

Tech is easing the workload of burnt out social workers, but the challenges of emotional labour remain

Some of the technological tools that social service agencies have employed may seem quite basic, such as an AI transcription tool that halves the time it takes to transcribe a consultation with a client. But with each worker handling 20 to 50 clients at any given time, the time and labour saved adds up.



Despite the conveniences of technology, social workers said that they still have plenty on their plates, given that their profession is centred on people. (Illustration: CNA/Nurjannah Suhaimi)



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Summary of news coverage

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The adoption of technology in social service agencies, such as AI transcription tools that significantly reduce the time required to document consultations, showcases the potential to enhance efficiency and alleviate the workload of social workers. These tools not only benefit clients by allowing social workers to handle large caseloads more effectively but also address the well-documented challenges of burnout within the profession, which have been exacerbated by increased demands, especially during the pandemic. The importance of technology in shaping the social service profession through education and skills development was highlighted by Minister for National Development Desmond Lee at a symposium organised by the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore (NUS) last November.

Mr Benjamin Ho, a senior social worker at Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities (**THKMC**), has encountered through his own exploration of AI for his work. “If a client comes to

me with marital issues, and I run the scenario through an AI prompt, it might recommend that I look at how external family issues might be influencing the couple's dynamics." he said. AI also helps Benjamin to reflect upon his work and plays the role of a clinical assistant.

Despite the conveniences that technology has afforded them, social workers said they still have plenty on their plates, given that their profession is centred on people. The need to be attuned to their clients' emotional cues can sometimes bleed into one's personal life as well – an "occupational hazard", Mr Ho shared. "Even when we're not at work, we tend to read cues in our personal lives that aren't really there too – we (over-analyse) our loved ones' actions but we don't recognise that the context is different." He added, "Technology itself is a wonderful thing, but it cannot and should not replace human interaction."