

What's the point of online networking?

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When Jérôme Kerviel was named as the alleged rogue trader at Société Générale, journalists immediately trawled social networking websites in search of facts about his career and personal life. But in spite of the risk of such (perfectly legitimate) intrusion, hordes of business people are still willing to lay out details of their lives on sites such as [LinkedIn](#), [Xing](#) and [Facebook](#). Why?

Given that these are predominantly smart, forward-thinking people, I can only assume that the benefits of membership outweigh the privacy risks. Over the next week or so, I'd like to try to quantify and analyse some of these benefits. I'm particularly intrigued by the potential for conflict between the trend for 'Brand Me' self-promotion and the 'keep your head down' discretion expected by more traditional employers.

A reasonable starting point for this inquiry is an old blog post by Guy Kawasaki, a US venture capitalist and web pundit, in which he suggests [ten ways to use LinkedIn](#) (he's also just done something similar for [using Facebook](#)). Aside from the obvious goal of trying to unearth new customers, he suggests that employers can use the likes of LinkedIn as a source of references during the interview process - just approach someone from the network of past and present employees at the interviewee's old company. That's the theory anyway.

There is one category of worker for whom online social networks appear to be a particular blessing: the self-employed, particularly those working as consultants. [James Amoroso](#), an independent food industry analyst and consultant, told me in an email that LinkedIn is "brilliant" for "straight business networking... especially if you are in business on your own".

For instance, the system allows him to track his contacts' contacts - knowledge that could lead to profitable new connections for him. However, he stressed that this does not translate into a licence to pester second-degree acquaintances willy-nilly. He said it can be counter-productive to approach someone to whom you have only a very tenuous link. If too many of these people say they don't know you, the privilege of approaching other members directly is withdrawn, he explained.

Clearly, networking sites can also help an employee to find a new job. Sociological research has shown that distant acquaintances can be extremely influential in guiding someone into a new role. The likes of Xing and LinkedIn teem with such "[weak ties](#)", waiting to be exploited by the restless. Conversely, imaginative employers and their headhunters can use such sites to poach new staff.

But social networking present challenges for more traditional and hierarchical companies that adopt new technologies and working practices slowly. For instance, is it politic for an employee to nurture external relationships online, right under the nose of their current employer? And what is the etiquette for publicly networking with employees at rival organisations?

To these and other questions, I don't pretend to have anything other than sketchy answers and suppositions at this stage prior to an interview with Kevin Eyres, LinkedIn's managing director for Europe, on Friday. All tips and anecdotes - or questions for Kevin - gratefully received.

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