Locked Out

of

Linked in

A Professional Identity Analysis of LinkedIn Users

"We connect hundreds of millions of people, ultimately, around the world by connecting talent with opportunity."

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CEO of LinkedIn

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Abstract

"LinkedIn allows users to create a profile based on their professional affiliation and connect to professional contacts within and outside their professional networks (Papacharissi)."

We are consultants for LinkedIn reporting on college age LinkedIn activity and proposing effective marketing techniques as a way to reach out to the college-age demographic. Through interviews and analysis of our participant's discourse and general use of their LinkedIn profiles, we explored how our participants manage their professional identity on their profiles as well as how LinkedIn actively aids college students in their transition to their intended industry. We found that our participants did not have the knowledge and/or experience to effectively managing their LinkedIn profiles, partly because of the fact that LinkedIn is not geared towards college-age users. Through further research and speculation, we formulated solutions both LinkedIn and college students could apply in order for college students to effectively manage their identity on their LinkedIn profiles.

Literature Review

In the past decade, there has been an influx of traffic on the Internet primarily due to the creation of social networking sites such as Myspace, Xangya and in more recent years, Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn. Due to the increase of users on the World Wide Web it is important and necessary that there is a concrete, yet broad definition of our newly established alternative way of communication:

> "Social networking sites are defined as: [W]eb-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd and Ellison, 2007)"

The world is at the users finger tips, we can not only acquire information and scholarly knowledge from the Internet but also personal information about other individuals. Social networking sites allow their users to post personal information such as city of residence, place of employment, educational background, hobbies, and favorites such as movies, books, and television shows; users can post photos and videos of themselves or their friends and share links they find interesting. This sharing activity is done not through face-to-face communication but rather within the "bounded system" of social networking sites.

In fact, "online interaction frequently supplemented or served as an alternative to face-to-face-interaction in way that had positive effects on social capital (Hampton, 2002; Hampton and Wellman, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003;Wellman et al., 2001)." Social networking sites have allowed every individual, with access to the Internet, the ability to be connected to their family, friends, and collegues in a matter seconds.

As Jeff Weine, the Cheif Executive Officer at LinkedIn- the only business oreinted social networking site- stated in Remarks at a Question-and-Answer Session with LinkedIn Participants, the important thing are the changes in human behavior that are a direct result to our use of social networking sites. The way in which we go online and represent our identities, stay connected to friends, family and colleagues, and of course, share information, knowledge, ideas and opinions (Weine 1). It is undeniable that social networking sites are changing the way we live and more importantly the way we, as a society, work.

In May of 2007 LinkedIn was founded as a social networking site geared to business professionals of all industries and titles with the tagline that 'Relationships Matter'. Since LinkedIn's establishment the site has reached out to 50 million members in 200 countries, including members for all Fortune 500 companies (Janusz 57). According to Zizi Papacharissi, "LinkedIn employs an architecture that provides its members with a 'professional sense of place', thus enabling and suggesting professional modes of interaction: referrals, introduction, networking, professionally related questions, answers and conversation." Unlike most social networking sites, users monitor their identity in a more professional manner through their use of discourse and connections made.

Upon LinkedIn's establishment the majority of the Internet population was under the assumption LinkedIn was only designed for a select group of users: business professionals. But in a recent study conducted by Anderson Anayltics results showed that LinkedIn has moved beyond this stereotype. "Its members span a wide range of ages, industries, job titles, and education and income titles (Bulik 1). According to Dan Shapero, the Buisness Services Director at LinkedIn, "It showed us that LinkedIn has really become a tool

for all information workers. Some people believe that LinkedIn is a place for job hunters, some believe its a place for serious networkers and other think its a way to keep in touch with old colleagues."

Even though there LinkedIn has broadened its array of users there are still characteristics that further bring together LinkedIn users together but also further seperate them. After analyzing over 70,000 LinkedIn profiles the researchers at Anderson Anayltics organized LinkedIn users into five seperate categories. These categories include: Exploring Options, Senior Executives, Savvy Network, Late Adaptors, Decision Makers.

The users who are exploring their options are the members who are seeking new job opportuities. "Some 70% are employed full-time but looking, and the majority of their LinkedIn settings focus on positions or career (Bulik 1)". This leaves the other 30% of members in this category to either be unemployed or still attending a college or university. The most popular category are the nine million savvy net workers who average sixty-one connections and are considered to have a "great rank" on the social networking site. Following the savvy net workers are the senior executives who are comprimised of mostly males and are considered the most happily employed group. "More senior executives joined for business-contact networking than the other groups (Bulik 2).

And then we have the 'late adoptors' and the 'decision makers'. The 'late adoptors' joined LinkedIn because their friends asked them to, therefore, connections and networking are not a high priority (Bulik 1). Therefore, they have a limited number of connections, people who they know personally, making their profile less persuasive. According to the researchers, the decision makers "this group also logs in to LinkedIn more often than non-decision makers and tends to have more connections, averaging between 40 and 50. Fifty-nine percent of decision makers say they are the first to try out new tech devices, software and/or websites" (Bulik 2).

Even though LinkedIn users are sorted into categories based on their level of professionalism on their profiles, the business site still calls for the users to manage themselves differently than they would other social networking sites. This is primarily because LinkedIn has a restricted profile in which its users can manage what Papacharissi calls 'face'.

"The performance associated with self-presentation can be understood as 'face' and individuals possess several 'faces' depending on the situational context" (Papacharissi 202). Face in this context is limited by the profile options and the services offered by LinkedIn =, opposed to other social networking sites. Zizi Papacharissi goes on to say that, "given the level of control over verbal and non-verbal cues in a variety of online contexts, individuals may put together controlled performances that 'give off' exactly the 'face' that they intend." According to Papacharissi, connections are the easiest way to presents ones level of 'face' on LinkedIn.

Papacharissi defines the term "connections" in the most eloquent way possible by stating,

> LinkedIn users usually affiliate with their work network and use the site to maintain a list of contact details for people they know and trust within their line of work, termed 'connections'. This network of contacts is employed to maintain communication, trade information and refer each other. The site employs a 'gated-access approach', meaning that connecting with others requires either a pre-existing relationship or the intervention of a mutual contact, which is a mechanism designed to facilitate trust among members. (204)

"'The key to social networking tools is to have lots of connections,' says Guy Kawasaki, 'the original Macintosh evangelist. It's a numbers game. The more people who are connected to you, the more opportunities you have" (Janusz 58). Professionals are looking to be informed and persuaded while they are persuing the millions of LinkedIn profiles, and according to Janusz, that is what other business affiliated connections are seeking.

Executive Summary

As outside research consultants for LinkedIn, we set out to understand how college-age users manage their professional identities on the social networking site, LinkedIn. Through interviews and artifact analysis of participant's LinkedIn profiles, we set out to explore the following questions: What kind of language do these college students use when managing their profiles? How frequently, extensively and proactively are participants involved in maintaining their LinkedIn account? We found that through the examination and application of the previous questions, our main focus became the following: How does LinkedIn actively aid college students in their transition to their intended industry?

LINKEDIN AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In gathering this data, we have gained valuable insights into the management of professional identity on LinkedIn by college-age students who are preparing for professional careers. Certain discourse used on the participants profiles as well as time spent managing their LinkedIn accounts reflected the usefulness of social networking to these participants. Upon conducting interviews and analysis of our participant's profiles, we found that most of our participants were not entirely sure how to manage their identities effectively on their LinkedIn profiles. As a result, the college level students are missing out on a valuable resource that can not only enhance their level of professionalism but also their ability to network in their intended field. The participants therefore spent little time and effort managing their LinkedIn profiles. The rest of our study involved researching and formulating reasons why our college-age participants were not effectively managing their profiles, and then formulating what actions LinkedIn could take to solve these problems, as well as what the participants could do to better manage their identity on their LinkedIn profiles.

THE LINKEDIN DILEMMA

Our focus was to understand the factors that aided in preventing college-age users from fully utilizing and reaping the benefits of the site. Some of the reasons that we found which prevented our participants from benefiting from the site are the following:

- LinkedIn doesn't seem as useful during college as it does in the post-college world

- LinkedIn seems to be useful only to certain majors and therefore industries.

- LinkedIn sends conflicting messages.

- The participants aren't necessarily ready to enter the business world.

- The participants want room, within their social networking site, to express themselves.

- The participants didn't have guidance and/or knowledge to effectively manage their identities in such ways that deemed them potentially valuable professional connections.

SOLUTIONS

We then took these factors and conducted further research to investigate how LinkedIn could market this demographic better through effective marketing techniques. The solutions we proposed include the following:

· The Learning Center page on LinkedIn should be more easily accessible.

· LinkedIn should expand upon their educational section.

-Establishing a tutorial

-Re design the overall profile layout

-Re design the 'edit' page for a more complete idea of the finished profile

-Enable a 'chat' function within the site

-College students should utilize on campus opportunities to increase their level of professionalism

· The participants should actively engage themselves in campus activities

-Searching for internships through LinkedIn will create more traffic and a better understanding of the site

Each of these solutions is specific to helping the college-age LinkedIn user to better establish a professional identity on their profiles. Our research team believes that through each of these solutions college-age users will have a clearer understanding of setting up and managing their profiles, which will lead them to have a better sense of identity and agency, therefore making them a more valuable potential professional connection.   To examine how college students manage their identities and how they utilize the social networking site, LinkedIn, we conducted an exploratory study relying on verbal data generated from semi-structured interviews with college students. After obtaining clearance from our institutional review board, we recruited a convenience sample of 5 college students at Ball State University.

Methods

Our intent was to generate data to support assessment of college students' use of LinkedIn, which is why all participants have a common institutional link. Though the participants all currently lived in the same geographical area, attended the same university, and had similar majors, we felt that data from this sample could still provide useful insight into the management of professional identity on LinkedIn, despite obvious limits on generalizability. We conducted 5-15 minute interviews with all participants about their use of LinkedIn. After the interviews, we collected information from the participants' LinkedIn profiles.

INTERVIEW
The questions were as follows:

Background

How did you hear about LinkedIn?
What attracted you to the site?
Why did you establish a LinkedIn profile?
How often do you use LinkedIn?

On the Personal Use of the Site

How has LinkedIn helped you professionally?
What features of LinkedIn do you use the most?
Do you find that most of your professional connections can be found on LinkedIn?
Do you feel that LinkedIn is a necessary tool in your industry?
Do you use LinkedIn differently than you use other social networking sites? Why?
Did you expect something more out of the site?

ANALYSIS

The interview data and artifacts were coded via a combination of descriptive and process coding techniques (Saldana, 2009). First, the transcripts were separated into single sentences (a subject plus its verb and complements). It was at the level of the sentence that the participants described the situated interaction of actors and actions that constituted our analysis of the participants in the study and the rhetoric used to describe their use of LinkedIn. This process of coding, supplemented by analytic memo writing, was employed in order to generate themes and core categories from the empirical data collected during fieldwork, leading toward empirically derived assessments of LinkedIn.

Findings

Our findings consist of what was gathered during interviews and artifact analysis of our participant's LinkedIn profiles, looking at language use, the participant's time spent managing their LinkedIn accounts, as well as general design choices on the LinkedIn site. We then analyzed and coded our information in order to find the five common themes we decided to focus on. These themes are the following:

- LinkedIn isn't geared to college students, but will be beneficial later in life

- Our participants do not know how to manage their profiles

- Only certain college students have profiles (depending on their majors)

- LinkedIn sends conflicting messages

- College students want room within their social networking site to express themselves

Participant Profiles

Leslie
-Female
-Age:20
-Major: Advertising
Mark
-Male
-Age: 22
-Major: Creative Writing
Kasey
-Female
-Age: 20
-Major: Public Relations and Advertising
Holly
-Female
-Age: 21
-Major: Public Relations
Chris
-Male
-Age:19
-Major: Telecommunications

I. LinkedIn Isn't geared towards college students, but will be beneficial later in life

Beginning with our analysis of the site, LinkedIn's options for setting up a profile are not ideal for college students. We found when setting up a LinkedIn account, LinkedIn asks it's users "When did you graduate?" It is evident that the question is geared towards college graduates. We also found that LinkedIn did not have

an easily accessible tool to understand how to set up an account on the site. Their main learning tool is located in a section that many of our participants seemed to be ignorant of. LinkedIn offers it's users the option of having different types of accounts. In order to have a better job search option, you have to up-grade to the Premium account, which requires payment. At the time of the profile analysis, all of our partici-pants had basic profiles. We also found that the side bar advertising depends on what jobs or compa-nies you have listed. We questioned the usefulness and relevance of this tool to our users.

Upon interviewing our participants, we were able to get a first-hand account of how they use LinkedIn. We found that our participants did not manage their accounts very often, only getting on their accounts an average of once every few weeks, and most of our participants admitted that they will most likely use it more in their later years, and that they have their accounts set up in anticipation of using it more after college. Holly, one of our participants and a P.R Major at Ball State University said, "If when I do start actively looking for a job... it doesn't help more then I'll be disappointed, but at this point I haven't really utilized it." Some of our participants also said that they were not actively looking for jobs and internships, or not sure of their intended major or industry. Analysis of participants' profiles revealed more of their neglect of their accounts. Though all of our participants used their full names instead of short-forms of their names that they may use in every day life in an effort to make their profiles professional, there was obvious neglect of use on all of their sites. Many of our participant's didn't have a photo for their profile and their connections consist-ed primarily of other students rather than professionals. We found the following reasons lent to our partici-pant's lack of knowledge on how to effectively manage their profiles in a professional way.

II. LinkedIn Sends Conflicting Messages

Though LinkedIn is geared towards users with a developed sense of professionalism, the site does not always seem to present itself professionally. We see this in the options LinkedIn gives users to connect their profiles to other social networking sites. LinkedIn allows it's users to add personal websites to their LinkedIn profile such as Facebook, Twitter, online portfolios or other personal websites. Upon artifact analysis of our participant's profiles, we noticed that the majority of our participants have their Twitter and Facebook accounts connected to their LinkedIn profiles, which allows status updates to appear in the LinkedIn news feed on their homepage. Since Twitter and Facebook are personal sites, linking personal, perhaps unprofes-sional information can send conflicting messages from LinkedIn to their college users.

III. Only Certain Industries Use LinkedIn

There are certain industries that are more professional than others, industries in which a professional would find a LinkedIn account necessary. This became apparent when we were interviewing our participants. Among all of our participants, those with Advertising and Telecommunications majors updated their profiles the most often, including one participant with a Telecommunications major who updates his profile every week. The other participants update their profiles every couple of weeks and the participant with a Creative Writing major updates his every couple of months. Kasey, an Advertising and P.R. Major at Ball State Univer-sity told us, "In one of my classes part of the requirements is to make a LinkedIn account." All three partici-pants with Advertising or Marketing majors said they had to get LinkedIn profiles for one of their major classes and all three of them said that their professor's helped them better understand the functions of the site. On the other hand, our creative writing participant, Mark, said, "A lot of places I would just submit work and it wouldn't be just a resume it would be samples of my writing instead." He never used his LinkedIn account because he knew he would be submitting written works through the mail or online submissions; not searching for companies to work on because his intended industry involves doing freelance work.

IV. No Creativity for College Students

Upon examination of the site as well as feedback from interviews with our participants, we found that

LinkedIn doesn't allow college students enough room to display their creativity or their day-to-day identity because it calls for a new identity management system that is strictly tailored for the professional individual, presumably for post-college graduates. Upon interviewing our participants, we discovered that our participants don't fully understand or were not aware of this system because they don't have the professional experience. Chris, a Telecommunications major, told us, "I don't quite have the experience to know what more I could get out of the site." If they do have the experience, then they have only been in that environment for a short time, as in a summer internship. Since a LinkedIn profile is based on an individual's resume and the participants professional connections are going to be looking at their profiles, it is important for an individual's profile to stand out. In the case of LinkedIn, there isn't much creative room for college students to express skills and experience specific to their college career.

In the past, LinkedIn has been a website geared towards users who are trained in a specific field that high-

Discussion

lights their positive skill set. Initially, LinkedIn limited its profile because it was geared towards post-college professionals which greatly excludes college students who are working hard to enter their intended professional field. Even though college students do not have the all of the refined or adept qualifications that their experienced and integrated post-graduate competitors do, they are evolving into eventual business men and women. College students need guidance and wisdom instilled in them by professors and professionals alike.

Therefore, there does not have to be a divided misunderstanding between LinkedIn and their growing college demographic. As consultants hired by LinkedIn to observe and improve the site, we have found that both parties can change their online behavior in order to better utilize the site.

LinkedIn Solutions

I. The Learning Center

The page that spells out the features of the site, The Learning Center, is an extremely useful tool to better orient a new users - of any demographic, profession, age, race, and gender- to the features, job opportunities available, mobile options, and the questions that have already been asked and provided with answers. It is essential that every social networking site provides its users with the sites intention and purpose to the world wide web.

However, the Learning Center is hidden within the LinkedIn tabs that appear on the menu bar. The page is located under the "More" tab and is the second option to choose from. None of our participants were aware that this function and feature existed within the site. If our participants, and in turn the rest of the LinkedIn beginner user base, was able to easily access the Learning Center page, this would no longer hinder the existing slow orientation process to the site.

II. Tutorial

Many social networking sites offer a brief tutorial which walks recently registered users through the broad features of the site and then leaves the user to learn the details as they go. Tutorials are an extremely beneficial tool available when joining a new social networking site because they help to welcome the user to the site by sharing their knowledge of all the aspects of the site.

LinkedIn, however, offers no tutorial to their new users. This sends the message that LinkedIn does not care about their users experience or whether their users feel like they understand and are a true member of the site. If LinkedIn created a tutorial that was available as the new user established a profile, this would narrow the gap between LinkedIn and their either less professional or less technologically savvy users. Web users need to be guided along the initiation process by visually learning about the site. Helpful tips are necessary in educating users about every aspect of a site, which can greatly aid when setting up a profile on a professional network like LinkedIn.

III. Profile Layout

A personal information section, career section, educational section, and interests section within any given social networking site are meant for users to get to know their fellow users that share in the social networking experience. Expressing oneself and connecting is what social networking is firmly based on. LinkedIn is modeled off a traditional resume with the exception that it is an interactive social networking site, with a user's profile also being their resume. However, LinkedIn could be more interactive by updating certain sections of the site.

LinkedIn offers extensive room to explain a particular job title by providing a description box and giving the user room to elaborate on how their presence in the respective company benefited their productivity or revenue. Yet, there is minimal room to explain how one occupied their time during their years at a college or university. This section would be college users'"time to shine" by elaborating on how their skill set may have benefited a club, organization, sports team, or theatre. Instead, the Educational Background information appears at the bottom of the profile, the formality in a traditional resume. However, the business world is constantly changing and LinkedIn, being an interactive professional website, should keep up with it.

More specifically, while a user is establishing a new profile they are asked if they have graduated from a college or university and are provided with numeric boxes informing a viewer of what years they attended school. There is not an additional selection for college students to state that they are still attending school, which completely excludes the college-age user. This piece of information could also be greatly misleading if a job recruiter or potential employer is doing their own research through LinkedIn and comes across this information on a college-user's profile.

Students spend longer than four years in college so expected graduation dates are not accurate. There are enough college students that are still unsure of what they industry they wish to enter and even less sure of what title they want to hold. Therefore, it is not uncommon that college students go through several major and minor changes. Even if they don't change majors they dabble in fields within their industry attempting to find a position in which they can best utilize their qualifications.

IV. Editing Features
A social networking user is looking for ease of access when they edit their personal profile. To a user, it is essential they can see what their whole profile is going too look like to other views. Identity management is important on any social networking site whether it be Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr. A users online profile is meant to resemble their day to day identity summed up in one local page. Facebook, for example, breaks up their profile by topic such as "Personal Interests" or "Previous Job Experiences." Within the topic are sub topics that the user can update allowing them to see the entirety of the section in the review process.
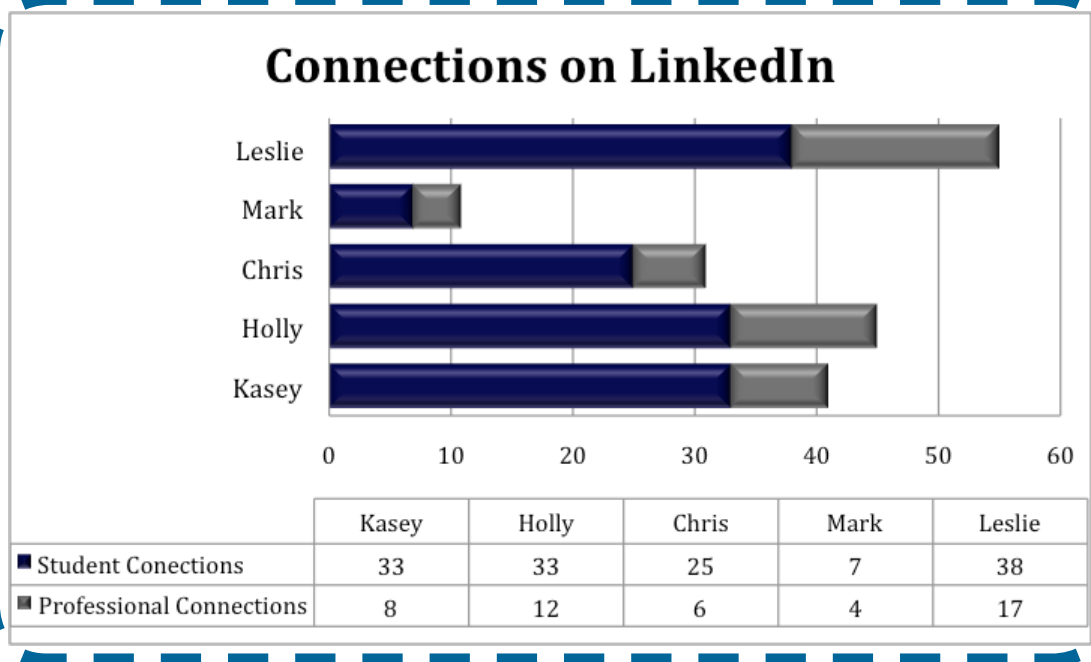
The LinkedIn profile is the opposite of this design, hindering the user of viewing their profile as a collective whole. When the new user is establishing their profile the process is composed of a step by step process which takes up half of the web page. The only way the user knows what order the sections will appear on

their profile is by a numbering system. LinkedIn should not model their edition options off Facebook, however, LinkedIn should take techniques that have proven to be successful and tailor them to their website. This way the LinkedIn users will be able to see the finished product before they click the submit button.

V. Connecting with Users Connections

One of the major ways social networking sites connect their users with one another is by an embedded chat system within the site. This is what the @ symbol functions as for Twitter and why Facebook receives a high amount of Internet traffic. By offering this option on any given social networking site this allows their users to further establish relationships with other established users.

Connections on LinkedIn

	Kasey	Holly	Chris	Mark	Leslie
■ Student Conections	33	33	25	7	38
■ Professional Connections	8	12	6	4	17

LinkedIn does not offer any embedded chat system on the site even though LinkedIn prides itself on their networking system. The only messaging system that is offered on the site is when the users adds a new connection. Additionally, under the More section there is an Answer section where users can post questions to other LinkedIn users. However, like the Learning Section, this feature is hidden within the site. As a result, there aren't many answers to the questions post or a wide variety of questions asked. LinkedIn could expand upon this function by moving the page to the main menu or re designing the page in its entirety. If LinkedIn makes these revisions and adds a chat system this would create more LinkedIn traffic.

Solutions for College Students

Colleges and universities teach students the skills they need in order to enter into their intended industry whether it be Advertising, Marketing, Telecommunications, Creative Writing, Business, or Microbiology.While an educational institution begins to instruct students the business world continues to refine this knowledge. Being apart of the business world requires a new identity management system, one which is intended to be professional in speech, attitude, and appearance. Appropriate norms such as these are only learned and understood within a professional environment.

Therefore, college students should and need to take more initiative in understanding the business world while they don't have to face any extreme consequences that are detrimental to their identity in the professional world.

As consultants it is not only our job to propose ways on how to improve LinkedIn but to also tell its users on how to maintain themselves on the site and give them more necessary tools on how to be appropriate and professional.

I. Take Part in the College Experience
Colleges and universities are established to educate its students so they can be adding to the market place of ideas. Colleges don't just teach students in the classroom by also providing hands on experience, lectures, and activities to make their students more well rounded.

Colleges offer workshops and seminars on how to conduct yourself professionally like in an interview. There are departments within the campus that offer one on one sessions on how to write a resume and a cover letter. More specifically, most professors will be willing to help you by guiding you to an easy transition to your intended industry

II. College Organizations
Colleges pride themselves on the vast number of student organizations to get their students more involved in the college process. What some college students don't realize or understand is that the organization, whether it is a fraternity, sorority, comedy group, or the Philosophy club, is indirectly training them to conduct themselves in a group of people, to give speeches, and to organize a group of their peers while doing something they love.

Part of taking initiative is putting yourself in professional situations, as on campus organizations that double as introductory professional organizations. Many of the students involved in campus organizations hold or have the opportunity to hold leadership positions. Typically, students go through a fair election process by a democratic vote based on speeches student gives. These speeches require students to reflect and vocalize what they feel is their positive skill set and how that skill set can benefit the group. This process is strikingly similar to a job interview and how students conduct themselves on LinkedIn.

Additionally, colleges offer on campus jobs to students which prepares them for more official interviews in the future.

III. Searching for Internships
Typically, the methods students use when looking for an internship is one that involves numerous tabs open within their browser. Ball State students search for internship listings that are specific to their major by a keyword search through an Internet browser. This results in multiple tabs open at once, making for a cluttered computer screen. If the student wishes to email a company about a potential internship then that task creates another tab.

Students forget about LinkedIn as a search engine within a social networking site. The information a viewer needs about a company, or a position, or a job listing is all listed within the site which creates a simplified search system.

If students utilized LinkedIn to help them locate internship opportunities then LinkedIn would become a part of the weekly, daily, or hourly, 'check in' routine.

Further Research

We understand that our study is limited to a small geographical area and a single institution so there are obvious limits of generalizability; therefore, we have various recommendations for studies in the future to further explore this topic. We recommend that the researcher looks at a larger range of LinkedIn users, including more age groups, people from various socio-economic classes, and professionals in

different fields of study.

We also neglected to consider how this particular age group differs from other generations and how that affects their use of LinkedIn. Another study might consider widening the age group for that reason, as well. References

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