The use of LinkedIn to find a job and how to train graduates in effective LinkedIn usage

The introduction of Social Network Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook or LinkedIn have attracted millions of users who have integrated SNSs into their daily practices (Rienties, Tempelaar, Pinckaers, Giesbers, & Lichel, 2010). The majority of SNSs primarily serve social purposes or tasks and aim to connect with friends, relatives and acquaintances. Professional SNSs such as LinkedIn are primarily used for business purposes and aim to: 1) connect experts; 2) share information about, and collaborate on, business cases and work fields; and 3) exchange job and function related information. This case study examines how Maastricht University, the youngest university in the Netherlands, is actively helping students to develop a strong online identity and employability record by providing a Social Media and LinkedIn workshop by We4People. As Maastricht University has to compete with more established universities, specific efforts are made to enhance employability of its graduates.
LinkedIn is the largest professional SNSs currently available. Fountain (2005) argues that the use of personal contacts in an online setting could be useful to obtain information about a job opening. Students and professionals actively construct public profiles in SNSs in order to increase their attractiveness and visibility for organizations; this then becomes a part of their job search strategy. Most profile information on LinkedIn forms in essence online Curriculum Vitae that can be shared with network relations, enabling users to add communities of practice to their profile to reflect their interests and expertise. Evidence shows that most students and graduates are unaware of how companies search for the online identity and networks of applicants.

Fountain (2005, p. 1255) argued that “new communication technology might be helping people to find jobs ... because it facilitates the personal communication between friends and acquaintances that often provide information about jobs”. That is, LinkedIn can be used for several informal job search strategies, which includes the use of personal contacts, such as relatives, friends and co-workers who act as referrals and provide inside information on job openings. The job searcher typically meets these personal contacts in a context unrelated to the search for information about job openings. This informal strategy saves on search costs compared to making use of formal channels such as browsing through vacancies in various newspapers, in this way contributing to job-finding. The strength of a social relationship or tie affects job searchers by the amount and quality of information about job openings available to them. Job searchers that use weak social ties, such as acquaintances or former colleagues, rather than strong social ties, such as close friends and family, are more effective in gathering and getting access to information on available jobs. Weak ties together with the interaction of a wide range of users in LinkedIn might provide additional information and opportunities related to jobs. Moreover, LinkedIn can provide
bridges for job searchers to valuable embedded resources and to distant parts of their social networks containing unique and valuable job information. During Maastricht's Social Media and LinkedIn Workshop the focus is on raising awareness of how to actively create and sustain an online portfolio that maximizes the potential of the graduate's network.

Our research (Rienties, et al., 2010) highlights that professionals use LinkedIn in completely different ways than do students. It was discovered that fifty percent of students were members of LinkedIn, while eighty-five percent of professionals were member of LinkedIn. On average, LinkedIn members have 104 contacts in their account with on average around twenty seven close contacts. Professionals who have more contacts and weak ties in LinkedIn can provide relevant new information than students. Thus, this indicates that professionals on the one hand have a broader network but on the other hand; this signals that professionals are actively maintaining and cherishing their professional network. Probably due to the fact that one-third of LinkedIn professionals receive job information via LinkedIn, professionals find it worthwhile to invest in their online presence. Furthermore, most professionals receive information about job openings by two or more SNS contacts on a monthly basis. In other words, professionals are actively using LinkedIn and their network to share relevant job information with their connections. Our research highlighted the fact that having a lot of LinkedIn links (i.e. contacts) in addition of having sufficient weak links with powerful connections increases the chance that LinkedIn users receive relevant job information (Rienties, et al., 2010). Therefore, in the Social Media and LinkedIn workshop students are given ample best-practices of professionals who actively and creatively are using their LinkedIn profile to enhance the visibility of their skills, expertise and network. By raising awareness and encouraging students and graduates to actively maintain their online
presence and create powerful networks, Maastricht University is actively enhancing employability of its students.

References


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