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Article

Mining social media posts: An alternative approach to understanding home health care workers' experiences

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SUMMARY

Home healthcare workers (HCWs) play a critical role in maintaining the quality of life of older adults and people with disabilities. Aging baby boomers and rising life expectancy are quickly increasing the demand for HCWs. However, both low mental health and high turnover are widely reported among HCWs. Prior research on HCWs relies heavily on interviews and surveys, but the large number of authentic posts on social media from HCWs about their work experiences has been largely neglected. To address the above research gaps, our study employs both AI-powered automatic text analysis and computer-assisted human coding to mine and analyze HCWs' social media posts. We hypothesized that work-environment-related stressors, lack of job support, and client-related challenges contribute to HCW stress. We found that HCWs often face hazardous work environments and challenging clients while lacking sufficient support, which contributes to increased stress in their jobs. The posts were predominantly negative, raising an alarm for the mental health of HCWs, as well as the conditions in which they work. Moreover, we demonstrated that the AI-powered approach and traditional human coding are complementary methods that can be used in tandem for mining social media posts. We also provided recommendations regarding how to improve HCWs' well-being and social media mining methods.

INTRODUCTION

Home health care, the delivery of personalized assistance to clients in a residential setting, is an essential part of the health care and social assistance sector for older adults and individuals with chronic illnesses and disabilities (1). It provides a wide range of services, from home care support such as washing, dressing, and toileting to medical services like nursing and therapeutics (1). Home health care is a cost-effective option for patients that is critical in maintaining patients' health, maximizing their independence, and preserving quality of life (2). In addition, home health care is one of the fastest-growing industries in the United States due to the aging of the baby boomer generation—individuals born between 1946 and 1964 during the post-World War II population boom—combined with rising life expectancy (3). By 2050, the United States will have around 82 million residents who are 65 years of age or older, and many of them will need home health care services (4). About 3.4 million home care workers (HCWs) were employed in the USA in 2020, and that number is likely to grow as the need for HCWs will increase by 33% by 2030 (4). Despite industry growth, the home-care workforce has not kept pace with rising demand, leading agencies to turn away clients or stretch limited staff across more cases, intensifying HCW stress (5).

HCWs are critical in the health care industry since they are the front-line employees who deliver home health care services. However, heavy work stress and high turnover rates have been widely reported in addition to low mental, physical, and general health (6-8). Due to the importance of HCW positions, some research examined the work environment, mental stress, and job satisfaction of HCWs. For example, based on interviews with 28 HCWs, a study found that relationships with patients, the structure and organizational aspects of their jobs, and the COVID-19 pandemic negatively influenced HCWs' well-being, mental health, and job satisfaction (9). Other prior studies identified several other factors that contribute to challenges faced by HCWs and job stressors, including lack of support from agencies or supervisors, working in isolation, low salaries, administrative bureaucracy, hazardous workplace environments, clients with cognitive impairments, work-family conflicts, and client deaths (9-11).

One important gap in the literature lies in the fact that prior studies rely heavily on HCWs' self-reported data, via interviews or surveys. However, the large amount of information that HCWs post on social media about their work experiences has been largely neglected. Given that self-reports are prone to response biases, alternative data sources are needed to overcome these limitations and cross-validate the findings of prior studies (12). With the advancement of automatic text mining tools, which are software applications that use algorithms to extract useful information, patterns, or insights from large collections of text data without manual analysis, researchers have turned to the vast amount of largely untapped social media data to understand individuals' behaviors in a variety of contexts (13). Researchers suggest that social media data could serve as a complementary data source to study individuals' feelings, attitudes, and behaviors (13). Compared to interview and survey data, social media data is sourced from and initiated by HCWs in their natural environment (13). Since there are no solicitations and disruptions, social media data is more likely to reveal HCWs' true feelings and experiences (13).Thus, social media data is less likely to be subject to social desirability, which is the tendency of people to present themselves in a favorable light by giving answers that are viewed as socially acceptable or desirable, rather than being completely honest (14). Moreover, through social media posts, researchers can access information from a larger number of subjects more quickly and cost-effectively than through traditional methods

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like interviews and surveys (13). For example, Reddit, a popular social networking platform, has been widely used by health researchers to understand the behaviors of both patients and healthcare workers (15). Reddit enables users to share opinions and engage in discussions with others in online forums called subreddits (15). However, the value and methodology of using text mining tools to generate valuable information about HCWs from social media platforms remains unclear.

This study has two main research objectives. The first is to develop an effective method for extracting valuable information from social media data. We focused on using AI-powered text mining tools because of their growing potential in social media analysis. However, as an emerging technology, AI-powered text analysis still faces significant limitations, and additional methods are needed to complement and validate it. Therefore, we also employed computer-assisted human coding alongside the AI-powered tool to analyze social media posts. Computer-assisted human coding is a human coding process where software tools help human coders analyze and categorize text data (16). An AI-powered text analysis tool is software that uses artificial intelligence—especially machine learning and natural language processing—to automatically process, interpret, and extract insights from large volumes of text data (17). The fundamental difference between the two approaches lies in the fact that final decisions are still made by the human analyst in the former approach, while in the latter approach, decisions are made by the AI. We believe these two approaches are complementary and, when combined, offer a comprehensive analysis of social media content. Our second objective is to examine the major issues that HCWs are concerned about based on their social media posts. Based on the findings of previous studies, we hypothesized that the job stressors related to a lack of job support, client-related challenges, and a hazardous work environment contribute significantly to stressful HCW positions. Lack of job support refers to a situation in which employees perceive that their organization does not value their contributions, well-being, or professional development. This may include inadequate training and poor responsiveness to employee concerns. Client-related challenges refer to the difficulties and stressors that arise directly from interactions with clients and their family members, such as client violence, non-compliance, and unrealistic requests. A hazardous work environment refers to any home setting or working condition that poses a risk to the health, safety, or well-being of the worker while providing care. Examples include cramped spaces and unsanitary conditions.

To test our hypothesis, we sought to understand HCWs' work experiences and challenges by mining their social media posts. We used posts and comments from the HCW online community "r/HomeHealthAide" on Reddit as the research context because this subreddit forum is a popular online community for HCWs in which HCWs can share experiences, seek advice, and provide support for each other. Analyzing HCWs' posts allowed us to identify the topics they are interested in or concerned about. We employed AI-powered text mining in conjunction with computer-assisted human coding to analyze these social media posts. This combined approach helped us to identify the popular topics they discussed, the major concerns they have, and their emotional states in the online community. To our knowledge, this is a pioneering study to understand HCWs by analyzing their social media posts. Our findings provide a deep understanding of the major challenges that HCWs are experiencing, offer important implications regarding how to improve HCWs' well-being, and provide suggestions on optimizing the home health care service experience.

RESULTS

We conducted an analysis on 545 Reddit posts from the HCW subreddit r/HomeHealthAide by using both an AI-powered text analysis tool and computer-assisted human coding (15-18).

Our AI-powered text analysis results showed that discussions on workplace safety and support dominated online conversations among HCWs on Reddit, with about 85.0% of the posts related to this topic **(Table 1)**. Under this topic, almost all discussions (95.2%) were related to injury due to a lack of support **(Table 1)**. The second major topic identified was job satisfaction and stability (13.4%), in which injury-related job dissatisfaction accounted for over half of the discussions (57.2%) **(Table 1)**. The third major topic concerned career development and advice (1.2%) **(Table 1)**. Approximately 51.2% of the posts and comments were negative, 47.5% were neutral, and only 0.4% were positive. These results indicated that the forum was dominated by negative or neutral posts.

Our computer-assisted human coding showed that although this online community is designed for HCWs, 26.0% of the posts were created by clients, students, or other non-HCWs **(Figure 1)**. In HCW posts (74.0%), the major topic was about HCWs asking questions and seeking advice from others (51.3%) **(Figure 1)**. The second major topic in HCW posts was shared experiences (22.6%), in which HCWs told others about their work-related experiences **(Figure 1)**.

In the first topic of HCWs asking questions and

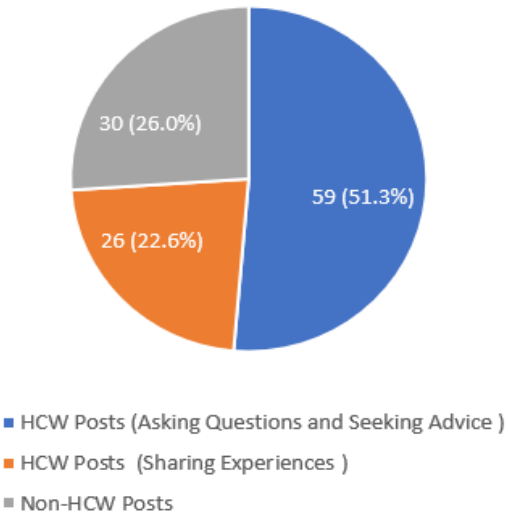

Figure 1. Authorships identified by computer-assisted human coding. Human coding found that although most of the posts were created by HCWs, about one-quarter of the posts were generated by non-HCWs.

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Topics and Subtopics	Count	Percentage of Total
Workload Safety and Support	455	84.8%
Injury due to lack of support	433	95.2%
Poor company response to injury	8	1.7%
Request for better safety training	6	1.3%
Seeking improved job support systems	5	1.1%
Job Satisfaction and Stability	72	13.4%
Injury-related job dissatisfaction	41	57.2%
Job switching due to injury	21	28.9%
Impact of injury on personal health	9	11.9%
Career Development and Advice	6	1.2%
Report of Overwork and Underpayment	2	<1%
Employer-Employee Communication	1	<1%

Table 1. Major discussion topics and subtopics identified through AI-powered text analysis of HCW posts. The five major topics identified by the AI-powered text analysis along with their subtopics.

seeking advice, about 45.8% of posts focused on HCW career development and jobs, such as HCW qualification, certification, and education (29.6%), job seeking (29.6%), and asking for advice on new job offers (18.5%) **(Table 2)**. For example, one HCW recently moved to a new state and asked questions about the certification requirements in the state. The second largest topic was the questions about clients (28.3%) **(Table 2)**. HCWs often asked questions regarding how to take care of clients with certain health conditions (e.g., clients with dementia). The third largest topic was questions about procedures and equipment (16.9%) **(Table 2)**. Some HCWs sought advice regarding how to perform certain medical or sanitation procedures or asked questions about specialized equipment. For example, one new HCW asked how to clean up for clients, particularly those with specific medical conditions such as incontinence, wounds, or limited mobility, which require specialized hygiene procedures. Sample quotations illustrating the major topics identified through computer-assisted human coding are provided in the Appendix **(Table S1)**.

In HCW posts on shared experiences, the majority of the experiences shared (81.8%) were negative. Most of these negative experiences were related to a lack of organizational support (81.0%), followed by complaints about their clients (57.1%), and other hazardous work conditions (e.g., overwork and low payment) (28.9%) **(Table 2)**. There were only two positive posts out of 21 posts on shared experiences (7.7%). One of them was about getting a new job, and the other having a happy client. Beyond sharing experiences, HCWs also occasionally shared some news or articles related to their jobs (11.5%) **(Table 2)**. For example, one HCW shared an article about Valentine's Day activities for seniors. The majority of the purposes of the posts created by non-HCWs were to recruit participants for research projects (23.3%), sell HCW equipment or products **(23.3%)**, or look to hire an HCW (23.3%) **(Table 2)**.

We conducted a Chi-Square test of independence examining the relationship between sentiment and three major topics, including 1) client-related challenges, 2) organizational issues (primarily lack of support), and 3) unsafe work environments. We analyzed 85 original posts from HCWs describing their experiences and posing questions. Due to the low number of positive posts (only two), we grouped sentiment into two categories: negative vs. neutral/positive. Results revealed significant associations between negative sentiment and company issues (i.e., lack of support) (χ^2 test, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 20.61$, $p < 0.01$, Cramér's V = 0.49). Here, Cramér's V shows how strongly two categorical variables are related. The associations between negative sentiments and client-related challenges were significant and strong, (χ^2 test, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 27.39$, $p < 0.01$, Cramér's V = 0.57). The associations between negative sentiments and unsafe work environments were significant and moderate (χ^2 test, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 7.45$, $p < 0.01$, Cramér's V = 0.30). Overall, these results indicated that negative sentiments were significantly associated with lack of company support, client-related challenges, and unsafe working conditions, thereby supporting to our hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

Using AI-powered text analysis supplemented by computer-assisted human coding, this study mined the online posts from the subreddit "r/HomeHealthAide," an online support community for HCWs on Reddit. HCW members share their working experiences, seek advice, and provide support for each other in this forum. We identified major topics and sentiments based on their posts. As hypothesized, our results from mining and analyzing social media data revealed that HCW jobs were stressful, and HCWs often faced hazardous work environments (28.9% of negative experiences), lacked organizational support (81.0% of negative experiences), and dealt with challenging clients (57.1% of negative experiences). Particularly, the posts consistently showed that HCWs lack adequate support from their agencies and clients. The posts

Topics and Subtopics	Count	Percentage of Total
Asking questions and seeking advice	59	51.3%
Regarding career development and jobs	27	45.8%
Education, qualification & certification	8	29.6%
Job seeking	8	29.6%
New job	5	18.6%
Others	6	22.2%
Regarding clients	17	28.8%
Regarding procedures and equipment (e.g., Medical or sanitation procedures)	10	16.9%
Other (e.g., legal)	3	5.1%
Sharing experiences	26	22.6%
Negative experience	21	80.8%
About the company (Lack of support)	17	81%
About patients	12	57.1%
Others (e.g., payment, self-illness, and overwork)	6	28.9%
Positive experience (e.g., a new job and a happy customer)	2	7.7%
Shared articles	3	11.5%
Non-HCW posts	30	26%
Research and student questions (e.g., data collection)	7	23.3%
Self-promotion & selling	7	23.3%
Hiring HCWs	7	23.3%
Sharing negative experiences	3	10%
Others (e.g., equipment and salary)	6	20%

Table 2. Major discussion topics and subtopics identified through computer-assisted human coding of HCW posts. The three major topics identified by the computer-assisted human coding, along with their subtopics.

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were predominantly negative (51.2%) or neutral (47.5%), and positive emotions were rarely expressed (0.4%), raising concerns about the mental health and well-being of HCWs.

Our study contributes to the literature on HCWs in two important ways. First, this study identified a new data source to study HCWs' experiences and concerns – social media posts made by HCWs. Compared to the widely used interview and survey data, the information contained in social media posts is initiated by HCWs in their natural environment, making it much more likely to reveal HCWs' true feelings and experiences. Moreover, since the data was obtained without solicitations and interruptions, it may help address some biases of the self-reported data. Our findings corroborated some findings from prior studies on HCWs, such as HCW jobs are stressful and challenging, and that they often face hazardous work environments and a lack of support (10,11). Most HCWs' concerns mainly stemmed from the hazardous work environment and lack of support. The hazardous work environment included encounters with rude or demanding patients and their family members, the physical strain of lifting heavy patients, unhygienic and cumbersome home environments, and the emotional stress of caring for terminally ill patients. In most of these cases, there is a lack of support from both clients and companies. Beyond these findings, many questions regarding a wide range of topics, such as career, clients, and work procedures, were raised in the online forum. This situation indicates that HCWs may frequently face new challenges while lacking sufficient training. Moreover, our findings highlighted the widespread lack of support and enjoyment in these positions.

Second, our results demonstrate that human coding complements AI-powered tools in the analysis of social media data. When comparing the AI-powered results with those of human coding, we found that AI-powered text mining has some limitations. AI-powered text analysis tools may take information out of context and are unable to detect the author's motivation for posting, which may neglect some important perspectives and information. For example, when posting about hazardous work environments, some HCWs wanted to vent their negative experiences, while others proactively sought a solution to address the problems. The motivations underlying the posts were very different, but the AI-powered text analysis grouped them into a single topic. Without differentiating motivations, diverse coping strategies employed by HCWs will be ignored, and corresponding interventions will not be developed. Moreover, as previously suggested, the process by which the topics are generated in AI-powered tools are typically not explained, and it is unclear how the topics are defined (19). As a result, it is difficult for the readers to understand the meaning of each topic and interpret the results. Though the results of the AI-powered text mining showed that 85% of posts were about workplace safety and support, it was unclear why workplace safety and support were grouped under the same topic. Although lack of support is often associated with workplace safety, it also occurred frequently when HCWs discussed other topics, such as having conflicts with clients and understanding medical procedures. Our human coding results suggest that workplace safety and lack of support should be coded in separate topics. Above all, AI-powered text analysis tools are constrained by these limitations, and computer-assisted human coding may complement these tools by addressing limitations and providing more meaningful insights about HCWs' experiences and concerns.

The findings of this study provide important implications regarding how to reduce HCWs' stress and improve home care services. Our findings suggest that HCW jobs are stressful, and one significant source of stress comes from the hazardous work environment. For example, multiple posts mentioned that the layout and sanitary conditions of the clients' houses may cause injury and other health problems in HCWs. Thus, HCW managers and administrators should carefully examine HCWs' working conditions, such as work hours, workloads, and clients' home environments, and take proactive measures to provide a healthy environment for HCWs. HCW agencies should inspect the safety of a client's house before assigning an HCW. One qualitative study conducted in Sweden suggests that risk assessment helps to improve HCWs' workplace health and safety (20). Moreover, the wages, shift times, and work intensity of HCW positions should be periodically reviewed and amended.

The lack of training and support was frequently mentioned in the posts. Many HCWs did not know what they should do in certain conditions and were unable to get adequate support from their agencies, which caused unnecessary stress and risk of injury. Thus, providing sufficient training and support to HCWs is crucial. A previous study found that job training significantly enhanced healthcare workers' skills and job satisfaction (21). Moreover, an official communication channel should be established to hear the voices of HCWs and provide timely support. Third, we found that HCWs are often confronted with emotional moments, such as the illness and death of a client and the aggressiveness of clients or their relatives. Our results consistently show that most of the shared experiences by HCWs on social media were negative. Thus, HCW administration should provide training on emotion management and coping strategies and equip HCWs with the skills (e.g., relationship building and proactive communications) needed to regulate their emotions. Based on a longitudinal evaluation, previous work found that standardized emotion regulation training improved elderly care workers' ability to cope with negative emotions (22).

Several limitations should be noted in this study. First, we collected social media data from one subreddit forum, and the number of posts is relatively small due to the size of the online community. Moreover, since contributors to Reddit posts are self-selected, HCWs with negative experiences may be more likely to post than those with positive experiences. As a result, their experiences may not fully represent those of all home health care workers (HCWs). Therefore, future research should incorporate larger datasets from a variety of social media platforms (e.g., X or Facebook) and use diverse data sources (e.g., surveys or experiments) to validate and strengthen our findings. Second, we used only one AI-powered text analysis tool-Siena Insights (formerly Idiomatic) (23). Although we selected this tool based on a comparison among multiple popular text mining tools, our results may be biased due to the limitations of only using a single tool. Future research should include the findings from other AI-powered text analysis tools to validate our findings. Moreover,

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the approach of integrating AI-powered text analysis and computer-assisted human coding that we developed should be further examined and improved in future research. More efficient and effective methods to generate valuable information from social media data should be developed. As a pioneer in employing social media data to study HCWs, we call for future research to understand the experiences and needs of HCWs by employing diverse methods and utilizing different data sources.

Despite its limitations, this is a pioneering study that employs both AI-powered automatic text analysis and computer-assisted human coding to mine and analyze healthcare workers' (HCWs') social media posts. The findings contribute to the HCW literature by revealing that hazardous work environments, challenging clients, and a lack of sufficient support are major causes of HCW stress. Moreover, we demonstrate that AI-powered analysis and traditional human coding are complementary methods that can be effectively used together to analyze social media content. In addition, this study provides suggestions for improving HCWs' well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection

In this study, the subreddit "r/HomeHealthAide" on Reddit was used as the research context because this subreddit is a popular platform for HCWs to exchange information (15). A web scraping tool Apify was adopted (24). All 545 posts and comments on the online community since it was created in 2019 were collected.

AI-powered Text Analysis

All posts and comments were analyzed by employing Siena Insights, a popular AI-powered text analysis tool, in which major topics and sentiments were identified (23). Although Siena Insights does not disclose details on how its sentiment scores and themes are generated, its outputs are based on contextual machine learning, text embeddings, and vector models for large-scale classification and sentiment analysis, along with generative AI for text summarization and granularity analysis to extract specific, meaningful insights (23). Contextual machine learning integrates factors such as linguistic context, post versus comment depth in a thread, reply hierarchy, and engagement metrics (e.g., upvotes, downvotes, and replies) into its predictions. This allows the model to move beyond basic text analysis to better capture underlying sentiments, tones, emotions, and intentions, thereby improving relevance and accuracy. Text embeddings and vector models, as common natural language processing techniques, convert text into numerical vectors that represent semantic meaning across words, phrases, and documents.

Computer-assisted Human Coding

The 115 original posts were analyzed by using computer-assisted human coding. The replies and comments were not included in human coding because they shared similar content with the original posts. Focusing on the original posts helped to reduce the distraction of redundant information and concentrate on identifying the key topics. The procedure recommended by Strauss et al. was followed (25). NVivo 12 was employed to facilitate the coding process (26). Specifically, the posts were coded and analyzed in three stages: open, axial, and selective (25). Open coding is the initial stage, in which data were broken down into discrete parts and codes are assigned to represent concepts that emerge from the data. For example, multiple topics were identified and codes were assigned to them, such as posts related to career development and jobs, and posts related to clients in this stage (25). Axial coding involves connecting and relating the codes. In this stage, we identified subtopics and their relationships with the main topics. Selective coding is used to identify key topics or themes and systematically analyze the remaining data. To ensure the reliability of the coding, two researchers independently coded the data. When a coding disagreement occurred, a third researcher was involved in helping the two coders reach an agreement. For example, in one post on overwork, one coder categorized it as "company-related," while another placed it under the "others" topic. A third researcher joined the discussion to review the coding decision. After deliberation, the post was ultimately categorized as "others," as overwork was seen as a common issue across various agencies and not specific to any single organization. During coding, major topics related to job stressors that contribute to the stressful HCW positions were identified.

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APPENDIX

Topics and Subtopics	Sample Quotations
Asking questions and seeking advice	
Regarding career development and jobs	
Education, qualification & certification	"I live in Illinois and am being told different things by different agencies regarding a requirement to be trained / certified in CPR. Can someone clear this up for me? "
Job seeking	"I live in NYC and I'm looking for agencies to sign up with. Got any you'd recommend?"
New job	Hi guys! I just accepted a job offer for a private caregiving company. I'm getting my HHC certificate, but I want to know some tips and tricks before I start…"
Others	"I'm just curious if anyone here can give me any info on starting my own home health company..."
Regarding clients	"She is getting very angry with me because I cannot understand what she is trying to tell me….Does anyone have any advice?"
Regarding procedures and equipment	"….I'm just not good with poop. Does anyone have any tips or tricks when it comes to cleaning a patient #2? Thanks."
Other (e.g., legal)	"I need help with an HHA legal situation. I can't really post on public post but am hoping someone will DM."
Sharing experiences	
Negative experience	
About the company	"They don't prepare you for half the crap you're walking into…"
About patients	"So, I take care of an older lady who is extremely two faced…"
Others (e.g., payment, and overwork)	"My body feels like it's been deteriorating, I'm only 21 years old. I love this job, but this never happened in the past."
Positive experience (e.g., a new job and a happy customer)	"When I arrived, my client said he vomited and had diarrhea in the bathroom. He was right! It took me over an hour to clean it up. He thanked me twice. It was a big job, but I was happy to do it."
Shared articles	Shared an article about Top 5 Valentine's Day Activities for Seniors
Non-HCW posts	
Research and student questions	"This paid (60$) research study is looking specifically for workers without a college degree…"
Self-promotion & selling	"One private room available at a Senior Home Care facility for $4500/mo. …"
Hiring HCWs	"I am looking to hire a part time home assistant to do light housework, shopping, meal prep, laundry, trash for my elderly mother who lives alone in Palm Desert, CA…"
Sharing negative experiences	My 2nd agency sent a woman who was nice, but she would hide things from me…"
Others (e.g., equipment and salary)	"What are normal prices for home health aids in the private market?"

Table 2. Major discussion topics and subtopics identified through computer-assisted human coding of HCW posts. The three major topics identified by the computer-assisted human coding, along with their subtopics.