



Using LinkedIn for Career Building

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Abstract

In this tools assignment, students study practicing accountants' LinkedIn profiles as guides for creating their own profiles. The assignment introduces students to professional networking online and helps students develop a business identity distinct from their existing online social media presence. The assignment gives students experience in critical thinking and exposure to LinkedIn best practices, as well as provides self-directed use of technology. Students create a LinkedIn profile, engage with accounting practitioners on LinkedIn, and begin developing a professional network. This assignment is applicable to accounting information systems, auditing, and professional skills development courses.

Keywords

Technology agility, AACSB accreditation, LinkedIn, online resume, social media, accounting curriculum, professional development, networking

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LinkedIn is a widely used business networking site (Marshall, 2022) that many firms use to recruit employees (Jobvite, 2020; Ryan, 2020). As students transition from academic life to an accounting career, they must expand their online social media skills, initially honed for purely personal social interactions, to include business and professional interactions. Accounting students will change their awareness of themselves as individual social beings and begin considering themselves businesspersons and, in many cases, members of the accounting profession. Technology skills and higher-level critical thinking about online technology are important elements of business and professional success (Kavanagh and Drennan 2008).

In this tools assignment (shown in Appendix A), students study LinkedIn best practices and then use LinkedIn to build their own online profiles. Students learn how to communicate effectively online in business and the accounting profession by reading online materials (listed with links in Appendix B and the teaching notes), navigating high-quality profiles and posts, and reading grading feedback. In working on the assignment, students will build their social media and business networking skills. The assignment also helps students build a personal brand through profile best practices, much as businesses and other organizations develop brands (Herrity, 2023, March 29).

The assignment encourages students to learn professional communication etiquette, review role model profiles, and think critically when creating a LinkedIn profile. By engaging with accounting professionals online, students develop a professional network while using LinkedIn social media technologies. Students benefit from communicating online with their instructors and accounting professionals, which builds a basis for future interactions and develops their network of professional contacts. Faculty benefit from creating class-based LinkedIn student groups and growing an alumni connections archive. Accounting professionals and accounting recruiters also benefit from students completing the assignment. Former students in the course groups serve as dynamic employment contacts for current students, guest lecturers for class, and potential practitioner research subjects. As practicing alumni, their network is expanded to include student connections that may result in future employees or colleagues. As professional accounting organizations reach out to students, a LinkedIn profile offers a ready mechanism for those organizations to share meeting notices, professional development opportunities, scholarships, certification tests and preparation offerings, and professional conferences.

The assignment closes by asking students to assess LinkedIn's capabilities and features. An overarching goal of the assignment is to enhance students' online professional communication and networking skills by applying online technology skills to a realistic and ambiguous business situation.

Motivation

Employers' use of social media in recruiting is prevalent, with the majority of employers using social media to screen candidates (Nauen, 2017; Driver, 2020; Salm, 2018; Elmer, n.d.). Many employers monitor and deny jobs to applicants based on their social media activity (Rathore, 2020). Some university graduate programs now use social media reviews to assess the online reputation of applicants (Hand, 2020).

LinkedIn is the most widely used social media tool for employee recruiting (Driver, 2020; Frederiksen, 2019). A Jobvite (2020) survey reported that 72% of recruiters are using or plan to use LinkedIn and to increase their LinkedIn recruiting investment (48% of large corporations and 33% of smaller corporations) in the future.

LinkedIn differs from personal social media sites because it was designed for professional social networking, career development and enhancement, and facilitating job recruiting (Sreenivasan, 2017). Firms use LinkedIn for brand identity, customer engagement, employee recruitment, and professional engagement (Cortez & Dastidar, 2022). LinkedIn can help students learn about the accounting profession, develop their personal brand, and engage with potential employers.

Most students use informal personal media every day (Auxier, 2021). Although students feel technologically savvy, few know how important having a distinct professional presence can be (Fisher, 2017). Similarly, few understand the difference between interacting socially with friends and communicating with professionals (McHaney, et al., 2015). Accounting professionals today use social media to learn, engage with new clients, connect with colleagues, and build reputations as subject matter experts (Stein Smith, 2016). Faculty can use the assignment to develop a student's communication skills, discuss professional etiquette, and note post elements to avoid, such as spelling and grammar errors, descriptions of alcohol or drug use, political discussions, or provocative personal photos (Jobvite, 2020).

In completing this assignment, students can reflect on their own career interests and professional development when deciding which professional organizations to follow and in seeking their professional connections. Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) Standard A5 (2022, 22) requires academic accounting to demonstrate fostering technology agility. Coyne et al. (2016, 166) suggest increasing technology awareness and

understanding by introducing multiple technologies and training in AIS courses. Additionally, completing the assignment allows accounting professors to offer career development and provide targeted feedback.

Learning Objectives

The assignment can help students develop competencies identified by accounting professional organizations, including the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), the Institute of Management Accountants (IMA), and the American Accounting Association (AAA). Requirements reflect the needs listed in the AICPA (2018) and IMA (2017) professional frameworks, such as communication, professional behavior and judgment, technology tools, and relationship management (networking and online social skills). The assignment's learning objectives are that students will:

1. Learn the attributes of an online professional business profile.
2. Create a professional profile to enhance professional visibility.
3. Increase technology agility by using LinkedIn features.
4. Use judgment to evaluate skill levels and knowledge expected of practicing accountants.
5. Demonstrate social behaviors and etiquette expected of those entering the accounting profession.
6. Demonstrate effective communication with accounting practitioners and faculty.
7. Build a professional accounting network to promote job opportunities and career advancement.

Table 1 maps the assignment requirements (see Appendix A) to these learning objectives and the related professional competencies.

Table 1
Map of Requirements to Learning Objectives and Professional Competencies

Requirements	Learning objectives	Professional Competencies
1	2	Technology agility
2	1, 2, 3, 4	Communication Professionalism Professional Judgment
3	1, 2, 3	Technology Agility Professional Judgment
4, 5	4, 5, 6	Communication Relationship Management Judgment
6, 7, 8	2	Professional Judgment Communication Relationship Management Judgment
9	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Communication Relationship Management Judgment
10	3, 4	Self-Reflection Communication Judgment

Assignment Options and Teaching Suggestions

Students can complete the assignment independently, which will use minimal class time. The instructor can introduce the assignment by discussing the roles of online presence and branding in developing a professional network and searching for internships or career opportunities. Students can search for themselves online to learn how common (or not) their names are and to see the large number of personal social media posts that do not reflect a professional image.

Instructors can discuss the differences between what they might post on career and business-oriented platforms and what they post on a more personal social media platform. We provide a LinkedIn reference profile to demonstrate best practices for each assignment requirement. Instructors can use their own LinkedIn profile or the profile of a well-known local accounting or business professional as examples.

The assignment has ten requirements. The first nine guide students through creating a social media presence using LinkedIn. The tenth is a written reflection on the learning experience.

Teaching Suggestions

The complete LinkedIn assignment is provided for instructor use in Appendix A of this document. Most instructor guidance appears in the separate Teaching Notes document, which provides additional teaching suggestions, a table of student readings, a LinkedIn usage guide with screenshots, and a suggested grading rubric.

This assignment has been taught for several years at four universities in various accounting courses at the junior, senior, and graduate levels, with class sizes ranging from 10 to 65 students. This LinkedIn assignment is best suited for an AIS or auditing course, where technologies and communication skills are generally taught in the accounting curricula. We recommend using the assignment in second-semester junior or first-semester senior courses.

Instructors are encouraged to use a well-designed LinkedIn profile as a model for demonstrating the best practices of the assignment requirements. Relevant suggestions are provided in the Teaching Notes.

Efficacy

To assess the efficacy of the assignment, feedback was solicited from accounting practitioners (including practitioners who serve as adjunct instructors) who reviewed the assignment, other practitioners who used the assignment in an IMA-sponsored professional development workshop, and students who used the assignment in class. In this section, evaluation summaries are provided by these stakeholders.

Practitioner Feedback: Value to Students

This assignment was designed using input from experienced practicing accountants, including adjunct instructors who actively practice accounting. Comments included “Thumbs up for usefulness,” “The interactions I have with your students on LinkedIn are very professional and courteous,” and, commenting on the weighting of the assignment we recommend, “Points seem fair for a somewhat lengthy and detailed project.”

Institute of Management Accountants (IMA) members who regularly engage with students through LinkedIn were asked to provide feedback on the assignment. The assignment was revised based on this feedback.

Practitioner Feedback: Value to Practitioners

A number of experienced accountants who have interacted with students using this assignment in their courses have requested copies and used the assignment’s guidelines and materials. The assignment materials were also used for an IMA-sponsored professional development workshop on professional branding using LinkedIn. A Senior Tax Manager at a regional financial institution acknowledged the usefulness of the assignment and adapted it to train new hires in social media use (after confirming details of the assignment to meet that firm’s established social media policies).

Frequency Analysis of Solicited Student Feedback

After using the assignment for years at multiple universities, reflection memos were solicited from students. We selected a sample of 28 student memos from a junior-level AIS course and used frequency analysis (Weber, 1990) to derive themes. Table 2 reports identified themes and decreasing order of frequencies for analysis.

Table 2
Student Reflection Memo Themes and Frequencies (n = 28)

Theme	Frequency
Specifically identified LinkedIn as a professionally oriented social media platform	18
Indicated planned future use of LinkedIn for professional branding	16
Had an existing LinkedIn profile before the assignment began	10
Nervous communicating directly with practitioners	9
Appreciated the requirement to step outside their comfort zone	9
Assignment facilitated the improvement and polishing of an established profile	8
Initially hesitant, but surprised by the high value of completing the assignment	4
[Student was] recruited actively during the two-week assignment period	2

The analysis also revealed that student comments were characterized as expressing the advantages of the assignment. The results appear in Table 3 in decreasing order of frequency.

Table 3
Student Reflection Memo Mentions of Advantages of the Assignment, with Frequencies (n = 28)

Theme	Frequency
Benefits of making connections and networking	25
Identified appropriate opportunities for using LinkedIn as a social media tool for professional branding	24
Ability to customize for professional branding	8
Value of a free tool that could be upgraded to a more expensive professional account after graduation	4
Ease of use	3

Several students provided examples of how profiles were customized to enhance the connection and content recommendations from others. All students identified at least one advantage of the tool; however, 86% mentioned specific pros as part of their professional brand.

Identifying the disadvantages of using social media, specifically LinkedIn, was part of the assignment to prepare students for the healthy skepticism and professional judgment they will need in their accounting careers. The goal was to have students critically analyze the tool, and all but one student indicated the benefits outweighed the costs of using LinkedIn. The analysis revealed that student comments were characterized as expressing the disadvantages of the assignment. These appear in Table 4 in decreasing order of frequency.

Table 4
Student Reflection Memo Mentions of Disadvantages of the Assignment, with Frequencies (n = 28)

Theme	Frequency
Excessive notifications of irrelevant information (content and connections)	16
Time commitment is required to establish a professional branded profile	13
Time needed to search for groups to establish a professional brand and wait for membership acceptance	14
Privacy issues regarding the use of one's own personal data	8
Overwhelming setup process (not intuitive without assignment instructions)	6

Unsolicited Student Feedback

Unsolicited student feedback was also received for the assignment. These comments included:

- Working on this assignment motivated me to look at internships in my area... before this assignment's deadline, I already had an internship job offer.
- Part of the class assignment includes taking pictures of myself and/or the speakers [at events]...
- I enjoy seeing the other students' comments on photos I shared.
- It was enlightening to see posts by older students that I know. They just graduated a year or so ago and already have some great career news to share.
- LinkedIn allows you to collaborate ... gives you the opportunity to stay connected with other like-minded professionals.
- It helps that we have courses that require us to create a LinkedIn that has some guidelines as to what it should look like to avoid looking unprofessional and turning away potential recruiters.
- This project provided insight into the amount of work it takes to maintain an effective professional network.

- I personally enjoyed the project and am excited to finally be on LinkedIn, although I was uncomfortable engaging with knowledgeable professionals as a student.

Discussion of Efficacy

For Requirement 10, students were required to write an analysis of the tool's pros and cons, provide feedback on each requirement in the assignment, and summarize the rewards and challenges of establishing a professional profile. Most students (64%) correctly identified LinkedIn as a professional social media platform and stated they would continue developing their profile for professional branding (57%). Students reported being nervous or uncertain about the practice engagement requirements in the assignment (32%) but appreciated the instructor guiding them through the interactions. Despite the short (two-week) time period allowed to complete the assignment, 7% of the students were recruited into positions due, in part, to their LinkedIn brand. Several students (36%) previously created a LinkedIn profile in another business course; however, 80% believed the assignment improved their LinkedIn profile.

Conclusion

This assignment helps students build their accounting brand images while exploring the breadth and depth of LinkedIn as a business-oriented social media tool. The assignment offers a guided career development experience using a leading social media platform and builds students' communication and networking skills.

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Appendix A

Professional Branding (LinkedIn) Assignment

A personal brand is [a unique set of skills and experiences that define a person](#). Effective branding [can differentiate a job candidate](#). In this assignment, you will explore ways to exhibit your accounting, business, and professional [competencies](#) that can help you enter an accounting career successfully.

Requirement #1 – The Importance of Professional Branding

Review [20 steps to a better LinkedIn profile in 2024](#) and LinkedIn: A Comprehensive Guide before joining LinkedIn if you do not yet have an account. If you do not want a public social media profile, you can use your first name and Student as your last name to create an online alias for the class assignment. You must have a profile for the remainder of the semester and may delete it after the final exam. **Required:** Join LinkedIn.

Requirement #2 - Completing Your Profile

LinkedIn is an opportunity to communicate with your target audience. Often, as a student, this audience includes potential employers. The goal is to create a distinct brand that will differentiate your profile to generate interest, so think creative rather than generic. Look at others' profiles as a basic example to complete this requirement. To complete your profile, simply click on the edit profile tab at the top of your page. Use your resume to complete a majority of these sections:

1. **Name:** Make sure you are using your full name.
2. **Heading:** Create a headline title after your name that describes your current role. It should be a short, memorable way to state who you are in a professional context. Akin to the objective statement on a resume. Review several profiles to gain insight into this task.
3. **Background Photo:** Insert a photo that provides a glimpse into your personality, interests, or what you value (e.g., hometown, vacation spot, sports, technology, or professional image).
4. **Education:** Include the schools you have attended, your GPA, certificates you have earned, and so on.
5. **Professional summary “about” statement:** This is a condensed version of your cover letter. For readability, consider using bullet points.
6. **Experience:** Fill in the experience section for at least the last five years of applicable experience for the profile you are trying to create
7. **Email:** Make certain your email has a professional appearance rather than a quirky personal touch.
8. **Specialties section:** Include professional phrases from the recommended competency list so a recruiter or hiring manager can find you through a “keyword” search engine.

Other Items to consider, but optional for the requirement:

9. **Recommendations:** It is one thing to say that you were a great employee at a past company, and it is quite another to receive a recommendation from someone who currently works with you. Third-party recommendations carry a lot of weight with recruiters.
10. **Claim your unique LinkedIn URL:** This increases the professional results that appear when people type your name into a search engine. Just set your LinkedIn profile to “public” and claim a unique URL for your profile (as in www.linkedin.com/in/yourname).
11. **Share the fruits of your labor:** Add examples of blogs you have written for professional societies or tech websites by displaying URLs.
12. **Make your resume available:** LinkedIn offers a free application for uploading your resume at [box.net](#). You can also use LinkedIn [to create a PDF of your resume](#).

Required: Complete your profile.

Requirement #3 - What's in a Picture?

Technology is everywhere, including future job searches. Sites like LinkedIn provide an opportunity for students to create a virtual, dynamic resume. When you use a picture to establish your profile, convey the attributes you want to signal (serious, intelligent, friendly, etc.). Employers are expecting a headshot. The best pictures provide some insight into your personality while still maintaining a professional appearance. This is often referred to as “casual professionalism.” Take and review several pictures before posting your own. Consider getting assistance to stage your photo in a more professional or natural setting, depending on the effect you want to achieve. **Required:** Upload an appropriate photo to your profile.

Requirement #4 - Building Your Connections

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. When sending an invitation to connect with another professional or join a group of interest, modify the standard LinkedIn request statement. Do not send the generic request. (Note: The smartphone app defaults to a standard connection invitation; therefore, you should personalize connection invitations using a computer.) State how you know the person or group and why you should connect. Many people will ignore generic invites. The quality of connections is important, not the quantity of connections. **Required:** Locate your instructor on LinkedIn and invite your instructor to connect with you using a revised request. Take a screenshot of this request, then paste it into your assignment memo. (Note: You can delete your instructor as a contact when the semester is over, but we hope you will not and will share your future career successes.)

Requirement #5 - Being Selective with Your Connections

LinkedIn facilitates making and maintaining professional connections. You should connect with your peer groups at school and work, as well as people in your aspirant professional group. Busy professionals often meet dozens of people a week. To increase the likelihood of connecting, mention how you know them or where you met, and give a reason why they should become one of your connections. **Required:** Invite an additional three LinkedIn users to connect with you. Take a screenshot of this request, then paste it into your assignment memo.

Requirement #6 – Joining a Group

Topics from class will be posted in a class group on LinkedIn. Locate our group through a search for “[Accounting class] [section number] & [Semester Year].” Request membership to our group. Pay close attention to not requesting membership in a group from another semester. There are many former classes still active. You should post any course/assignment questions on our group page. Everyone is encouraged to participate in the discussions or answer the questions. We are a collaborative group, so let’s get started. **Required:** Join our class group.

Requirement #7 – Practice Makes Perfect

Your contacts and potential employers might review the groups you join to learn what is important to you. Choose groups thoughtfully. Spammers often send messages to members of large open groups. If a group no longer provides value, drop out of the group. The groups you choose should provide you with contact resources and valuable information relevant to your career. **Required:** Join three to five value-added groups using a combination of professional (organizations or employers) and academic (student groups or university) affiliations. Do not hide these groups until your instructor has reviewed them for this requirement. Take a screenshot of your group memberships, then paste it into your assignment memo.

Requirement #8 – Making a Good First Impression

Show you are engaged and using an active dialogue with groups by acknowledging accomplishments, commenting on promotions, and occasionally “liking” group interactions. Be succinct. Do not overuse recommendations or endorsements so that when you do make one, it is taken seriously. Consider liking or commenting on existing discussions before you start a discussion of your own. **Required:** Provide two “likes” and one “comment” on discussions in different groups you have joined (our class group is not eligible for Requirement 8). Be certain to complete your due diligence before completing this task. You don’t want to give the impression of someone unprepared. Take a screenshot of this request, then paste it into your assignment memo.

Requirement #9 – Posting a professional event

You will need to make a professional post by doing one of the following.

1. Upload a picture of speakers at an event and tag the speakers (@speaker name & @company affiliation) and use #keywords with a one-sentence recap of what you learned from them or
2. Upload a picture of yourself with speakers/event coordinator thanking them for the event by tagging them (@speaker name & @company affiliation) and using #keywords in your post.

The picture can be something from your work, a philanthropy project, or a school event. Professional event opportunities for the semester will regularly be posted in our class group to aid in this requirement. **Required:** Post an event photo with tags and #keywords. Make sure your activity is not set to private and is visible to your connections. Take a screenshot of this request, then paste it into your assignment memo.

Requirement #10 – Memo

Write a two-page memo to discuss (1) the pros/cons of using LinkedIn for professional networking and (2) conclude with what you found rewarding and difficult about the assignment. State what value you would expect by maintaining your LinkedIn profile and establishing your personal value and professional branding for entering into the accounting profession. Attach relevant screenshots in an appendix to your memo. **Required:** Memo using the guidelines provided by the instructor.

Appendix B

Student Readings (Organized by Related Assignment Requirement)

1. Join LinkedIn

Why LinkedIn. www.careerbuilder.com/advice/social-media-survey-2017
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2. Complete Profile

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3. Upload Appropriate Photo

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 Crampton & Hauck, 2014. <https://www.slideshare.net/RENCORP/new-accountant-761enhancedonlineedition>
 Reddy. <https://content.wisestep.com/linkedin-for-accountants/>
 Ramsey, 2019. <https://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/resources/managing-social-profiles-in-college/>

10. Prepare Memo

Faculty provided,
 University Academic Resources- Writing Center,
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/professional_technical_writing/memos/sample_memo.html

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