

Making Better Use of LinkedIn (Part 1)

By Dennis Kennedy and Allison C. Shields

Everyone has a network. Even the most solitary of solo lawyers works within networks of people. LinkedIn can be a useful tool for developing, managing, and nurturing professional networks.

For many years, LinkedIn has been the social networking platform most used by lawyers, in part because its emphasis on business networking and professional relationships appeals to lawyers. But there is a big difference between simply using LinkedIn and using it well. Almost all lawyers we talk to believe they could be using LinkedIn in much better ways than they are now. They often realize they use only a small portion of LinkedIn's powerful features and want to do more.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who knows lawyers that most say they can't find the time to learn how to maximize their LinkedIn use.

In this two-part article, we want to accomplish two things. First, we want to give you simple and specific guidance for creating an action plan to take your use of LinkedIn to the next level, no matter your starting point. In the second part of this article, coming next month, we focus on some little-known or underutilized jobs that

LinkedIn can do for you—competitive intelligence and network/relationship analytics—and show how LinkedIn can be a valuable tool for performing these functions. We'll also talk about LinkedIn as an example of how to think about the ethical requirement of technology competence.

How do you use LinkedIn now?

Let's start by taking a quick look at your current LinkedIn use.

- Is your LinkedIn profile up to date, and when did you last update it?
- How complete is your profile? (LinkedIn has a great tool that shows how complete your profile is, and what you need to add to get to "All Star" status.)
- How many connections do you have?
- How many new connections have you added in the last three months?
- Do you regularly read your LinkedIn newsfeed, like or comment on others' posts, or make your own posts?
- Have you joined or participated in any LinkedIn groups?

Your answers will give you a good sense of where you are and what your priorities might be for improving your LinkedIn presence. But don't just jump right in. Take some time to strategize. Be systematic and choose actions that will give you the most bang for the buck—and by "buck," we mean time.

The three essential building blocks

The best way to improve your understanding of LinkedIn, target your efforts, and get results is by focusing on what we call the "three essential building blocks of LinkedIn." These are profiles, connections,

and participation. If you understand these blocks, you will "get" LinkedIn and should find it a valuable use of your time.

- **Profiles** establish your presence and professional identity on LinkedIn. Your profile is a living, professional online biography or résumé that lets others know, in detail, *who you are*.
- **Connections** are the people in your networks with whom you have mutually agreed to connect. Connections are *whom you know*.
- **Participation** is the way you cultivate and tend to the connections in your network. It is how you engage with members of your network. Legal professionals who have joined LinkedIn but say they have found no value often have neglected this crucial building block. Participation is *how you interact with your connections*.

The key point: you must put effort into your online networking, just as you would real-world networking. LinkedIn is not magic. It's best to have an approach or philosophy to your network-building. We often suggest thinking about the question, "What are you hiring LinkedIn to do?"

Your LinkedIn action plan

Here is an outline for a LinkedIn action plan, no matter your starting point.

Profile

General: If you're a beginner or your profile hasn't yet reached all-star status, spend 30 minutes each week improving your profile until you are an all-star. Make your profile as complete and current as possible.

Easiest: Update your photo with a professional headshot.

Law Practice Solutions is a regular feature brought to you by the Practice Management Resource Center (PMRC) of the State Bar of Michigan, featuring articles on practice, technology, and risk management for lawyers and their staff. For more resources offered by the PMRC, visit our website at <http://www.michbar.org/pmrc/content> or call our Helpline at (800) 341-9715 to speak with a practice management advisor.

Get a second opinion: Ask a few people who know you well to look at your profile and provide feedback. For example, does it accurately reflect what they know about you? What's missing?

Most powerful step: Improve your headline. The headline is often the first and only thing people see about you on LinkedIn. It is used in many places. Lawyers tend to have headlines that say something like “Partner, X & Y LLP.” Think about what you really want people to know about you—from the perspective of your target audience. Are you “Partner, X & Y LLP” or are you “Bankruptcy lawyer helping shopping malls in Michigan deal with lessee bankruptcies”?

You can say a lot with the 120 characters LinkedIn allows for your professional headline. Think about adding volunteer activities, awards, or other items that might appeal to others: “Volunteer of the year for XYZ charity”; “Youth robotics team advisor”; “Antique boat restorer”; “Guitarist in oldies band.” “Venture capital lawyer for Michigan biotech companies; high school science fair judge; winemaker” certainly says a lot more about you than “Partner, X & Y LLP” does.

Where are you currently getting referrals? Consider mentioning that in your headline. You can also use your headline to invite others to connect or talk with you: “Estate planning lawyer with Kennedy Shields LLP; get tips on protecting your assets at kennedyshields.com.”

Strategic updates: In general, most of us do a poor job of keeping our current job description and accomplishments updated. Schedule time to update your profile on a regular basis, even if it's only 15 minutes each quarter. If you speak, write, get interviewed, or create other content, explore the ways you can add links, slides, and other media to your profile.

Connections

General: Spend 15 minutes each week working on your connections. Make sure you're connected to all the people you should be, *especially your referral sources.*

Easiest: Respond to existing invitations in your inbox. It's okay to ignore invitations from people you don't know.

The magic 500: It's not really magic, but regular users generally consider having 500

connections as an indication that you actually use LinkedIn. If you are below 500, consider working to get up to that number. Uploading your Outlook or other address book and selecting people to invite is an easy way to do this.

Most powerful step: LinkedIn has some underused tools that can take your connections game to the next level. You can easily find alumni from your schools, former coworkers, people who work where you used to, and other people you might know at your clients' companies. LinkedIn's algorithms can reveal other people you might want to connect with, and its premium accounts provide even more great tools.

Strategic approaches: You might also devise a connecting strategy, such as connecting to all your top referrers, building out your network in certain geographies or industries, or seeking connections among those who help your client base. For example, an estate planning lawyer might work on connecting to local life insurance agents, accountants, and financial planners.

Participation

General: Participation unlocks the true value of LinkedIn. Try to spend 30 minutes each week on LinkedIn in one or two ways that make sense to you.

Easiest: Read your LinkedIn newsfeed and “like” or comment on the updates of your connections.

Join a group or two: LinkedIn groups are a great way to learn about hot topics and trends in areas of importance to you and participate in discussions.

Most powerful step: Commit to posting one update a week and see what kind of response you get. Concentrate on information useful to your connections (even if you're just sharing a link to an article) and don't try to sell your services.

Strategic approaches: If you have a connections strategy, it makes sense to use your LinkedIn participation to follow through on that strategy.

Premium accounts

While the free account is good enough for almost everyone, LinkedIn has been putting more advanced tools into its premium

accounts. You can upgrade to a premium account and cancel it whenever you want. If you are looking for a job, hiring someone, or launching a new practice or marketing effort, the additional features can easily justify the price of a premium account, especially the sales navigator account.

Bring LinkedIn into the real world

Don't forget to take your LinkedIn relationships offline. LinkedIn shouldn't exist in a vacuum; it is an extension of your real-world networking. Just as you should transfer your in-person relationships to LinkedIn, you should transfer the relationships you establish on LinkedIn into the real world. Schedule a phone call or a meeting with your connections to take your relationships to the next level. ■



Dennis Kennedy (www.denniskennedy.com) is a legal technology author, information technology lawyer, and adjunct professor at the University of Michigan Law School and Michigan State University College of Law. He wrote the legal technology column for the ABA Journal for many years, and has written several books on legal technology, including Make LinkedIn Work for You: A Practical Guide for Lawyers and Other Legal Professionals (2019), with Allison C. Shields. He also cohosts The Kennedy-Mighell Report podcast on the Legal Talk Network.



Allison C. Shields is the president of Legal Ease Consulting, Inc., where she provides practice management, productivity, and business development coaching and consulting for lawyers. She is the co-author, with Dennis Kennedy, of Make LinkedIn Work for You: A Practical Guide for Lawyers and Other Legal Professionals (2019). You can find more information on her website at LawyerMeltdown.com or on the Legal Ease Blog.