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Networking's new weapon

Web sites make connecting with others for career advancement a snap

By NICK COLTRAIN
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Sites like **LinkedIn** and Facebook have proven invaluable to venture capitalist Wayne Kimmel.

They help Kimmel, of Philadelphia, keep up with his thousands of contacts and put businesses with mutual interests together. It also helps him fill vacant jobs at businesses his firm invests in.

"I certainly think that somebody who has a relationship or a connection will rise up on the pile of résumés," said Kimmel, a managing partner with ETF Venture Funds. "There's a level of comfort that I think comes from that kind of a relationship, that kind of connection."

And thus, the job hunter's arsenal grows.

More than 37 percent of professionals use online networks to job hunt, according to a recent Institute for Corporate Productivity survey. LinkedIn, a network for professionals, is the the **fastest growing** of the online networks, with 23 million accounts and 1 million more joining every month, according to company records.

The importance of networking has long been appreciated in career advancement. But with services such as LinkedIn, rolodexes and lunch meetings give way to online databases and question forums.

The essence of what LinkedIn offers is a sort of flow chart of personal connections.

A user connects with people they personally know. LinkedIn will then connect the user with others whom their connections know and people their connections' connections know. A dozen direct connections can become a network of 14,000.

Finding these **new connections and creating others is the true value of LinkedIn**, said Krista Canfield, public relations manager for the site. Keeping track of former colleagues can also help employees fill vacancies at their job.

"As everyone knows, some companies consider the best hires are the ones other employees know or trust," Canfield said.

While LinkedIn isn't a true job-hunting Web site, there are a number of ways users can draw attention to themselves, she said. **Intelligent questions and thoughtful answers in the forums, for instance, can make a user's name stand out,** Canfield said.

Canfield said her job at **LinkedIn** actually stemmed from a question she asked. Canfield said a former client, who knew people at LinkedIn, saw she was interested in the site and passed on her name.

For long-term planning, a user can pick her dream job and probably find someone in her network who

holds it, giving her a sort of career path template.

But Canfield and experts agree: Don't let this new tool in the job hunt replace the tried-and-true.

The search requires multiple approaches, said Margaret F. Dikel, co-author of "The Guide to Internet Job Searching." Her Web site, rileyguide.com, suggests **splitting time between online and traditional networking.**

She suggests printed journals and online job banks for leads and business directories and industry Web sites for research.

Don't let anything Web-based distract from the all-important face time, Dikel said. A high number of online contacts doesn't mean employers will recognize a name, she said.

"It seems to me that if you're going to spend all this time getting to know people, pick up the phone," Dikel said. "There is still so much more value to a face-to-face contact and even voice-to-voice contact. **A physical handshake is still really powerful.**"

Kimmel agrees that LinkedIn isn't a replacement for lunch meetings. "It's absolutely not a complete substitute for face-to-face meetings and getting to know people," he said

The true value of sites like LinkedIn likely won't be apparent for a few years, said Jay Jamrog, vice president for research at the Institute for Corporate Productivity, which did the survey on social networks and business.

"I don't think right now it's vital. It's a nice tool to have in your back pocket like all the other networking tools you have," he said. "I feel it's about two years away from really being a good business tool for recruiting or for looking for jobs."

Jamrog compared online networks to the Wild West -- highly unregulated but with **remarkable potential.** The networks out there now are open to everyone, but closed networks are where the real benefits will be.

He expects the future to see more closed networks, those open to only employees of a particular company or those in a particular industry.

Sites like ning.com already let users create intensely focused social networks.

Jill Gugino, a University of Delaware career counselor, thinks online networks will become crucial for job-hunters. "It's doing all that stuff you do in person and now you're doing it in the virtual world," Gugino said. "It's something we'll all have to get used to."

But, Gugino echoed the importance of real-world relationships. "Finding a job is not an event, it's a process. **It takes time and it takes energy and it takes building those relationships,**" she said.

"A student wouldn't go to a career fair or any other networking event and walk up to an employer and say 'Here's my résumé, can you get me a job?' " she said.

After all, no one weapon wins every battle, no matter how new it is. 