
A review of LinkedIn

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There is an art and science to networking, whether it's online or in the physical world. LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>) is an online social networking site for professionals, which can assist in the science of making connections, but there's still the art to master.

LinkedIn is a cross between a people search site and a social networking site. While anyone can search for the public profile of registered subscribers, making contact with LinkedIn users relies on a network of LinkedIn colleagues. Based on the adage of there being only six degrees of separation, users can contact other LinkedIn subscribers through a network of connections that are described as 1st degree (people you know personally), 2nd degree (a network of contacts your 1st degree contact knows), and 3rd degree (extended potential network of contacts that you may connect with through mutual connections).

For many users, the networking potential of LinkedIn is under-utilised¹ and, anecdotally, the experience of LinkedIn users is mixed. In researching for this article, colleagues who are LinkedIn users remarked that they weren't using the site to its full potential, or else that they didn't see the benefit of it. Other colleagues were full of praise and, eg had used LinkedIn to locate potential new board members for an organisation.

There are similarities between LinkedIn and Zoominfo (<http://www.zoominfo.com>). Zoominfo began as a people search site, which very cleverly gathered profile information about people working for corporations that was publicly available on the web, such as their employer, job title, images, or any articles or profiles that referred to the person in the company. Users could then opt to fill in the further details of their profiles, to assist people to find the correct profile information. Zoominfo is now also offering linking between its registered users.

As with so many social networking sites, LinkedIn has experienced rapid growth in the number of subscribers. LinkedIn was established in 2003, when its executive team sent out about 100 invitations to colleagues inviting them to join. By the end of 2004, there were 1.2 million subscribers;² it now boasts more than 9 million subscribers from 130 industries around the world;³ the vast majority of whom are from the United States.

CREATING YOUR PROFILE

While a non-subscriber can search LinkedIn for profile information, registered users gain more benefits by being able to potentially make contact with other LinkedIn users through their connections.

Therefore, the first step for a user is to create a profile, very similar to a resume, of his/her professional accomplishments, which should include a summary of experience, employment, education, groups and associations, interests, and links to his/her web and blog sites. The user may simply use the profile to promote his/her expertise, or to connect a web of potential business contacts, which are interlinked by who knows whom, for the purpose of finding a new job, recruiting staff, finding business opportunities, or locating industry experts.⁴

This is where the science and art of networking meet. LinkedIn does a very good job of replicating the characteristics of physical world networking. The more effort that a person puts into

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¹ Kawasaki G, "Ten Ways to Use LinkedIn", http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2007/01/ten_ways_to_use.html (viewed 5 January 2007).

² Bardon D, "Online Social Networking for Business: An interview with Konstantin Guericke, VP, LinkedIn", (2004) 28 (6) *Online* at <http://www.infotoday.com/online/nov04/bardon.shtml> (viewed 7 January 2007).

³ About LinkedIn, http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=company_info&trk=ftr_abt (viewed 11 January 2007).

⁴ See Bardon, n 2.

networking, not only by attending events, but in the preparation, follow through, and any service that he/she can deliver, the more likely that his/her service or expertise will be recommended to others, and that business opportunities will prosper.

Likewise, in LinkedIn, it is important that the user's profile is well prepared and reflects the purpose for which the individual intends new contacts to refer to the user's expertise. For example, if the user wishes to be referred to new contacts for new business, the summary and experience information needs to be neatly outlined, and should reflect the depth of the user's talent. Seeking a recommendation for service also helps to build the reputation of the user.

Guy Kawasaki (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/guykawasaki>), a heavily sought-after contact in LinkedIn, recently offered suggestions for getting the most out of LinkedIn,⁵ and worked with LinkedIn to make his profile more appealing.⁶ His suggestions included:

- adding the user's personality to the profile;
- adding substance to the user's experience summary, which would be similar to an introductory spiel used for face to face networking;
- including business and career specialisation key words;
- seeking recommendations of the user's work from LinkedIn colleagues;
- adding additional information, such as personal web and blog sites, activities, interests and awards; and
- using the personal, also known as vanity URL option, if the user's profile is to be web searchable ie <http://www.linkedin.com/in/yourname>

Users can opt to keep their profiles accessible to LinkedIn users only, or to publish their profiles on the web, using a personal URL option. The public profile shows only the user's profile; it doesn't show details of any connections. Those users opting for the personal URL option, are advised to customise LinkedIn's web address to the user's name eg <http://www.linkedin.com/in/heathercarine>.

For many freelancers, who don't have websites, this is an easy way to promote their expertise and improve their page rank in search engines. A user's LinkedIn address can then be used as part of an email signature, in the same way that users would promote their companies' websites in their electronic signatures.

For companies which provide minimal detail on their employees, a LinkedIn public profile is an opportunity to promote their expertise on the web. Using a rock 'n' roll analogy, it's like having a Myspace site, in addition to the band's website.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

With a well-prepared profile, the next step for a user is to develop a strong personal network of trusted colleagues who may be willing to introduce the user to their LinkedIn contacts.

As with face-to-face networking, making initial connections and asking for introductions can seem awkward at first. Also, like leaving a networking event with a handful of business cards, it's up to the LinkedIn user to decide how to make the most of new potential connections.

Making connections starts with building a LinkedIn network of people that the user already knows. These connections are defined as their 1st degree contacts. It seems intrusive but, when a user initially sets up a profile, LinkedIn reads the list of contacts from Outlook, or other personal information manager system. The user is prompted to send, to current contacts, a pro-forma email encouraging the contacts to join his/her network on LinkedIn. The pro-forma LinkedIn email can be customised, and the recommended list of contacts taken from Outlook can also be scaled back, in favour of a few handpicked contacts to start building a user's personal LinkedIn network.

Once a contact has accepted the user's invitation to join his/her personal network, each contact can see the summary details of each other's contacts ie Jenny invites Mary to join her personal

⁵ See Kawasaki, n 1.

⁶ Kawasaki G, "LinkedIn Profile Extreme Makeover" http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2007/01/linkedin_profil.html (viewed 19 January 2007).

network. Jenny and Mary can now both see names of the personal contacts that each other has in her LinkedIn network. For networking purposes, Jenny can now ask Mary to arrange an introduction to one of Mary's contacts and Mary can decide whether or not to make this introduction. The personal network of a user can only be viewed by the contacts the user has invited into his/her network. However, each time a user in a personal network adds a further connection to this network, each person in the network is notified of this when they log in to LinkedIn.

Establishing a connection to 3rd degree contacts isn't as straight forward. For research for this article, I sought an introduction to a contact who was described as a 3rd degree contact to me, via a 1st degree contact in my personal network, using the LinkedIn introduction. My contact was unable to establish who the common connection was between her and the 3rd degree contact, and therefore wasn't able to arrange an introduction.

LinkedIn also offers further options to make contact directly to any users on LinkedIn for premium subscribers. Premium subscriptions range from \$20 to \$200 per month.

LOOKING FOR JOBS AND NEW RECRUITS

As a LinkedIn profile is akin to having a personal career profile on the web, there are opportunities to use LinkedIn for seeking work and recruitment. A user can elect to be contacted for career opportunities or job inquiries, and recruiters can post job listings on LinkedIn. According to LinkedIn, contacts to potential recruits via a referral, introduction or their premium inmail service, retrieve a 70% response rate, which is far higher than cold calls or email referrals.⁷ However, at present, it appears that LinkedIn is not actively being used by many Australian recruiters, although I did notice one Sydney-based IT recruiter.

LOOKING FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

The science of networking comes to the fore in finding recommended LinkedIn users for service providers. Service providers in categories, such as business consultants, or web designers, are listed if they have been recommended by a LinkedIn user. Furthermore, the service providers are listed according to whether they are recommended by your colleagues, 2nd degree contacts, or by all LinkedIn users. An introduction can then be arranged via the user's contact to the service provider, or to the person recommending the service provider. A limitation to this facility is that the search for a particular service provider outside the United States cannot be limited beyond restricting the search to a country. Therefore, a search for a recommended business consultant cannot be drilled down to a city or state in Australia.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

LinkedIn has recently added an answers component to their site. It is similar to Yahoo Answers (<http://answers.yahoo.com>), but more like Freepint (<http://www.freepint.com>) with regard to the questions being of a business nature and being responded to by experienced professionals. A nice feature is that you can link to the profile of the person asking the question and providing the answer, and to a list of their questions and answers. This is another feature that could be used to showcase the expertise and willingness of users to assist not only their colleagues, but also the broader LinkedIn community.

OVERALL

There are limitations to LinkedIn, particularly in its search facility. In my test, users who were known to have profiles weren't retrieved in the search results. LinkedIn's search options are also quite limited, particularly with regard to limiting searches to geographic areas within countries outside the United States.

LinkedIn boldly claims that its site isn't networking, instead "it's what networking should be".⁸ For users who are looking to extend their professional circle, LinkedIn is a very good tool that can

⁷ LinkedIn FAQ, http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=customer_service (viewed 11 January 2007).

⁸ About LinkedIn, http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=company_info&trk=ftr_abt (viewed 20 January 2007).

complement their other networking options. It is an icebreaker that helps a person to link to an extended network of people for employment or other business opportunities. Like networking in the physical world, its success will rely on the character of the networkers in the system.