

From Mouse Click to Handshake: Tips for Alumni on Effectively Using LinkedIn in the Job Search

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Most of us have been in discussions where alumni have asked us why and how they should use LinkedIn in their job searches. For many alumni, LinkedIn represents an uncomfortable plunge into the social media world which they find novel, challenging, and sometimes downright scary. Others may simply lack information about the site's purpose, value, or function and therefore not take that first step. No matter the issues, the following information is designed to help you, the advisor, in discussing effective LinkedIn usage with alumni.

Why Use LinkedIn?

Explaining to someone why a particular tool should be used requires an explanation not only of the tool's generic value but also of its value to that particular individual. In this case, lawyers should know that there are three ways that LinkedIn can provide them with value — all depending on the current stage of their career.

First, if your alum is seeking a position, LinkedIn is a tool that will allow her to create, build, and maintain a network of people who can assist as she researches practice areas and employment settings that may be of interest, determines the direction of her career, and begins looking for her next opportunity. Because LinkedIn is the social media site that professionals, especially those in the legal sphere, are using most, it is important to note that your alum will not be found by those legal employers and recruiters who are using LinkedIn as they network, source, recruit, and hire new employees if she is not on the site!

Second, for an alum who is seeking to build his professional network to share ideas and learn more about his current field, LinkedIn facilitates connections with others who have the same professional interests or are serving the same sorts of clients.

Third, LinkedIn can help an individual connect with potential clients and thus provide endless business development opportunities for an alum who is at that stage in her career.

What Should I Include in My Profile?

When advising alumni on creating their LinkedIn profiles, emphasize that the profile should include the information that they would want a potential networking contact or employer to know about them as a professional. It should include a summary of the alum's current position or hopes for his or her next opportunity, relevant experiences, degrees, bar admissions, continuing legal education, and publications. However, the profile does not need to be a rehash of the alum's résumé — it should include only the most important information and be easily digestible.

Should I Include a Picture on My Profile?

Advise alumni who are new to LinkedIn that it is imperative to have a photograph as part of their profile. The best reason to include a photograph is that it can be a huge help as networking moves from online to in-person. When meeting someone for the first time — especially in a public place such as a café or restaurant — it will be extremely

helpful for your alums and their LinkedIn contacts to be able to recognize each other! It is also important to note that, whether because of a perceived lack of personality or of interest in maintaining the LinkedIn profile, profiles without photographs are often overlooked by recruiters or potential contacts. You can also remind alumni that the photographs they choose should depict them as professionals; for example, a head shot in a suit in front of a plain background works well.

Can I Use LinkedIn to Search for a Job or Is It Just for Networking?

LinkedIn can be used for both purposes simultaneously. Networking and job searching go hand-in-hand: if an alum is seeking a new position, talking to individuals in the field will allow her to find out about unadvertised openings in the “hidden job market,” and building and maintaining her network while she is employed can help the alum gain impressive references or recommendations when it is time to move on to her next position. Thus, connecting with others through LinkedIn can simply increase the alum’s contacts and presence in a professional setting; or allow her to be contacted directly about a current position that is being publicized, or sourced, through LinkedIn.

Conducting informational interviews is the gold standard to help alumni learn about practice areas of interest; gain insights about working at a particular firm or organization; or hear about the best way to get a foot in the door in a particular market. Reaching out to contacts through LinkedIn is a perfect way to do all of this — and it’s simple.

How Do I Find New Contacts Using LinkedIn?

The best way to find people on LinkedIn is to use the advanced search feature and complete the relevant fields. For example, if an alum wants to practice national security law and is interested in meeting someone who works for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in Dallas, he can enter “U.S. Department of Homeland Security” in the

Company field (and change the drop-down menu to “current”) and enter 75201 (for Dallas) in the Postal Code field. After clicking the Search button, the results will show those LinkedIn members who meet this criteria and how they are connected to the alum. Individuals are often surprised to find that a 1st degree connection (someone your alum already knows and with whom he has already connected on the site) has a job or practices in an area that meets the alum’s search criteria. In this case just encourage your alum to reconnect with that person. The next best scenario is that one or more of the profiles in the search results are of individuals who are a 2nd connection — i.e., someone with whom the alum has a common connection. In this case, your alum can simply reach out to the common connection and ask to be introduced! Both scenarios provide a great way for your alum to take the information he finds on LinkedIn and use it to network with someone offline.

Should I Participate in the Group Discussions?

Yes, it is advisable to take an active role on LinkedIn. This is another tool that alumni can use to expand their online and offline networks and show off their knowledge, skill, and experience in their areas of professional expertise. Encourage your alumni to submit answers or pose questions within a group, join discussions, and participate by commenting on industry-related links and articles. Nothing will come from being a “lurker,” so alumni should take the initiative and make contact with others using a group as the backdrop. LinkedIn connections are beneficial in all stages of a career so engaging and making one’s presence known can only help alumni both now and down the road.

Which Groups Should I Join?

Ask your alum to think of LinkedIn in terms of the types of groups or communities to which he belongs in “real” life. Being an active member of alumni groups (undergraduate, graduate, law school, and even high school), professional organizations (bar associations, advocacy groups), or

other groups on topics about which he is passionate (volunteering with the elderly, working for a better environment) are all good places to start. When making the decision about which groups to join, have your alum think in terms of strategy (who else is a member of this group?) and quality (is the substance of this group likely to be helpful to me?) over quantity.

Are There Pitfalls I Need to Be Aware of?

LinkedIn is a tool to utilize in networking, the job search, and communicating with other professionals about the legal world of work. Being professional means paying attention to the profile picture you choose, what information you share, and what information you omit — in other words, it is imperative that you remind your alum to manage her “digital dirt.” Nothing should be put out there that your alum does not want to be seen by the public, including by prospective employers! Being active on LinkedIn, as mentioned above, can also be valuable in terms of learning about others’ career

paths, finding interesting employers, making new contacts, and finding potential clients. Being purposeful means that your alum should perform strategic searches, reach out to contacts who can add value — and to whom she can also be helpful — and ensure that she knows when to take the conversation offline.

For further reference, see the E-Guides on E-Professionalism available at www.nalp.org/eguides.

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