

2



It's not what you know but who: Are online professional networking services any use? By Tim Buckley-Owen

Jinfo Newsletter

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Whether you're an independent freelancer or corporate man/woman, your network of contacts is your single-most valuable information resource. Long gone are the days of the grubby address book, and even the Filofax has been confined to the recycling bin of history. Contacts networks are now high-tech affairs.

And when it comes to massaging those contacts and managing your career through self-promotion, adding a line or two to your general purpose CV from time to time just won't do the trick any more. Functional CVs, individually tailored to impress, are de rigueur.

LinkedIn <<http://www.linkedin.com/>> is one of a number of online networking services that combines your contacts list with your CV. (Another is Zoominfo <<http://www.zoominfo.com/>>, which describes itself as 'the search engine for discovering people, companies and relationships'.) Both are tools for linking to other people you know professionally and, through them, to their contacts.

Vampire's kiss

Like the vampire's kiss, it doesn't take long for multiples of people to get sucked into using the service. My very new and modest 12 connections (LinkedIn reckons you should end up with at least 45) have 123 connections between them, and those connections can muster a further 22,900.

What do you do with these connections once you've found them? LinkedIn's key function is to enable you to tell people you're out there and, hopefully, identify career and business opportunities as a result. So its other main feature is its personal Profile builder.

Like all the LinkedIn facilities, the Profile builder is highly structured. It has boxes for your previous jobs, your education (although not, oddly, for your professional qualifications) and your contact requirements -- what would be the WLTM part if this were a dating agency. But the crucial bit is the Personal Summary.

All about me

It starts with a box for your professional 'headline'. This is effectively your job title, and you need to think very carefully about how to phrase it -- especially if you are pursuing a portfolio career. I eventually opted for 'Information Industry Commentator & Trainer' -- a bit lengthy, but I needed to try to cover my current activities. The main issue is not to undersell yourself -- but you mustn't appear too self-important either.

Then comes the Summary. Abandoning a lifetime's habit of concocting

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chronological CVs (which merely tell potential employers that you've been around a long time and weren't fired), I concentrated on my key offerings -- writing, editing, training and consultancy -- with a couple of lines on each giving main activities and clients.

The Websites area lets you add a few live links, e.g., the training providers for whom I work, which show up as Additional Information on your Public Profile.

Finally there's a 'Specialties' section, where you can say a bit more about what makes you stand out from the professional crowd. Not much more, though: LinkedIn sternly cuts you off if you exceed your allotted 500 characters, so you need to make every word count. I used this section to expand on some of the activities I'd covered in the Summary, concentrating on those in which I'd particularly like to generate new business.

Get recommended!

All the time you're working on your Profile, LinkedIn is urging you on: my network is 27 per cent complete, it tells me, and my profile is now 85 per cent done. It will be 90 per cent done if I add a recommendation, and elsewhere on the page a blunt message says 'You haven't been recommended' and a link orders me to 'Get recommended'. I ought to do it, I know -- but asking someone to endorse you out of the blue doesn't come easily.

Will LinkedIn generate useful leads? Don't know yet. The Google-generated ads appearing on my Profile page are all about training for trainers and freelance writing opportunities, so some of my career buzzwords do seem to be working. And a survey by career management firm DBM indicates that 60 per cent of employment opportunities located by their clients do come through targeted networking, compared with only 2 per cent through 'cold calling' marketing letters.

The few friends that I've talked to about LinkedIn so far admit that they've left their Profiles pretty dormant, adopting a 'wait and see' attitude. Maybe my experience of it will turn out the same. Nevertheless, joining LinkedIn has made me think carefully about my personal USPs, and has reminded me that keeping my network of professional contacts fresh should be a constant concern. So it certainly hasn't been time wasted.

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Risk Management Report

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This report provides a practical overview of risk management and can be used by executives, managers and staff to gain a solid understanding of the tools and processes of risk management. The included tool kit of 8 hands-on worksheets and activities helps users translate the information into an actionable risk management plan.

Author Jela Webb is a noted consultant, writer, speaker and trainer in knowledge management and risk management fields. In 1992, she was appointed to a new role, Risk Review Manager, in a UK bank, and she has further developed her expertise in the field through MBA studies.

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