

Let's Link In – Who Are You Again? By Kathi Guiney SPHR, GPHR, President YES!HRSolution

Social networking: the very name suggests conversations on common interests and fun had by all. But this name can also invoke anxiety. Social networking is an imperfect, unpredictable mirror of the real world. People online don't always act how you expect them to, and one style of interaction will not fit all. The tactics you use to connect with your friends surely won't fly with your business associates. So how do you successfully translate online social networking to the business world?

To start, set clear objectives for building an online professional network. Is your purpose to advance industry knowledge, stay in touch with former coworkers, research specific topics, or look for a new career opportunity? Defining your purpose will help you select a target audience and will help you follow guidelines for appropriate posts. Now about what's appropriate...

You are networking to make business connections, not to get a date or find a best friend. Getting too personal or assuming an instant BFF connection can kill a potential business connection fast, and it's easy to act bolder when the face-to-face interaction is not there. Always maintain professional tone and content. Trading gossip or personal information like your semi-lucid experience at a recent concert is not appropriate business conversation. Save all that interesting social information for your friends and family, because a potential boss may not find it so intriguing. Keep business with business and personal with personal.

Although personal and business networking should be kept separate, some basic etiquette applies to both. Unless you have a close personal relationship with a boss, coworker, or client, stay away from their personal Facebook pages. It's less awkward if business connections don't have to ignore your request or accept it out of guilt or obligation. And if you're that person who won't take "I do not want to connect" as an answer (even on professional networking sites), or who sends multiple requests through many networking sites, slow down. It could be the recipient is "just not that into you," and it's time to move on. If you are the recipient of multiple requests, you may come to find that person only wants to connect so they can sell you something or be hired by your company. Good for them—a bit misleading for you.

Accurately representing yourself in social networking forum can translates well to professional networking. It's great to mention your profession, role, and company name, but remember this is networking and not a direct sales meeting. Be honest and do not oversell, and never push products or services. If you have a common connection, mention it, or if you're seeking new employment, why not be honest? Professional truths tend to surface soon enough.

It is important to be aware of your profile picture, as it is often a potential business connection's first impression of you. Your profile picture should be professional and clear. That duck-lipped selfie' you took with your smart phone is unlikely to meet the right standard, and does not offer a compelling qualification for business connections.

Social and business networking can be productive and fun, but they are as different as East and West. By keeping a handle on what's appropriate for each, you can avoid becoming a cyber pest and can work on growing a successful professional network to take you where you want to go.