

Benefits & Risks for Nonprofit Leaders Using LinkedIn

LinkedIn can be a powerful tool. Understanding its culture is critical to success.

By Chris Croll

First, the good news. LinkedIn is a valuable social media channel for nonprofit leaders. You can use it to network with other professionals, recruit volunteers, and communicate with donors and other key audience members. But there are risks you should understand before you jump in.

Here are some of the benefits:

Collaborate with other nonprofits. According to LinkedIn, there are over 87,000 groups focused on nonprofit issues. This means you have access to thousands of people who are facing many of the same issues you face each day. For instance, in the “Volunteer Coordinators” group, one member posted the question, “What database do you use for volunteer management?” Hearing people’s responses is a quick way to validate your own choice or learn about other options that may work better for you. There’s nothing more helpful than learning the experiences of those who’ve “been there,” just like you.

To post your own questions, select “Groups” from the dropdown search box (the default is “People”) and search by topic for whatever you’re researching. Once you find the appropriate group, post your question. Don’t be surprised by the helpful and courteous responses you receive! Because LinkedIn is used primarily by the business community, there’s a higher level of integrity and responsiveness than there would be in a social network used primarily for entertainment purposes.

Create private work groups. Many nonprofits manage “closed” groups on LinkedIn that require “Administrator” approval before members can access the group. Closed groups are great for collaboration and communication amongst a pre-screened list of members.

The group “Compass Volunteer Network,” for example, is composed of MBA alumni from Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, Dartmouth, and the University of Chicago. This group provides pro-bono business consulting to nonprofit organizations in the greater DC area. Only alumni from those institutions are permitted to join the group. This keeps the group’s membership laser-focused on the mission.

Network. The reason most people take the time to fill out profiles on LinkedIn is because they’re interested in networking. LinkedIn is like a trade show, a cocktail party, and a job fair rolled into one! Looking for a new job? Search the job listings or enter a specific organization in the search box. Want to recruit volunteers? Do a key word search for terms like “mentoring” or “youth services” to get access to thousands of people who have included those terms in their profiles. Some nonprofits even use LinkedIn to recruit new board members.

Now that you’re using LinkedIn to help manage your organization, be aware that there are risks. These dangers stem from not understanding the “culture” and expectations of the site’s millions of users.

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Risk #1 — Not thanking someone for help. If you post a question in a group or someone otherwise assists you on LinkedIn, remember to thank them — publicly — for their assistance. In our haste to get an answer and move on, we sometimes forget that it’s people—not search engines — who are taking the time to help us out on LinkedIn. Take that extra second to say “thank you.”

Risk #2 — Forgetting you’re on stage when you update your status. When you post a status update on LinkedIn, you’re essentially broadcasting to all the contacts in your professional network. Your reputation can be compromised in an instant if you post something too controversial, personal, or irrelevant.

LinkedIn is a very different venue from Facebook or Twitter where opinions, stories, and hour-to-hour happenings are acceptable as status updates. LinkedIn is about work. Most of your connections are too busy to be bothered with overly trivial or personal updates.



Chris Croll (chris@crollventures.com) advises nonprofits and for-profits on how to use social media to advance their missions and objectives. This article is adapted with permission from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center’s Web site (nonprofitrisk.org, 202-785-3891).

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