

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About LinkedIn

(But Were Too Busy Networking Online to Ask)

by *Lindsey Pollak*

November 2009 NACE Journal

"Throughout 2008, social networking sites and blogs saw more time spent by users than personal e-mail." - Nielsen Online

This quote demonstrates that we have hit a watershed moment: In the United States, we are now communicating via social media sites more than we are communicating through e-mail. This is a huge change in the career advising and recruiting world, and a change that professionals in these fields must embrace in order to remain relevant and valuable to the college students of today and tomorrow.

Social media encompasses many web sites, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and MySpace, to name just a few. Many of these, although popular with college students, are not relevant to the work of career services and HR/recruiting professionals. The most valuable and appropriate for these professions is LinkedIn.

The professional social network founded in 2003, LinkedIn exists for professional networking only. There are no party photos, no poking or winking, no quizzes to find out which 1980s TV character you most resemble. LinkedIn is 100 percent about building, expanding, leveraging, and supporting your professional network. By definition, LinkedIn is a must-use site for people whose entire job is based on linking people with career opportunities. But, like any technological tool, LinkedIn requires some training and guidance for maximum success.

The Basics

Like other social networks, LinkedIn is mostly free and exists to connect you online with people you know and trust in the "real world." You can form these connections by searching for individuals by name or by uploading contacts from your address book. Then, the site provides you with opportunities to connect, degree by degree, with the connections of your connections for mutual benefit. (Note that the way LinkedIn is set up, you can only connect to a non-direct contact through an introduction from a mutual connection. This ensures that the connections on the site are trustworthy and that there is remarkably little SPAM on the site. If you do want the ability to connect with people without a direct connection, you can upgrade to a paid LinkedIn account, which offers that benefit.)

How far and wide can your network expand? LinkedIn currently has more than 50 million members globally, and that number is growing by two million people every month. Professionals from more than 170 industries and every Fortune 500 company are represented. Within the network you will find people from large corporations, professional services firms, nonprofits, start-ups, small businesses, hospitals, academia, students, and more all together in one place. Think of it as a global resume data base spanning every sector of the economy.

Building a Strong LinkedIn Profile

How can you make the most of this broad network? The most important place to begin is by creating a strong, professional LinkedIn profile. The more complete and robust your profile, the more professional contacts will find you, the more

opportunities will come your way, and the more students will have a model for creating their own professional online presences.

Here are some tips for creating a profile that will impress whomever you want to connect with—professional colleagues, parents, students, administrators, conference planners, and others:

- **Include keywords in your summary statement.** The summary portion of your profile provides a chance to share the highlights of your bio in your own words. It's also a place to include keywords and phrases that someone might type into a search engine to find a person like you. Be sure to include relevant keywords such as "career services," "conference speaker," "employment expert," or other terms you want your name to be associated with. Not sure what words are most compelling and search friendly? Check out the profiles of other professionals you admire and use some of the same terminology.
- **Post a friendly photo.** Campuses and career fairs are primarily in-person environments, so a friendly-looking LinkedIn photo can help students recognize you around the quad or feel comfortable approaching your booth at a job fair.
- **Write for the screen.** LinkedIn, or any web site for that matter, is not the place for long-form prose. Present your summary statement in short blocks of text with lots of white space. Bullet points are great, too.
- **List all experience.** One of the most valuable aspects of LinkedIn is the way it connects you with former colleagues and classmates, who, as we all know, are some of our best networking contacts. It would be a shame if a long-lost former colleague, who happens to be a successful recruiter now, couldn't find you because you hadn't listed that shared employment in your LinkedIn profile.
- **Collect diverse recommendations.** Nothing builds credibility like third-party endorsements. The most impressive LinkedIn profiles have at least one recommendation associated with each job a person has held. Think about soliciting recommendations from colleagues in the career center and employer organizations, former student recruits, and industry association colleagues.
- **Share your news.** A great way to stay on other people's radar screens is to update your status (the box near the top of your profile) at least once a week. Tell people about events you are hosting or attending, major projects you've completed, books you are reading, successes you are celebrating, or any other news that you would tell someone at a networking reception or on a quick catch-up phone call.

LinkedIn profiles are a great way to build credibility for every member of your team and to give students and alumni several touch points to connect with your career center or company. **For more advice on building and maintaining a strong profile, visit the micro-site that LinkedIn has created exclusively for career services professionals.**

LinkedIn Groups: Where the Action Is

Once you have a great profile, you'll want to start building new connections and getting involved in valuable conversations in LinkedIn Groups (www.linkedin.com/groupsDirectory). These are communities of professionals based on common interest, experience, affiliation and goals. University alumni groups and company-related affinity groups are among the most popular and active on the site. **NACE also has a LinkedIn group.**

What happens in a group? Join a few and you will find areas for discussion, job postings, event announcements, news dissemination, and more. If you are thinking of starting a group for your organization, you will find groups to be beneficial as additional communication vehicles, community brand builders, and research tools for learning more about your students or employees.

One of the values of a LinkedIn group for career services professionals is the way such a group can encourage students and alumni to connect and help each other find job opportunities. When students sign up for LinkedIn and can find a group that is full of friendly alumni to network with, LinkedIn has immediate value. As John Hill, director of alumni career services at Michigan State University, likes to tell his students, when you reach out to fellow members of the MSU LinkedIn group, “every contact is a warm contact.”

Many career centers across the country are providing support for students hoping to network with alums and recruiters on LinkedIn. Brandeis University, for example, hosts workshops and provides a PowerPoint presentation on its web site to teach students how to connect appropriately with the school’s alumni. Students are not accepted into Brandeis’ Career Center LinkedIn group until they have taken this training. This ensures that students approach alumni in the appropriate way and makes sure the group is beneficial to all.

Some corporations also have begun setting up LinkedIn groups for their intern programs and are providing workshops and guidelines on how students should make appropriate use of these online communities.

Connecting Students With Opportunities

One of my favorite stories about LinkedIn comes from the career center of a small community college. A student walked in one day and told his career counselor that he wanted to be an ophthalmologist. The community college had no classes related to this, but the student was so passionate and eager that the career counselor really wanted to encourage his career plans, knowing it would be a long road ahead. So she went into LinkedIn and typed in to the search box the name of the community college and the word “ophthalmologist.” Up popped one single name of a man who had graduated from the college and gone on to that career. The counselor helped the student write an introductory e-mail and the alumnus responded right away. The ophthalmologist was thrilled to help this student and became an ongoing mentor.

Social media facilitates all sorts of connections that might never have occurred just 10 years ago. And yet, students are often shy about reaching out to successful professionals or entry-level recruiters on a site like LinkedIn.

Career professionals and campus recruiters have a big responsibility helping to guide young people into their livelihoods. We have to prepare them for the future, and social networking is going to be a big part of that future. Here are some tips to pass along to students about networking and finding jobs on LinkedIn:

- **Build a strong professional profile.** Many students don’t have the most professional online presence on social networks such as Facebook and MySpace. LinkedIn provides professional branding and appropriate visibility to recruiters, alumni, and grad school admissions officers who are often Googling candidates before accepting them. Students need just as much guidance with their LinkedIn profiles as they need with their resumes and cover letters. Here are some reminders to share:
 - Feature a professional photo of you alone (not with friends or significant others).
 - Include a headline about your area of study and/or career ambitions.
 - Develop a keyword-rich summary that includes the type of positions you seek.
 - Include volunteer activities, internships, and extra-curricular activities in your profile summary—unpaid experience absolutely counts as experience.

- **Connect with friends and family.** As you talk to students about LinkedIn, you're likely to hear this comment: "But I don't know anyone!" Since LinkedIn becomes more valuable the more connections a person has, encourage students to connect to:
 - Parents and other relatives.
 - Friends—neighbors, family friends, peers, and those a few years older.
 - Internship managers and colleagues.
 - Former bosses.
 - Connections from volunteering.

- **Ask for answers.** [The answers feature on LinkedIn](#) is a place where students can ask a question to the entire LinkedIn network. Answers is a great place to seek advice on various career fields or graduate programs. Students can also build their professional credibility by answering questions about which they have some experience or expertise.

- **Research companies and career paths.** LinkedIn is a terrific communication and networking tool; it is also a valuable research tool. When students come to you with interest in specific companies, show them how to research those [organizations using LinkedIn Company Pages](#). By doing so, students will simultaneously learn valuable information about the company (such as where employees have worked before and after joining that organization) and find networking connections into that company from the people in their own networks. LinkedIn's Company Pages can also help students prepare more thoroughly for job interviews.

Find additional guidance in the LinkedIn Grad Guide. [The LinkedIn Grad Guide](#) provides a tutorial specifically for college students. In a simple three-step process, the guide helps students get started on LinkedIn and provides many examples of how their peers are using the site.

As you can see, social media is a game changer in the world of entry-level career development. Will another technology come along and change the game again? Probably. But for now, social media, and LinkedIn especially, are ruling the present and leading us into the future.

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