

LinkedIn and Your Professional Identity

Beth A. Brooks, PhD, RN, FACHE



On a regular basis I am asked by nurse leaders, “Do I really need a LinkedIn profile since I’m not looking for a job?” “Do recruiters even look at LinkedIn profiles?” “Can I just list my education and work experience?” or my favorite, “Are you sure I need a photograph?” To these nurse leaders, my resounding answer is “yes, yes, yes, and yes!” Like it or not, LinkedIn is the “go to” site for job seekers and professional networking (as opposed to Facebook, which is for personal networking, although recruiters looking to deliver the highest quality candidate will review the candidate’s Facebook profile). Regardless of your career stage, for any nurse leader who wants to manage their professional identity, a LinkedIn profile is a must.

As a networking tool, LinkedIn is invaluable. Especially after meeting a new colleague you want to connect with to learn more about, or if you need a simple and easy way to connect 2 colleagues who do not know one another. LinkedIn is also great for staying abreast of the latest work-related news, a way to learn about new hires joining your organization or employees on a new team. I’ve used LinkedIn to learn more about students enrolled in courses, graduate school classmates, and speakers at conferences. One of my favorite features is the ability to publish short, 500- to 1000-word articles. I call these thought pieces my blog, and my connections are able to comment, often leading to brief discussions. In addition to professional networking, LinkedIn is the go-to site for job seekers. And yes, recruiters really do use LinkedIn for screening, selection, and hiring purposes.

WHY LINKEDIN?

Here’s why. LinkedIn debuted in 2003 (although it seems like only yesterday!) and now enjoys 146 million US users (500 million worldwide), and a total of 106 million unique monthly visits. (As an aside, in 2016, Microsoft bought LinkedIn for \$26.2 billion). Companies use LinkedIn to make initial screening decisions.¹ Ninety-four percent of hiring managers use LinkedIn to recruit,² with 85% of them using it for selection purposes.³ LinkedIn is slightly more popular for higher-income individuals,⁴ is seen as an extended online resume,⁵ includes skill endorsements and recommendations (de facto reference checks and a view of your rolodex),² provides initial impressions of

person–organization fit,^{6,7} and the type and number of connections speak to one’s networking ability,⁵ as well as professional standing. As the popularity of LinkedIn has soared, so have questions about the reliability, validity, and legality of LinkedIn as a selection tool.^{1,8} And although there are urgent calls for more research,¹ preliminary evidence indicates that yes, LinkedIn is reliable and valid when evaluating applicants. So my question is: “Does your LinkedIn profile accurately represent you?” Here, I will share research findings and provide suggestions to improve your LinkedIn profile for managing your professional identity.

LINKEDIN PROFILE SECTIONS

Every LinkedIn profile contains the following sections: portrait; headline/job title; profile summary; work experience; volunteer experience and causes; projects; languages; certifications; publications; education; discussion posts, comments, and articles; recommendations; endorsed skills and expertise; interests; and honors and awards. The order in which these sections appear in the profile, the precision in which relevant work and volunteer experience is described, and the type of portrait used all contribute to your professional identity. The number and type of endorsements, recommendations, and connections along with the entire profile being complete signal information to the reader. Known as signaling theory, the signals sent infer unobservable information (eg, value congruence) from observable attributes (eg, cognitive ability).⁶ In order to enhance information accuracy, it has to be rich, relevant, visible, available, and of high quality (the Realistic Accuracy Model).⁹

In the absence of rich, relevant, visible, and high-quality information, recruiters make inferences about you which in turn predicts their intentions to recommend job seekers for hiring. When information is missing, incomplete, or rife with grammatical errors, the danger is in having sent the wrong message. For example, you may choose to not include a photograph, thinking it may lead to discrimination based on gender, age, or ethnicity, but what a recruiter infers is that the person has something to hide.^{7,8} Thus far, there is scant evidence to support any fears of discrimination.⁸ On the other hand, LinkedIn profiles with photos receive 21 times more views, 36 times more messages, and

appear in more search results than pictureless profiles, an important consideration for an active job seeker.

ASSESSING YOUR SKILLS, PERSONALITY, AND COGNITIVE ABILITY

One may think that the top skills most desired by employers cannot be assessed on LinkedIn, when in actuality, leadership, planning, organization, communication, teamwork, and networking skills can all be accurately assessed from a LinkedIn profile.⁸ For example, recruiters can assess leadership by evaluating the number and type of leadership activities described, and the number and types of connections, endorsements, and recommendations. The structure and completeness of the profile, along with how multiple activities are managed concurrently hint at planning and organization skills. Indications of your communication skills are found in the detail and clarity of your descriptions, as well as your grammar and spelling (no typos, please!). Including group activities alludes to teamwork skills and the number of (relevant) connections implies networking skills. You do not need to accept all requests to connect; be thoughtful about which connections reflect your true qualifications. However, there are some skill sets, such as information seeking, problem solving, conflict management, and adaptability that do not lend themselves to accurate assessment on a profile, so you'll need to be prepared to demonstrate those using other means.

Recruiters also use LinkedIn profiles to make inferences about personality. Of the “Big Five” personality traits (ie, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, and neuroticism) indicators of 2—extraversion and conscientiousness—can be found in certain profile sections.¹⁰ Extraverts are social, active, and assertive, which is revealed in volunteer activities, interest groups, number of connections, and the photo, whereas conscientiousness is revealed in a complete, long, well-written profile.

It is probably not surprising that recruiters will surmise cognitive ability based on education, academic achievement, work experience, and certifications. They also determine career success (and likelihood to turnover) based on the number of jobs held, promotions, and whether or not the job is aligned with academic degrees. Though surprising to many, the public nature of profile information diminishes opportunities to engage in impression management.^{3,5,8} Because recommendations, and in particular endorsements, cannot be “faked” or controlled by you, for the most part, both are seen as accurate.

CREATING AN IMPACTFUL LINKEDIN PROFILE

So now you may be wondering how to create an impactful LinkedIn profile. The evidence is clear that suc-

cessful profiles have 3 key characteristics. First, a portrait that depicts a professional demeanor, rather than a casual photo, helps to build a professional identity. The current preference is to have an environmental portrait rather than a corporate headshot, but either is acceptable. What is not acceptable is a photo in casual clothes, at a party or family event. Examples of both can readily be found online. It goes without saying that apparel, grooming, eye glasses, and for women, jewelry, should be contemporary, tasteful, and stylish.

The second characteristic is the length of the profile. As previously discussed, a complete, well-written profile rather than a short one is preferable, because being thorough, using correct grammar and spelling speaks to conscientiousness.^{8,10} If you include an e-mail address, be sure it is professional, not something like wildncrazyrn@gmail.com. One strategy to both add to the length of your profile while enhancing your professional identity is to write articles. Earlier, I mentioned my LinkedIn profile articles act as my blog. Writing a monthly or (if you're really ambitious) a weekly article builds your professional identity. Using #hashtags ensures your article appears in LinkedIn searches for that topic. In fact, 45% of LinkedIn article readers are in upper-level positions (managers, vice presidents, directors, C-suite level). LinkedIn shares your article with connections and those that follow you. Only 0.2% of users publish articles (approximately 1 million users), so users that publish articles stand out.

The third characteristic is the number and types of connections, discussed throughout this article. To summarize, connections signal information about you, your leadership and networking skills, so keep them relevant to your work, aligned with your interests, and reflective of your professional standing. Think carefully before accepting or ignoring a request. The rule of thumb is to have at least 10 connections for each year of your career.

CONCLUSION

Nurse leaders who desire to maintain their professional identity by using a LinkedIn profile will always include accurate, rich, relevant, visible, available, and high-quality information. They are aware of the signals sent by the information that is (or isn't) included, and are mindful that organizations interested in accurately assessing their abilities and commitment to a potential employment relationship, will be scrutinizing their LinkedIn profile carefully.

References

1. Roth PL, Bobko P, Van Iddekinge CH, Thatcher JB. Social media in employee-selection-related decisions: a research agenda for uncharted territory. *J Manage*. 2016;42(1):269-298.

-
2. Landers NR, Schmidt BG, eds. *Social Media in Employee Selection and Recruitment: Theory, Practice, and Current Challenges*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International; 2016.
 3. Kluemper DH, Mitra A, Wang S. Social media use in HRM. In: Buckley MR, Halbesleben JRB, Wheeler AR, eds. *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group; 2016:153-207.
 4. Blank G, Lutz C. Representativeness of social media in Great Britain: investigating Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, and Instagram. *Am Behav Sci*. 2017;61(7):741-756.
 5. Zide J, Elman B, Shahani-Denning C. LinkedIn and recruitment: how profiles differ across occupations. *Employee Relations*. 2014;36(5):583-604.
 6. Bangerter A, Roulin N, König CJ. Personnel selection as a signaling game. *J Appl Psychol*. 2012;97(4):719-738.
 7. Chiang JKH, Suen HY. Self-presentation and hiring recommendations in online communities: lessons from LinkedIn. *Comput Human Behav*. 2015;48:516-524.
 8. Roulin N, Levashina J. LinkedIn as a new selection method: psychometric properties and assessment approach [e-pub ahead of print]. *Pers Psychol*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12296>. Accessed April 15, 2019.
 9. Funder DC. On the accuracy of personality judgment: a realistic approach. *Psychol Rev*. 1995;102(4):652-670.
 10. Kluemper DH. Social network screening: pitfalls, possibilities, and parallels in employment selection. In: Olivas-Lujan MR, Tanya Bondarouk T, eds. *Social Media in Human Resources Management (Advanced Series in Management, Volume 12)*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group; 2013:1-21.

Beth A. Brooks, PhD, RN, FACHE, was presented with AONE's Mentor Award in 2017. Dr. Brooks is President & CEO of The Brooks Group, LLC, a Chicago-based career coaching, personal brand, and consulting firm. She can be reached at bethbrooks@thebrooksgroupllc.net.

1541-4612/2019/ \$ See front matter

Copyright 2019 by Elsevier Inc.

All rights reserved.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2019.03.001>