

How to Network Professionally Online

You've heard it a million times (so it wouldn't hurt to hear it again): "Success is not just about what you know; it's about who you know." With LinkedIn, the world's largest professional online network, the "who" is at your fingertips. Follow these easy steps to get connected now—and to turn those connections into opportunities.

1. 100% complete = 100% more likely to get noticed

You can't build connections if people don't know you exist or see what you have to offer. Your LinkedIn profile is your online business card, your resume, and your letters of rec all in one. Don't be shy: users with complete profiles are 40 times more likely to receive opportunities through LinkedIn.

2. You're more experienced than you think

Complete profiles are so important because the more information you provide, the more people will find reasons to connect with you. Think really broadly about all the experience you have, including summer jobs, unpaid internships, volunteer work, and student organizations. You never know what might catch someone's eye.

3. Use your inbox

Contrary to popular belief, networking doesn't mean reaching out to strangers. The best networks begin with those you know and trust, and then grow based on personal referrals. Start building your LinkedIn network by uploading your online address book and connecting to friends, relatives, internship colleagues, and professionals you know in the "real world."

4. Get personal

As you build your connections on LinkedIn, always customize your connection requests with a friendly note and, if necessary, a reminder of where you met or what organization you have in common. If you're being referred by a mutual friend, write a brief intro of who you are and why you'd like to connect. You'll impress people with your personal touch.

5. Join the "in" crowd

Another way to form new online relationships is to join LinkedIn Groups. Start with your university group—alums love to connect with students—and then find volunteer organizations or professional associations you already belong to. As a member, you can comment on discussions, find exclusive job listings, and meet people who share common interests.

6. Lend a (virtual) hand

As you build connections and group memberships, think about what you can do to support other people. Comment on a classmate's status update, forward a job listing that fits the criteria of a friend, or write a recommendation for a summer job colleague. You'll find that your generosity is always rewarded (and, of course, it feels really good to help someone!).

7. Update your status #early and #often

Networking is not just about who you know; it's about who knows you. Stay on other people's radar screens by updating your LinkedIn status at least once a week—you can do this directly on LinkedIn or by linking your Twitter account and marking tweets with #in. Mention events you're attending, projects you've completed, and other professional news.

8. Question (and answer) everything

LinkedIn's Answers feature is a great place to seek advice from a wide variety of people all around the world. You can also show the world what you have to offer by answering people's questions about a topic where you have some expertise. The more active you are in Answers, the more people will view your profile and want to connect with you.

9. Do your homework

Before an informational interview, a job interview, or a networking get-together, use LinkedIn to learn about the background and interests of the people you're scheduled to meet. Access Company Pages to research organizations and their employees, and use Advanced Search to find things you have in common with people you're meeting.

10. Now step away from the computer...

There's a perception that young people are only comfortable communicating online, so be sure to support your online networking with real human contact. Set up phone calls, attend live events, and send snail mail notes to people you interact with on LinkedIn. Remember that online methods should supplement, not replace, in-person relationship-building.
