One legal professional's systematic approach to LinkedIn (234)

By Kenneth Jones on May 30, 2021

Going long on our professional relationships.

Like many things in the world, the one-two punch of automation and the pandemic have vastly altered the landscape of professional networking. To a great extent, building relationships in the clubhouse after a glorious afternoon on the links or while sipping a Woodford while awaiting your grilled **branzino** has been replaced, at least temporarily, with the likes of Zoom, Microsoft Teams and, of course, the business networking platform LinkedIn.

Some in the legal industry may welcome this sudden and stark shift, while other wish we could return to the ways things worked pre-pandemic. Alas, with COVID getting under control, we are finally in a position to construct a new normal that includes a heightened appreciation for technology.

One thing that is constant, however, is the value of networking, which has its own two-step of identifying expertise beyond one's own immediate environment and building trust. The reason is simple: When we need specialists to support us with a specific need or problem, we generally prefer to work with those we've grown comfortable with over time. Further, sometimes we are the specialist who get the referral.

Although I am not a lawyer, by dint of my 23+ years experience in a legal department, law firm, and legaltech company, see **Post 107** (summarizing career history), I have come to see myself as a legal professional who can make significant contributions to difficult legal industry problems. Cf. **Post 226** (Bill Henderson discussing a "renew[ed] and expand[ed] legal profession"). Thus, I network with a purpose, including my engagement on LinkedIn.

In this post, I'd like to share five key drivers of quality in building a solid professional portfolio on LinkedIn:

1. Defining professional goals
2. Developing useful content
3. Building a multidimensional network
4. Mutually beneficial relationships via bidirectional engagement
5. Expanding capabilities and connections into targeted areas of interest.

Further, each of these activities should be interconnected as part of a single, cohesive vision of personal and professional career journey. Cf. **Post 210** (Jason Barnwell discussing strategies for overcoming complexity inherent in the law's "wicked problems").

1. Defining professional goals

While it might be tempting to think of LinkedIn as a sort of Facebook-for-business, we probably should resist that urge and approach the platform using a more structured approach.

Let's start with a straightforward example. Within a law firm, lawyers and professional staff seek to provide excellent client service and representation, share excellent results and commendations, improve one's professional skills, and collectively apply all those elements into building a strong legal practice. Thus, I ask: should we build their own portfolio of accomplishments, skill development, and results within a platform like LinkedIn so it can be directly shared with professional contacts? I believe the answer to this question is a resounding "Yes!".

Regarding commendations, it is worth considering that **Chambers** and **Super Lawyers** recognition is based on a structured process. Essentially, without getting into too much detail, there is an in-depth market analysis conducted by an organization to evaluate and rank an attorney and their capabilities. This includes an evaluation of the positive qualities and skills to get a legal practitioner to the point public recognition is warranted. As we saw in the LinkedIn posting of many law firms with respect to Chambers USA, which just released its **2021 rankings**, this is a generally accepted practice in the industry.

Another valuable type of professional content on LinkedIn is a positive result for a client. While sometimes impossible to share these (under state ethics rules, permission must be granted), it's awesome when you can, for example, speak about winning a case, gaining a favorable judgment, or assisting a client with challenging business development or contractual issues.

Another exemplar might be a new type of capability. This could include an attorney being licensed in a new state or a law firm launching a new practice area, or any ability a law firm has to perform a task in a more efficient, automated manner (perhaps with approaches such as artificial intelligence or improved workflows). These types of advancements are relevant to both current and prospective clients,

As a personal example, not surprisingly, for many years I've routinely and continuously focused on highlighting the profile of my employer, the attorneys at our firm, and our technology subsidiary. Other more transient areas I opted to highlight are technology areas (e.g. SALI Alliance or Cloud Transformation Strategies, see **Post 108** for more information on the latter) or special areas of interest to me at different points in my professional life (e.g. teaching, consulting, even certain areas of advocacy on rare occasions).

What's the key point here? Just as a counselor creates an approach for a legal matter, attempt to frame up the desired outcome and then structure your strategy and tactical activities in support of that preferred end result. To draw a parallel, an attorney's "motions, briefs, depositions, and trial preparation" are mirrored within LinkedIn in the form of "posts, likes, shares, and content development." If one take's the time to develop goals and tactical actions to support them, LinkedIn activity will migrate from potential sporadic or haphazard interactions to an organized plan of attack designed to move your career and organization forward. That's the place we want to be!

2. Developing useful content

Once we've defined our professional goals, the next step is to develop content worth sharing. As social creatures, we are all interested in the awards, accolades, and announcements among peers, particularly if these messages are gracious, concise, and to the point. Yet, the content that likely builds the greatest trust is often gifting our expertise to others, thus saving readers time or aiding them in their work.

Developing your own content is a long road, not a quick hit. What are the options here? Here's a few.

Original content – writing

With respect to written pieces, it takes some time to pitch pieces to editors to build your street cred so those in the publishing field view you as an introspective thought leader who they wish to include in their content. Alternatively, you can create your own content channel via a publication on **Lexblog** (the platform used by Legal Evolution). Thousands of lawyers and allied professionals in the legal space are building their reputations — and practices — this way.

LinkedIn is an excellent place to help evaluable whether original content is a long road for you, as it offers the opportunity to **self-publish articles**. Particularly for those new to their field, this is a great way to start building out a portfolio of interest and specialization. Of course, my advice would be to develop content that is educational in nature, non-political and confrontational, and adds a unique perspective on an emerging or interesting topic.

In my field (legal technology), areas like security and cloud transformation technology tend to be rife with opportunities to share experiences and perspectives. Do you have a unique window on something happening in your field? If the answer is yes, you likely have content that others would like to read. Doing it well is a function of time and practice. Again, this is a long-road strategy.

Original content – speaking / teaching

Regarding original content, speaking and teaching is another. In my experience, getting gigs in high-quality settings is something that, like writing for trade publications, takes time. But other areas are a touch easier.

One is to connect with a Legal Continuing Legal Education Provider (CLE), as they tend to be looking for fresh content for their educational initiatives.

There are some pros and cons to giving CLEs. The pros are that the presenters are perceived to be teachers, which, in my experience, tends to play well in the future as one attempts to identify further opportunities to develop content. The cons are that attendee levels are lower, the courses are paywalled, and there can be a back-and-forth process as it relates to getting the content approved for CLE credit. But, all in all, it is still an option I wholeheartedly recommend to those looking to break into the world of developing their own content and brand.

Note that CLE is a broader category than it used to be. For some excellent ideas and more information about the types of legal education which is most salient in today's work, please see **Post 193** and **Post 121** (descriptions by Legal Evolution contributors Evan Parker and Dan Rodriguez articulating data and evidence-based evaluations of legal educational content).

Curating and summarizing the work of others

Have you ever read a fantastic article or attended a fantastic presentation that is going to significantly boost your professional life? If it is valuable to you, it is likely valuable to your peers. Thus, don't miss the opportunity to share this insight on LinkedIn, always being sure to concisely state *why* the content is valuable. Further, tag the original content creator. Although this approach is covered in Section 4 below (on mutually beneficial relationships via bidirectional engagement), it is worth noting that *our* gloss or take on someone else's original content–which is *our* original content–is especially valuable to peers, as it conserves our most finite resource: time.

Sharing on LinkedIn

Any and all original content should be promoted (meaning self-promoted) in LinkedIn. I would define "self-promoted" as posts you yourself do on LinkedIn, posts from one's employers, and interactions that utilize your platform connections, such as LinkedIn groups.

Naturally, one must carefully straddle the line between "informative" and "bombastic". And it's equally important to avoid the perception of promotion in the context of one's own posts. But don't entirely avoid breaking out your "LinkedIn bullhorn" due to those concerns. Without a willingness to engage at least some promotion, there really is no point in even developing content. So learning to find the right place on the continuum as it relates to marketing one's content is a worthwhile exercise indeed.

3. Multifaceted connection buildout

This might be one of the easier conceptual areas to cover in this post. To keep it simple, depending on what one is hoping to accomplish via LinkedIn, see Section 1 above, the types of connections one makes will vary, generally in a few targeted areas.

For example, if someone like me is trying to grow our Xerdict/CaseEnsemble software business, it is helpful to connect with those in legal operations or CIOs in other law firms. When trying to expand my content creation universe, editors and writers in places like **Law360**, **ALM Media** and the like is where I want to be. And if I am at the time of my life where I might want to teach, well, that's when connecting to professors and deans within potential local institutions is probably a good idea. The point here is, think about your plan, and then execute towards the goal.

That brings one to the next logical question, which is "how to best connect"?

Once one is a "content creator", common interests become a great vehicle for growing connections. Reflecting on (commenting on or liking) the posts of someone in an area of mutual interest is a solid strategy for developing a relationship. Sometimes you'll see others react to your content (your article or public speaking event), and if there are good reasons to connect to those individuals, by all means, introduce yourself and express your sincere thoughts.

That, by the way, is a really key point. Take the time to introduce yourself with a personal note which describes why you want to connect. Connection requests without personal notes tend to smack of either laziness or clickbait. One wants to be perceived as authentic, sincere, and generally interested in others, not one just "checking the boxes." So be sure to put in the effort to do so. It is time well spent.

In the end, developing even a relatively small number of close LinkedIn connections that tend to comment on or co-promote each other's content can fuel a consistent pattern of thousands of views per posting, Overtime, the result is a reputation for expertise and steadiness that is top of mind among one's peers.

4. Mutually beneficial relationships via bidirectional engagement

We all understand that, in relationships, descriptive terms like "one way" are bad, while something like "give and take" is good; that listening is much more important than speaking; and that consistent engagement is meaningful.

These same concepts apply to LinkedIn. No matter how impressive your recent article or speaking engagement may be, it's not just about you. A huge piece of the puzzle is taking the time to recognize, or reflect upon, the accomplishments of others.

How might one do that? For starters, setting aside 5-10 minutes a day to review content in your feed is a disciplined approach for active listening and response. Use this time to review content, and to carefully and thoughtfully react to it in a manner that it can be inferred you actually care. Generally speaking, that means making a brief comment on the material. Those who just mindlessly or aimlessly "Like" a series of posts, with no substantive reflection on the content, will be quickly be identified as reactive or shallow participants in the forum.

Alternatively, those who genuinely post well-constructed comments to the posts of others will, in time, receive the same on their content. This type of reaction — often known as a third-party independent endorsement — is ultimately what one is hoping for in the LinkedIn platform. Those posting excellent content — supported with third-party endorsements — become subject matter experts with a certain amount of gravitas which elevates one to areas where they are asked to write and speak even more.

There are some internal benefits as well. For me, working for a litigation boutique, when appropriate we post content about our attorney's accomplishments, external material, etc. Believe me, taking the two minutes it takes to not just like the content, but to share a post with a comment is something that is generally appreciated by your fellow team members.

As one, ideally on a daily basis, interacts with others on the LinkedIn platform to cultivate relationships which can bear fruit down the road, it's worthwhile to continually hearken back to one's original goals defined back in Section 1. Framing one's approach is always important. For a different sort of look back at the importance of "approach" in legal, consider the importance of providing excellent client service, especially in manner described in **Post 214** (where Carlos Gámez and Carly Toward outline the value of the "client centricity" as it relate to technology roadmaps and data structures to ensure one's tech activities are aligned to improve the client experience). Endeavor to ensure comments and interactions align with the high-level goals you set for yourself at the outset (e.g. promoting your business, client expansion, personal objectives, whatever they may be).

5. Expanding capabilities and connections into targeted areas of interest.

Let's finish with a small case study. I have a personal interest in legal standards and the **SALI Alliance**, see **Post 221** (discussing value of standards), which is an area I was able to explore via connections and a speaking arrangement via the **MIT Computational Law Workshop**.

Accordingly, last week I saw a **post** by the Corporate Legal Operations Consortium (**CLOC**) with some great news about their endorsing the **SALI Alliance**. I decided to do a quick share of that, tagging a few members of the legal community, including Legal Evolution contributor **Carlos Gámez.** In the end, this acted as a catalyst for some additional reposts, reactions, and comments from members of my network. All in all, a very simple way for me to spend less than a minute and reconnect with other thought leaders on a key technological issue of the day.

For attorneys, it's easy to imagine a myriad of use cases for expanding one's usual sphere of influence into other topical areas of the law. Commenting on case results, expressing ideas about legal innovation developments, or offering an opinion on legal theories outside one's typical practice certainly are all textbook examples of how to expand one's field of vision into desired areas of representation and influence.

To recap, my comments on SALI aren't what I usually do on LinkedIn. But it is the type of pivot which is easily accomplished within the friendly confines of the platform. Whether it is new areas of law, or even more distant of interest, anything from social issues to advancing Access To Justice programs within legal to offering non-traditional perspective (as I did in **Post 142** during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic), direct commentary on loosely related topics is another way to broaden one's sphere of influence on business social media.

Conclusion

Given the changes in society, both technological and societal driving by the pandemic, the manner in which we grow our professional network is fundamentally altered (perhaps temporarily, although likely just like returning to office scenarios we'll observe some type of hybrid outcome).

Considering LinkedIn as a true business tool — not a Facebook For Business — should now be a core element of one's personal and business development. And once we do so, just like a legal matter, contract negotiation, prepping for court or any other common legal work task, a structured approach setting high-level objectives, defining action steps to work towards goals, and then executing the plan in a disciplined manner making sure to allocate out the necessary time and resources to move tasks forward will help ensure your and your business's objectives are more likely to come to fruition.

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