

ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH ALUMNI THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES; A WINNING PROPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

Social Networking Web sites in universities and companies are becoming widely used. The Advisory Board for the Department of Information Systems & Operations Management (ISOM) at Ball State University is charged with finding ways to improve the department's services to students; especially student job placement after graduation. Through collaboration with the Advisory Board, the authors have developed a plan using Social Networking tools to provide students the opportunity to contribute to departmental improvements as well as to connect with alumni around the world thereby expanding their professional networks.

The authors researched the value of Social Networking in universities and among students and alumni. The determination was made that the best solution would require a tool that provides students with the ability to build relationships with professionals and the opportunity to voice their opinions in efforts to improve their department's program. After determining the site's most appropriate design, the authors analyzed various Social Networking sites. Facebook and LinkedIn were selected. In addition to the research and design of the sites, risks and marketing were taken into account. As technology changes and additional features become available, the authors will improve the system to fit the student and university need as well as continue to conduct ongoing research.

INTRODUCTION

The job market is a competitive environment, often with multiple people competing for the same job. University curriculum is designed to prepare students for the job market and to help them stand out in the interview process. However, in a competitive environment, what you know is not always enough. In most cases, the common saying is that it is “who you know” that really matters when seeking a job or growth within your career. Debra Feldman (2009), author of *Its Not Just What You Know – It’s Who You Know*, states, “With over 70% of new hires stemming from personal recommendations, having effective connections is just as critical as being smart, trustworthy, personable, qualified and available.” Building a strong professional network is as important as building a strong resume, and having connections will help an applicant stand out in the interview process.

There are a number of organizations, events, and tools available that enable and encourage professional networking. Thousands of books and articles are available that list the best ways to network or steps to develop a professional network. But with over 1.6 billion users on the World Wide Web, some of the newest and most efficient ways to get connected with professionals can be found online. Social Networking Web sites are becoming some of the most popular ways to connect with friends and family today. These tools are also being utilized by businesses for marketing and advertising. “Fifty-two percent of Social Network users had become a fan or follower of a company or brand, while 46% had said something good about a brand or company on a Social Networking Web site—double the percentage who had said something negative (23%)” (Anderson Analytics, 2009). Social Networking site attendance is growing every day and is becoming the number one place to connect with a large number of people.

Universities can use Social Networking sites to connect with students, provide them an outlet to voice their opinions, communicate openly, and ultimately improve university educational offerings. Students can provide universities with feedback about their experiences, things from which they gain value, and ideas for improving the educational process. This benefits both the university and the student, as it helps the university improve and gives students a voice in their education. Alumni can also join the social network from anywhere in the world and ultimately connect with and mentor students. This enables students to build professional networks and connect with university leaders all in one place. The tools and features required to build the proposed online Social Networking site are available for free and are customizable to fit individual specific needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to explore the various Social Networking site options, certain research must be collected. The authors mainly focused their study around Social Networking and undergraduate mentoring. This information was collected to make more informed and educated decisions during the development of the Ball State University ISOM department’s Social Networking site.

Social Networking

Online social networking is the use and interaction with Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a profile, list users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In recent years, modern society has seen a rise in popularity of online social networking, amounting to virtual social networks spanning the globe (Ellison, 2007). Social networks in the past have been useful for participants in areas such as interpersonal support (Wellman, 1992), planning riots and political contentions (Tilley, 1984), assisting in the flow and settlement of foreign immigrants (Salaff, Fong, & Wong, 1999), connecting people in the work environment, and even connecting independent organizations (Nohria & Eccles, 1992).

Technology is capable of connecting vast numbers of people on unprecedented levels. These computer-supported-social-networks (CSSN) become virtual communities (Wellman et al., 1996). Social Network Sites (SNS) have become a fast-growing industry of their own. The recent success of sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flixster, Spoke, Ryze, Xing, Classmates, Tagged, My Yearbook, Ning, Windows Live Spaces, Blogger, Word Press, Yahoo GeoCities, Flickr, and others are evidence of the popularity of this form of CSSN.

Traditionally, social networks were built and maintained “by hand,” so to speak. That is, everything was done offline (before the Internet existed). When SNSs were introduced, the assumption was that the flow of people from one form of network to another would be from online to offline. People would meet each other online and at a later time would eventually meet face-to-face. In one study, as much as one third of the subjects who met online had subsequently met face-to-face (Parks and Floyd, 1996). The flow also goes in the other direction – from offline networks to online networks. Facebook users were shown to “search” online for people with whom they have a preexisting offline connection – more so than they “browse” for new strangers to meet (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006).

Social capital embraces the idea that one can gain value through accumulating relationships with other people (Coleman, 1988). The term is defined in various ways in a variety of fields (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition."

Social capital allows people to benefit by having relationships with multiple people in their networks. The greater the social network, the greater the individual's social capital and the more resources that person can access or tap into when needed (Paxton, 1999). By building connections to people who would otherwise be outside their offline networks, people can gain benefits such as employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). Further, various forms of social capital have been linked to indices of psychological well-being, improved self-esteem, and satisfaction with life (Bargh & McKenna, 2004) (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004).

Within the social capital field of study, there is a distinction between *Bridging* social capital and *Bonding* social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital refers to individuals who are acquaintances and may help each other on occasion, but there is a lack of emotional support. This is often referred to as “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1982). Among undergraduate students, the use of *Facebook* was associated with all forms of social capital, but the strongest association was with bridging social capital (Ellison, 2007).

On the other hand, bonding social capital is found in situations where two individuals have close emotional relationships such as families and close friends (Putnam, 2000). Recently, Ellison (2007) added a third dimension of social capital called *Maintained* social capital. This refers to the ability to maintain connections with people over time, as the subject goes through various life changes. These connections might otherwise be lost when people leave a job, move to a new city, or otherwise lose touch with friends. The initial impetus behind maintained social capital was the idea of undergraduate students maintaining contact with high school friends through the use of Facebook and thus to build social capital and personal support from a previous community of friends.

Mentoring and Networking with Undergraduate Students

Mentoring is a concept that dates as far back as ancient Greece. It has been defined as “the process whereby a more experienced person helps a less experienced person develop in some specified capacity” (Murray, 1991). In the academic realm, schools of education have been leading the way in the modern mentoring movement through the required student teacher practice whereby master teachers pass on lessons to student teachers through practical, hands-on, and supervised experience in the classroom. This is considered a necessary component in a student’s preparation to become a teacher (Clement, 1995) (Eckmier & Bunyan, 1995) (Ganser, 1995) (Head, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1992) (Henderson & Barron, 1995).

Traditionally, schools of business have taught students specific skills and competencies in business, with little focus on professional preparation or supervision of skills in an applied setting (Cunningham, 1995). However, in 1996 the AACSB Faculty Leadership Task Report stated that the “lack of real-world business contact” was a major problem with business education. Largely as a result of the influence of AACSB, business schools began to incorporate professional practice and managerial skills into business training (Bigelow, 1995). One can draw the conclusion that most forms of contact between the business community and a college of business will help to overcome this problem, including the application of a mentoring program for students.

There is little research to document the long-term success of mentoring programs in schools of business. There are, however, many articles documenting the successful *implementation* of mentoring programs in schools of business (Coley, 1996) (Gibb, 1994) (Mumford, 1995) (Sahl, 1997). Some research has shown that mentoring can lead to success in an organizational setting (Dreher & Ash, 1990) (Fagenson, 1989) (Whitely, Dougherty & Dreher, 1991). Some research has been given to specific implementation strategies for mentoring programs in business schools

(Dreher & Cox, 1996) (Pollan & Levine, 1995) (Pullis, Fine & Warren, 1996) (Ragins, 1997) (Vincent & Seymour, 1995). One study even showed that alumni who had been involved in mentor types of relationships as students tended to be greater financial donors as alumni (Clotfelter, 2003).

Formal mentoring requires dedicated time and effort on both the mentor and the mentee. In a fast-paced business society, business professionals with extra time to dedicate to students are becoming hard to find. In addition, there are a variety of risks, not the least of which is the risk that in a formal paired relationship, the two parties may not connect well on an interpersonal level. The use of Social Networking sites to help students develop their professional network may be a partial solution. While a Social Networking site may be less rich in interpersonal communication and relationship building, it does allow for multiple students to benefit from multiple alumni (i.e. would-be mentors). Also, there is always the possibility that a more formal mentoring relationship could develop from interaction on a Social Networking site.

NETWORKING IMPLEMENTATION

This article describes the implementation of online social networking tools in support of a mentoring program for the Ball State University department of Information Systems and Operations Management (ISOM). Using Facebook and LinkedIn, group pages have been created and are currently being developed for members of the Advisory Board of the ISOM department as well as current students and alumni of the department. The objective is two-fold:

- To improve the Information Systems and Operations Management department by fostering interaction between current students and the departmental Advisory Board members
- To better prepare Information Systems and Operations Management students for the job search by creating a place for them to develop and expand their professional networks

Results will be observed through group site usage, interaction, and statistics as well as anecdotal evidence obtained through discussions with students and Advisory Board members after three and six months of implementation. Preliminary results will be the basis for extended research in the future.

Two Social Networking sites were selected for the initial implementation: Facebook and LinkedIn. The process by which each site was chosen was based on site statistics and site feature requirements. Facebook and LinkedIn were originally identified as possible contenders as both are widely used and recognized as top Social Networking sites.

- Facebook is also recognized as the leader among sites targeting college students (Editorial, 2009) (Top, 2009).
- LinkedIn is considered the most applicable for business-users for professional networking (Hempel, 2009). It is also already known to be one of the most popular Social Networking sites among the alumni who will be using the sites in this study.

Site Design

The proposed online communication portal for this study is intended to be a template that can be built on multiple Social Networking sites. Specific features have been identified to be utilized in the creation of the study's Social Networking site. The generic requirement for the site is that it needs to contain the functionality for users to create groups in which they can connect and share information with other users. For more detail, the required and supplemental features within the group have been identified in Table 1 along with each feature's benefits to reaching one or both of the objectives.

Social Networking Site Features			
Required	Benefits	Supplemental	Benefits
Discussion Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any user can communicate thoughts • Any user can view others' posts • Any user can comment on posts 	Chat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students and alumni can chat in real time
Officer/Member List	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denotes which members are students and which are alumni • Facilitates communication between alumni and students 	Videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni can post videos about their companies • Board members can post videos related to the ISOM field • Students can view all videos
		External Web Site Links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to company sites, job search sites, and all other sites can be accessed from one place
		Photos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni can post pictures from companies • Students can view pictures to get a better feel for companies • Students/Board members can post class pictures to attract potential ISOM majors
		Event Calendar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board Members can post all ISOM-related events • Alumni can post any recruiting-related events • All students can view these events
		Recent News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All users can post any news that relates to job search, ISOM field, or anything that would be of interest to ISOM Board Members, students or alumni
		Resume Postings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides another outlet for students to distribute resumes • Alumni can view resumes and match to job openings
		Blogs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni can post out-of-college experiences and advice • Alumni/Board Members can communicate announcements • Students can post advice for future students
		Job Postings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni have a forum to post job openings in their companies • Students have a place to find major-related job openings • Job postings combined with student/alumni connections provide students with a better opportunity to find a job

Table 1: Social Networking Site Features and Benefits

After identifying the required and supplemental elements of the Social Networking site, Facebook and LinkedIn were each examined to determine which of the features each possessed. Table 2 displays each Social Networking site's features. Coupled with the sites' usage statistics and demographics, this information helped identify the need for the usage of two Social Networking sites. Facebook Groups and LinkedIn were the two best options. Although LinkedIn does not include an Officer/Member List feature, its strong presence in the professional world combined with its popularity and reputation as well as its many supplemental features made it a good choice to complement its sister Facebook Groups. Facebook is the number one ranked Social Networking site available (Editorial, 2009), while LinkedIn ranks as one of the top professional Social Networking sites (Top, 2009). It has also been identified that the two sites are favorites among the target demographics. The traffic generated on both of these sites coupled with their combined coverage of all required features and multiple supplemental features made the two options the top choices to meet the objectives.

Social Networking Site Feature Checklist			
Feature	Facebook Group	Facebook Page	LinkedIn Group
<i>Discussion Forum</i>	✓	✓	✓
<i>Officer/ Member List</i>	✓		
Chat			
Videos	✓	✓	
External Web Site Links	✓	✓	✓
Photos	✓	✓	
Event Calendar	✓	✓	
Recent News	✓	✓	✓
Resume Postings			
Blogs			
Job Postings			✓

Table 2: Social Networking Site Feature Checklist

MARKETING

Along with a detailed plan of the proposed Social Networking sites and their benefits, a marketing plan is a necessary component of the proposal. “If you build it, they will come” is an ignorant approach to the creation and future usage of the study’s web sites. If students and alumni are unaware of the sites’ existences, they will not use them. There are two marketing paths that need to be explored: alumni marketing and current student marketing.

To market the site to the department’s alumni, two methods will be utilized: individual alumnus emails from professors and board members and postings on the various Ball State University online alumni boards. The individual alumnus email should be the primary method of marketing to alumni. Personal invitations are a more proactive approach to advertising for the sites. They also provide direct points of contact to which alumni may respond to. Although the various Ball State University online alumni boards are comprised of multiple students with multiple degrees, this form of advertisement could be useful. When members post on these boards, all other members are emailed. Also, because these boards are strictly voluntary, this is a good way to reach students who have actively made attempts to stay involved or connected to university, making them more likely candidates to volunteer to participate in the groups being created for this study.

Marketing to current ISOM students is equally important, as it contributes to both of the goals of the site. Four communication methods have been identified to advertise to these students:

- Trail blazer student identification and encouragement by professors or board members
- Class announcements by professors or board members
- Student-to-student encouragement
- Links on the Ball State University’s Career Center Web site as well as its ISOM Department Web site

Trail blazers should be identified as students who carry a lot of influence with other students and can both provide feedback and be the first to use the site while promoting the site to other students. It is recommended that each professor or board member single out one or two trail blazer students to check out the site, provide feedback, and then post comments. It is more likely for a student to post on the discussion board if there are already posts by other students. After these students have posted comments on the site, professors should make announcements in their classes to advertise the site and its benefits to them.

Along with professor encouragement, it is also good to have the site advertised on other widely-used student sites. Many students use the Career Center Web site to look for jobs. Due to the heavy student traffic, links to the Facebook and LinkedIn Groups will be added to this site. The ISOM Department Web site is also a place where students go to learn more about various aspects of the ISOM Department. Posting links on this site would not only provide another place for these students to get their information, but it might also help to attract students to the major by getting more perspective from alumni of the ISOM department.

RISKS

Eleven risks have been identified by the authors as potential risks to the proposed Social Networking sites. The authors have defined ways to help mitigate these risks.

1. Risk: Students do not see value in the site.

Mitigation: Ball State University ISOM Professors and leaders and University leaders will emphasize value in building a strong professional network with alumni and other business leaders and identify examples of students who have succeeded with this. The departmental Advisory Board will also attempt to demonstrate the value of student feedback by making visible changes and crediting the feedback left on the site.

2. Risk: Students do not use the site.

Mitigation: Identify student trail blazers to start using the site and commenting their thoughts first. These students should also encourage other students to use the site. Professors can build projects and assignments around these sites to help students get involved with the proposed Social Networking sites.

3. Risk: Alumni do not see value in the site.

Mitigation: Ball State University ISOM leaders will connect with alumni and request their participation, stressing the benefits to the students. These leaders will also point out the professional benefits of mentoring a young associate in the business world. They will provide examples of successful mentors and the value of staying connected.

4. Risk: Alumni do not use the site.

Mitigation: Identify alumni leaders who will take charge in utilizing this system and who will connect with other alumni to encourage their involvement.

5. Risk: Students use the site as a complaints department.

Mitigation: Ball State University ISOM Professors and leaders will communicate with students and identify guidelines for using this Social Networking system. Each group description will list these guidelines. The sites will also be monitored by officers to ensure that inappropriate comments remain off the sites.

6. Risk: Students use the site only to connect with alumni and not to contribute to the improvement of the ISOM department, therefore only accomplishing one of the two goals.

Mitigation: Ball State University leaders, Professors, and Alumni will communicate with students and stress the importance of student contributions to improvement of their University's ISOM Department both for the improvement of their education and the improvement of future students' education. They will also identify the value of student contributions and provide successful examples.

7. Risk: Students use the site only to contribute to the improvement of the ISOM department and not to connect with alumni, therefore diminishing alumni participation and only accomplishing one of the two goals.

Mitigation: Ball State University leaders, Professors, and Alumni will to communicate with students and stress the value of students networking with professionals/alumni. They will also provide examples of mentorship success stories.

8. Risk: The two sites confuse students and alumni regarding which site to use.

Mitigation: Professors and Board Members will identify certain alumni and students to connect to each site. They will also demonstrate the benefits of each site when presenting them for the first time and explain to students that they are free to choose whichever site they preferred.

9. Risk: Student constructive comments could be perceived by potential future ISOM students as weaknesses in the program.

Mitigation: Site groups will clearly state their purpose to strive for excellence and constantly improve. Site groups will also be private and only viewable to those who are members.

10. Risk: Students use the site at first, but after awhile, the attraction wears off and site usage ceases.

Mitigation: Board Members and Professors will communicate anytime a change is made based on a student's contribution. This will remind students that the sites are available and that they are actually taken seriously.

11. Risk: Alumni connect with current students through the use of students' personal profiles and see wall posts from students' friends that may seem inappropriate, giving a bad impression of student professionalism.

Mitigation: Alumni will initially be instructed to communicate with students mainly through email. However, if they choose to communicate through student's personal profiles, they need to be aware that their personal profiles are not direct reflections on their professional life. Students also have the option of setting up limited profiles. If students have inappropriate content on their personal pages, they are encouraged to grant alumni with limited access to their personal profiles.

CONCLUSIONS

Networking with professionals is a value-adding process for many people and is becoming almost a necessity for young professionals seeking to improve their career options. The authors expect that the proposed Social Networking system will add value to students' career growth and help improve the education provided at the university. These goals can be accomplished through the utilization of free Social Networking sites to enhance the networking process between Ball State University leaders/staff, students, and alumni.

Students will have the ability to connect and build relationships with alumni from all over the world. They will have a place where they can discuss career challenges and ways to improve the job search process. ISOM department Advisory Board members will be able to reach out to the departmental student body to receive valuable feedback regarding the department's educational

offerings. Students will have the opportunity to voice their opinions to the Board and help build strategies to improve the educational process. Overall, the authors expect this system to improve job placement and career growth for students as well as improve the educational process and student contribution within the Ball State University ISOM Department.

FUTURE RESEARCH

To ensure this proposed system is continually improved, the authors will conduct future research within this area of interest. This process will be ongoing and will help the authors develop a strategy that will provide the most value to students and universities, as well as sustain student/alumni site usage. Research will include the study of various Social Networking sites to determine what other features and functionalities available on other sites can add value to this proposed system. The authors will also research the impact of adding more members to this system who will be able to connect with students and help improve the university educational process. Other research will be focused around how to measure the effectiveness of this system. As more research is conducted, the proposed Social Networking sites should have the ability to expand their features and functionalities; provide new opportunities for students, alumni, and faculty; and utilize a variety of tools and applications to contribute to the accomplishment of the established objectives.

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