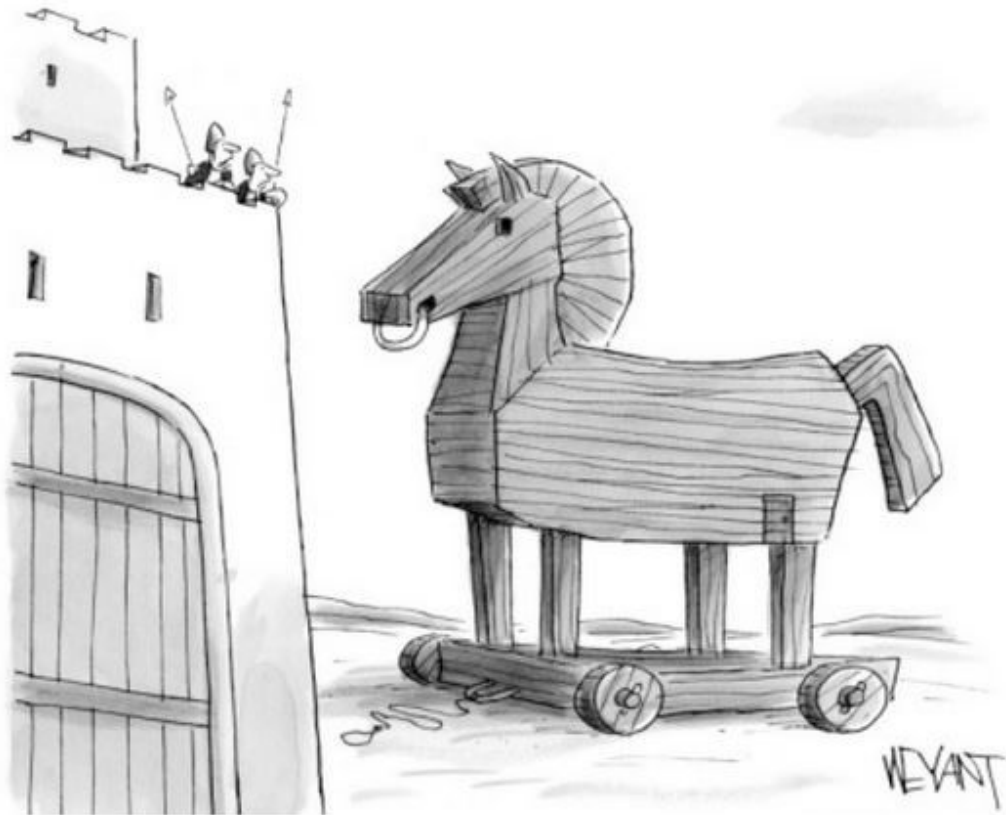


6 Developing your social network



“Hi, I’d like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn.”

LinkedIn New Yorker cartoon spoof (2017)

“Hi, I’d like to add you to my professional network.”

This request might seem obvious in an age of mobile devices, Twitter handles, and LinkedIn pages. But **social network technologies** like smartphone apps and profile sharing platforms are not the same as “social networks.” After all, on the Web, social network sites are only about twenty years old. We might point to SixDegrees.com, founded in 1997 (about five years after the Web first exploded into the public consciousness) as the first company to try to take the practices of social networking and translate them to web

technology. As media scholar danah boyd and her colleagues described in a 2008 article, “SixDegrees.com allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists. Each of these features existed in some form before SixDegrees, of course. Profiles existed on most major dating sites and many community sites. AIM and ICQ buddy lists supported lists of Friends, although those Friends were not visible to others. Classmates.com allowed people to affiliate with their high school or college and surf the network for others who were also affiliated, but users could not create profiles or list Friends until years later. SixDegrees was the first to combine these features.” But “While SixDegrees attracted millions of users, it failed to become a sustainable business and, in 2000, the service closed.”

sixdegrees.com circa 1998



(<https://archive.org/web/> 2015)

Despite its early demise, SixDegrees demonstrated many of the qualities that many online social network technologies still possess, which work against their usefulness for career-building:

- Such sites often initially attract **homogenous populations** — people who are largely similar to each other — and result in users self-segregating by factors like nationality, age, education level, class, gender, or race/ethnicity.

- Such sites make visible **preexisting social networks** of contacts, friends, or fans, but don't necessarily lead to the growth of those social networks or the development of new social networks.

In other words, not all “social network technologies” are designed to facilitate “social networking” in the sense of exploring ideas and building relationships with new people previously unknown to you.

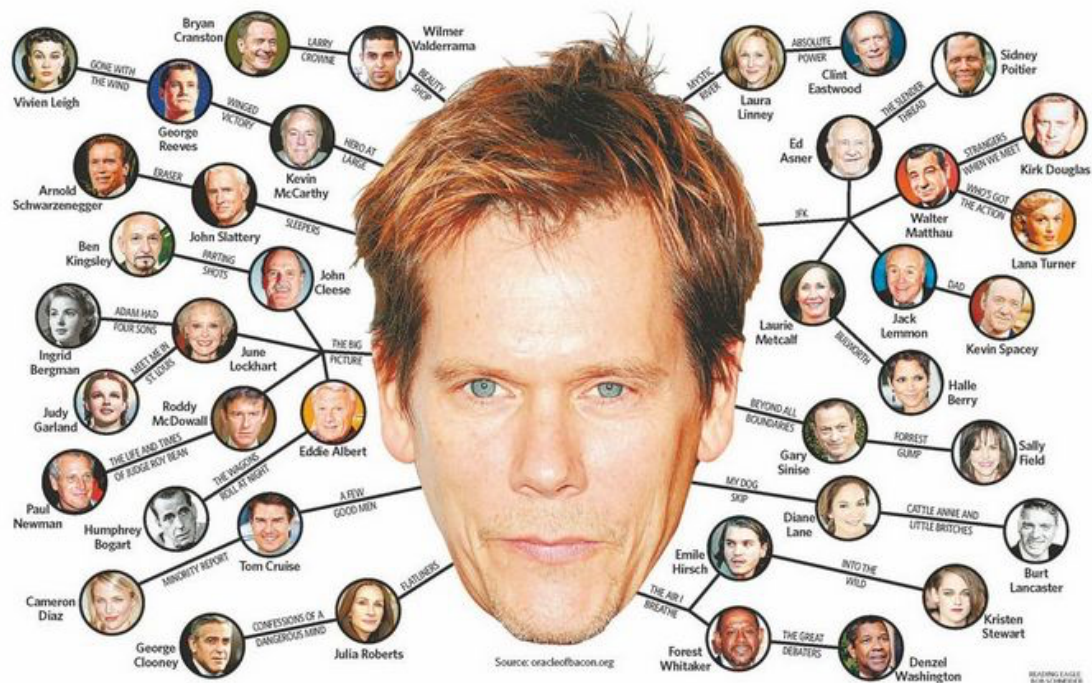
This chapter explores not just social networking technologies, but the dynamics of social networks themselves, to provide some background on the relational aspects of both academic and career success — aspects of community and cooperation that can get lost in the narcissism of personal brand-building and self-promotion.

Mapping small worlds

One of the key markers that today's social network technologies make visible is a simple measure of scale of one's social network — for example, how many Facebook friends or Twitter followers you have, in total. But what does “scale” mean in such a network? How many of the “links” in your social network are useful to you for generating new ideas or learning about new opportunities? It would be useful if we could map out such social networks in greater detail — and then learn from those maps about how networks function in the first place.

There's a popular online meme that explores this very idea: the **Kevin Bacon Number**. In 1997, about the same time that SixDegrees.com was getting started, a group of students at William and Mary College found a new way to use the online Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) which attempts to catalog metadata like title, plot, and cast for every film ever produced. By the late 1990s, IMDb held metadata on roughly 500,000 actors who had participated in over 200,000 feature films from 1898 to 1997. The students found a way to use this database in a silly parlor game, as explained by sociologist Duncan Watts (2003): “If you have acted in a movie with Kevin Bacon, you have a Bacon number of one (Bacon himself has a Bacon number of zero). Since Kevin Bacon has acted in quite a lot of movies (over fifty at the time of writing) and at last count had acted with 1,550 people, it follows that 1,550 actors have a Bacon number of one. This might sound like a lot, and certainly Bacon has acted with many more people than the average (which is only about sixty), but it is still less than 1 percent of the total population of movie actors. Moving outward from Bacon, if you haven't ever acted with him, but you have acted with somebody else who has, then you have a Bacon number of two. [...] In general, the object of the game is to determine an actor's Bacon number by figuring out his or her shortest path to the great man.”

The Kevin Bacon Number game



(found on stockwet.me)

Watts knows a lot about the Bacon Number Game because he was one of the first researchers to actually use the IMDB network to start testing theories about how people's social connections map out in different social circumstances. Watts wondered whether the trick of being able to find a short path from practically anybody to Kevin Bacon was a function of the particular agency of that actor himself (having acted with 1,550 people) or a function of the structure of the movie industry and the resulting life of *any* actor (considering the reasons that lead directors to cast movies, select costars, and choose how many people can feasibly be featured in a two-hour production). So Watts used the IMDB to model what would happen if you used other actors as seeds instead of Kevin Bacon. As it turns out, when you computed *anyone's* number (the Denzel Washington number, the Naomi Watts number, etc.), two patterns emerged: (a) no matter who you started with, every actor could be connected to every other actor in an average of less than four steps; and (b) every actor's costars in a movie starred with each other 80% of the time (Watts 2003).

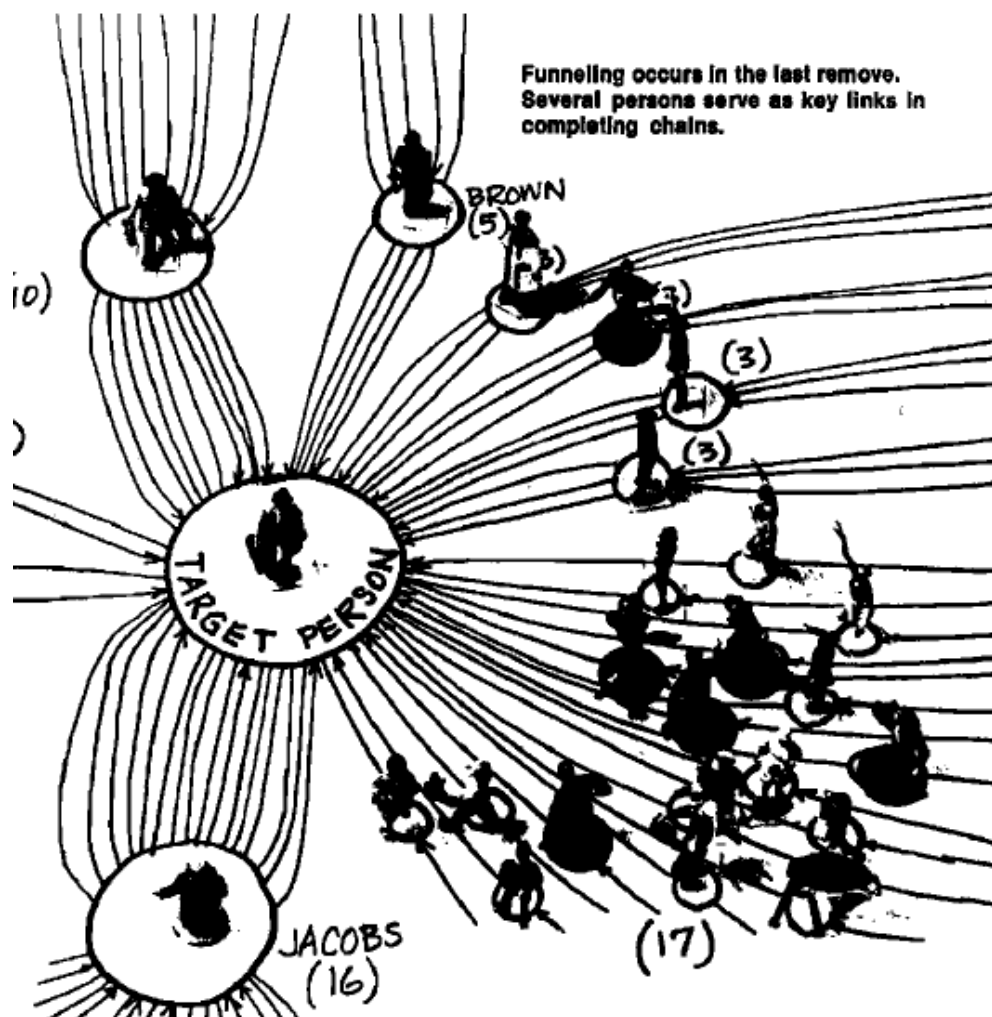
Distribution of actors according to “Bacon Number”

BACON NUMBER	NUMBER OF ACTORS	CUMULATIVE TOTAL NUMBER OF ACTORS
0	1	1
1	1,550	1,551
2	121,661	123,212
3	310,365	433,577
4	71,516	504,733
5	5,314	510,047
6	652	510,699
7	90	510,789
8	38	510,827
9	1	510,828
10	1	510,829

(Watts 2003)

Watts called this a **small world network** because (a) to any individual participant at any particular moment, it looks like they are surrounded by a very small group of people who are homogenous (they keep starring in the same movies with them) — the “small” part; but (b) really, all participants, no matter how “distant” or different their experience, can be reached through only a few short steps (about four connections) — the “world” part.

So-called “sociometric stars” in small-world networks



(Milgram 1967)

Other researchers had found something similar, two decades earlier, well before the development of online social network technologies. In 1967, Harvard psychologist Stanley Milgram led a series of experiments where his team arbitrarily selected hundreds of individuals by mail, asking them to forward a postcard to a named target individual in Boston, simply by sending the card to a friend who they thought might have a greater chance of knowing the person than they did. They found some striking patterns: (a) on average, it took about five to six steps to get to the target individual (this is the source of the later-coined phrase **six degrees of separation**); and (b) nearly half of the pathways passed through three particular persons, who Milgram referred to as the “stars” in the social network (powerful nodes with lots of diverse friendship links) (Travers & Milgram 1969).

Small worlds and career development

So how do such “small worlds” — where close, visible links seem to be people very similar to you, but it is actually possible to reach distant, diverse people by following links over just a few steps — connect to the career development process? Scholars who study business practices around hiring have long known that employers much prefer to hire individuals who are personally known to their current employees than to hire individuals who are found through more impersonal help-wanted advertisements or unsolicited résumés. According to a recent article in the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, jobseekers should avoid relying only on the **dart board approach** to finding a job, where one sends out hundreds of résumés in hopes of receiving one or two interviews, and instead take advantage of the **hidden job market**, where organizations interview people based on a referral from someone trusted (Vilorio 2011). In one recent survey of young professional workers, half of the respondents found their current position through such hidden job market networking: “introduced to the hiring manager through a personal connection, were recruited by someone they knew, leveraged their university's alumni network, or were recommended to someone at the company by a family friend or mentor” (Citrin 2015).

How job-seekers find employment

How did you get your job?	Frequency	
I applied to an opening online (job board, company website, LinkedIn, etc.)	22%	
I had a personal connection with someone at the organization and they introduced me to the hiring manager	20%	51% got jobs through net- working
I was recruited by someone with whom I had no prior connection	13%	
I was recruited by someone I know	12%	
I had a family friend or other personal connection introduce me to someone who works at the company	10%	
I applied through a job fair/via on-campus recruiting	7%	
I had an internship that led to a full-time job	6%	
I successfully connected with someone with whom I had no prior relationship	5%	
I reached out to an alum of my university and the alum was either the hiring manager or introduced me to the hiring manager	2%	
I had a mentor who introduced me to someone who works at the company	2%	

(Citrin 2015)

What kind of networks matter most to a successful job search? Sociologist Mark Granovetter offered an answer to this in the 1970s, in his book *Getting a Job*, after tracking how nearly 300 male technical, professional, and managerial workers in a Boston suburb found jobs. As might be expected, he found that referrals through social networks were the most prevalent (and most productive) means of changing employment. In fact, “A number of respondents even had the odd experience of being refused a job for which they applied directly, only to be accepted later for the same job through personal contacts” (Granovetter 1974).

But it was the question of which members of one’s social network provided the best job information that most surprised Granovetter. Dividing the job-seekers’ networks into **strong ties** (the closest, most trusted, and most similar connections) and **weak ties** (the most distant and diverse acquaintances), Granovetter coined the term “**the strength of weak ties**” because he found that “professional, technical, and managerial workers were more likely to hear about new jobs through weak ties (27.8 percent) than through strong ones (16.7 percent)” — perhaps because “individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends.” Or as author Meg Jay in her book on twenty-year olds poetically put it, “Weak ties are like bridges you cannot see all the way across, so there is no telling where they might lead.” (Jay 2012) This is not to say that the strong ties are useless: “strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available.” But strong ties have limitations — what sociologist Rose Coser called “**the weakness of strong ties**” in 1975, just a year after Granovetter’s study was published (Coser 1975). “Our strong ties feel comfortable and familiar but, other than support, they may have little to offer,” described Jay. “They are usually too similar — even too similarly stuck — to provide more than sympathy. They often don’t know any more about jobs or relationships than we do.” (Jay 2012) Thus to be successful in a job search, a candidate must be able to draw on both kinds of resources — acting like a “**bridge**” between both the people closest to us and most similar to us, and the people more distant from us and somewhat different than us (Granovetter 1983).

Personal branding within social networks

The study of small world networks reminds us that many decision makers with employment opportunities may actually be connected to us through a short path of friends, family, instructors, peers, and colleagues. So how do you stand out within this network of possibilities? One way is to adopt the techniques of organizations themselves when they are trying to build consumer excitement about the product or service that they offer: build a

.....
personal brand
.....

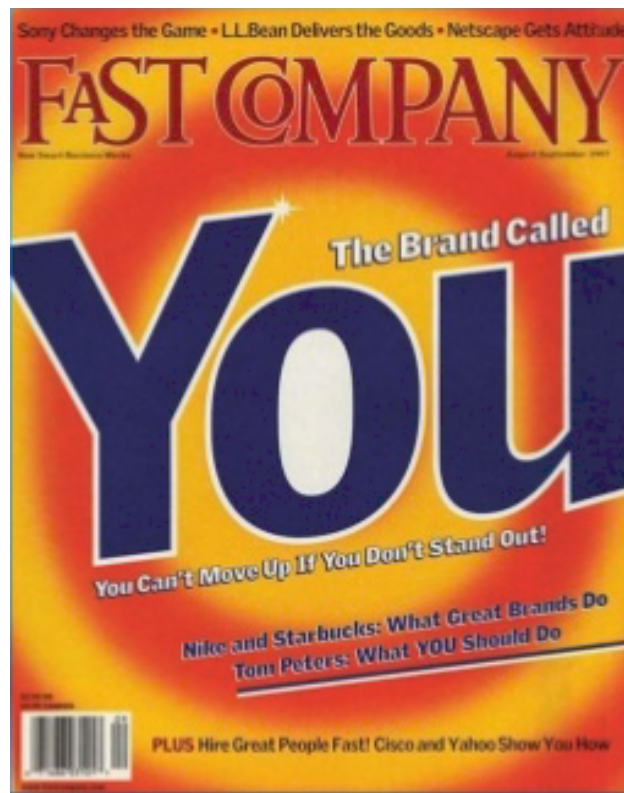
A clear and memorable description of the value you offer and the goals you have for your career that you can quickly describe to peers and hiring decision-makers, which is reinforced through your record of achievement and collegiality every day on the job.
.....

powerful **personal brand** that efficiently and memorably communicates value to a target audience.

The notion of personal branding is commonplace in the business press right now, but much of the hype can be traced to a 1997 article titled “The Brand Called You” in the new-media business magazine *Fast Company*, written by a management consulting expert named Tom Peters. Back in 1982 Peters had co-authored the business bestseller *In Search of Excellence* which profiled 43 top for-profit companies

to discover “8 basic principles that made these organizations successful.” Peters brought a similar idea to his 1997 article, except this time he focused on individuals rather than corporations: “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You” (Peters 1997).

Tom Peters article “The Brand Called You”



(1997)

This article by Peters spawned a cottage industry of similar books and articles — including one titled *The Start-Up of You* co-authored by one of the founders of LinkedIn, Reid Hoffman. But the basic message in each case was the same: since organizations no longer hire employees for life, abandoning the “linear” career with a corporate ladder (or what sociologists might call an “internal labor market”) for a new and contingent set of constantly-changing, project-based work, you’ve got to be an **embedded entrepreneur** and sell yourself in order to succeed over time. According to Peters: “Forget your job title. Ask yourself: What do I do that adds remarkable, measurable, distinguished, distinctive value? Forget your job description. Ask yourself: What do I do that I am most proud of? Most of all, forget about the standard rungs of progression you’ve climbed in your career up to now. Burn that damnable ‘ladder’ and ask yourself: What have I accomplished that I can unabashedly brag about?” (Peters 1997)

Advice to brag about yourself can sound a lot like the worst excesses of advertising — exaggerate your résumé, “spam” social media sites, and get your name out in front of the audience in any way possible. But that’s not it, according to Peters and other “brand you” consultants. “If you hear that,” writes a business consultant in Gallup magazine, “proceed with caution. These folks are confusing strategy with tactics. Your résumé, your interview, your networking groups, your Facebook page, your tweets, your LinkedIn connections — all that stuff is tactics. They’re the ways in which you reveal your brand” (James 2009). That brand itself needs to be built on long-term relationships where you’ve demonstrated to multiple decision-makers that you’re productive, curious, trustworthy, and in general a valuable addition to their organizations. For example, in one study of creative workers in the fashion industry in London and Milan, branding was less about what one wrote on their own social media site, and more about the positive and cooperative reputation they had built up with peers on different projects over time: “to attract attention to one’s personal brand is also about receiving recognition for one’s ability to ‘give’ and ‘contribute’” to the community within which one works (Arvidsson et al 2016). Or as the founder of [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), Jeff Bezos, is alleged to have quipped, “Your brand is what people say about you when you’re not in the room.” (Clowes 2015)

In other words, brands are built through hard work rather than the “sizzle” of marketing. As one career adviser describes it, “branding” has a confused meaning only if you mistake “networking” for an advertising exercise in the first place: “To me, networking connotes a giant cocktail party with inexpensive wine and hundreds of people I don’t know all looking for a job. It involves a one-way street of exploiting others for your own gain. I much prefer the words and spirit behind the two-way street of relationship building” (Citrin 2015).

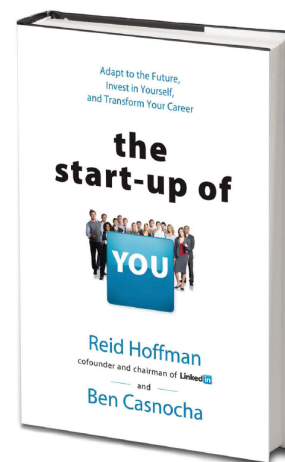
Online tools for networking and branding

Now that we have a rough understanding of social networks as depending on a geography of interpersonal relationships (some close, some distant, but each important in different ways) and of personal branding as more than simply advertising (incorporating not only self-promotion but also long-term trust-building), we are ready to consider how online tools like social networking services can help you grow and mobilize your social network and your personal brand.

As of this writing, the number one social networking service to be present on for an entry-level job search in the college labor market is **LinkedIn.com** — and while this will inevitably change over time, a specific understanding of how LinkedIn works and how to make the most of it will help you when the next hot Internet service comes along in a few years' time.

LinkedIn was founded in 2003 by Reid Hoffman, and became a public company a little less than a decade later in 2011. Five years after that, it was purchased by Microsoft for \$26.2 billion (though it will continue to operate as an independent brand). Recently the company counted over 400 million individual members and 3 million organizational members (including every Fortune 500 firm). The average user is aged 25-34, and more than half of the users hail from outside the US (especially from India, Great Britain, and Brazil). While a wide range of industries are present on LinkedIn, the high-tech, finance and manufacturing firms dominate. And with a recent push to sign up college users, some 39 million students and recent graduates are members (Taub 2013; Breitbarth 2012; Bonson 2013; MarketLine 2015; Wingfield 2016).

LinkedIn and Reid Hoffman's The Start-Up of You



(LinkedIn.com 2015)

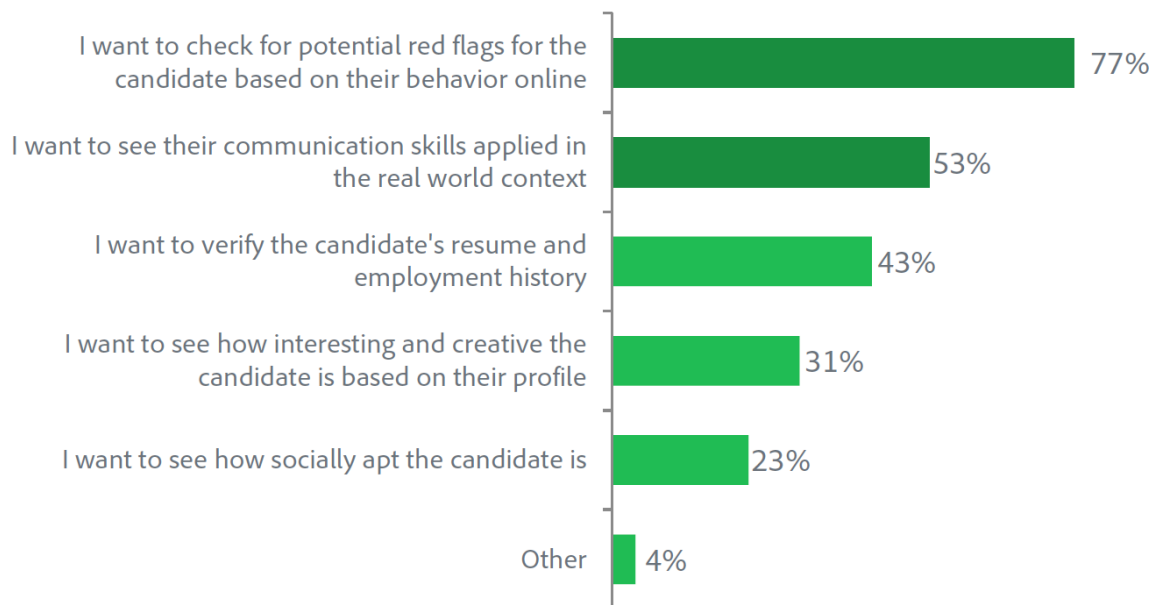
All of these metrics are important to the strategy that LinkedIn uses to turn its database into a profit center. For example, unlike Facebook, which generates nearly 90% of its revenues from advertising to its users, LinkedIn generates less than 25% of its revenues from advertising. Another 20% of LinkedIn's revenues come from its "premium subscriptions" (paid users who have access to more services). But the majority of LinkedIn's \$1.5 billion in revenue, over 55%, comes from what are called **talent solutions** — in other words, the services and data that LinkedIn sells to corporate human resources (HR) departments and outside search firms ("headhunters"). After all, LinkedIn can not only help companies find likely job candidates, it can also tell companies things like which universities provide the most candidates to a company's industry (or to its direct competitors), or which combinations of skills and experience seem to be commanding the highest wages in the labor market (MarketLine 2015; Bonson 2013; Korkki 2013). It does this by mobilizing all of the data it has aggregated, or what it calls the **economic graph**, to create a "real-time picture of employer needs and the skills people have around the world" (Selingo 2015). In practice, LinkedIn becomes used as "the first place to check out a new contact," whether that person is a potential employee, a potential client, a coworker, or a competitor (Zhang et al. 2014).

So you might think of LinkedIn as serving as all of the following old-style business technologies, simultaneously:

- As a *phone book* (for you to create your listing so people will find you)
- As a *business card* (for you to pass along your information to someone in a low-stress way)
- As a *Rolodex* (for existing contacts to seek you out or seek their own network for specific skills)
- As the *help wanted section* of a newspaper (for firms to advertise openings to a general audience)
- As a *temporary employment agency* (for firms to seek out individuals with very specific skills)
- As a *corporate recruiter* (for firms to seek out individuals who work for the competition)
- As *direct mail* (for people to advertise their services to you and find clients)

And add one more to that list: as a *detective agency* for employers, even if they've found your résumé through other means. An Adobe Corp. survey of over 1,000 hiring managers in 2014 revealed that nearly half searched out applicants on social media — predominantly to check for **red flags** (signs of behavior or attitudes that could be damaging to an organization's functioning or brand if this employee were hired), but also to check their communication skills "in the real world context" (Adobe 2014).

Reasons that firms research job candidates using social media



(Adobe 2014)

Using LinkedIn effectively

So what does all this mean for how you should use LinkedIn as a liberal arts and sciences student seeking employment? In general, if you use LinkedIn — and we advise that you do, at least until another such market-dominant system comes along — you should use it as completely, and professionally, as possible. For example, in terms of branding, LinkedIn’s own data suggests that “a photo will increase by 11 times the likelihood that recruiters will click on your name” (LinkedIn.com 2015). LinkedIn offers users the chance to post work samples — even multimedia presentations — so that employers can judge communication skills directly (Taub 2013; Goel 2014). But turn off the feature that broadcasts all of these changes to your network of contacts; that kind of non-update is considered to be impolite **data smog**.

In terms of social networking, joining a group or following an organization are two good ways to get to know decision-makers in an industry. And remember, the goal is not to amass the most contacts; the goal is to cultivate meaningful contacts. Include a personal message whenever you request a “link” from someone, and only respond to invitations to join someone’s network if you are able to articulate the real-world connection that exists between you and that person (Korkki 2013). (For example, as a UW professor, I will always respond to requests from UW-Madison students to be part of my professional network; however, I don’t respond to link requests

from outside students whom I have never met or heard of.) Finally, note that LinkedIn is always developing new tools, especially for the college student market; in early 2016 the company released a **LinkedIn Students** app for both iOS and Android mobile platforms, designed to help students translate their majors to possible careers based on data within the LinkedIn network.

Whether using LinkedIn for either personal branding or social network curation, make sure to engage in what media scholars call **boundary regulation**: keeping your social media identities on different services distinct and, in some cases, private. The way you perform your identity, your personality, and your life on Facebook among a small circle of family and close friends should be entirely distinct from the way you portray your actions in the world on a professional career-focused site like LinkedIn. This helps avoid the **context collapse** of your different social networks merging together in unproductive or unwanted ways (Zhang et al. 2014).

If the recent history of the high-tech industry is any indication, LinkedIn probably won't be the dominant social networking platform for career-building forever. But whatever online tools you use for networking, make sure you use them on your own terms, in a way that is polite, professional, and ultimately effective for your personal career goals.

Don't neglect your offline social networks

It is important for you to understand and optimize your use of information infrastructures for job-seeking — not only the platforms that job-seekers use to bring their career stories to employers, but also the databases that employers use to sift and screen applicants for positions (more about this in chapter 8). But no matter how effective your use of online technology, remember to also take advantage of the unique and valuable in-person social network opportunities that your university environment offers to you. After all, the modern university is itself an information infrastructure, designed to bring experts together to produce, test, and pass along knowledge — what better environment could there be in which to produce, test, and pass along your own career story?

For example, consider this strategy for in-person networking with your fellow university community members: professors and instructors. Every time you take a course without introducing yourself to the professor or instructor, even just dropping in for 15 minutes during office hours, you're missing an easy opportunity to build your professional network — and to get help in that particular course, besides. As one professor writing in a recent career-advice book put it, "Once the professor knows you, it is much easier to be successful in the course. If it's a difficult class, go to their office hours and ask for help. Let them know you sincerely want to learn what they are teaching and want to improve your skills and knowledge. This can turn a C paper into an A paper

very easily. But the inverse is also true: If you never attend class, showing up only to turn in your homework, take the midterm, and take the final, your professors will notice.” (Terhune & Hays 2013) In the same way, don’t forget to practice networking with academic and career advisers — or even fellow students — who you meet each semester.

This sort of in-person networking takes time and effort, but if practiced consistently, it may very well allow you to form a rare and powerful connection to someone whose career path you admire, and who is willing to help you work through your own career decisions: a professional **mentor**. This term originated with Homer’s *Odyssey*: The wise elder named Mentor provided advice to Odysseus’s son Telemachus during his father’s long voyage away from home — and in the end, Mentor was revealed to be Athena, the goddess of wisdom, in disguise (Vasan & Przybylo 2013). But good mentors don’t simply dispense advice; they provide counsel instead. The difference is crucial, according to Stanford design professors Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (2016): “‘Counsel’ is when someone is trying to help you figure out what you think. ‘Advice’ is when someone is telling you what he or she thinks.” They explain, “Counsel invariably begins with lots of questions aimed at accurately understanding you, what you’re saying, and what you’re going through. Good counselors will often seem to ask the same question a couple of times from different points of view, to be sure they’re getting it.” In short, “they’re focused on you — not on themselves.”

.....
social capital

Ideas, information, and support drawn from your network of relationships with peers and mentors — both “strong ties” with whom you share many common experiences, and “weak ties” who come from backgrounds very different from your own.
.....

As advisors, counselors, or mentors, the people you encounter every day at university offer a unique resource as you seek information on jobs, employers, industries, and careers. Taking advantage of this social network provides you with a third form of career-building “capital” besides the “human capital” of skills and knowledge (from chapter 2) and the “identity capital” of introspective awareness (from chapter 4): the **social capital** of trusted and reliable peers and mentors. On one hand, these individuals

represent classic “strong ties” in that they are committed to working on your behalf and often know you quite well. But on the other hand, since a university by definition brings together people from different backgrounds, different ideologies, different stages of life, and different parts of the world, many of your professors, advisers, and fellow students can also serve as “weak ties” that connect you to communities much more diverse and distant from your own. As we have seen, successful social networkers are able to “bridge” between their strongest and weakest ties, to draw upon the benefits of both. Remember that your university community — especially the “circle of support” at SuccessWorks that we mentioned in chapter 1 — is there for you.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is a social network and how do you build one?
2. What are the characteristics of “small world” social networks and how do they relate to job searches?
3. What is the “hidden job market” and how do you access it?
4. What is a “personal brand” and why is it useful?
5. How does LinkedIn earn revenue, and what does that mean for you as a user of its service?
6. Why might organizations check your LinkedIn site (or other social media sites) before offering you a job or an interview?
7. Why should one practice “boundary regulation” when using online social networks?
8. Why is it important to build “social capital” as well as “human capital” and “identity capital”?

READ MORE ABOUT IT

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