

Your Online Job Hunt

No job search would be complete without going online and looking for opportunities on the Web. After all, it's easier and way faster to just type in your ideal job position in a search box versus poring over piles of newspaper classifieds or knocking on the doors of companies one by one. There are literally hundreds of websites that job seekers can use as the starting point of their online hunt; Monster.com, Indeed.com and even Craigslist are good sites to begin with. But there's another way of getting hired online that is slowly winning companies over.

While most of us have accounts on Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites, many don't realize that it's also a powerful tool for getting that job you've been looking for. More and more companies are turning to these social sites to fill gaps in their firms and grab great talent such as yourself through online referrals and word-of-mouth. If you've been wondering how your friend got his ideal job so quickly, he probably used his online social network to multiply his chances of connecting to the right people at the right time.

In this chapter, we'll talk about how you can boost your online presence and get noticed by employers as well as how to leverage social networking sites to get solid leads on companies that are hiring, or even just looking to hire, motivated people like you.

Getting Started on Social Media

First off though, let me just walk you through the basics. Social networking sites come in many forms. From bookmarking and dating to location-based and general networking, these websites connect all sorts of people through many different ways. Let us share a few of the sites that are most relevant to your online job hunt.

LinkedIn - This is a prime example of how social networking intersects with business. LinkedIn is a site dedicated to professional networking and is a very popular tool for keeping in touch with your business colleagues and former work peers. You connect with others by getting introduced through established contacts. This is one of the websites you need to really have an account in as it rolls together your resume, calling card and contact list in one place.

Facebook - This is the largest and most popular social network in the world; it even has a movie coming out soon. What once was just dorm room project used by college kids to hook up with each other, Facebook now has over 400 million active users. Many companies have established mini-websites in the site called Pages where they can interact with clients, customers and job seekers. Its popularity and reach makes it a gold mine for making new contacts in your chosen industry.

Twitter - As opposed to the two previous sites, Twitter is more focused on sharing what you say as opposed to what you are. You post short messages online for the world to see but it has an added social aspect in that people can follow you and your "tweets" as they are called (as well as allowing you to follow and tweet them back). It's a vital source of information since the real-time feeds

constantly churn out the latest on job openings, company news, musings by people you admire and general career buzz related to your industry.

Other Sites - There are also many other more focused sites that hone in on specific interests while adding a social layer to them. If you are into writing, there's LiveJournal and for those into graphics and media, there's deviantART. Many popular content sharing services are also social networks; YouTube, Flickr and Digg let you share videos, images and websites, respectively. Discussion forums, message boards and online groups are sites where you can talk with like-minded enthusiasts on niche topics like window sill gardening, vintage automobile repair and extreme geocaching. While these sites might not look like they are relevant to you right now, you will find out later that they can affect your job search one way or another.

How To Leverage Your Online Activity

It is very likely that you already use many of the sites mentioned before though you probably use them more for your personal stuff than for getting ahead in your career. But if you really want to keep on target and get that dream job you've been aiming for, there are a few things you will need to do online to get it. It's not going to be a quick fix solution and you will have to do a lot of work especially if you are new to social networking. In the end though, all of that work will pay off and will make advancing in your field much easier in the long haul.

1. Stay professional

Social networking is blurring the lines on the types of connections people have. With many sites liberally using "Friend" as the term of choice when describing online connections, it is sometimes hard drawing the line between work buddies and close friends. If you want to be seen more professionally online, you need to take a closer look at your online presence.

It would be best to compartmentalize your private life and your professional life. For Facebook, since it's a violation of their terms of service to have more than one account per person, you will need to keep your professional and personal contacts on the same account. What you can do to keep them separate is to tweak the privacy settings of your account so that you don't inadvertently share intimate stuff meant for your spouse with your business contacts.

You will also need to comb through what people see on your Facebook page and remove anything that you don't want prospective employers to see. Recruiters, in fact, are using social sites more and more when trying to find people for positions they want to fill. So remove any text, comments or pictures that don't uphold your professional standards. You wouldn't want them stumbling upon your drunken spring break pictures a few years back (not that you have any, of course).

If you really need to keep things separate, you can use Facebook for personal contacts and LinkedIn for professional ones though that might be a disadvantage if you want to make more connections online. For Twitter, setting up separate accounts is no problem and you can even protect your personal account for more privacy.

2. Mingle Online

Now, you need to connect to people online. Add a few of your trusted business contacts to your profile and ask for introductions to people in their circle that you want to connect with. Just like in the real world, introductions and referrals go a long way in building trust between people online. If you do want to add other people you are not directly connected to, approach it like you would a job interview and send a short cover letter.

Most networking sites allow you to add a message when trying to add a contact to your list. You can include in your message how you admire that person's work and how you think you can be a valuable contact to him or her. Most of the more popular persons will immediately add you in most cases but putting in a good cover letter will not only give a good impression, it also helps polish your writing skills in selling yourself. You'll find out how important this will be later on.

In the case of Twitter, you can follow people who have great insight on your professional field of interest. If you follow someone, it is likely they will follow you in return but with a few great tweets you can gain followers of your own. We will discuss more of this in a bit.

3. Lurking is a Good Thing

You might be tempted to step into the conversation the first time you get online. Don't! Lurking and just absorbing the Wall posts, tweets and news on your chosen industry will let you gain knowledge and not just about the technical stuff; it will also give you some insight as to how people interact in your field and what the do's and don'ts are.

To increase your breadth of knowledge, don't just follow Wall posts and Twitter feeds. Read up back articles on blogs and previous posts in discussion forums. Check out older mailing list archives of groups related to your field. Brush up on your reading by monitoring newsfeeds from your favorite websites that are related to your industry. Once you've built up a sufficient mastery of what's out there, that would be the time to put up your own content.

3. Time to Strut Your Stuff!

Now you need to show your contacts what you are worth. You can post links to relevant news on your Wall in Facebook or retweet them on Twitter. A more effective approach to getting noticed is to ramp up on your writing skills and share your insights on current industry trends. While rambling and sharing opinions are easy for most folks, condensing it into a short Wall post or a 140-character tweet whilst keeping it meaningful and relevant requires greater skill. You won't get it right the first few times but doing it often will help you master the art of short messaging. Start with easy, relevant news snippets and level up your writings to opinion pieces and original remarks.

You don't need to start all of the conversations yourself, though. You can also comment on what your contacts have to say and share your thoughts directly with them. If they have a blog, read through their latest posts and share what you think by commenting on them right on their site. It's more personal when you post a comment on their Wall or blog, or give a direct reply on Twitter and it will strengthen the connections between the two of you.

Also, post online often but not too often. Just match the speed of how most people in your professional circle respond, but maybe a notch lower; if they send tweets five times a day then write three updates per day, if they post to their Wall daily then stay in stride through every-other-day

messages. Once you get in a good rhythm, you can set your own pace that will not flood your friends or followers needlessly.

If you're gunning for a career that requires you to create content like writing or design, you can put up a personal site that you can link to your social profiles. Since social sites are more for sharing snippets of yourself, you can put the more meaningful content on your own site where you can showcase the best that you can offer. Put your research on the latest controversy rocking your field on a blog or showcase your technical skills by uploading videos with step-by-step walkthroughs on how you build your creations. You can share any new content through your Facebook page and Twitter feed and your contacts can spread your work far and wide. It might even reach people who might want to hire you.

4. Mingle Offline

Since you've established your online credibility, it's time to meet other folks face to face! Many industry groups meet regularly offline and there is even a social site you can use for this. Browse through Meetup.com and check local meetings in your area that match your career interests. Some are informal get-togethers, others require membership and some even feature talks by prominent industry speakers. Most have meetings once a month and are open to the public so feel free to drop by and mingle. You might even probably recognize a face or two from your own contacts on FaceBook or LinkedIn.

If you can't find local groups, tap your online friends and ask around. Some will point you to national groups that might even have local chapters in your area. Others might be too informal to have websites of their own but meet and chat offline regularly.

Getting some actual face time with folks is a great way to begin asking around for employment opportunities. While many folks would probably not sit well with sharing job openings with online contacts they haven't met, these same people would be more open when it comes to casual conversation in real life. And since you've built up a good reputation online, they know you have the skills they are looking for to complement their company's strengths.

One last thing: don't forget to bring business cards that show how you can be contacted online. It should have your email, personal website, and your Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn URLs.

Actively Look for Opportunities

Of course you don't just sit around after all that. You need to keep looking out for opportunities where you can further your career. Not all jobs are found in postings on job boards or retweets of openings by people you follow. Many are subtle and if you follow your online contacts more closely, you can strike an excellent job offer before it's even advertised.

Did you find out that one of the companies on your watch list is expanding? Hit up a friend who works there and find out if there are possible openings for you. Read a tweet from a contact that says he is flooded with work? Offer to help out and you might get hired. Found a Wall comment from a friend looking for new ideas? Present some of your work and become one of her consultants.

By now, you have probably made quite a name for yourself. A month's work online building your profile translates to a lot of time in the Internet. You can now go out and post to your Wall the type of work you are looking for. Tweet out what opportunities you want to pursue. Message your top contacts and get referred to the right people in your industry.

The best tactic to get hired is to keep yourself relevant in your field of interest. Let people know that you are pursuing related projects and keeping up with industry trends while actively looking for work. This way, you make it easier for people to refer you to companies that will value your abilities and skills.

Etiquette on the Internet is Called Netiquette

There are some things you should remember though when interacting online:

1. Don't Rant, Ever!

It's annoying enough when someone does this offline, but its effect is compounded online where hundreds of people can easily see what you post. Furthermore, once it's on the Internet, anything you say cannot be erased. No matter how hard you try, things you put online will crop up eventually.

Save yourself the trouble and don't post anything demeaning, illicit or angry online. Similarly, don't post anything that will make people do the same. This holds true offline as well.

2. Be Discreet

Discretion is something that the Web has in very short supply. Companies value their privacy and any conversations between you and them should be held close to the chest. Even if you have a burning secret you want to tweet about, it's best to leave it out of your message streams.

3. Keep it Clean

On top of keeping your feeds clean of scandalous remarks, you should also refrain from talking about anything unethical or even illegal online. Companies value someone who has high moral standards and will stick with them through good and bad.

4. Don't Post What You Don't Know

Posting to Facebook and Twitter has been made too easy that even unsolicited replies get some air time. If you want to stay professional, don't tout yourself as being knowledgeable on a topic if you're not.

5. Don't Write Like a Kid!

It comes as no surprise that social networks are littered with cases of bad grammar and even worse spelling. Maybe it's because people can now post with just their cellphones or that they always want to keep their status updated. In any case, you don't want to be them if you want to boost your status online. Post legibly with proper grammar at all times. Your future boss is reading.

6. Forgive and forgive

The Internet can be a harsh place and you can get scathed pretty quickly from all the biting remarks and snide comments that come your way. Be understanding and quick to forgive others when they seem to post something hurtful towards you. You might just be looking at it at the wrong way. The better response is to be the better person and let it slide and maybe send them a private message later on when things cool off so you can discuss things in a more civilized manner.

Get Ranked: Brand Building and More

On to something a bit more advanced: building your online brand. You already know most of the basics of how to interact online to find jobs and be found. If you want to raise the bar a bit higher, there are several things you can start doing to further increase your reputation and get noticed by recruiters and companies.

Social networks are just one facet of your social identity online. You need to take into account your Google search results as well as feedback given to you by other persons. The Internet has made us more accessible to everyone else. So professionally, each person now has the same reach online as a small corporation. This means you should start thinking of yourself as one in terms of how you present yourself to the world. You need to build and maintain your personal brand image so that you stand out and get an edge above other candidates out there.

Promoting your brand doesn't mean hiring a PR firm and launching a massive ad campaign. You can follow a few concrete steps to strengthen your image online.

Domains, Emails, Usernames, Oh my!

Getting a domain name under your real name should be one of your top priorities. It will help you keep your image secure from those who want to put you down as well as having a launch pad for centralizing your online activity. Unless you have a really unique surname, your best bet is to reserve a domain under the name most people know you by. If your name for example is Charles Norris but you go by Chuck Norris most of the time, chucknorris.com is a good choice.

Buying domains from online registrars is pretty cheap and you can probably scoop up several domains under your name and its variants like chucknorris.com, chuck-norris.com, chucknorris.net, etc. for just a few dollars. Better yet, buy your domain with a hosting provider so that you can put a website and add an email server on top of it as well.

An email address that uses your name after the @ sign shows you're serious in establishing yourself online. Using admin@chucknorris.com certainly looks more professional than chucknorris@some-email-service.com. And if you're more used to online webmail or your hosting provider's email isn't as user-friendly as you hoped, you can get a Google Apps account and tie your domain name to it. While everyone else sees your usual email address, behind that scenes you can access it as easily as a Gmail account.

Lastly, you also need to grab usernames off the more popular websites that match your real name. Doing so makes it easier for people to look you up and you can easily promote yourself with it. For

example, you can grab twitter.com/chucknorris or facebook.com/chucknorris. In case variants of your name are already taken or you just want to be unique, you can take a username that matches your goals like facebook.com/extremecoder or twitter.com/marketingmaven.

Create a Clear, Consistent and Concise Message

Building a brand doesn't stop in just getting the names you want. You have to let people know what you are about and what your story is. Remember that website tied to your domain? It's now time to create it, even if it's just a rudimentary version for now. What most people do is they post their resume online at their home website like chucknorris.com. While that is all well and good, what would be better is to reword your resume and post a brief bio in the About Me section of the site. Highlight your achievements and what your goals are plus adding a few action pictures of yourself doesn't hurt. You can even post a video resume if you're inclined to do so but make everything short and to the point.

And what do you put on the main page of your site? This is the place where you put content relevant to your work. Add some photos of some recent projects, throw in a few thought-provoking and deep musings about the industry you are in and insert a few links to other sites relevant to your work such as previous employers, project websites and professional associations where you are a member. Since this is your personal brand, it's best to leave the design work for the site to professionals unless you are a web designer yourself. In addition to making the site better than your usual run-of-the-mill homemade website, it has the added features of being search engine friendly and compliant to web standards.

With your website in place, you also have to work on how you appear on other sites that carry your name. Be consistent from site to site and send the same message on each of them. Portray yourself as a smart, responsible and talented person in your Facebook, LinkedIn and other online profiles. You can't be a rock star in one site and a business professional in the next.

In addition, you need to be clear on the message you want spread. Creating a tag line like "A sysadmin with a passion for green tech" makes you easy to remember while imparting the focus of your career search. Make sure your bio only puts across one main point so that readers don't get confused.

Testimonials and Feedback Build Social Proof and Credibility

The final piece of the puzzle is adding in proofs of your work and feedback on yourself. Because everyone is pretty much anonymous in the Internet, getting recognition is less about being everywhere in the Web and more about other people talking about what you do. Testimonials, reviews and feedback are the currency that drives the Web.

Gather some testimonials from past employers or professors and put them on your site. Better yet, add some links to the official websites of a few projects you've worked on. Write a review on a person you've been following or who you interact with often and it's likely they'll do the same for you.

Get Ranked

All of this would be useless though if you're not the top hit when people search for your name. It's even worse if the top hit when people search for "Chuck Norris" is "chucknorrisucks.com". Grabbing the top spot in Google is not as straightforward as buying a domain name. It takes time and effort to work your way to the top.

Fortunately, getting top billing on name searches is much easier compared to a generic search term. If you've been working on your online profile like the way we discussed earlier, chances are you will own the top spot when it comes to searches for your name and you will likely also have the other top links on that page pointing to profiles and sites under your name.

Update Often (Optional)

If you have the time and inclination, you can make the front page of your site into a blog. This will keep your site on the top of searches for your name as well as giving potential employers some reading material that showcases your skill and talent. Take note though that you will have to update this often to be relevant since a stale blog might give the wrong impression that you don't finish what you started.

Your brand is an integral part of your identity so make sure it remains untarnished and reputable in everyone's eyes. Pretty soon, all your work on building your network and increasing your online reputation will lead you to that top spot you've been aiming for.