

The Value of Your LinkedIn Connections



BY RICH MAGGIANI | *Fellow*

I'M ON MY LinkedIn account every day. I get a lot out of it. I decided early on that to stay connected, nationally and internationally, I had to



Social media has transformed the way we communicate. This column discusses the intricacies and ramifications that social media has on our everyday personal and professional lives. Suggestions for topics are welcome. Email me at rich.maggiani@solari.net.

spend more time on LinkedIn. After all, it is the leading social media site for professionals, at least in North America. (In Europe, it's XING. These same principles apply with most professional sites, though.)

The purpose of LinkedIn is, of course, linking to other professionals. It is these connections—and the extended contacts that it engenders—that form the robust network from which

you all can benefit. To get the most out of LinkedIn, you must grow your connections.

Cultivating these connections takes time and consideration. It is,

however, time well spent. Why? Your connections are a valuable resource that can assist you with professional dilemmas. But, as with all social media, this assistance is a two-way street; be prepared and open to help the contacts in your network as well.

Your LinkedIn network includes your first-degree connections (your direct connections) and your group connections, plus your second- and third-degree connections (people in your connection's immediate network).

How Your LinkedIn Network Can Benefit You

You can add connections in many different ways. I'll discuss a number of ways and present a rationale for each method. But first, let's look at how you can benefit from your network. You can:

- ▶ Get introduced to someone in a connection's network.
- ▶ Ask a connection a question to help solve a problem.
- ▶ Learn from a connection's expertise and even get advice.
- ▶ Engage in a discussion about a topic of mutual interest.

- ▶ Recruit a connection to help you get a job or contract in their company. (Your connections can tell you who hires technical communicators, the names of key people on the front lines, of the types of jobs that are being offered, and where you stand after you've submitted a resume or project offer.)
- ▶ Request that your profile be forwarded to one of your connection's contacts.
- ▶ Ask that others keep you in mind when they see projects of interest to you.

With benefits such as these, you can start to see the value of a large, robust network.

Add Connections

Start with LinkedIn by connecting with people you already know. These can be work colleagues, friends, classmates, other STC members, even neighbors. These are the people you know best, who can form the foundation of a strong network.

Next, delve a little deeper to link with people you know, but who are not in your immediate circle of friends and colleagues. People you know in this second tier generally share some of your same interests but also engage in other professional endeavors that can potentially help you.

Finally, you can push the networking limits to link with people with whom you could form a mutually beneficial relationship. In my network, these are the people at the outer reaches (and some beyond that) who share little of my closest interests, and yet have some relationship that can benefit me. For example, the most valuable of these arms-length connections work in companies I market to and are in a position to help me wend my way through the corporate hierarchy to that key hiring person.

Before you start adding connections, consider the suggestion from my previous column: fully complete your profile. LinkedIn uses this information to help you locate potential connections.

Join Groups

When you send an invitation to connect, LinkedIn asks how you know the person. You must then provide a company, school, email address, or LinkedIn group that somehow links you. What is accepted by LinkedIn, however, depends on how completely both of you have filled out your profiles. By joining groups, you expand your potential network.

As a reader of *Intercom*, here are some groups you might consider joining:

- ▶ Society for Technical Communication
- ▶ Documentation Managers
- ▶ The Content Wrangler Community
- ▶ Technical Writing Professionals
- ▶ Technical Writer of Writers

Consider joining other groups that interest you, too. For instance, I also belong to these groups: Learning, Education, and Training Professionals Group; Apple Macintosh; Professional Speakers and Seminar Leaders; and Linkin [sic] Hawai'i. You can join up to 50 groups.

Search by Name

The quickest way to find someone is to type their name into the People search box on your LinkedIn home page. Depending on the name, this keyword search could get a few results, dozens, or even hundreds.

You can further refine your query through the Advanced People Search tab. Try entering the person's first and last name and any of the number of other options. I find location (searching within a certain radius of a zip code) to be the greatest help.

Through the Add Connections link, you can search by email address, as long as the person uses that specific email in their LinkedIn profile. I'm wary of importing my contacts from my email application. Instead, I simply list email addresses of the people I want to invite be-

cause I'm more comfortable with this, and it allows me to control the email addresses in the search.

Find Second-Degree Contacts

The Add Connections link also allows you to search by colleagues, classmates, and my personal favorite, "people you may know." The Colleagues tab lists potential connections by the companies listed in your profile; the Classmates tab provides contacts from the schools in your profile.

The People You May Know tab starts by listing your second-degree prospects (in other words, the first-degree connections of your first-degree connections), with the number of connections you share. I enjoy scrolling through this list, frequently finding many gems. What's best about this method is that it is a bit happenstance.

Want something more organized? Then scan your first-degree's connections. Simply click the number link next to a name when you list your connections. Frequently you'll know a handful of the same people.

Also scan members of your groups. Every group lists its members for you: first by your first-degree connections, then by your second-degree connections, and finally by group members not in your direct network (up to 500 members). Listed on the left of the screen are the group's newest members. I look for people I know, as well as people I share other connections with.

Send Invitations to Connect

Whenever I send an invitation, I emphasize the way I know that person, and I customize every invitation because a personal note goes a long way toward having your invitation accepted. LinkedIn gives you 300 characters for personal notes.

LinkedIn makes it easy to "get linked," and yet I find it curious that they only allow you to connect with people you already know. As I alluded to earlier, my more distant connections travel in circles other

than my own, and thus open doors that would otherwise be inaccessible to me. For me, this is important.

If you want to add these types of people to your network, you essentially have two choices. First, find a connection to a distant person through your established connections, and then ask those connections to introduce you. This is a circuitous route, one that LinkedIn recommends you use.

The second option is to introduce yourself directly to this distant person by sending them a well-written invitation explaining some common ground you share (such as you are both STC members or in the same LinkedIn group). Understand, though, that this route is a bit risky. Your invitation can be accepted (most likely) or it can be ignored (somewhat likely). After ignoring your invitation, that person can click the dreaded I Don't Know (IDK) button, an event that LinkedIn notices and frowns upon. If you receive a few IDKs over a short period of time, LinkedIn scolds you in an email. Continued IDKs can result in your account being suspended, which only takes a humble apology to get reinstated. Clicking I Don't Know takes two steps, and as such, rarely occurs. I have invited numerous people using this explanatory invitation method, and no one has IDKed me yet. Instead, four out of five accept and the rest simply ignore the invitation.

I think of these two choices this way: when I'm at a professional gathering and want to meet someone, I don't ask someone to introduce me; I respectfully approach and introduce myself. Rarely am I shunned. Instead, the vast majority of the time, we have a rousing discussion. I walk away with a business card, and then, back in my office, invite that person to connect on LinkedIn. Through LinkedIn, this process is reversed, but the outcome remains the same—a robust network of professional colleagues. ■