

Digital Life: Networking Web sites won't get you a job, but they can open doors

March 5 2009, By Walin Wong

I have no idea what I'm doing on LinkedIn. I log into the professional networking site maybe once a month, I accept connection requests from people whose names I don't recognize, and I never contact anyone.

Part of my LinkedIn incompetence stems from my belief that professional sites are often just another social hang-out. But I've come to realize that dismissing such sites is also shortsighted.

There are many ways in which online communities can help in the search for a new job or career advice. The key is being smarter about using professional sites, while also remembering that they are not replacements for quality offline interaction.

Take Kent Martin, 27, who will be graduating from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management in June. Martin signed up for a site called MyWorkster, which was founded by two then-students at the University of Virginia. He searched for alumni in the biotech field and contacted them via the site.

"I used it as the conduit for conversations," Martin said. "I wish it was more extravagant. But it came down to shooting them a note saying, 'I graduated in 2004 and saw you're part of the biotech network. I'd love to chat with you.'"

Through Kellogg's career services office, Martin landed an internship at Genentech last summer and then was offered a full-time job at the

company. He'll relocate to San Francisco after graduation.

"It's competitive to get jobs," Martin said. "When I was interviewing, it was pretty important that I articulate my sincere interest in the biotechnology industry. How could I do that if I didn't have a strong understanding of the different dynamics within the industry? The best way to do it, in addition to online research, was to reach out to people who work in the industry."

With unemployment at 7.6 percent, the highest since September 1992, job seekers are looking for an edge. And many of them are turning to online resources.

Jeff Saliture, MyWorkster's CEO, said that within some university networks on his site, alumni registrations are outpacing current students by 10-1. LinkedIn's latest data show that the site is getting one sign-up about every second, and the number of applicants per job listing has doubled in the past six months.

Guy Kawasaki, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, worked with LinkedIn to create a list of 10 job-seeking tips. Much of his advice comes back to the basic tenet that it's still about human interaction.

For example, he cautioned against trying to contact a hiring manager who is more than two degrees away. "I never help friends of friends of friends," Kawasaki wrote.

That's an important reminder that online communities are not perfect replicas of real-life connections. Sites such as Facebook have lulled us into believing that we're close with people just because our profiles are linked in cyberspace.

In reality, the number of online friends from whom we could ask for a

professional favor - passing along a resume or introducing to a hiring manager - is a limited group. Maybe this is why Kawasaki urges LinkedIn members to "build your network before you need it."

Saliture offers the same advice. He said the booming alumni registrations on his site is indicative not only of the economic downturn, but of younger professionals' attitudes toward building their networks.

It may be that "students do not ... recognize the importance of professional networking until the second semester of their fourth year," Saliture said.

But it's never too late. As Martin puts it, a professional network maintained online and offline creates "a great forum to help others and learn about others' backgrounds."

"Down the road, there could be an opportunity to hire someone or vice versa," he said. "That's really the ultimate goal. You want to open as many doors as possible to you and others."

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