

Myths and Risks of Social Networking

By Jake Swearingen

published on BNET.com 9/05/2008

You know that connecting to colleagues online has real benefits, but there are some things holding you back. If you're worried about wasting time, losing your privacy, or struggling with your technical skills, don't be — most social networks are safe and easy to use. That said, there are a few genuine concerns to be on alert for. Here's a rundown of what you do — and don't — need to worry about when networking online.

The Myths

It will become a time suck.

This will only come true if you let it. While the initial setup process may take part of an afternoon, once you're up and connected to colleagues, a social network won't require much time to maintain. In fact, your network can save you time by helping you find who you need quickly. Of course, any social network will require a modicum of attention and time in order for you to get the most of it. But then again, so does e-mail, and you'd hardly want to give that up.

I'll lose my privacy.

Nearly every social network has ways of ensuring that your profile data is only viewable to those you have invited to see it. A stranger browsing Google won't be able to trawl for your email or contact info — unless you've put it in your public profile. And remember: You don't have to list any contact info you're not comfortable disclosing. Worries of identity theft are ill-founded as well, as even those within your network would never see information like your Social Security number, date of birth, or home address. Think of it this way: There's already bountiful information about nearly everyone on the Internet these days. At least with a social network profile (which tends to rank highly on Google), you control some of it.

I'm not tech savvy enough.

If you've managed to click on and read this story, you're more than savvy enough to use any social network. It's true that some sites, such as MySpace, can expect users to know basic HTML, but both Facebook and LinkedIn do all the heavy lifting for you. LinkedIn, in particular, uses a clear, simple interface designed with the site's average user — aged 41 — in mind. Filling out an online profile is just like typing a resume or filling out a form, one that's decidedly simpler than, say, a 1040A.

The Risks

I'll be deluged with spam.

Nearly every social network implements safeguards to keep spam at a minimum. And nearly every social network fails to some degree. MySpace saw users abandoning the site in droves after spam artists started using profiles as bait for illicit websites. Facebook users are sometimes deluged when friends inadvertently send out requests to install applications. And users on LinkedIn have been barraged with promotional emails or requests for introductions from overzealous contacts. MySpace and Facebook are still struggling with the issue, but there's a quick fix for LinkedIn. If someone's outreach gets a little heavy handed, you can easily remove the pest from your contacts without them even knowing. (None of the major social networking sites inform contacts when you remove them from your network.)

My personal and professional lives will collide.

Who you are in the office can be very different from who you are outside of it, and online social networking can focus unwanted attention on that distinction. To avoid uncomfortable overlaps, make sure your contacts on LinkedIn are only those you know professionally. (Unless you're both in the same field, it's probably best to ignore your brother-in-law's requests to link to you.) If you use sites like Facebook for professional networking, set up two separate accounts — one to meet with others in your industry, and another to keep up with friends from college.

My mistakes will come back to haunt me.

A stain on your virtual record can be difficult to get rid of. Specious advice, passive-aggressive recommendations, a white lie about your job history — these things can stick around for years after the fact. And don't assume that simply deleting your profile will fix the problem. **Facebook faced a wave of anger from users** this February after it was discovered that bits of old profiles remained even after users deleted them. (Facebook now says the problem is fixed). Just as with e-mail, think twice before you type.
