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23. EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Exploring the Potential of LinkedIn

LinkedIn is known universally as a platform for professional self-promotion, and has become a ubiquitous player in graduate job recruitment. It can also be a valuable tool in 21st century career development learning more broadly, including for research into industry opportunities, structures and norms, professional network development, and informal learning. It can also be a powerful ingredient in career identity development as part of an integrated suite of practice-based approaches. This chapter explores some of the opportunities for, and uses of, LinkedIn as a platform for specific elements of students' career development and employability learning, and professional network development. It also discusses pitfalls and contested issues in the use of LinkedIn, and social media more generally, in preparing higher education learners for work. The chapter provides brief practical examples of learning activities that can be integrated into curricula at foundational, broadening and deepening, and advanced/capstone undergraduate levels.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND LIFE/WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY

With developments in smartphone technology, social media has become a part of everyday life for millions. Social media's original remit related to personal interests, communication and personal relationships, but is now also central to marketing activities, recruitment and work generation/acquisition (Manroop, 2014). Social media has transformed the ways in which employers, workers, job seekers, and recruiters interact with one another. Adler (2016) surveyed 3,000 workers, and found that 85% of them had obtained their most recent roles using social networks. University aged students (aged 18–24) make up the largest segment of social media users, but a significant body of literature discusses that this does not mean that students in this age group are necessarily highly digitally literate, advanced social media users, or use social media for professional purposes. Even the original proposer of the "digital native" idea now argues that it is not true that those born after 1980 have advanced digital skills (Prensky, 2011).

While many universities are now embedding employability skills and career development learning into programs (Bridgstock, 2009; Jackson & Wilton, 2016), there is a need for specific social media learning applied to professional and career development (Bridgstock, 2018; Benson, Morgan, & Filippaios, 2014).

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LINKEDIN: SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT & EMPLOYABILITY

LinkedIn was created in 2003, and is now the largest professionally-oriented social networking site, with more than 400 million members in 200 countries as of 2015 (LinkedIn, 2015). Like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, LinkedIn members can create a personal profile for themselves and link with others. However, profiles emphasise education and career history, and professional affiliations. Members can connect with other LinkedIn members, thus accessing broader networks through the networks of connections. They can communicate directly with these connections. They can also join interest and affiliation groups (corporate, conference, networking, industry, professional, alumni and so on), and establish new groups. LinkedIn also enables members to search for employment opportunities, research companies and industries, provide curriculum vitae information, and give and receive recommendations (Buck, 2012). LinkedIn offers members access to a wide variety of articles by business professionals and other members on diverse topics, but focusing particularly on professional development or on career insights and advice.

Nearly all job recruiters use LinkedIn to talent scout, research and screen potential candidates (Acikgoz & Bergman, 2016). One of the most recent developments in recruitment that will become increasingly influential is talent analytics, which employs big data-based algorithmic approaches to identify suitable candidates on the basis of their published attributes and capabilities, experiences and social networks (Winsborough & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2016).

UNIVERSITY LEARNERS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND LINKEDIN

There is an assumption that because learners in traditional university age groups use social media in their personal lives, that they will also do so in their professional lives, and that they will be highly adroit at doing so. My survey research with 3rd year undergraduates across two Australian universities (Bridgstock, 2016) revealed that while 82% used Facebook every day, only 12% used LinkedIn regularly. Despite understanding in theory that networking was important to job acquisition, more than eight in ten university graduates surveyed only applied for jobs using direct application methods (e.g. responding to advertisements on SEEK). My research joins that of many others pointing out that a small minority – only 39 million of the more than 400 million members of LinkedIn are students (LinkedIn, 2015), and that social media for professional and career development represents a significant opportunity in university students' career and employability development. Informal use of social media by students does not transfer to confidence or awareness in its applications for work and career (Benson et al., 2014; Pozzi, 2015).

Several studies have investigated why students do not join or use LinkedIn. Non-users of LinkedIn tend to not see the benefit of joining the network and do not know how to use the site, or find it confusing (Colbeck, 2015). Dominant in these studies is the finding that students lack skills in using social media for professional purposes. The skills deficit may actually be double-pronged: Benson and Morgan (2016) suggest that skills associated with online professionalism and skills for technical proficiency are both lacking in many undergraduate students. Skills for online

professionalism include career management, ethics and information security, digital branding, networking and communication online.

Manroop et al. (2013) found that under-use of LinkedIn for career development can be linked with a “passive and laid back” approach that comprises creation of a profile and then hoping that others (such as employers and recruiters) will seek them out. McCabe (2017) noted that active participation is a key determinant of success on LinkedIn, including making contact with those with similar interests, active networking and information sharing.

Many students who are infrequent or non-users of LinkedIn lack awareness of the features and functions of LinkedIn that can benefit their careers. Manroop et al. (2013) interviewed young job seekers, many of whom were completely unaware of the job search features of social media, and some of whom were surprised to learn that social media can be useful for building networks and research. Johnson (2017) further reported that non-members can be surprised to discover that recruiters use social media to review potential candidates. Neier and Zayer (2015) surveyed undergraduate students and found that while many recognised LinkedIn as a tool for building industry connections, most did not perceive it as a medium to gain exposure to others’ ideas and opinions, or to facilitate expression of one’s self and ideas.

Another key reason cited for non-engagement or under-engagement of students with LinkedIn is a perception that profile creation is a post-graduation activity, and that students may not have enough work experience to start the process; or even that doing so might damage their careers (Slone & Gaffney, 2016). This finding resonates with other literature suggesting that without scaffolded support, students can leave career development activities until the final semester of study, or even after graduation, disadvantaging their careers and weakening their graduate outcomes. Wetsch (2012) and Bridgstock (2009, 2018) argue strongly for students to commence building a professional network before graduating, since the development of a professional online presence and network takes time.

Finally, some students perceive that LinkedIn is not safe, and can be concerned about privacy and sharing information about themselves online. While LinkedIn activity tends to be professionally focused and it may therefore be less of a privacy risk than for other social media sites (Zide et al., 2014), these concerns may still be warranted: social media is associated with a range of privacy and safety issues.

UNIVERSITY TEACHING OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

As social media becomes central to career development, several scholars now argue that professional social media use should be considered a core twenty-first century capability (Bridgstock, 2018; Benson et al., 2014). While universities are embracing social media to share news and experiment with pedagogy (Erskine et al., 2014; Jenkins et al., 2012), few universities teach social media skills.

Wherever social media is taught, it is often within a specific disciplinary area such as media studies (Kim & Freberg, 2017), where it is examined as a social and technological phenomenon rather than as a set of professional skills. Social media

skill development is also taught practically in the context of social media marketing and public relations (e.g. future social media marketers engage in campaign development), and also incidentally if social media-based pedagogic strategies are employed for students to learn disciplinary content (Manca & Raineri, 2016). Social media pedagogy is a growing area of research and practice in higher education, but much less frequently extends to authentic professional activities and career development learning using social media such as LinkedIn (Pozzi, 2015). There are a number of reasons for this: The first is that much of the employability-focused curriculum still emphasises the disciplinary and transferable knowledge and skills required for performance “on the job”, rather than career development learning. However, this emphasis is changing, with many universities now including career skills in their curricula as well as disciplinary and professional content. The second reason may be related to the fact that some educators lack digital and/or social media skills themselves, or through want of recent experience of industry workplaces may be not as familiar with current practices and role requirements.

Perhaps the most commonly cited reasons teachers give for non-inclusion of social media learning in curricula mirror the concerns of students about risks of privacy, safety, and data ownership. The management of these social media risks can be complicated by university social media policies, which may be restrictive, are often complex and multi-faceted, and are subject to change (Pasquini & Evangelopoulos, 2017). Teachers also express concerns about a lack of university technical support for their use of social media in teaching, increased academic workloads, needing to separate their own personal and professional online identities, and lack of integration of social media with learning management systems (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). These concerns are valid, and for many represent significant barriers to including social media in their educational practices. However, I join many other commentators in suggesting that the affordances of social media-based learning, and the dominant role that LinkedIn plays for career development in many fields, means that we must find ways to surmount these challenges if we are to provide an effective and up-to-date university learning experience.

LEARNING CAREER AND EMPLOYABILITY CAPABILITIES USING LINKEDIN

So far, this chapter has presented arguments for students to learn to engage with and use LinkedIn for career development and employability learning purposes, along with risks and concerns that must be considered when developing and delivering social media-based learning experiences. It now turns to the career development and employability capabilities that can be fostered through LinkedIn. These capabilities are divided into two categories (refer to Table 23.1): (i) connectedness capabilities focused on the characteristics and affordances of social media and social networks for work and career (Bridgstock & Tippett, 2018), and (ii) career development and employability learning not specific to social media and social networks, but that lends itself to development via the LinkedIn platform, at least in part.

Table 23.1. Categories of learning for career and employability using LinkedIn

Connectedness capabilities – making the most of social networks for career development	
Social network literacy	the ability to reflect upon and articulate (i) the roles that social networks play in professional life, and (ii) how professional social networks operate; the ability to navigate social networks strategically and effectively
Building a connected identity	the ability to represent professional identities effectively in the context of social networks, including social media profiles and personal/professional “branding”
Making connections	the ability to extend and expand professional networks and develop weak ties, including networking
Strengthening and maintaining connections	the ability to strengthen professional connections and develop strong ties, and then maintain these as needed
Working with connections	the ability to work effectively with collaborators in professional contexts and for professional applications, and make use of professional connections for knowledge creation, problem solving, professional learning and career development
Broader career and employability learning through LinkedIn	
Career self-management	the ability to navigate one’s career; to define and realise one’s personal career objectives based in an adaptive career identity, knowledge of self and the world of work
Professional communication	the ability to share or convey ideas or information accurately, clearly and as intended in professional contexts
Digital literacies	the ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate, use and create information
Digital citizenship	the ability to use digital technology safely, responsibly and professionally, based in knowledge of digital privacy, safety, netiquette, legal issues and health

The connectedness capabilities presented in Table 23.1 are under-represented in higher education curricula. LinkedIn supports the development of social network literacies and professional branding, and provides stellar opportunities to make connections and weak ties, although strengthening connections and getting to know people well professionally is still primarily the purview of face-to-face interaction.

LinkedIn can also become a site for career identity development and career self-management. Career identity can be thought of as a ‘cognitive compass’, guiding career-related behaviour. It is continually constructed through behaviour, experiences, and social interaction. As the expression of skills and career experiences is revised and augmented, and the profile title and headline is adjusted, the student is continually revising their career identity by linking with others with similar professional interests, engaging in active research, and interacting with individuals and organisations. Careers educators who use LinkedIn as a career development learning tool often suggest that students develop a title and “I am” statement that links multiple sometimes disparate education and career experiences with an overarching statement about career purpose and activity. Such strategies can make for a more intelligible profile, and mean that the student may have to update

these profile elements less often; it can also provoke deeper thinking about career identity than typically occurs in the early stages of career.

It is mostly through exposure and experience that members learn how to use LinkedIn strategically for career development. For instance, the combination of LinkedIn with a range of other professionally relevant social media, can help with “Social Klout” and help ensure that students appear in recruitment searches. The choice of social media platforms is industry-specific. For instance, in journalism, professionals will often combine LinkedIn with twitter, and a blog to maximise Klout. Advanced users will also personalise their LinkedIn profiles to reflect their personal “brand”, including videos, documents, images and recommendations from others that help to position individual skills and experience (McCabe, 2017).

Other employability skills beyond career development learning that are developed by LinkedIn activity include professional communication and interpersonal skills, intercultural skills, digital literacies, creative capabilities, and privacy and copyright knowledge (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012). Bridgstock (2018) discusses the wider role of social network capability for the 21st century professional. It provides the basis for knowledge creation, and a significant proportion of informal professional learning in knowledge intensive fields. Much of the power of social networks in the 21st century is in weak and indirect ties, crowdsourcing and knowledge networks.

TEACHING APPROACHES AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

This section details suggested learning activities using LinkedIn, grouped by undergraduate degree phase (foundational, broadening and deepening and advanced – capstone). The corresponding career development learning and employability emphases are also described. Ideally, the learning activities should be embedded into a whole-of-program approach, involving increasingly advanced LinkedIn-based activities embedded into a broader employability-orientated curriculum.

Foundational Phase: Exploring Possibilities

Learning emphasis: career development learning; privacy, security, legal issues, health; communication; digital literacy; social network literacy; building a connected identity (foundational) In the foundational phases of undergraduate programs, learners may benefit from exploration and investigation of potential career opportunities online, including roles and industry sectors of interest. The outcomes of this exploration can be reflected upon given the learner’s values, capabilities, and interests, and provisional decisions made about careers and plans for study.

Prior to and also embedded into this exploration should be activities that help ensure that learners will contribute online in ways that are safe, responsible and informed. Pozzi (2016, p. 6) summarises these elements for learners as “protect yourself” (using social media with an understanding of the roles of privacy, security and the law in mind), and “look after yourself” (understanding that the use of social media can affect one’s health, and managing this).

As part of a wider research project into career options that may involve interviews with industry practitioners, desk research, and brief direct experience of work places and work, learners are tasked with researching the online presences of industry-relevant groups, organisations, and professionals in their field/s of interest, and sharing their findings with their classmates. They may explore recent organisational and individual activities, jobs posted, and the profiles of professionals in order to identify industry opportunities and trends, required skills and capabilities, and become familiar with professional behavioural norms online. In order to access some of the content required to complete this activity, they will be required to create their own LinkedIn profiles. The profile creation task can initially be undertaken as a guided classroom activity using a basic “how to develop your LinkedIn profile” guide and existing learner resumes as the basis (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012). The profile can then be updated progressively as learners develop more advanced knowledge of profile design for their role/s and field/s of interest (Zide et al., 2014). As part of the profile creation exercise, learners should also connect with one another, the program page if applicable, and the institutional alumni page.

The foundational phase is also an excellent opportunity to develop learners’ social network literacies, by using LinkedIn and other social media such as twitter or Facebook to demonstrate social network phenomena and principles that are useful for professional networking online, such as context collapse, strong, weak and indirect ties, network size and quality, and network complexity and diffusion. Sacks and Graves (2012) presented several useful learning activities for foundational social network literacy development, including an exercise that demonstrates the power of social media by asking learners to use social media to map how many degrees of separation they are from a list of influential people, and another that uses analogue methods to map learners’ in-class networks to explore the strengths and weaknesses of different network strategies. These foundational social network literacies are useful in the broadening and deepening phase, where learners use these social network concepts to strategise their own professional network development.

Broadening and Deepening Phase: Connecting with Others

Learning emphasis: Building a connected identity (intermediate), making connections, strengthening connections In the broadening and deepening phase, learners focus on honing their LinkedIn profiles (connected identity), and developing and adding value to their professional networks. An exercise that asks learners to become recruiters shortlisting candidates’ LinkedIn profiles for a hypothetical job role may be useful in discovering the ingredients of a highly effective profile (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012). In this exercise, groups of learners are given 40 LinkedIn profiles and a recent job advertisement. They take approximately 30 minutes to shortlist five candidates for the role. The class then discuss the shortlisting process and outcomes, including articulating the key characteristics of LinkedIn profiles that reflect positively or negatively on the applicant. These characteristics are then embedded into the learners’ profiles in the next activity.

A second intermediate activity that draws upon the social network literacy learning from the foundational phase asks learners to draw their existing social networks, and then with their post-university “dream job role” in mind to describe and map how their associated dream professional network would look (Sacks & Graves, 2012). Learners create a plan to move their current network towards their ideal network, including social network characteristics such as complexity, size and quality, and also specific individuals and organisations with whom they wish to connect. Plans include the extent, and ways in which the learners plan to use LinkedIn, twitter, and other social media tools such as blogging to meet their networking aims, as well as analogue (face to face) approaches.

Once learners have reasonably well-developed LinkedIn profiles and an idea of what they would like their professional networks to look like, they can engage in online and face-to-face networking. For learners who will be engaging in work integrated learning at capstone level, the networking may be conducted with these opportunities in mind. In this learning activity, learners join LinkedIn groups and connect with organisations and professionals in their chosen career fields. The safety, privacy and legal principles for social media covered in the foundational phase can be revisited at this point, and then extended to ensure that learners are prepared to remain professional when networking. The activity is not just about making professional connections with others; it is also about strengthening connections online and offline through adding value via status updates, sharing content, writing brief articles and contributing to group discussions by asking and responding to questions.

Advanced Phase: Preparing for Launch

Learning emphasis: Building a connected identity (advanced), making connections, strengthening and maintaining connections, working with connections In the advanced phase learners revise their profiles again, with a view to the next phase of their journeys (in many instances this will be post-graduation initial job search, but not always). By this stage, periodic and ongoing revision and updating of social media profiles should be accepted as normal. An effective learning activity for advanced learners is a SWOT analysis (Johnson, 2017). Thinking of their next career steps and with professional differentiation in mind, learners reflect upon their current professional strengths and weaknesses in terms of skills and capabilities, the market demand/trends for their preferred job roles and industries, and their major external threats (including competitors). They provide specific evidence for their answers, including examples / experiences from work and learning experiences, and industry trend research from relevant and reliable sources. The learners can then use their SWOT analysis summarise their most outstanding accomplishments, and add this to the summary section of their LinkedIn profile (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012).

Using their knowledge of successful social media strategies undertaken by others in their professional field/s, learners can also create their own portfolio of social media profiles in addition to LinkedIn. Each platform can add in different ways to the learner’s professional narrative (Johnson, 2017). For instance, professionals with

a visual communication-related role may benefit from using Instagram, Pinterest or YouTube. Learners who use platforms beyond LinkedIn should learn the principles and practices of social media reputation management. Sites such as BrandYourself and AboutMe can be useful in increasing search engine rankings for professional social media profiles, and can be used for tracking and analytics.

CONCLUSION

Learning to use social media for professional purposes is an ongoing process that requires a commitment to continual exploration, connection with others, and revision of identity and brand. It is also here to stay. LinkedIn is now a key means by which people acquire work, and connect with others for professional learning and career development. LinkedIn can also be a useful platform for career development and employability learning more broadly. Thus, it should be included in higher education programs, and the recognised concerns and pitfalls around its use should be considered and addressed. Many of these can be ameliorated through explicit learning of digital literacies and digital citizenship not only by learners and teachers, but also by educational leadership and policy-makers.

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