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Online networking sites can be useful for work

Most people are using them to build contacts or even to look for jobs

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USING Facebook to keep in touch with work contacts may sound like a slacker's excuse for spending time on the Internet.

But more and more people are finding online networks a useful way to expand their pool of friends and acquaintances, and even scope out job prospects.

A walking example is Mr Anthony Leong, 31, who has taken his job search online through electronic networks such as Facebook and Web messaging program MSN Messenger.

Although he initially used these networks to keep in touch with friends, he realised they were also handy tools for the corporate world. He has asked his "trusted network" of friends to help him find a job by introducing him to their own friends and providing a reference.

"Networking is important in every aspect of life," he said. "You never know when you might hit the jackpot with a huge pool of contacts at your fingertips."

Human resource firms are seeing more people like Mr Leong, who use social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn in their professional lives.

Most of them are part of the Generation Y workforce, who view these sites as an essential part of their daily lives and think it natural to extend their use into the workplace, said Mr James Mendes, managing director for recruitment specialist Alexander Mann Solutions.

But even the older generation is jumping on the bandwagon, he added. The biggest perk of these sites: They are free.

The more people sign on to these networks, the more effective the websites become as a tool to manage a large base of contacts, said Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of corporate services at The GMP Group, a human resource consultancy.

This behaviour has not gone unnoticed by companies, which are getting in on the action by, for example, using social networking sites to host recruitment drives, he added.

But not all sites are equal. Facebook is more of a casual social network that helps people stay in touch with friends and family, while a site like LinkedIn is meant for professionals to mingle.

As with every corporate situation, there is proper etiquette to be observed on social networking sites, said Mr Goh.

Obvious no-nos include bad-mouthing your current or previous employers on your website profile, and openly searching for another job while you are still employed, he added.

Companies and individuals alike often make the mistake of providing too much information online, said Mr Mendes. "Keeping content brief, thoughtful and insightful ensures a captive audience."

To maximise the value of online networks, serious job-seekers should update their profiles regularly and carefully, Mr Goh said. "Some companies are using networking sites to find candidates. Keeping your profile updated can increase your employment opportunities."

Employers also look at the interests you list on your profile, as well as the personal information you disclose. Choosing what to make public can affect your chances of getting a job offer, he added.

The photos you post, the personal information you disclose, and even the other sites you are linked to can compromise your image and job opportunities, he said.

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FACEBOOK

■ What it is: The online networking site that started it all, Facebook - at facebook.com - began as a network for students at Harvard. Opened up to the public in 2006, it ballooned into the world's largest social networking site.

■ Who uses it: There are more than 200 million active users, half of whom log on at least once a day, site statistics show. Though it started life as a college network, those aged 35 or older form its fastest-growing group of new members.

■ How to use it: You need to provide a valid e-mail address, gender and birth date. Users can upload photos and videos, share Web links and play games, among other things.

Facebook allows members to decide how much information they want to make public, and to which groups of people.

■ Good for: Creating a comprehensive database of those you know, and keeping up to date with their professional and personal lives.

LINKEDIN

- What it is: Located at linkedin.com, the website touts itself as a “professional network” that connects businessmen and helps people find jobs. Access to the site is free, but “premium” paid versions with tools for reaching members beyond your own network will cost US\$24.95 (S\$36.40) a month onwards.
- Who uses it: More than 41 million people are on LinkedIn, half of whom are from outside the United States, according to the website. The site also says its members include executives from all Fortune 500 companies.
- How to use it: Once you’re in, you can create a profile and update your educational and work background so that interested recruiters can contact you. The site also has a jobs section where you can search for openings.
- Good for: Finding a job, viewing the employment details of your contacts, and keeping in touch with people you meet at work.

TWITTER

- What it is: Twitter.com, which has been ranked as the third most popular social network in the world in terms of monthly visitors, is slightly different from the other networking sites. Instead of creating elaborate profiles about themselves, Twitter’s users “micro-blog” by posting frequent one-line updates on their current thoughts and actions.
- Who uses it: About six million people visit the site every month, but there are no numbers available on the total member pool. Research firm Nielsen Online has said 13.9 million people signed up in March, but its findings showed that 60per cent of Twitter users spend just a month on the site before quitting.
- How to use it: You just need an e-mail address to create a Twitter account, after which you can start posting messages of up to 140 characters each. In order for Twitter to have any meaning, users need to subscribe to other members’ updates by choosing to “follow” them, which means whenever they put up a message, you will be notified. In return, they can choose to be your “followers”.
- Good for: Instant updates on the lives of your contacts, and to stay on top of news. Twitter is one of the best sources for quick news flashes.