

LinkedIn: A Community of Practice

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February 14, 2016

Author Note

This paper was prepared for EDTC 816 Advanced Methods in Building Online Communities, taught by Dr. Christopher Shamburg.

## LinkedIn

The subject of communities according to Etienne Wenger has taken on heightened interest among many of the online communities that exists, especially those such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, Tumblr, Instagram, Vine, Meetup, Flickr, VK, Tagged, Snapchat, Classmates and LinkedIn (eBizMBA Guide, 2016; Wenger, 2009). Each social networking site attracts groups of people with common interests and moves them toward that particular community. These online communities provide choices, and contribute positively to human interaction. Michelle White (2002) notes that in cyberspace, “community” is a popular way of describing “synchronous online settings” much like LinkedIn and suggests that they offer “social exchange, emotional support, and learning environments (p. 56). Such communities encourage complex and important activities which legitimize those settings by making them seem as if they are physical and real (White, 2002). There are elements that activate these communities—these are people, places, and things. According to Lieberman (2013), humans are wired to one another—we are wired to be social. Therefore, we are driven to become part of or join communities which have been redefined in this digital age (Tavani, 2004). On a basic level a community, whether physical or virtual, is comprised of people as members of the group. LinkedIn was launched and began in May 2003 as a professional networking site and its key players are Reid Hoffman, Founder and CEO, Jeff Weiner current CEO, and Dipchand Nishar, Vice President of products (Tasarra-Twigg, 2015). Its headquarters is located in Mountain View, California. Over the years, LinkedIn has become attractive to users as it keeps innovating—now with a mobile app giving the users more opportunities to stay connected—anytime and anywhere with android, iphones or other smart devices.

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In this paper, the researcher will examine LinkedIn through the lens of domain (purpose), practice (behavior), and community (ethos and mindset). The *domain* for the LinkedIn community is job seeking – this is the driving force for its success because users can connect, collaborate, share best practices and disseminate research (Power, 2015, p. 196). The LinkedIn website has a busy modular look and has become an online tool replacement for business cards which can become outdated (sometimes within a year). Business professionals who keep their profiles current can invite persons to look them up on LinkedIn. It is a professional networking site, social networking and part job bulletin board—all rolled into one. In 2012, LinkedIn had 191 million members, the figures have since doubled. The current membership is now at 332 million (Tasarra-Twigg, 2015). According to Tsarra-Twigg (2015), the gender ratio is 43% male and 57% female. The age demographics is the next focus, with members 13 to 17 totaling 7%; members' aged 18 to 24 make up 26% and the remaining members aged 35 and older comprise 66% (p. 5). The benefits of LinkedIn is that it is an excellent business-2-business marketing tactic for networking rather than just sending a faceless advertisement, as done with resumes (Tasarra-Twigg, 2015). As a positive online community—it provides choices that contribute to user interaction. Individuals can use aliases or real names when they interact on this forum. Using aliases minimizes one's benefits for using LinkedIn. The researcher believes that it is necessary to use real names and constantly update profiles as some “major changes to both personal profiles and company pages were made”, as part of LinkedIn's new marketing campaign (Sammons, n.d., p.1). Personal profiles are the base of a user's presence on LinkedIn. Just as people make up a society, the same goes for community—they are the primary ingredient. A community is made up of people who interact on a regular basis around a common set of

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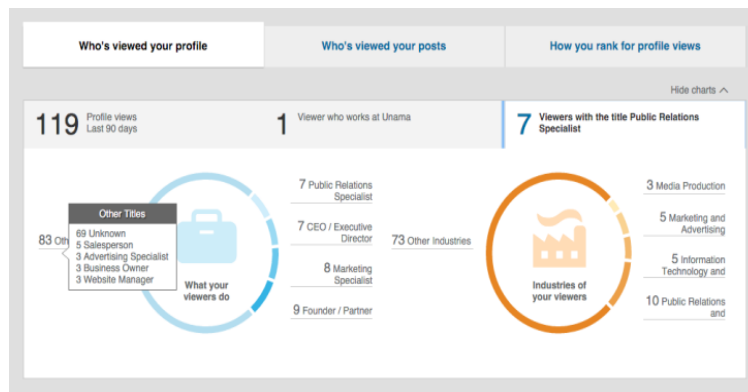
issues, interests or needs. In physical communities people share experiences, pool resources, represent interests of larger groups, and builds relationships with other like-minded individuals (Robinson, 2014). People are naturally curious about what is going on (whether positive or negative) in other people's minds. De Milto (2015) argues that if you're not on LinkedIn, you almost don't exist (p. 167). Identities in LinkedIn are formed by the values lent to them from the groups they call their own (Stenzel, 2011; Schaffer, 2014 & Schiavelli, 2014). Community participation is usually voluntary, with individuals assuming certain roles at varying levels of intensity and based on time commitments. An advantage of LinkedIn is that its members are active on the site and even those on the periphery such as recruiters or businesses can access information about its members. For example, about a year ago on LinkedIn, an institution made me a job offer. I didn't find them—they located me and made a connection.

According to Power (2015) users can access the sites search tools, import contacts and searched for people in groups. This is the *practice* component of the community. Through LinkedIn, users can stay in touch with people from past jobs, volunteer work, persons they studied with at colleges and universities, as well as professional groups or organizations. LinkedIn puts the onus on the members to keep their contact information current. Members can maintain privacy by not communicating with members they do not know (Duffy, 2015). The levels of participation in LinkedIn involve connecting with people that the member knows or has some relationship with. The participant or members' profile is similar to a resume—they can list skills, education, work experience. To properly connect each member must agree to the relationship. Before a connection occurs, the member has to state or make note of the relationship or have some personal information such as an email or phone number (Borzykowski,

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2013). Even if you don't know a member or user, you can still send them a private message. This happened to my LinkedIn profile, another user who was not connected asked if I could write a reference letter for him. As participants begin to make connections (personal or professional), LinkedIn can begin to send notifications of persons whom he or she might know and want to be connected with. Some users have mentioned that they find this feature nagging at times. People who use LinkedIn are looking to find jobs or clients, even businesses such as General Motors are using social media and technology to revolutionize the customer service experience (Boler-Davis, 2016). The social component to the site now lets users see who is viewing their profile. Figure one extracted from Duffy (2015) demonstrates this capability through LinkedIn:

**Figure 1**



Of course, in today's electronic world, meeting places do not necessarily have to be physical spaces. There is value in having a premium account. The cost and benefits are numerous. When job postings are listed, users with badges are among the first picks for the job openings. Premium accounts gives sharp attention to job searches and users should pay attention to tutorials, emails, and professional development tips provided by LinkedIn (Elad, 2016).

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Reference checks, InMail messaging, statistics from profile views and membership in the Open Link program are some of the benefits available to Premium members (Elad, 2016).

Finally, to be effective, *communities* need a place for their members to gather. In conventional community environments, the place is often a physical space where members meet and exchange ideas and insights. This place becomes a unique identifier that reinforces the group's sense of commonality (Lesser, Fountaine & Slusher, 2000). The Internet has provided a virtual medium where individuals can effectively interact across boundaries of time and space. Technologies such as LinkedIn were developed to support community efforts by allowing individuals to connect with others to discuss similar work challenges, capture and share common tools and techniques, conduct real-time dialogues, solve problems, and introduce outside ideas and influences (Bersin, 2012; Prasad, Norton & Coatta, 2014). LinkedIn is a community in the real sense because members can keep up-to-date regarding what other members are doing. The value of this community is that it provides an array of networking and recruitment opportunities. As a member, I stay connected with people all over the world. The final element in communities that matters is—things. Etienne Wenger (2009) and others suggest that a critical activity performed within communities are the management of “boundary objects” or things. In the virtual world, these objects can be rules, norms, procedures, tools, and other artifacts that communities use to accomplish tasks. LinkedIn members need to become familiar with the tools settings and customizations. These can either make or break their experience with the social networking tool. For example, individuals use things as mechanisms for documenting and sharing what they know and how the work they perform should be accomplished. For example, commendations from groups and event postings happen frequently through LinkedIn. LinkedIn

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members have written recommendations about knowledge, skills and abilities possessed by other users; as was done for me from my job and a former cohort from the University of the West Indies. Through the interaction of people, places and things, communities help individuals develop a sense of identity based on similar goals or interests. According to Tasarra-Twigg (2015) some of the benefits of LinkedIn are that it is used by recruiters and its members can follow such companies or groups by keeping up with the job market. Members can showcase their curriculum vitae or resume and share information about their knowledge and competencies for the job market. Through these things, communities provide a vehicle to share their common tools and forms of community knowledge. Individuals within a community relate to these common objects and use them as vehicles for expanding the collective knowledge of the group. Through technology, communities of practice are everywhere. LinkedIn is a virtual community of practice—its members are able to encourage conversations that exchange valuable knowledge. Its members are immersed in a society driven by technology—its use can be educational, fun and for connections (Kovar, 2015; Kerner, 2015). Informal, self-organizing networks within and outside of organizations are sources or avenues for knowledge generation and in most instances—distribution. These groups that form out of special and similar collaborative interests and goals are called communities of practice.

To conclude, a community of practice is a group composed of members who share common interests and objectives, but who are not necessarily located in the same area geographically and may occupy different roles within that grouping (Pearlson & Saunders, 2006, p. 326). They usually communicate in person, by telephone, and email to solve problems together. They can generate new knowledge and nurture its generation or development by

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providing sufficient time and incentives for the exchange of ideas. LinkedIn is one of those social tools that have maximized its power and potential to bring career professionals together. A free account through LinkedIn has numerous benefits: networks connections with no limits on size or numbers, profiles can be very detailed, multiple connections can be sent simultaneously, and a user can find just about anyone using LinkedIn (Elad, 2016). It is for everyone invested in their career and is a community of practice. As a recognized community, members or job seekers can keep up with job openings and can compare themselves with other candidates for positions. Members of the community can be visible to only their contacts or to everyone connected to LinkedIn. This is how LinkedIn serves the needs of its community. It offers real results in terms of business networking and it is a modern way to keep technologically savvy—even Chinese are using more business social media to stay current (Stout, 2014). LinkedIn does not exist in isolation and its boundary of practice is not formal, no membership card is needed. One of the disadvantages or insulation of this community is that the largest percentage of demographics is individuals aged 35 and over. LinkedIn needs to attract more and increase their younger members. As a professional network, it remains unmatched when it comes to the world of business. LinkedIn is beneficial for members who want to be best connected not the most connected as with Facebook. As a networking tool it helps to save time by getting the right candidates to the interview table.



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