3 Benefits and 2 Risks for Nonprofits Leaders Using LinkedIn

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First, the good news. *LinkedIn* is a valuable social media channel where nonprofit leaders can network with one another, recruit volunteers and communicate with donors and other key audience members. But there are risks of using *LinkedIn* that you should be aware of before you jump in.

Here are some of the benefits:

1. **Collaborate with other nonprofits**. According to *LinkedIn*, there are over 87,000 groups focused on nonprofit issues. This means you have access to thousands of people who are facing many of the same issues you face each day. For example, in the “Volunteer Coordinators” group, one member posted the question, “What database do you use for volunteer management?” To post your own questions, select “Groups” from the dropdown search box (the default is “People”) and search by topic for whatever you are researching. Once you find the appropriate group, post your question. Don’t be surprised by the helpful and courteous responses you receive! Because *LinkedIn* is used primarily by the business community, there is a higher level of integrity and responsiveness than there would be in a social network used primarily for entertainment purposes.
2. **Create private work groups**. Many nonprofits manage “closed” groups on *LinkedIn* that require Administrator approval before members are allowed to access the group. Closed groups are great for collaboration and communication amongst a pre-screened list of members. The group “Compass Volunteer Network,” for example, is comprised of MBA alumni from Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, Dartmouth and the University of Chicago. This group provides pro-bono business consulting to nonprofit organizations in the greater DC area. Only alumni from those institutions are permitted to join the group. This keeps the group’s membership laser-focused on the mission of the group.
3. **Network**. The reason most people take the time to fill out profiles on *LinkedIn* is because they are interested in networking. *LinkedIn* is like a trade show, a cocktail party and a job fair rolled into one! Looking for a new job? Search the job listings or enter a specific organization in the search box. Looking to recruit volunteers? Do a key word search for terms like “mentoring” or “youth services” to get access to thousands of people who have included those terms in their profiles. Some nonprofits even use *LinkedIn* to recruit new Board members.

Now that you’re using *LinkedIn* to help you manage your organization, you should be aware that there are risks of using the site which stem from not being aware of the “culture” and expectations of the site’s millions of users.

Risk #1 — Not thanking someone for help. If you post a question in a group or someone otherwise assists you on *LinkedIn*, remember to publicly thank them for their assistance. In our haste to get an answer and move on, we sometimes forget that it is people—not search engines—who are taking the time to help us out on *LinkedIn*. Take that extra second to say 'thank you.'

Risk #2 — Forgetting you're on stage when you update your status. When you post a status update on *LinkedIn*, you are essentially broadcasting to all of the contacts in your professional network. Your reputation can be compromised in an instant if you post something too controversial, personal or irrelevant. *LinkedIn* is a very different venue than Facebook or Twitter where opinions, stories and hour-to-hour happenings are acceptable as status updates. *LinkedIn* is about work and most of your connections are too busy to be bothered with overly trivial or personal updates.

LinkedIn is a valuable tool for nonprofit professionals, volunteers and Board members and becoming familiar with the culture of the channel is critical to success.

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