



Out of work? It's time to get connected

Many flocking to sites like LinkedIn and Facebook to find a new job



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With layoff numbers skyrocketing nationwide, that sucking sound you hear is a torrent of unemployed workers heading to online networking sites.

LinkedIn and Facebook, the two biggest, are seeing membership rise as those out of work stampede to the Internet to find jobs. (Unique visits to both LinkedIn and Facebook are up more than 100 percent this past year, according to Nielsen.)

“The rush online to these sites started in the spring, when the economy started to look bad, but after the financial collapse we saw a huge rush,” says Matthew Fraser, a senior research fellow at the international business school INSEAD and co-author of forthcoming book “Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom: How Online Social Networking Will Transform Your Life, Work and World.” “People are trying to build social capital online as a hedge towards uncertainty.”

Social networking sites can connect you with hundreds of people you probably wouldn’t be able to hook up with in traditional job-seeking ways, but they are by no means a silver bullet for the unemployed.

“There is some sort of social prestige you get out of these tools but does that translate directly into employment or financial well being? I don’t see that happening,” says Michael Stefano, assistant professor of communications at University of Buffalo.

Stefano recently conducted an experiment where he had 50 college students select 12 of their Facebook friends and ask them to help with a school project by taking a 10-minute survey. Of the 600 total asked, only one out of seven responded on average, he says. The majority did not even click on the URL to look at the survey.

Helping someone find a job will take a lot more time and energy than that, Stefano points out. While he admits there are anecdotal stories about people finding jobs via these sites, he’s “doubtful” they are statistically significant.

Building your network

Indeed, there are no hard numbers that show networking portals are any more effective than picking up a phone and asking friends if they know of any work. And these sites are not far-reaching, having long been focused on professional office dwellers, not blue-collar or service-sector workers.

But, that said, they do offer most job seekers potential for more exposure, a wider reach of contacts, moral support and a connection to the outside work world. So, if you’re out of work, it’s a good idea to have a social networking membership in your gig-hunting tool belt.

“Being part of a social network isn’t required but it is a differentiator,” says branding guru Dan Schawbel, author of “Me 2.0: Build a Powerful Brand to Achieve Career Success.”

“People who lose their jobs now have a list they can send out messages to,” he says. “And, if they have strengthened those relationships over time, chances are they can get a job much more quickly.”

That’s how it worked for David Stevens, who was laid off from his job as sales rep for two radio stations in San Jose on Oct. 1.

After the initial disappointment of losing his job, he got right on LinkedIn and reached out to his network of about 150 people.

Tips for your job search

Here are some tips on using social networking sites in your job search from Michael Neece, chief strategy officer of PongoResume:

- Establish a detailed profile on one of the major business-centric networking sites, such as LinkedIn. Aim to create a network of at least 50 direct contacts.

- Keep your online information professional. Do not write anything online that you would not want a potential employer to see.

- Use networking sites to find specific contacts at targeted companies, then use your network to get introductions.

- Submit comments to blogs that are occupation- or industry-specific.

- If you use Twitter.com, use it to keep your followers updated on your job search activities and how they can help you.

- Do not use a contact e-mail address that is unprofessional, such as sloppyjoe@gmail.com or sweetcakes@aol.com.

- Make your personal information in your social networking profile private, if it’s something you don’t want hiring managers to see. MySpace and Facebook both offer this option.

He also updated his status on LinkedIn, which basically is a section on his page that allows all his contacts, and the membership at large, to see what he's up to. He wrote: "I'm up for grabs. Who wants me?"

Within hours, he got a call from the CEO of the Santa Clara Chamber of Commerce, whom he had met at a face-to-face networking event, who was now one of his LinkedIn connections. The CEO gave him the contact information for the head of the chamber in Mountain View.

"I called her that day, she called me back that afternoon, we scheduled an interview for the next week, I went through the interview process and negotiations," he recalls.

He is now the program and events manager for the chamber.

Ask for introductions

What worked in Stevens' favor was the fact that he already had an established network before he lost his job. But that doesn't mean you can't ramp up your list of possible job contacts fairly quickly.

The trick is making sure you first reach out to friends and colleagues who you know well, who can then connect you with their friends and friends of friends that may work at companies or in industries you want to find a job in. Cold connecting with people on social network sites will probably get you as much success as cold calling a hiring manager on the phone.

"Don't be shy to ask for an introduction," says Martha Finney, human resource consultant and author of forthcoming book, "Rebound: A Proven Plan for Starting Over After Job Loss."

You can also make connections by attending speaking events of individuals you respect in your industry and talking to them there or following up later with an e-mail, says Schawbel. You also can respond to a blog post or paper an individual has written, he says, to start up an online dialogue that could lead to them ending up on your contacts list.

While many experts say LinkedIn should be your top choice when deciding which network to join, some also point to Facebook's growing influence as a great job tool.

There is also Xing.com, for professionals who want a more global reach, adds Finney.

Also, blue collar and service sector workers shouldn't just disregard these sites. Even though they have a long way to go before becoming established in these segments, the growing number of members signing up will only expand their reach in the months ahead. (LinkedIn has about 32 million and Facebook has over 120 million.)

LinkedIn's members represent 150 different industries globally, and there are nearly 500 groups on the site that pertain to manufacturing — like the Furniture Manufacturers Group, for instance, as well as the Medical Device Manufacturers Association Group. "Clearly folks in this sector are starting to see the value in networking online," says LinkedIn spokeswoman Krista Canfield.

Establish your online presence

So how do you get the most job-hunting bang for your buck? (Well, actually, most of these sites are free, unless you subscribe to a premium service.)

I suggest you focus on only one site at first so you can establish a strong presence online and build up your network quickly.

You should spend a lot of time crafting your resume/profile on the site, making sure you include a lot of information on what you've accomplished in your job or jobs, not just listing titles and dates, says Craig Millard, manager director of search firm MRINetwork office, The Millard Group, who says almost every headhunter has LinkedIn on their computer screen at all times.

In this economy, he says, "hiring managers are looking for people that have proven results."

He also advises that your background information include specific words and phrases you think a manager in your industry would be looking for if he or she were to do a keyword search.

If you currently have no Web presence, signing up for a networking site will give you that because such sites are often at the top of Google's search results pages, says Susan Barnes, professor of communication and associate director of the Lab for Social Computing at Rochester Institute of Technology.

She suggests you do a Google search on your name. If someone else with the same name as you shows up at the top of the list, she suggests you try to use a different version of your name. For example, she uses "Susan B. Barnes" because there are so many people named Susan Barnes.

It's all about finding ways to differentiate yourself — or your brand — online and offline, says Schawbel. "Make everything you add to your social network profile best represent your brand, and understand that everything is public on the Net."