

## **Building a Web of Influence**

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I'VE always thought I'd make a great chief executive of a Fortune 500 company. I have strong organizational skills, for instance, and I would be happy to slash redundant divisions to raise the stock price.

As for logistical aptitude? On a single day last week, I juggled several strategic initiatives that included baking a three-layer birthday cake, interviewing a historian, shoveling out my daughter's bedroom in preparation for a visit from my parents, and nursing my husband through the flu ("Fever still 101.5," he weakly announced at regular intervals).

That all happened before lunch.

So far, the only thing standing between me and my own Gulfstream is any kind of offer from Exxon Mobil. Or even Microsoft.

My problem could be networking. Or more specifically, a lack of it. I work in a basement where my only business contacts are my dogs, which appear unimpressed by my résumé. And on rare occasions when I venture aboveground to attend an event with the sort of people who should be only too willing to offer stock options in return for my grandmother's chocolate cake recipe, I get tongue-tied. I blush.

On the Internet, however, no one can tell you're self-conscious. Business networking sites — from the five-year-old site LinkedIn.com to an upstart called NotchUp.com — attract members by stating that reluctant self-promoters like me can make contacts, and even get job interviews, fairly passively.

"People who hire often don't follow the old listing model, where they're hoping someone qualified will see it and contact them," said Kay Luo, a spokeswoman for LinkedIn. "They go out and look. They do keyword searches. By putting information online, you make it possible for people looking for your expertise to find you."

I decided to give it a try. A few weeks ago, I reactivated a long-dormant account I had at LinkedIn, and found myself keeping company with more than 19 million members who also are building far-flung networks in the hopes of advancing their careers.

I also put my résumé online at NotchUp, which promises to connect me to recruiters and headhunters who will pay me for going on a job interview. How could anyone resist that premise?

At LinkedIn, I encountered a far bigger crowd than when I was last there four years ago, when it was a fledgling network. This time I quickly ran across a large number of colleagues, old friends and business acquaintances. Within days I was checking my LinkedIn home page for updates as compulsively as I visit Facebook.

I checked my "network updates" to see who among my contacts recently had added new contacts and whether those were people I wanted to poach for my own network. And LinkedIn instantly alerted me when others viewed my profile — "10 people in the last 2 weeks" — and gave me hints about their identities. For instance, viewers included "reporter at Bloomberg," "editor at Chicago Tribune" and — offering hope that the Exxon job could one day come through — "Owner in the Staffing and Recruiting Industry."

I threw myself into passive networking. After accepting several invitations to become what the site describes as a "trusted contact," I sent out dozens more of my own. Before I knew it I had created a business network that included 99 connections (first-degree contacts), more than 10,000 friends of friends and more than 700,000 third-degree contacts.

It was fun. I learned that a neighbor who lives a few blocks away and who owns a book-production business has a list of 280 first-degree contacts that includes more top editors, creative directors and publishers than work for Condé Nast.

But what could I do with this fascinating tidbit? The only immediate benefit was being able to lord it over the dogs. Informed that I had gone over their heads to forge new relationships in the business world, they responded by walking to the door to remind me that my real job is to let them out into the yard 27 times a day.

I wasn't getting any nibbles from NotchUp, where the site had recommended I set a job interview price of \$400 based on my experience and income. I hoped the problem wasn't me; the first employer to use the site last week after it opened to headhunters described NotchUp as "a brilliant premise" after he had found three promising candidates for top-level engineering positions. "I offered \$900, the price NotchUp set, to interview the most interesting guy," said Kimbal Musk, the chief executive of Me.dium, a company in Boulder, Colo., that creates Internet applications. "If you go through professional recruiters to find these people, you pay \$50,000."

Was I being too passive? I called Ms. Luo of LinkedIn for advice. "Let me log into your account," she said. I heard clicking.

She recommended editing the address of my LinkedIn profile Web page to add my full name, a change she said would increase my page's rank in search results if anyone searched for me at Google. (This strategy worked, to a point; my profile still appeared lower on Google's results than an item from the gossip site Gawker, which described me as a "super creepy adult.")

Ms. Luo also had advice regarding my specialties, one of which was "still able to recite most of 'Annabel Lee' memorized in fourth grade."

"You will want to add keywords — maybe 'Styles writer' — so people who are searching for that expertise can find you," she said.

"Actually, I was considering a new direction," I said. "I was thinking of running a Fortune 500 company."

Ms. Luo silently considered this before saying, "Usually, the way to change is through people you know who trust you. Say a former boss has a wife who works in another industry that you want to get into. You can ask him to tell her, 'Hey, Michelle doesn't have experience but she did this for me and knows this and I think she would be a great hire.' "

This sounded plausible, if I were the sort of person who could ask a former boss — or anyone I'd ever met— for that kind of favor without dropping dead of embarrassment.

Slowly, I began to see concrete signs of the value of passive networking. One day, a first-degree contact asked me to introduce her through LinkedIn to one of my other first-degree contacts, a writer at The New York Times who my friend thought might be interested in a book she wrote. She phoned soon after to say thank you; the writer had responded right away.

A few days later, the same newspaper writer coincidentally forwarded an introduction to me from one of her first-degree contacts, a magazine editor looking for a humor writer.

Meanwhile, another first-degree contact told me her daughter had landed an interview after learning at LinkedIn that the interviewer and she went to the same college.

Even Coye Cheshire, a researcher for the school of information at the University of California, Berkeley, had positive LinkedIn experiences to report when I phoned him.

"I have friends, particularly in the tech industry, who absolutely think LinkedIn is essential as a new way to distribute résumé information," he said. "My wife, a photographer, finds a lot of

utility there as well, not necessarily directly related to getting a particular gig, but as something that points her to information that could be useful down the road."

In other words, don't expect to realize the value of one's business network immediately.

In my case, I'm too busy now to change jobs. But someday, after my dogs learn to turn doorknobs with their paws and my husband's cough finally breaks up, I will be ready.

I only hope that by then, the Exxon recruiter I see listed among my third-degree LinkedIn contacts will be searching for someone with expertise in "weekly allowance arbitration."

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