

Site makes small world of corporate galaxy



MINING 'NET WORKS

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Anyone in business has probably received it: the e-mailed invite from a colleague to join his or her connection at LinkedIn, the business Internet networking site.

Being the nice person you are, you probably responded in the affirmative and became, well, LinkedIn.

Then came more e-mails informing you that so-and-so has joined so-and-so and would you like to join them?

Where is this going and when does it end?

That's a question Moody Chisholm, chief executive officer of Manatee Memorial Hospital, mulled a time or two after an acquaintance asked him to join the online networking exchange for businesspeople about a year ago.

"Honestly, I don't use it for anything," Chisholm said. "I actually added a little bit more information later because every time someone sends me a message it pesters you about adding more information about yourself."

Statistics show the business networking site at www.Linkedin.com is growing explosively and many business people find it useful in building contacts, making helpful connections and sharing information.

As travel budgets get tighter and connectivity through the Internet and portable devices improves, more business people are looking to networks like LinkedIn to find solutions to their challenges or move ahead in their careers.

Nielsen, the TV ratings company, reported in April that LinkedIn was far ahead of the pack among social networking sites in terms of the number of monthly unique visitors. LinkedIn had 1.9 million unique visitors in April of 2007, compared to 8.7 million this April - a 361 percent increase, according to Nielsen.

LinkedIn officials say the company has 23 million members and gains 1.2 million new members each month.

LinkedIn invites people to create a profile of themselves, much in the way similar social networking sites like MySpace and FaceBook do. But rather than posting favorite movies or what's on their iPods, however, most LinkedIn members are likely to list places they have worked, degrees held and universities attended, associations they belong to and any awards and honors they have received.

In fact, frivolity is somewhat discouraged.

"We try to **keep it business and professionally related**," said Krista Canfield, a LinkedIn spokeswoman. "We're very strict that we want this to be a place where people can do business and be a work-type environment rather than just a fun environment."

Canfield acknowledges that many users of the site don't realize its full potential.

One of the best features of LinkedIn is the ability to pose questions to multiple users at a time, she said.

LinkedIn boasts a 93 percent response rate to questions and people typically see responses within eight or nine hours, Canfield said.

"I've seen people ask, 'Is it better to get a Mac or a PC?' " Canfield said. "To be able to get a response to that question within a few hours is pretty powerful."

The average LinkedIn user is 41 years old and has an average household income of just over \$110,000, Canfield said.

User profiles list a person's industry. That means a person working for newspapers, for instance, can search for people in that industry to connect with.

Florida has more than 585,000 LinkedIn users from companies like Walt Disney, Motorola, Citigroup and IBM, Canfield said.

In addition to networking, some also use LinkedIn as a job-search tool. Chisholm, of Manatee Memorial, said he was contacted through the service by an applicant for an information systems job.

The basic services of LinkedIn are free. Business and Business Plus upgrades (\$19.95 and \$50 per month, respectively) give users a wider scope of contacts, priority customer service and other perks.

Bryan St. Laurent, a local man who works in sales for a Utah-based Internet job interviewing service called HireVue, is a LinkedIn believer.

"Successful people have more connections," said St. Laurent who was Chisholm's first connection. "LinkedIn provides that platform. Right now I've got probably about 1,000 direct connections through LinkedIn. They're all over the world, from Australia to Singapore and everywhere in between."

When he was recently in Chicago, St. Laurent met a man who had human resources-related questions about expanding a business in the Middle East.

St. Laurent offered to pose the man's questions online to one of the roughly 200 direct connections in the Middle East he had formed through LinkedIn.

"He's now gotten over 25 direct responses from people on the ground in Saudi Arabia with names, and contacts, pointers and do's and don'ts, all for free," St. Laurent said. "It allows people to build connections and build relationships in their areas of specialty."

Pedro Perez, owner of Nuevo Advertising Group in Sarasota, has also found benefit from using the site.

"I feel it's a great resource to network," Perez said. "With the cost of fuel and living going up, it's a great way to still do some business and save some cash."

But Perez said a person has to work at developing his or her connections on LinkedIn. It doesn't happen automatically.

"The secret is getting to a point where your network can start to work for you," Perez said. "Adding connections and interacting with your network also helps. Posting questions, adding to your Q&A, answering others' questions. Basically work your network."

