



What's With LinkedIn?

I have been accused of being somewhat old-fashioned with my emphasis on face-to-face communication so today I would like to attempt to join the 21st century. It has been proposed that LinkedIn represents a “professional” social networking site and so it may be worthwhile discussing some aspects of this communication medium. Let me state at the outset that I am a user but not an expert and so I would welcome correspondence which adds to my understanding – and that of the other readers. Similarly, the purpose of this column is not to promote membership of LinkedIn but to promote understanding of its potential use. (So you can stop reading now if you are not at all interested in LinkedIn.)

Let's start with a fundamental question: why bother joining LinkedIn? I think that there are several benefits, essentially related to the theme of facilitating communication with other people:

- It can help to build a virtual, electronic network that allows you to reconnect with past business colleagues and/or follow their career path.
- It can provide some useful information about another person that you may not be that familiar with. Depending upon the level of detail in their profile, for example, you may be able to learn about their previous roles, organisations and education.
- It may also be interesting to understand who else they know, by reviewing their connections. This is not just to expand your direct network. It may be valuable, for example, to know what competitors your client is connected with.
- There is an option to join specific groups which may help you connect with special communities that share views and expertise.

With those benefits in mind, here are some tips that may be useful:

1. Be clear on your own purpose for joining. If your purpose is clear it should be easy to answer common questions like: Should I invite friends as well as business colleagues? What groups should I join? How frequently should I visit the site?
2. Construct and maintain your profile carefully. Depending on your purpose, for example, it may (or may not) be helpful to include a photo. Think about how much detail you would like to provide about your work history, given that your profile may be used by recruiters, employers and clients. I would be particularly wary about quoting your full date of birth – unless you are confident that it will evoke birthday presents every year.



3. Even if you have a clear distinction between your use of this site and other networking sites, it would be important to ensure that your profiles are broadly consistent. You may inadvertently be confusing people if the message they obtain from your LinkedIn profile is vastly different to that evident from your CV, your Facebook or the reference to you on your company's website.
4. Again, depending on your purpose, it may be worthwhile cultivating some references. I don't have personal experience here, but I know that some people have benefited from personal testimonials being included on their profile.
5. If you are using LinkedIn as a communication tool, think about at what point you forgo the "message" option and use a telephone or traditional email with one of your contacts.

It is clear that LinkedIn is not for everyone. Here are some concerns that you might like to consider before you join the network:

- It takes time and, especially if you lack discipline with your use of time, it may be too great a distraction
- If you already feel overloaded with information then this will only add to your burden.
- If you already feel that there are too many people in your mobile phone or personal organiser then you probably don't want to add even more names to keep track of.
- Not everyone enjoys being tracked down by past business colleagues. If you are not good at saying no to invitations you might think twice about being open to contacts from "old friends".
- If you are by nature a closed, confidential type then you may be uncomfortable with the sharing that others may expect from you. You may also be unhappy with the potential for less scrupulous types to misuse your information.

It takes some thought to use social networking effectively – even allegedly professional sites such as LinkedIn. I would welcome other thoughts, tips and experiences.