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Connecting students, alumni and employers?: there's an app for that

By Jo Conlon

LinkedIn has been described as the non-sexy, sleeping dragon of social media (Buck, 2012). It has become the premiere social media site for professionals; most employers in the UK will search for a job candidate on LinkedIn. This makes it very useful when searching for jobs internships, exploring careers or accessing company information.

Yet, while students may be active on other social media platforms they are less engaged with LinkedIn. Certainly our creative students report that LinkedIn has little appeal, they find the professional business persona off-putting and believe that having a job is a prerequisite for a profile.

Additionally, for LinkedIn, students and graduates are the fastest-growing demographic, with LinkedIn graduate established in 2011 and the LinkedIn graduate app in 2016. LinkedIn has many capabilities that facilitate the type of networking students must engage in to find internships, jobs and make professional connections (Cooper and Naatus, 2014). From a personal branding perspective, LinkedIn offers users the opportunity to differentiate themselves in competitive job markets by creating a professional profile. It is important to note that in most Google searches a person's LinkedIn profile comes up as top of the search, it is therefore important this makes a good first impression. The LinkedIn profile tells a story about you – so does not having one.

This article reports on an internally funded project: *LinkedIn groups in higher education - Maximising community benefits for students & alumni in fashion & textiles*, which aimed to establish a supportive, collaborative community to leverage the vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1977) of our students and alumni to encourage students to begin building a professional identity and network which will be vital to their career progression. The grant paid for a student co-researcher to work with academics, the careers service and marketing.

Getting started – Build a profile

Although LinkedIn is more than an online, highly visible CV, the user profile is the starting point. LinkedIn measures profile strength from 0 to 100% and unlike other social media this requires a significant and ongoing time investment. The careers service partners deliver LinkedIn workshops at beginner and advanced level to all current students; through these hands-on discussions and troubleshooting sessions, students repackage the embedded skills in academic work and part-time work to showcase their experience and abilities in an initial profile. This is the important first step to develop a strong identity and sense of self-worth to enter competitive job markets with confidence.

This then needs to be coupled with overcoming the fear of putting yourself out there in an unfamiliar environment. A means of support to bridge the confidence gap between current and emerging professional identities is needed. It's also important that students recognise the difference between connecting with friends and family on sites like Facebook and networking with unknown professionals.

Discover - existing and peripheral contacts

A significant component of a strong, visible profile within LinkedIn is having 50 connections. LinkedIn does have a number of features to assist in building connections. We encourage students to grow their network organically and to be cautious in accepting indiscriminate connection requests. The LinkedIn facility of scanning existing email contacts shows who's on LinkedIn already, and facilitates connection requests. LinkedIn has many groups organized around industries and functional areas and groups provide a mechanism to build connections with others around a common interest or organisation.   It is this feature that was leveraged in this project; forming a university student and alumni group provides a "safe space" and the opportunity to connect with peers in their cohort, in other years of the same course, with other students in the department and near-peer alumni.   Existing students particularly those returning from work placement serve as important role models. We have found that our alumni often are very pleased to offer their advice, provide internship and job leads, and return to give guest lectures. Near-peer alumni offer a powerful combination of the benefits of peer and mentor relationships. We ask our students to seek out our guest speakers on LinkedIn to offer their thanks and comments on the talk and to request to connect.

Participate

 It was envisioned that the group would share news, knowledge, work experience and job opportunities. Currently we have established an appreciated repository but are keen to get all members contributing in an active community to prevent it sliding into an alternative space to teach from. We are establishing a hub of LinkedIn champions to regularly pose questions that will evoke a response. We are also currently seeking to identify where LinkedIn can fit seamlessly into class activities and assignments and provide opportunities for members to contribute and recognize hat their voices are important. For example, making a conversational post on a news article ahead of a class discussion or tutorial, adding a link to a blog post or online portfolio seeking feedback, seeking recommendations and endorsements to build their profile, researching the profile behind job roles, using geographical features to conduct a search to identify potential businesses in an area, conducting market research for an assignment, identifying potential interviewees for primary research and sharing these experiences in the safe space of the LinkedIn group. We see the opportunity to demonstrate the potential of LinkedIn beyond its human resource management applications and to teach students how to use it as a collaborative medium (Wankel, 2016) to support others and feel part of a community that places a premium on quality intellectual exchange (Gershbein, 2016).

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Jo Conlon is a Senior Lecturer in Fashion & Textiles with 18 years' technical and management experience in the clothing industry. Her current research centres on knowledge management, learning and change within organizations. Through her doctoral research, Jo developed the first undergraduate fashion programme in the UK embedding Product Lifecycle Management (PLM), recognised by the sector as creating new professionals with a key differentiator that can transform the industry. Jo also supervises a Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) project which is a UK Government-supported initiative, enabling graduates to work on challenging projects in a partnership between a business and a university.

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