

Social media for chief executives: the essential guide

In the last 20 years, NHS chief executives have had to build, change, energise, merge, stabilise and reinvigorate their organisations, as well as cutting waiting lists and improving care and clinical excellence. NHS chief executives' time spent has often had to be internally focused.

This briefing explores how using social media platforms can help NHS chief executives develop a collaborative leadership style that helps get results in the complex system of health and social care. It answers four questions:

- What is social media and who is using it in healthcare?
- Where does social media align itself with the wider policy context?
- Why should every NHS chief executive be social media literate?
- What guidance and examples exist of NHS chief executives already using social media well?

Background

In the last five years, major changes have occurred that have catalysed a change in the leadership styles within the NHS.

Firstly, changes in the NHS' structure and hierarchy, the Dilnot Report, the Boorman review, the Francis Report and the tightening of financial belts have all provided incentives for a changing leadership style. It has been recognised that the NHS now needs collaborative leaders who take an active interest in those they work with every day. "The old model of 'heroic' leadership by individuals needs to adapt to become one that understands other models such as shared leadership, both within

organisations and across the many organisations with which the NHS has to engage in order to deliver its goals."¹

Secondly, social media has grown from a fledgling technology to one that is connecting vast numbers of people and is driving change in how retailers do business, governments talk with their citizens and the NHS interacts with patients and staff. The Royal College of General Practitioners and the General Medical Council have both released guidance for their members on using social media professionally. The Government Digital Service has been educating and training Whitehall departments in using social

Key points

- Social media is here to stay. NHS chief executives need to be increasingly socially media literate so they can work with the information found on social media platforms.
- Social media platforms give you the power to break free from your geography to hear about and influence at local, regional and national levels.
- Twitter offers easy-to-join networks of NHS professionals and stakeholders, broadening perspectives.

media, while the Francis Report and the Department of Health's information strategy both set out the need to engage with patient feedback and comments on social media platforms.

Thirdly, in academia there has been a move away from linear management models to distributed system-based models of management and leadership. Complexity theory has grown and leaders and managers have been faced with the task of affecting change through relationships and social capital instead of just through power.

What is social media and who is using it?

Many of you will know social media by the names of individual platforms: Twitter, Facebook

NHS stakeholders on Twitter

- patient groups
- the general public (many talking about how to access the NHS and their experience of services)
- Members of Parliament
- the media
- local councillors
- members of the local government executive
- your staff (see our ['Increasing staff engagement with social media'](#) briefing for more information)
- your future staff (see our ['Can social media have a place in your recruitment process'](#) briefing (available from the end of June) for more information)
- your competitors and collaborators.

and YouTube are all part of a large social media ecosystem. Hundreds of different platforms make up the term 'social media',

but in this briefing we will concentrate on Twitter as an important first step into social media for chief executives.

Internet and social media usage in the UK

- 85 per cent of people in the UK have used the internet²
- approximately half of all people in the UK have a smartphone (a phone able to connect to the internet)³
- over 50 per cent of people in the UK use social media sites⁴
- Only 34.2 per cent of people regularly read a newspaper⁵

Twitter

Twitter has 10 million active users in the UK⁶ and in March 2012 had 6.2 million unique visitors.⁷ Healthcare professionals are fast finding niches on Twitter to help, support and learn from their peers. Nurses, through communities such as [#wenurses](#), epitomise this approach to modern-day networking and other groups such as [#Nurchat](#), [#weMidwives](#) and [#studentNT](#).

Facebook

In March 2012, Facebook had a unique audience of 25.7 million people in the UK.⁸ Facebook is the UK's most popular social media platform with two thirds of the UK's 40 million internet users⁹ having accessed it.¹⁰

The growth in online patient communities

As more and more patients have gone online in search of information about their condition and NHS services, formal and informal patient groups have sprung up.

Health charities now regularly offer patients forums, Facebook groups and Twitter chats which discuss the details of their condition, often with qualified nurses on hand to provide answers and support.

Websites such as [HealthUnlocked](#), [iWantGreatCare](#), [Patient Opinion](#) and [Patients know Best](#) help connect patients with other patients and services and enable patients to comment on the care they receive.

These groups started at a patient level and some are now being woven into the NHS to help provide better online services to patients and the public. They are starting to gain traction in the system and the power to change how the NHS views and uses patient comments.

Social media enables individuals and organisations to publish, often for free, their views and information about a topic(s) of choice. Social media platforms link together people, or rather profiles of people, in real time. This enables social media platforms to bring together communities of interest – groups of people who share the same passions and jobs and face the same challenges. Much like the coffee houses of the 18th Century, social media platforms have brought together differing opinions and are places of discussion and learning.

As individuals in the communities share their thoughts via tweets, blog posts and podcasts, the community builds up a knowledge base and quickly becomes a place in which to ask

questions, find out the latest information and discuss topical issues. The Twitter community [#nhssm](#) is a good example of this in which patients, clinicians and managers pose and answer questions surrounding the use of social media in the NHS.

Healthcare is very well represented on social media platforms. Diverse groups of professionals and patients cover topics from system-wide change to condition-specific best practice.

Every facet of the NHS is represented on social media. Senior Department of Health officials, nurses, junior doctors, radiologists, patient groups, NHS librarians, mental health practitioners, HR and finance professionals and more are all on Twitter discussing their

professions. There is also evidence that online comments from patients can predict the quality of a service.¹¹ A variety of NHS stakeholders regularly use Twitter to discuss topical issues, comment on services, lobby the system and share the latest news, information and research.

Myths about social media

Within the NHS there are a number of myths about social media, such as problems with the security of the technology, the issue of staff wasting time on Facebook and the risk of getting it wrong and ending up on the front page of a newspaper. Like all myths, they have their roots in the truth but have elements that have been over-emphasised.

Recently, the chief executive of the NHS Employers organisation, Dean Royles, made a series of rebuttals to these myths in a podcast and article:

[Podcast: Slaying the five social media myths](#)

[Article: Dispelling five myths of social media use in the NHS](#)

'Every facet of the NHS is represented on social media. Senior Department of Health officials, nurses, junior doctors, radiologists, patient groups, NHS librarians, mental health practitioners and more are all on Twitter.'

'Only chief executives who are social media literate will be able to ask the right questions of their directors and staff when discussing the results of social media use and monitoring.'

Dean's central argument is that social media doesn't take up time from your usual day-to-day; it is an entirely new way of working.

In 2012 the Government Digital Service produced its [Social media guidance for civil servants](#). It includes guidance on overcoming the technical barriers to accessing the internet and social media. It is recommended reading for chief executives who wish to be able to thoroughly discuss the pros and cons of the internet and social media access with their IT colleagues.

Social media and the wider NHS context

The challenges facing the NHS of integrating healthcare, integrating health and social care, meeting the financial challenge and using patient experience outcomes as markers of quality and commissioning value, all require NHS chief executives to engage and lead diverse groups of people through change.

The policy environment has helped to instil a need to engage with a wider variety

of stakeholders. Social media is one way of listening to and acting upon stakeholders' views and experiences.

The stated aims of the NHS Operating Framework '[Everyone Counts: Planning for Patients 2013/14](#)' are:

1. NHS services seven days a week
2. More transparency, more choice
3. More patient participation and better customer service
4. Better data and more informed commissioning, improved outcomes
5. Higher standards and safer care.

Numbers 2, 3 and 4 all include social media. Increased transparency means being more open online as to what information is available, and actively promoting its presence. Patient participation and better customer service involve going to where the patients are already talking – Twitter, forums and blogs, not just the town hall. Better data requires collection and open sharing of anonymised data sets for comparison, which in turn drives more choice. Twitter is an excellent way to share, discuss and promote these data sets to the wider public.

The Francis Report also asserts a belief in the greater use of patient comment. Its recommendation 255

('Information – using patient feedback') says:

"Results and analysis of patient feedback, including qualitative information, need to be made available to all stakeholders in as near 'real time' as possible, even if later adjustments have to be made."

Francis recommendation 111 ('Effective complaints handling – lowering barriers') asks provider organisations to "constantly promote to the public their desire to receive and learn from comments and complaints".

This is something more chief executives can do via a Twitter account and blog; taking the lead in promoting patient voice within the NHS. As described in 'How can social media platforms help NHS chief executives do their job?', below, social media can help chief executives set, maintain and communicate their vision.

The Department of Health's [information strategy](#), states:

"4.67 [...] Increasingly techniques such as sentiment analysis or social media aggregation have the potential to provide rapid indicators and early warnings of some areas of performance. The extent to which patients, service users and carers feel that services are integrated and coordinated should be analysed and form part of the range of issues covered."

All of these challenges and commitments to more frequently use social media and content on social media lead to a requirement for NHS chief executives to be social media literate.

The need for social media literacy

As social media begins to be used across the NHS to monitor patient comments and topical health stories, chief executives will need to become confident in discussing the methodologies and results. See the [NHS England social media dashboard discussed in their February board papers \(item 4b, point 40\)](#) as an example of the type of information used from social media platforms.

The easiest way of becoming social media literate is to use social media. We will now look at how using social media can complement different areas of a chief executive's role and help build a collaborative leadership style.

How can social media help NHS chief executives do their job?

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, can help chief executives with deliberative engagement; setting, maintaining and communicating a vision; engaging staff; consistently communicating with multiple stakeholders; networking with peers; and building a collaborative leadership style.

Deliberative engagement

Deliberative engagement is "different from other forms of engagement in that it is about giving participants time to consider and discuss an issue in depth before they come to a considered view."¹²

Unlike a meeting room or hospital, social media has no physical or geographical boundaries. It lends itself very well to deliberative engagement. Iterative and reiterative information and discussions can be had on Twitter with a variety of stakeholders over a long period of time. Accompanying detailed information can be published on blogs and websites and promoted via Twitter profiles and online events.

Setting, maintaining and communicating a vision

A major part of any leadership role is setting, maintaining and communicating a vision. [Section 6 of the NHS Leadership Academy's leadership framework](#) covers creating the vision:

"Those in senior positional leadership roles communicate the vision and motivate others to work towards achieving it. They:

- communicate their ideas and enthusiasm about the future of the organisation and its services confidently and in a way which engages and inspires others
- express the vision clearly, unambiguously and vigorously

- ensure that stakeholders within and beyond the immediate organisation are aware of the vision and any likely impact it may have on them
- take time to build critical support for the vision and ensure it is shared and owned by those who will be communicating it."

By using social media, chief executives can connect with more colleagues and peers from across the system and communicate their vision at any time, from anywhere. An excellent example of this is Dr Mark Newbold's blog (www.marknewbold.com) in which he describes his aims and experiences in a weekly 'CEO diary'.

Consistently communicating with multiple stakeholders

Twitter and blogs offer chief executives an easy way to provide a consistent vision and message to their many stakeholders.

As social media platforms are open to everyone (with an internet connection) blogging and tweeting enable chief executives to keep staff, patient groups, MPs and the media up to date at the same time. In times of bad press they also give chief executives a platform from which to give their side of the story, without the influence of an editor.

'By committing to engaging stakeholders via social media you commit to helping them better understand the complex world of the NHS.'

As service reforms increase, maintaining contact and a consistent message with a diverse set of stakeholders will become ever more important. Social media is one way of ensuring you are on hand to reiterate your evidence for change, rebut misinformation and reassure concerned stakeholders.

Networking with peers

Peer support is key to maintaining one's energy and motivation when leading organisations and people. Twitter offers a real-time support network of fellow chief executives. Many NHS chief executives already share their local best practice and discuss the tough questions facing the NHS openly with their followers (see the 'Examples and guidance from NHS chief executives' section below). Through these networks, best practice is shared, ideas generated and support given to a range of colleagues.

At a time when a NHS chief executive's list of key contacts is growing, Twitter is a convenient and fast way of staying in touch and exchanging ideas. Detailed business will always be conducted face to face, but social media can help maintain a relationship in between meetings.

Building a national network through social media can also help you begin to influence the views of your peers, whether they work in your region or not. You can connect with people in London or Bristol or Cumbria and find common ground, share best practise and argue your point. Twitter is like a conference with an agenda set by its attendees, which constantly evolves with the latest topical issue or story. You have a chance to influence that agenda to promote your best work and your organisation.

Helping to build collaborative leadership style

The very nature of social media is collaborative. Online 'places' such as #nhssm enable people to ask for help and advice, share information and discuss issues; in effect they build collaborative relationships via such things as guest blog posts and sharing information.

By openly discussing the hard choices your organisation faces, you will help build social capital with stakeholders.

The social capital built up from these online discussions and relationships will help NHS chief executives open up the 'black box of NHS management' to the media and public and show why and how decisions about their healthcare are made in the interest of the patient. By committing to engaging stakeholders via social media you commit to helping them better understand the complex world of the NHS. In turn this can help build momentum and support for service change if you too show a willingness to listen and learn from those around you.

'Social media is one way of ensuring you are on hand to reiterate your evidence for change, rebut misinformation and reassure concerned stakeholders.'

Examples and guidance from NHS chief executives

Twitter offers chief executives a way of connecting directly to their colleagues. In the example below, Paul Mears, Chief Executive of Yeovil District Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, has heard of some interesting work going on in Leeds and asks Rob Webster, Chief Executive of Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust, for his experiences about a community podiatry service.

Twitter also offers chief executives a way of challenging stakeholders' opinions and putting their side of the argument across to the public.

From the NHS Leadership Academy, here is an example of how a blog helped a deputy director of nursing and a chief executive engage staff around quality and safety of care:

"[the deputy director of nursing] set up an innovative and experimental chief executive blog which allowed staff to receive regular updates on the strategy. This proved to be a successful initiative as it enabled staff to access and respond to real-time messages from the chief executive about the future of the organisation."¹³

'Twitter offers chief executives a way of challenging stakeholders' opinions and putting their side of the argument across to the public.'



Top tips from NHS leaders



Dr Mark Newbold

Chief Executive, Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust

Twitter: [@drmarknewbold](https://twitter.com/drmarknewbold)

Blog: www.marknewbold.com

My three reasons to use social media:

1. It facilitates openness. You will be thinking, explaining, opining, musing and responding in public. Everyone can see who you are, what drives you, what interests you – they can understand you as an individual. You become real to many more people.
2. It helps you to be accessible. Anybody can talk to you – ask for help or for a view, give you their views, debate with you, joke with you. You are not aloof or anonymous or hidden. You are saying: “I’m here and you can engage with me, about anything of mutual interest”.
3. You are part of the debate. In fact, you are part of many debates – hearing, learning, shaping and being shaped, steering, correcting, leading or following. General chat, or specific and hash-tagged, you are in the mix, hearing and being heard, and that’s important. “Go on, try it – I promise it will help you be a better leader!”



Lisa Rodrigues CBE

Chief Executive, Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

Twitter: [@lisasaysthis](https://twitter.com/lisasaysthis)

Public weekly message: www.sussexpartnership.nhs.uk/about/news/articles

My top tips:

- Social media isn’t email. You don’t have to read everything that appears in your Twitter timeline, nor reply to everything addressed to you. It’s a conversation to join in when you are available.
- Never use social media under the influence of alcohol, in anger or for highly personal discussions.

“I don’t think you can separate being a chief executive of a publicly funded organisation from who you are as a person, so don’t have a separate account for talking about work issues and what you do in your (limited) spare time.”



Rob Webster

Chief Executive, Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust

Twitter: [@RobWebster_LCH](https://twitter.com/RobWebster_LCH)

Blog: nhsrobwebster.com

My top tips:

- Remember to tweet about what else is going on in your locality outside of healthcare. The NHS is part of the wider community and Twitter is a great way to show how it interacts with other people and organisations.
- Be yourself – authenticity is a clear part of effective leadership. So is listening and engaging. Do follow up and don't grandstand – social media carries the same requirements.
- Ask for help on social media channels when you need advice, expertise or a view. It usually appears very quickly and is always valuable.

"Twitter is a gift to every leader – it flattens hierarchies, increases access, gives you support from experts and thousands of followers when you need it, provides up-to-date official (and unofficial) news and, when used properly, can increase your reputation, the reputation of your team, the reputation of your organisation and the reputation of the NHS."



Ruth Carnall DBE

Former Chief Executive, NHS London Strategic Health Authority

Twitter: [@ruthcarnall](https://twitter.com/ruthcarnall)

My top tips:

- Twitter helps to get your view and personality across. There is no distortion in it unlike in the mainstream media. However, you have to be prepared to engage with whoever comes along and take brickbats along with bouquets.
- Be relaxed about humour and don't be hung up about status. You don't need to respond to everything although that is the temptation at first. If you do this you will spend every waking hour on Twitter! Ration yourself.

"Make sure to follow people you disagree with otherwise you get a rosy tinted view of the world."



Dean Royles

Chief Executive, the NHS Employers organisation

Twitter: [@NHSE_Dean](#)

Blog: www.nhsemployers.org/deansblog

My top tips:

- Use it to listen. Social media isn't just about telling people what you do, but a great way to get the views of others in a timely, cost-effective way.
- Signposting. Twitter is great way to draw attention to your organisation's websites and services. 140 characters may not seem a lot, but attaching a link means you can get lots of information to people quickly and effectively.
- See it as an important communication channel and use it strategically. It really can complement newsletters, meetings, face-to-face meetings and walkabouts, particularly as you use it outside of 'normal office hours'.
- If you see the value in social media and twitter, have a review of your policies to make it easier and safer for staff to use it too.

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Notes

NHS Employers

The NHS Employers organisation is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first. Our vision is to be the authoritative voice of workforce leaders, experts in HR, negotiating fairly to get the best deal for patients.

We help employers make sense of current and emerging healthcare issues to ensure that their voice is front and centre of health policy and practice. We keep them up to date with the latest workforce thinking and expert opinion, providing practical advice and information, and generating opportunities to network and share knowledge and best practice.

We work with employers in the NHS to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- pay and negotiations
- recruitment and planning the workforce
- healthy and productive workplaces
- employment policy and practice.

The NHS Employers organisation is part of the NHS Confederation.

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