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More Life & Arts

Is LinkedIn doing its job?

LinkedIn is still the go-to careers networking platform. But does all the effort and agony of self-promotion actually lead to employment?



Catherine Healy

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LinkedIn: There's a big difference between recruiters who cultivate an in-person relationship with people over time and 'volume recruiters' – the sort who 'fire out messages constantly'

As a nation traditionally wary of self-promotion, we can feel all sorts of unease with LinkedIn. Odds are you've heard tell of at least one cringe-inducing post or profile description on the networking site. I'll always remember a friend describing an



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but there's always a risk that you could end up seeming, well, a little full of yourself. What to some might look like admirable drive comes across to others as embarrassingly smug.

Given the economic uncertainty ahead, though, should we be beefing up our profiles and readying inspirational reflections to share with our connections? Is online networking really all that helpful?

Ronan Kennedy, a Dublin-based career coach and business mentor, sees LinkedIn as an invaluable way of staying connected to former colleagues and social acquaintances – those dormant ties that can prove even more useful for work advice than current contacts, according to research. “The power of your network is very important, in that it might help you skip the CV queue or uncover opportunities invisible to the wider job market,” says Kennedy.

Larry McCowan, chief operating officer at Quest Recruitment, an agency specialising in banking and financial roles, tells me LinkedIn is still the go-to platform for hiring managers in his orbit. “Some of those who've been around a long time would probably use databases as the first port of call, but I'd say upwards of 80 per cent of our recruiters would use LinkedIn first and foremost.”

However, more traditional channels also have an important role to play, he says. There's a big difference between recruiters who cultivate an in-person relationship with people over time and those he calls “volume recruiters” – the sort who “fire out messages constantly”. “Usually, those would be inexperienced recruiters trying to fill short-term contracts on low margins. The aim there would be to talk to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible.”

Malwina King, a director at Sigmar Recruitment, also stresses that LinkedIn isn't a silver bullet for finding suitable candidates. Its usefulness very much depends on the sector and level of seniority involved, she says. “In some areas, a LinkedIn profile is expected – if you're a marketer, for example, or working in software. If you don't have a profile as a candidate in some of those fields, people might wonder what's going on.”

For more sensitive hires, LinkedIn often falls short. “People in senior leadership roles are less inclined to be on a platform like LinkedIn,” says King. “And even if they are there, they're not searchable; they're not listing their skills or interests, and they're certainly not going to flag that they're looking for a job. Executive



Conor O’Keeffe, a consultant with recruitment firm Robert Walters, agrees that a robust proposition is needed in headhunting for senior positions. “We spend time identifying potential candidates – many of whom may not be necessarily looking to move jobs – and then we identify ‘triggers for movement’, be it company reputation, growth rate, progression opportunities, pay or work perks, which are then built into our pitch.”

For more junior professionals, though, LinkedIn’s lack of intimacy seems unavoidable. I get a tepid reaction when I turn to my own social media circle for feedback on the site. A number of friends feel resigned about the sheer volume of LinkedIn candidates for every opening, having seen plenty of past applications go ignored – either by an algorithm or a human decision.

One acquaintance tells me he’s submitted CVs for over 50 jobs on LinkedIn using its “quick apply” function. “I never hear anything back,” he says. “The only messages I get are sponsored mails from American universities trying to sell master’s degrees. I honestly have no idea why I still have it. The one thing it’s useful for is learning about company structures if and when you do get an interview.”

Another user, a software engineer, has learned to dampen his expectations in spite of regular contact with recruiters. Scrolling back through his inbox, he counts a total of four approaches in August, two in July, three in June, five in May, and eight in April. He suspects, however, that few read through his page in any depth. “Some recruiters throw out as wide a net as possible when a job comes up. People will send over a huge posting but then they’ll look at your profile and say, ‘Oh sorry, I didn’t realise you don’t have such-and-such experience.’”

King says in-demand specialists do sometimes experience a sense of “LinkedIn fatigue”, as she puts it. “These are people being bombarded by requests from recruiters and employers, and we find now that they’re not often that responsive.”

O’Keeffe concurs that professionals in candidate-short markets – sectors like IT, qualified accounting and high-tier legal services – do, indeed, tend to be relatively inactive on the site.

Although LinkedIn will likely continue to be widely used for CV showcasing, O’Keeffe points out that there are now many other options for fostering meaningful professional connections, including AngelList, Meetup and dedicated



Still, LinkedIn can have its uses for those feeling stuck in a rut. A recent PhD graduate facing a highly challenging academic job market messages me to say he was initially sceptical about joining the site. It's since enabled him to secure interviews for a range of positions. He says that seeing people with PhDs in non-academic roles has given him the confidence to apply for jobs in new sectors. "It's really helped me to work out what the landscape is like."

Workers in the tech sector seem particularly attuned to the dynamics of online networking. For Aoife Deegan, a 28-year-old marketer at a global software firm, LinkedIn is a way to advertise not just her own work but also her employer's accomplishments. She might promote an office charity event, for example, or post about being at a conference in San Francisco or Dallas.

Positive messaging counts for a lot in an industry scrambling to attract the best talent, after all. As she puts it: "Companies want staff to be pushing out to their networks, 'Look how great it is to work here.' It's as if we're brand ambassadors."

Some are still unsure of how to strike the right balance, though. Kennedy advises LinkedIn users to be discerning about how they present themselves. "The focus, when you post, should be on starting an interesting conversation or sharing something that'll be of actual value to others – rather than just uploading a photo of the free breakfast bagel you got in the office."

Marie McManamon of Clearcut Career Guidance and Consulting stresses that authenticity is key. "A lot of publications on careers and CVs can be Americanised and not appropriate culturally to the Irish context." If they decide to post on the site themselves, LinkedIn users should be confident that they have genuine insight on the subject at hand. Employers know fluff when they see it, she points out. "It's not the place for opinion pieces unless they're well grounded. Also, if you do publish, it's essential to thank people for their comments and engage with them, or it will come across as relentless self-promotion."

Of course, in other sectors, LinkedIn hype barely registers at all. McManamon reckons it is of little benefit to many recent graduates and semi-skilled or "hands-on" workers. "It's like using a recruitment company; I'm not going to sign up to an agency as a graduate because I'm not a unique candidate. These aren't places that need tens of thousands of graduates on their books."



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Facebook.”

And for all the virtues of a quick and easy online exchange, in some cases you just can't beat a more personal connection. “Before spending hours online, get advice from someone who knows the market,” says King. “Most people – especially if they haven't looked for a job in years – actually just need to have a human conversation.”

The big mistakes job seekers make on LinkedIn

Conor O’Keeffe, consultant at Robert Walters, lists some of the pitfalls to avoid when creating a LinkedIn profile.

No profile photo: The absence of a LinkedIn photo can be interpreted as lazy. Use a recent photo you genuinely like, one in which you're projecting confidence, and dressed consistently with your professional image.

A misleading headline: If you have aspirations of moving up, don't use your current title in your headline. Instead, opt for something that reflects the job you want without being misleading, eg “Marketing professional for high-growth companies”.

A basic experience section: Too often, people think of this section as just a quick timeline listing all their employers and positions held. Recruiters and hiring managers will use this as their filtering mechanism. Be sure to explain how you excelled in previous roles.

Not being proactive with ‘Recommendations’: Endorsements are a great way to build credibility. But recommendations are a cut above: the most powerful ones are written by genuinely enthused people whose expectations you exceeded.

Applying everywhere: You may be eager to get your career back on track, but be wary of applying to every seemingly relevant role on LinkedIn Jobs.

Not making it easy for people to contact you: Make sure you provide details on how people can connect with you.

Having a static profile: Once you establish your LinkedIn profile, don't forget about it! Make the effort to regularly review the content and share status updates.



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