

The Connected U

Case study overview

The production of 16 case studies has confirmed our thinking and commitment to the idea of The Connected U – the importance for students and academics of developing and maintaining a professional online profile for their employability.

We spoke to employers, alumni, students, academic staff and advisers, paying particular attention to recent graduates who were able to recount how their engagement with employability activities and LinkedIn in particular had paid off for them.

Collectively our respondents confirm the strong benefits to students and staff of habitually engaging in and maintaining their LinkedIn profile and offer suggestions for how to do this well. The article reports on the key messages from our respondents.

Employers

James Craven (Professional Headhunter, Sagar Wright) has recognised a shift in the way that social media is used by professionals and how recruiters are increasingly relying on LinkedIn to research and source candidates. He says, “It is important that when graduates are looking for jobs that they understand how important social media now is to that process.”



James urges graduates to take control of their digital footprint. “I’ve heard stories of employers researching candidates and declining them on the basis that they didn’t have a LinkedIn profile.”

Kathryn Palmer (Content Marketing Executive, Emerald Group Publishing) graduated from Sheffield Hallam University in Creative Writing before joining the academic publishers, Emerald Group. She understands the value of having a professional online presence and how LinkedIn is a platform for demonstrating professional identity. She recognises that the Summary, Headline description and Recommendations form the most crucial aspect of a profile. “LinkedIn is a community of like-minded professionals that you can get in touch with on a very easy, person-to-person basis, which you don’t get anywhere else.” She points out that, “Social media offers a real opportunity for you to understand the values of a company.”



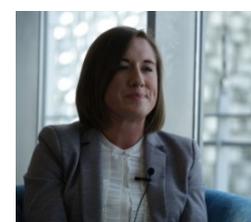
She advises students to develop the habit of checking your profile regularly - “Update it when you’ve done anything new and do a good revamp once a year.”

Greg Thompson (Education Liaison Coordinator, Financial & Legal Skills Partnership) says, “You should represent yourself on LinkedIn as you would want an employer to see you in person.” Students should also reach out and connect with senior managers in their chosen field. While he recognises this can be intimidating, he encourages students to set aside nerves and begin to establish a professional network that will be of benefit to them in the future.



Alumni

Natalie Coaten (Marketing Specialist, IBM) Natalie began working for IBM after completing her studies at Sheffield Hallam University. She discusses the importance of distinguishing the purpose of LinkedIn in comparison to other social networking sites. She reflects on the benefits of using LinkedIn during her placement year and how she used it as a research tool to prepare for interviews. Her LinkedIn habit continues in her current role where she uses it as a networking website. “Networking on LinkedIn is so important... before I'd even got to the interview I'd secured a reference that had gone to the managing director and had been able to prep myself by speaking to someone in the company... I was actually offered the job right there and then.”



Martyn Robotham (Applied Computing graduate) spoke about the first impression you present to an employer using LinkedIn. He says, “Your photo on LinkedIn is equivalent to the first impression you give at an interview - it has to be professional.”



Martyn, like others, made the key point that it is never too early to start your profile. Building a profile throughout university created a platform that enabled him to demonstrate his recommendations to his prospective, and now current, employer.

Velcho Aleksandrov (Marketing graduate), having completed a yearlong placement at IBM as Social Business and Collaboration Lead, Velcho has gained an understanding of how the corporations use LinkedIn. “Employers will look at every platform and channel that you have.” Conversely he points out, “If you want to be an employee of that company, you have to understand who they are.”



He reflects on how he used LinkedIn while on his course. “You can see the backgrounds of your tutors and what areas of knowledge they have.” He talks about how it is important, during your course, to build a relationship with tutors and to cultivate that connection. This helps a student to demonstrate their ability to develop professional relationships.

In marketing terms he says, “It’s like marketing a product; you can’t force somebody to buy it, you can only show them the benefits.”

Jonny Douglas (graduate and director of MADE with DESIGN) graduated from Sheffield Hallam in Product Design, setting up his own company, MADE with DESIGN, a year later. He offers an insight into using LinkedIn as both a creative and business-focused individual for finding collaborators for his creative projects. “Everyone has a personal brand; LinkedIn is one way of showcasing that brand.” He talks about ascertaining how many degrees of separation lie between you and the interesting people you find on LinkedIn and how this is helpful to gaining an introduction.



We asked respondents how easy it is to manage their profile amongst everything else they have to do. Many spoke of developing a LinkedIn habit, Jonny said, “It might just be two minutes on

the bus or five minutes when I'm waiting for a meeting, but I do regularly check LinkedIn, mostly to keep up with connection requests."

Adam Beck (Graphic Design graduate) highlighted how, for some students, employability is not cool. "My friends laughed at me when I said I was going to the careers service's social media networking workshops. But three months later, I was employed in Berlin, working in a multinational agency with clients such as BMW, MINI, and Panasonic as a direct result of a contact I'd made on LinkedIn."



Adam explored the idea of networking to unlock hidden, unadvertised opportunities.

Adam's experience of using LinkedIn demonstrates how it can expand your network of contacts and help you to access unadvertised opportunities.

Melissa Timmins (Communications Officer, NHS) joined LinkedIn in her first year at university. She found that once she established her profile she developed the habit of updating it as she began to search for a placement. Being able to fill in her profile was a useful way of logging her experience and it also increased her confidence. "I developed my LinkedIn profile and began to analyse my previous work experience and the skills university had given me. It made me believe in myself!"



Students

Smita Poojary (International MBA student) explains how LinkedIn allows students to capitalise on opportunities from around the world. She offers advice on the key features an employer looks for on a LinkedIn profile, often before calling in a candidate for an interview. She also clarifies how, as a professional, LinkedIn becomes a way to seek advice from global industry experts.



"LinkedIn is one of the apps I use daily in order to stay updated on new job openings, changes in industry, grow my professional network and stay updated on latest management changes."

Smita discovered that she could access university rankings and recommendations on LinkedIn before applying for her course in order to make an informed decision and as an International

student she acknowledges that a professional online presence is crucial when seeking internship and employment opportunities from around the world.

Academic staff

Sue Beckingham (Educational Developer, faculty TEL Lead and Lecturer) is well-known across the sector through her social media presence. She says, “LinkedIn is essentially my digital rolodex” and talks about how LinkedIn has helped her to develop her career. She recounts how having a well-developed LinkedIn profile has led to many professional opportunities beyond the university including being invited to keynote internationally.



As a lecturer she says that showcasing projects and setting up groups are instrumental to professional development and effective teaching practice. Finally she points out that potential students or parents of students now search for the profile of tutors and so it’s important for academics to detail their professional achievements.

Michelle Blackburn (Lecturer in Student Engagement and Employment Lead) understands the benefit of using LinkedIn as a professional tool. She discusses the difficulties she had with LinkedIn but also the advantages that it provides for her students and for her own professional standing.



“If somebody like me, an old fogey can create a profile, then so can anyone else.” She decided to create a profile to show her students how they could use it. “In my very first lecture I always say ‘go and join LinkedIn.’”

Using LinkedIn has now become a habit. “If there’s a conference I’ve just gone to then it goes straight onto LinkedIn. A book chapter - the reference goes on to LinkedIn.” It takes just two minutes to complete that simple task, yet it has an immeasurable effect on your professional standing.”

Anne Nortcliffe (Programme Leader, Industrial Collaborative Engineering, and Placement Tutor) has an interesting network of connections to cover the range of her role. She is always on the lookout for new connections. “If I meet somebody for the first time, I

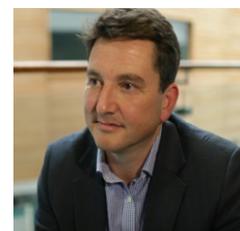


immediately find them on LinkedIn and connect to them.” In her programme role Anne uses LinkedIn as her own ‘port-of-call’ when searching for speakers from industry to engage her current students.

Anne Doncaster (Lecturer in Digital Media Production and creative practitioner) understands the benefits that connections provide both to her freelance projects and her teaching practice. In the case study she discusses her policy on accepting connection requests from students and networking on LinkedIn. She sees Facebook as, “a personal network of friends and family, whereas my network on LinkedIn is very professional so I don’t have any problems letting students link up with me.” The benefit of connecting to students is the ability to see what they’ve gone on to do. Regular updates from alumni allow her to remain aware of a graduate’s career history. This enables her to remain in contact and call graduates in to give presentations to current students.



Andrew Hirst (Teaching Fellow in Work-Based Learning) discusses the value of LinkedIn to build educational rapport with students. He says, “Students are proud that they’ve been endorsed by an academic and that’s an important aspect of teaching.” He also notes it enables him to access the latest sector information on LinkedIn which contributes to his teaching practice. He says that creating links to academic work on LinkedIn benefits his professional standing. “Lecture slides can be published directly onto your LinkedIn profile, using ...SlideShare, so it’s useful to demonstrate what you’ve been doing.”



Advisors

Rachel Firth (Senior Careers Adviser) meets many students that seek advice about their LinkedIn profiles and offers pointers that can help them catch the attention of employers. She offers plenty of useful advice on:

- customising your headline
- writing successful summaries
- completing your profile
- being specific about your career aims
- gain inspiration from alumni and using the Find Alumni feature
- how LinkedIn works for creative students.



She notes that many current “students have used LinkedIn to successfully secure work experience.”

Conclusion

Drawing upon the wide range of experience amongst the project's respondents, The Connected U project confirms how important it is for all students to develop a LinkedIn profile at the earliest opportunity, and from this to establish habitual engagement in their Personal & Professional Development Planning. For students this is an important dimension of managing their digital footprint - without a LinkedIn profile our study suggests you effectively become hidden from professional life.

This applies to our academic staff too - as it does to any professional. When this is connected to the expectation of teaching staff to remain in good standing, developing and maintaining a LinkedIn profile, or a strong presence on academic social media sites like Academia.edu or Research Gate, is now a sign of one's professional commitment.



Written by Andrew Middleton

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