

# How to Get Started With LinkedIn

by Jake Swearingen

**Tags:** [Network](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Social Networking](#), [Networking](#), [Online Communications...](#)

More and more business professionals are using social networks to build relationships, meet new contacts, and market themselves. For the uninitiated, however, diving into the virtual meet-and-greet can be daunting. Where to begin? For first-time users, the answer is [LinkedIn](#). Developed specifically for business, the site doesn't run the risk of blurring your professional life with your private one; and with more than 25 million users, it serves virtually every industry and profession.

Joining a network like LinkedIn is simple, but turning it into a powerful networking tool takes a bit of savvy. Here's how to set up a profile, build a network, and put it all to work — without social-networking anxiety.

## Things you will need:

- None. LinkedIn does offer higher-grade accounts for a monthly subscription fee, but don't upgrade until you're sure you'll use it.
- Plan to spend at least a full afternoon establishing your profile and network. Then make time to check in at least once a week to see what everyone is up to.

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- **Your E-mail Contacts:** LinkedIn allows you to quickly search through everyone you've e-mailed and connect to those you'd like to reach.
- **Well-Defined Goals:** What do you want out of your network? Is there a field you hope to move into? A new position you'd like to try? Do you simply want to find other professionals in your field?
- **Your Company's Policy:** While nearly every company is fine with social networking (even the CIA reportedly has its own internal social network), make sure you understand your company's policy on confidentiality.

## Create a Compelling Profile

**GOAL:** MAKE IT CLEAR WHAT YOU'VE DONE IN YOUR CAREER — AND WHAT YOU WANT TO DO.

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Before you connect to others, you must first set up a profile page at [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com). While your page will detail your work history, don't assume you can copy and paste your resume and be done with it. Your profile page should reflect your professional interests, passions, and ambitions. The site will walk you through filling in the blanks, but you'll want to think ahead about two areas:

## Defining Yourself

Directly underneath your name will be a short headline of four or five words. More than anything else in your profile, these words are how people find and define you. Are you seeking to connect mainly with others in your field and industry? Then a simple, explanatory headline like “Senior Project Manager at McDonnell-Douglas” is best. Are you seeking to branch out into other areas? “Leader of High-Performing Aeronautical Engineering Projects” alerts others quickly to the value you would bring to an organization. Regardless of how you phrase your headline, make sure to use keywords that will help others find you.

## What You’ve Done, and What You Want to Do

When listing your past job experiences, use verbs as much as possible. Show what you’re passionate about, and what you’ve learned from each job. Chris Brogan, a vice president at business-technology company CrossTech Media and a frequent blogger on the topic of social networks, suggests listing “non-jobs” you’ve done, like chairing a conference or leading a panel. “People shouldn’t just think of this as a resume tool,” he says. “It can be a way to show color and breadth.”

“LinkedIn is aspirational,” says Mrinal Desai, a former LinkedIn “evangelist” and currently a vice president at desktop-sharing software company CrossLoop, Inc. He recommends including not just what you’ve done but what you want to do in the future. One place to do this is in the “About” section. “You can add an area where maybe you don’t have experience but you’re looking to gain it,” Desai says.

## Checklist

Make Sure You Include:

1. A solid headline with keywords relevant to your industry.
2. A picture. “People do business with people,” Desai says.
3. How you prefer to be contacted. At the bottom of your profile, you can let people know how you want to be contacted — through LinkedIn, by e-mail, or over the phone.
4. What you want to be contacted about. At the bottom of your profile, you can select interests like reference requests, consulting offers, or career opportunities.

### MAKE SURE YOU DON’T INCLUDE:

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1. Any contact information you’re not comfortable having your contacts see. Your contact information will be visible only to those you are connected to, but you should decide whether you want that to include things like phone numbers or personal e-mail.
2. Anything that even begins to stray from the truth. Unlike even a resume, your profile will be seen by a lot of eyes. Did you really lead that project, or did you lead it along with several others?

3. Anything you wouldn't want fellow colleagues — current, former, or future — to know. LinkedIn is for professional relationships, and just like at the dinner table, it's wise to keep politics and religion politely to yourself.

## Build Your Network

**GOAL: CONNECT WITH OTHERS WHO SHARE YOUR PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS AND CAN HELP YOU MEET YOUR GOALS.**

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After you've created your profile, it's time to begin to connect to others. LinkedIn will allow you to search for people you know to see if they're already members. But once you connect to someone, you can also look at the profiles of anyone they know, and in turn anyone those people know. Because of these three degrees of separation, your network can grow exponentially. Fewer than fifty direct contacts can translate to millions of business users.

Before you begin connecting, decide who you want to connect to. LinkedIn suggests in its FAQ, "Only invite those you know and trust." As [Anshu Sharma](#), a senior director at Force.com, put it in his blog, "If you receive an invite on LinkedIn, ask yourself if you would take a call from this person on a busy Monday morning."

Desai sees who you connect to as a way to ensure quality control: "My network acts as a filter, and I act as a filter for my network. My network won't send me anything that's spam."

Also consider your position relative to those you're connecting to. "Does my CEO 'friend' our receptionist? Does he 'friend' his niece?" Brogan asks. "I think it depends on how much status matters for you." A good rule of thumb is the more traditional your industry, the less you want to connect to those very far above or below you on the corporate ladder.

But what if you work at Hewlett-Packard? Should you connect with someone at rival company IBM? Yes, says Brogan: "More than likely, you're not always going to be at the same company, and there could also be some cross-pollination of ideas there."

## Nitty Gritty

### HOW TO NOT BE FRIENDS

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If someone contacts you and you don't want to form a connection with them, you don't need to flatly reject them and worry about the attendant awkwardness. When looking at the invitation to connect, simply hit "Archive." The other person does not receive a message saying their invitation has been rejected, and you don't have to worry about unwanted invitations clogging up your inbox.

Likewise, if you find that an existing contact is blasting you with too much information or making overly aggressive requests for introductions and recommendations, LinkedIn will let you remove that person easily — and without the contact knowing they're out of your network. If only it were that easy in real life.

# Get the Most From Your Connections

**GOAL:** NOW THAT YOU'RE CONNECTED, PUT ALL THOSE PEOPLE TO USE.

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There are three main things your network can do for you: answer business-related questions, make recommendations and introductions, and provide company information. Make sure that you focus on helping others when you first join. "It's the idea of bringing wine to the party," Brogan says. "If you're offering up helpful stuff and services, your reputation will go a lot further than if you're just out there for yourself."

## **1. Ask and answer questions.**

While signed in, you can quickly see a list of open questions that have been asked by anyone in your extended network. Queries can range from advice on turning a website into a business to detailed questions about tax law. Participating in these exchanges is an easy way of gaining trust and building your reputation. Asking questions will prompt informed sources to offer their expert advice (which helps everyone in the network), while providing answers gives you a chance to show off your own expertise to others.

## **2. Recommend and introduce colleagues.**

Recommendations work as a form of currency in a social network. Those who are happy with your work can write a brief description of their experience on your LinkedIn profile. By having a broad range of endorsements attesting to your professional expertise, you show others that you can be trusted. And make sure to recommend those you've had good experiences with. Introductions are trickier but also more valuable. This is where your personal judgment needs to come into play. When someone contacts you for an introduction, be sure you understand and approve of what they want before making the handoff. Likewise, make your intentions clear when you are asking for an introduction.

## **3. Learn more about your professional network.**

You can quickly learn a lot about a potential business partner or contact by reading their profile. Mrinal Desai uses it before almost every meeting. "It brings up a lot of things you can discuss and build a relationship on," he says. Unlike, for example, someone's Google results, everything you find on LinkedIn has been voluntarily placed there by your contact.

Rachna D. Jain, a psychologist and chief social marketer at MindShare Corp., a company focusing on the psychology of social networking, recommends watching to see who your contacts are becoming connected with to figure out who might be worth getting to know yourself.

## Hot Tip

### STAYING PLUGGED IN

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LinkedIn has a number of plug-ins and add-ons that can make your social networking even more effective. Here are three you should make a part of your online life:

**LinkedIn Outlook Toolbar:** Build your network from those you e-mail frequently, manage your network from within Outlook, and see mini LinkedIn profiles for everyone who e-mails you.

**Web Browser Toolbar (for Internet Explorer and Firefox):** Quickly search LinkedIn for any name you come across while surfing. Read about an interesting person in the *Journal*? Click on their name and see how closely you're connected.

**LinkedIn E-mail Signature:** Create a custom e-mail signature in Outlook, Outlook Express, and Mozilla Thunderbird with a brief version of your LinkedIn profile and a link to your full profile.

## Manage Your Social Network

**GOAL:** CONTINUE TO GAIN BENEFITS FROM YOUR SOCIAL NETWORK — WITHOUT MAKING IT YOUR FULL-TIME JOB.

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“Don't expect that you can post something one time and get ongoing benefits,” Jain says. You'll need to continually update and refine your profile and your network. The most obvious way to do this is to add new contacts. When Jain comes home from a conference, for example, she goes through the business cards she collected to see who's on LinkedIn. Adding new contacts, sometimes from outside your immediate field or industry, is also a subtly persuasive way to sell yourself by letting others see how far your professional sphere extends.

Brogan advises checking up on your profile about once a month and making sure your job description is still accurate. He also recommends reaching out to contacts even when you don't have a business concern. He tries to touch base with a few contacts every week for no other reason than to check in and see how things are going. “The thing I think people do a little wrong in social networking is they reach out only when they have an issue — when they've lost their job, or they need you out of the blue.”

## **Danger! Danger! Danger!**

**FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD NEVER DO ON A SOCIAL NETWORK, ACCORDING TO DR. RACHNA D. JAIN:**

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1. **Leave negative feedback.** “It stays around for a very long time, so even if you have a change of heart, it can be very difficult to retract it.”
2. **Lie.** “Give a truthful account of where you’ve worked and what you’ve done. Be real. Be honest.”
3. **Spam.** “It’s not a push marketing strategy. Avoid drowning others in your promotional material.”
4. **Gossip.** “Don’t send forth news that may not be yours to share.”
5. **Oversell yourself.** “Stay away from arrogance or over-hyping what you do.”

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