Will Work for Friends

Online interactions will never replace the power of face-to-face meetings. But social networking can enhance those relationships—and may even land you a job

By Rebecca Little

The national unemployment rate reached 9.4 percent in May, with Chicago's rate at 10.7 percent in the same month, according to the most recent data available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. As you would expect, the number of applicants at the high-volume national jobs websites—such as Monster.com, CareerBuilder.com, and HotJobs.com—has soared. For example, in January, CareerBuilder.com, the nation's largest in traffic and revenue, reported a record number of job seekers—25.7 million unique visitors.

So how can the recently laid off hope to stand out when employers are calling the shots in such a competitive market? Social networking seems to be the next frontier. "People are finally realizing that you have to attack it differently than everyone else is," says Brian Uzzi, an expert in social networking and a professor in the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. "Using these networks at least gets your foot in the door, and that's the key."

The research underlying social networking derives from an influential 1973 study, "The Strength of Weak Ties," from the Stanford University sociologist Mark Granovetter. His research showed that most people found jobs through public ads, headhunters, and through their friends—but the best jobs came from friends of friends. "It turns out that your close friends often travel in the same circle as you, but a friend of a friend is in a different echo chamber," Uzzi says. "By

contacting them, you bring the job seeker's knowledge and background into a new world that the job seeker himself didn't know about—and [in this new world] his skill set is more highly valued."

Like it or not, social networking is quickly becoming an expected part of presenting yourself as a potential employee, especially in business, as some companies have begun to ask for access to a Facebook or LinkedIn profile in addition to a traditional resumé. "If you're not there, you've missed one of the selection criteria," Uzzi says. "It may not be so much for content, but they want to see that you are a tangible, real person."

LINKEDIN

A work-oriented social networking website, LinkedIn launched in 2003 as a way for professionals to connect their business networks with their personal ones, essentially formalizing Granovetter's "friends of friends" structure. Today, a new member joins every second and, according to published reports, the number of applicants to the site's own job listings has doubled since February.

Mike Brady, 33, a Naperville resident who was laid off by the Bank of America in April 2008, used LinkedIn in his recent job search. "When I found a job I liked, whether it was through a company's website or through a job board, I would check LinkedIn to see if I knew anybody at the company or if I was a second degree away," Brady says. "Then I would try to get my foot in the door that way." (LinkedIn also has a tool called JobsInsider that makes this process even easier: When you look at a job posting on Monster, CareerBuilder, HotJobs, Craigslist, SimplyHired, Dice, or Vault, LinkedIn will reveal any contacts in your network at the company.) Brady, who in January landed a job at an online brokerage, found the company's human resources person on LinkedIn and sent his cover letter and resumé directly to her through the site.

Another way to use the site is to join a group related to your business expertise and participate in the "answers" forum. "Instead of coming out with 'You should hire me,' you're throwing out some suggestions to help a particular company," says Barbara Maldonado of Oak Park, who was laid off not long ago. "You hope that someone will look at your profile and as a result offer you an opportunity or want to have a discussion."

Maldonado cautions that posting in forums can be time-consuming. "It's a slippery slope because once you start, you have to keep up that online presence," she says. "People will forget about you if you disappear." Her work paid off. In March, she accepted a job as a business development manager with Elmhurst-based Marketing Resources, the direct result of a LinkedIn conversation that had started five months before.

FACEBOOK

Many people use Facebook socially, but it can also be a resource for job leads. As more Millennials enter the work force—an astonishing 90 percent of high-school students and 90 percent of college students have Facebook profiles, according to Northwestern's Uzzi—

interacting through the site will become the norm. "Their generation is habituated to it," Uzzi says. "When they go into the business world, it naturally morphs into a personal and professional representation of themselves." But Facebook is apparently becoming the norm for the rest of us, too: The 35- to 54-year-old segment grew 276.4 percent over the previous six months. And, the 55- to 65-year-old group grew by 450 percent from September 2008 to March 2009, according to Inside Facebook, a blog that tracks the site.

MYWORKSTER

MyWorkster.com, a site that harnesses the power of alumni connections, was founded in 2006 by two students (now alumni) at the University of Virginia and comprises 4,000 alumni networks organized by college or university. Jeffrey Saliture, the company's CEO, says that alumni are now outranking student join-ups. "The amount of alumni registrations has surged in the last six months, and there is now almost a ten-to-one ratio of alumni to current students," Saliture says.

On MyWorkster.com, employers can search for candidates using the site's advanced matching algorithms, which Saliture says makes the process similar to that of online dating services but with professional instead of personal criteria. Traditional job boards, Saliture says, are in a way suffering from their own success. "They get tons of resumés, and it's highly inefficient," he says.

The growing site recently rolled out Facebook Connect, where users can link their Facebook profiles with MyWorkster; the bridge allows users of both sites to integrate updates, user names, passwords, and certain content.

TWITTER

Twitter, the social network that broadcasts 140-character blurbs to your community of followers, is gradually finding its place among job seekers.

Maldonado used Twitter to put the word out that she was looking for work and followed other people who were in the same situation. "If anyone was looking for a job, I left a note that said I'm in the same boat, asked what they are looking for, and said if I run across anything in [your area], I'll keep you in mind," she says.

"Twitter can be such a great resource," says Jessica Dembo, a resident of Skokie. Dembo launched the blog JoblessInChicago.com after being laid off from a division of Staples in early 2009, her second layoff in two years. Dembo created a Twitter identity for JoblessInChicago as soon as she created her blog, and searched for relevant people to follow, including other unemployed members, recruiters, and companies like Kelly Services that post jobs on Twitter. "I signed up for them so I would get their tweets to check out their job postings both for myself and people on my site," Dembo says. As for her fellow unemployed Tweeters, she would send them messages as well. "It's all about trying to make friends and stay top of mind," Dembo says. "People really do think about you."

TIP

Get **Better Results** on the Big Jobs Boards

Customize each job application. "Don't send the [same] resumé to 100 employers," says CareerBuilder's spokeswoman Jennifer Grasz. "They will spot the spam a mile away." Instead, look for keywords in the job posting and pepper them into your resumé. Also, highlight specific accomplishments using a searched-for phrase such as "increased sales" or "increased efficiencies." But avoid cutting and pasting complete phrases from the posting into your cover letter or resumé. Says Grasz, "That will be flagged, too."

Illustrations: Anke Weckmann