



# Kevin Eyres: LinkedIn to a world of opportunity

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**Heading up a networking site doesn't leave much time for personal plans. Juliette Garside reports**

Kevin Eyres, European managing director of professional networking site LinkedIn, has been a little busy of late. Two weeks ago he exchanged wedding vows with Sigrid - German born, London based, and a fellow new media mover. Next week an internet start-up that he chairs will go head-to-head with Time Out by launching a location-based entertainment listing guide to London.

And to cap it all, LinkedIn has just completed a round of venture capital funding which saw it valued at \$1bn.

Bain Capital Ventures' decision to join LinkedIn's existing backers in a \$53m fundraising, in exchange for a 5pc stake, propelled the company, founded five years ago by former PayPal executive Reid Hoffman, into the ranks of most highly valued new media businesses.

Does Mr Eyres really think a company which broke even 18 months ago and which will make a grand total of \$100m in revenue by the end of the year is worth that much money?

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"Absolutely. Bain don't just dabble, they are expecting multiple returns. This is not an advertising deal as has been done in some other cases."

He is referring to the \$15bn valuation placed on Facebook, in which Microsoft last year invested \$240m in exchange for a nominal stake and the exclusive right to sell advertising on the site.



LinkedIn boss Kevin Eyres doesn't have much time for personal plans

advertisement Bain will make its money back when LinkedIn is sold or listed on the public markets. But this is some way off.

"Initial Public Offering is not something we are looking at in the near future. When Google came to market they had a long history of meeting projections. We want to do the same. We are building what we believe is going to be one of the big internet companies of the future."

A grand claim, when fellow networking sites Bebo and MySpace have given up their independence and been sucked into the bowels of media conglomerates.

Mr Eyres dismisses these comparisons. "You've started to get fatigue in social networks. There are only so many sheep you can throw at somebody."

While Facebook's poking, cuddling and sheep throwing applications may be eye-catching, the novelty wears off. By contrast, interaction on LinkedIn can actually be useful.

Professionals have used the site to ask for advice on anything from the best expatriate tax advisors to finding Asian distributors for spinal implants. Most knowledge is exchanged for free. "You can think of it as a favour bank," says Mr Eyres. More lucratively for LinkedIn, it has also become a hunting

ground for job seekers and recruiters. Half of its members are company directors or managers in charge of budgets.

All 500 of America's largest companies are represented. Bill Gates, Barack Obama, Sir Alan Sugar and Lastminute.com founder Brent Hoberman have all uploaded their CVs, as have 23m others, of which 6m are in Europe, and 1.5m are in the UK.

LinkedIn charges companies for postings on its jobs board, and for a premium lets them comb its member profiles and email approaches to suitable candidates.

For some headhunters, it has become a valuable tool. So much so, that a former employee of recruitment firm Hays who quit to start his own consultancy is being ordered by the High Court to hand over lists of business contacts built up on his LinkedIn page.

The site has traction. Its UK membership pales by comparison with Facebook's 9m users, but having taken four years to reach 10m members, it got to 20m in a year and will reach 30m in less than seven months.

A reliance on recruitment advertising as Western economies head into a downturn is not necessarily a healthy place to be. But Mr Eyres says he will seek other revenue streams, by finding ways to share its database with those who can pay to access it. Conference organizers, for example. "Just think what LinkedIn will be when we have 100m professionals," he muses.

A former 400m runner who won an athletics scholarship to his Texas university, Mr Eyres was wheelchair-bound for four months soon after starting his career as an engineer manager at Compaq Computer. He had ruptured both Achilles tendons.

"It's moments like that that give you real clarity about what you want to do in the future. Where do you put your drive and passion?"

He decided he wanted to work in business, and outside the US. The inspiration came from his father, a general manager for camping equipment maker Coleman, who moved the family to Australia when he was still at University. He became interested in different cultural approaches to doing business.

"In the US, if you try something and it doesn't work out, it means you are that much closer to success. We are starting to see that more here, and I think that is encouraging." LinkedIn, which has a UK team of eight, is the third business Mr Eyres has launched from scratch in London for an American new media company. The first was eight years ago, for search engine AltaVista, one of the casualties on Google's path to world domination. The second was holiday price comparison site SideStep, which like LinkedIn began its European existence in the spare room of his Marylebone home. Before that he had a brief flirtation with medicine, turning around a research centre for learning disabilities. But he found the public sector mindset of the doctors and nurses frustrating.

"In Silicon Valley if you have a great idea you can implement it tomorrow. It's very different working with people who are from the NHS."

David Yu, chief executive of the online betting exchange Betfair, was one of the people Mr Eyres brought to London to join AltaVista. They had also been colleagues in the US.

Mr Yu recalls his friend's ability to lead teams through punishing work schedules. "He brought his dog into the office, and he would go and get meals for people, whatever it took. He will roll up his sleeves and will do any job he asks anyone else to do. He led by example."

First in and last out of the office at 2am, Mr Eyres, who like his father holds a pilot's license, still

found time to join the West London Aero Club.

Any spare moments of the last fortnight, however, have been spent planning a well-earned honeymoon with Mrs Eyres.