

August 25, 2010

Social Networking Your Way to a New Job

By FARHAD MANJOO

UNTIL just a few years ago, looking for a job was a relatively straightforward process. Write a résumé. Scour job sites or the classifieds. Submit an application for listings that seem appropriate. Reach out to recruiters. Then, wait.

“It doesn’t work that way at all anymore,” said Nancy Halverson, senior vice president for learning and talent development at the recruiting firm MRINetwork.

Like everything else in business, the job-search process has undergone a revolution since the advent of [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), LinkedIn and other social networking sites. Job hunters today must learn to navigate the sometimes slippery social mores of online discourse — for instance, learning to promote themselves without coming off as self-involved.

At the same time, they must be constantly vigilant about managing their online reputation; the slightest slip may discourage potential employers.

“It’s almost like social media has replaced the white pages,” Ms. Halverson said. “Recruiters don’t even know how to find you if you don’t have a presence online. It’s nonnegotiable — you have to have a profile on a social networking site.”

For many people looking for work, however, the technological requirements of the modern job hunt present a profound hurdle. Increasingly, these people are turning up for help at the career offices and continuing education departments of their local universities and community colleges.

“Teaching people how to use these new tools is really becoming one of the main things that we do in career counseling offices,” said Nancy Richmond, assistant director of career counseling and exploration at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#). “We’re showing them that using social media is a great way to show employers that they’re on the forefront of cutting-edge trends. It can be extremely helpful for their careers.”

Twice a semester, Ms. Richmond’s office holds workshops teaching students and alumni how to use LinkedIn and other social networks. She also offers one-on-one tutoring to help people brush up their online profiles and counseling on how to approach potential employers or networking contacts online.

Such sessions have become a mainstay at colleges around the country — often, colleges say, because students are demanding them. This fall, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire will offer a series of continuing education courses called “The Language of Social Media,” which aim to give people a quick on-ramp to the world of online networking.

The course came out of a series of classes that Laurie Boettcher, a local social media enthusiast, had been teaching at her chapter of the Chamber of Commerce; the courses were so well attended, a university

spokeswoman said, that the school decided to take up the series for itself.

“We think it’s important not just to teach people why they should have a presence online, but also to teach them about how to be consistent — what’s appropriate in how you represent yourself online, and how you should go about promoting yourself,” Ms. Boettcher said.

It’s sometimes a tricky process, as many people looking for work have never had reason to set up a presence online and have no idea how to go about it. These people worked in industries like manufacturing, where Facebook and Twitter weren’t a part of daily life. Or they had plugged away at the same company for decades and never felt the need to make a résumé, let alone a LinkedIn page describing their job history.

In an economy that ejected people from jobs suddenly, and with such finality, career counselors say, these people feel bereft — they have all the skills necessary for new jobs, but few of the skills required for the job-search process.

It’s not the technical skills that are the toughest to master; what’s often more difficult for people who haven’t used networking sites, say job coaches, is mastering the subtle social skills involved in asking people online for help.

It’s an art that can befuddle even technically adept people. In 2008, Oliver Schmid, an I.T. consultant based in Los Angeles, lost his job with a German technology company. Jumping into the job market for the first time in 20 years, Mr. Schmid did what job seekers have always done — he sent out his résumé and waited for companies to call him back. He didn’t get any takers.

“People who looked at my résumé just didn’t seem to fall in love,” Mr. Schmid said. The real problem, Mr. Schmid said he believed, was that the résumé didn’t tell his whole story — it didn’t explain his range of experiences, nor the full measure of his passion and creativity on the job.

Scouring the Web for tips on job hunting, Mr. Schmid found several sites and forums with advice on how to set up his “personal brand” online. He began to blog about his work and then to use Twitter to reach out to others in his profession.

“I was very uncoordinated at first, really stumbling a lot. I didn’t know what I was doing or what to talk about,” he said. But over a period of a few months, Mr. Schmid got the hang of it — he got better at writing short posts about his work, at pointing out his posts to the right people on Twitter and being consistent, but not overbearing, in advertising himself.

All of this took a lot of work. Miriam Salpeter, a job coach based in Atlanta, says that one of the main conversations she has with unemployed people concerns expectations — even if you do everything online correctly, there’s no guarantee you’ll find a job immediately.

“What you’re really trying to do on social networks is expand your sphere of influence,” Ms. Salpeter said. “You want to grow the number of people that know about you. As more people get to know about you and see who you are, that can pay off.”

That’s how things played out for Mr. Schmid. A former colleague noticed his posts on Twitter and recommended Mr. Schmid for a freelance position with a Norwegian technology company.

Mr. Schmid landed an interim freelancing position with the firm, which later turned into a longer-term contract. Without Twitter, he said, he probably would not have found the job. “They weren’t looking for me — they just spotted me online, and it worked out,” Mr. Schmid said.