

If your friends haven't urged you to join Facebook or Twitter in the past few months, don't worry. Someone will bring it up soon. People have been joining in droves, and someone is sure to ask you to come on board as well. But is it worth your time? Can Facebook, or any large social network for that matter, have any meaningful impact on your career?

Social networks and online communities are growing so quickly that it makes sense to consider perfecting your Web skills and looking at them to facilitate your own career networking, there are smart strategies you can use.

LinkedIn (220 million users and growing)

There are fewer people on LinkedIn than other social networks, but they're the right people. This well-crafted site is designed solely to help you make professional connections. LinkedIn's search tools help find people like you, people who might need you, people you might need, and people who share your skills. All this is free, and it's worth an hour of your time to get familiar with its look and feel.

Facebook (1 billion users)

The social networking darling of 2007, Facebook's popularity exploded when it opened membership to everyone, not just the college students who gave it its start. In May 2008, the site unlocked its application environment for outside developers, who responded by creating more than 9 million apps (so far) to make it more fun and useful. Now millions of people are joining each month.

Most likely you'll find Facebook is an engaging, if not terribly useful, place to visit. The running feed on your main page tells you what everyone you know is up to, and you can report on your own activities - telling everyone, for example, that you're finishing an assignment, or looking for a new job, or learning a new skill. That could prove helpful if you're trying to make your career intentions known.

Filtering out all the fun chatter and using the power of the platform to assist your career development could make Facebook an important professional tool. For now, cave in to the peer pressure and establish a Facebook identity. Even if it doesn't become a big part of your day, it's vital to understand what it's all about and why so many people are gravitating toward it.

And if you have an entrepreneurial streak, consider developing your own Facebook mini-app, posting it at the site, and incorporating some Google ads into it. Maybe you'll make a few bucks.

Roll Your Own Social Network

Another way to use social networking to your professional advantage is to create your own mini-network and populate it with people with whom you've enjoyed success in the past. Ning, a build-your-own social network service originally co-founded by Netscape founder Marc Andreessen, gives you the tools to set up your own little LinkedIn or Facebook. Just follow the template and consider creating a club for former employees of the company you used to work at. People usually enjoy reconnecting with old acquaintances, and you can update each other on where you are and what you're doing. As friends invite other friends, you may discover you've reconnected with dozens of potentially valuable contacts you thought were lost forever.

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Make a Social Network Work for You

Think Before You Post!

With any professional and social network it is critical to think before posting anything. The stories are increasingly common of prospective employers doing a search, which turns up unflattering information about a potential hire. So unflattering that the decision to hire is reversed or, in some cases, offers of employment are rescinded. The point is being careful. You are creating a brand and the brand is you.

Resist any temptation to post self-deprecating pictures, tell jokes and think long before making political or religious statements. You can't control how a stranger might interpret the message. Professional and social networks can be valuable tools in creating and advertising you. Use them wisely.

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