were more able to use social media to connect with family and friends, as well as access vital services online (e.g. banking or booking a doctor's appointment).

➢ **Benefits of Social Media: A Beginner's Guide for Community Cooperatives**
- https://plunkett.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Beginners_guide_to_social_media_-_for_community_co-operatives.pdf

- The complete beginner's guide to using social media. This resource is tailored for community co-operatives but is highly relevant for any community group, social enterprise or enterprising individual seeking to get to grips with the basics of social media use, digital networking and online promotion.

- Practical examples are included within the text, such as screenshots of positive examples of social media use, and links to good practice social media accounts. Covers how to join social media, the benefits of using social media, how to improve your visibility and promote your business online, social media coverage and good practice examples.

➢ **Learning Resource: Use of Social Networking in Community Development**

http://www.msucommunitydevelopment.org/paul/content/Lachapelle%202011%20The%20use%20of %20social%20networking%20in%20community%20development%20CD%20Practice.pdf

- This resource provides theoretic learning on the challenges of social media and digital networking in the community context, flagging up the major causes of exclusion, which are particularly relevant within the rural context. Challenges include the overwhelming nature of IT skills and constantly changing technology; potential alienation of people; digital divide between have's and have not's; and exacerbating divisions of perspective).
- Also discusses the benefits that social media use can have when used well within a community, to include and inform all members of the community.