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Forging Meaningful Social Connections in a Virtual World

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Forging Meaningful Social Connections in a Virtual World

In the age of LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other social media avenues, we can easily connect with individuals professionally and personally around the globe. The quantity and diversity of connections in our social networks have increased substantially. Yet, the question is whether we are connecting with others in meaningful ways so important to our personal and professional development. How do we forge those types of connections?

In their book, *The Lonely American*, Dr. Jacqueline Olds and Dr. Richard Schwartz discussed the rise of social isolation and disconnectedness in society (Olds & Schwartz, 2009). The obvious causes are television and the Internet. Rather than talking to our neighbors over the fence, we live in an age where we email coworkers in the office spaces right next to us. I recently heard a story about a college-age son texting his mother on the floor below to make him a sandwich!

The causes of our social isolation go beyond technology. Typically, a nuclear family now has two wage earners busily working full-time. Their free time is spent catching up on chores and spending time with their children and immediate family members rather than friends and extended relatives. There is little time left for involvement in social and civic groups. Additionally, the number of individuals living alone is increasing. According to the 2010 US Census, 28% of American households are occupied by someone living solo, which makes it a more common residential type than the nuclear family (Klinenberg, 2012).

Career Development and Social Isolation

With this backdrop, I started the Career Services Center for Walden University in January 2007. Walden University is an exclusively online university with students located all over the world. We communicate with our learners typically by phone, Internet, and e-mail.

Having worked face-to-face with career services clients my entire career, I found it challenging to connect with students through telephone advising and e-mail. Additionally, I was the *Lone Ranger* of Career Services for my first 2 years in my new job. I spent a substantial part of my time developing our website, a very solitary activity. This social isolation was compounded by the fact that I was a

new resident of the Twin Cities and living alone. I was building a whole new professional and personal network.

During this time, I learned about social isolation, both personally and professionally. Social isolation is a risk factor for learners in an online environment, who interact with other students asynchronously via online discussion posts, rather than synchronously in a traditional classroom. Social isolation is also a challenge for individuals who have lost their jobs and their daily social interactions with colleagues and clients.

More than just being emotionally painful, social isolation can have a very negative impact on our mental and physical health. Researchers of more than 148 studies involving over 300,000 participants showed a link between social relationships and mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Loneliness is as bad for individual health as smoking and obesity.

Strategies for Forging Stronger Social Connections

Realizing social isolation was a societal problem as well as a major health risk, I decided to wage my own personal campaign to help individuals forge stronger social ties. I hosted a Round Table discussion with my colleagues in the Minnesota Career Development Association where we discussed strategies and resources to support unemployed clients in staying socially connected, not just through professional networking but through forging new personal connections as well.

In June 2010, I started a venture called Plan B Connections. I launched with a website and delivery of a workshop called “Making and Maintaining Meaningful Social Connections” to unemployed job seekers through a local church. I discussed the importance of building social capital, the quantity and quality of social ties. I covered strategies for making stronger social connections, such as volunteering for an interesting cause on a regular basis to get to know other volunteers well and engage in meaningful conversation. One workshop participant said this topic was an aspect of unemployment that she had never heard addressed before. I continue to offer these workshops and maintain my website which houses a collection of national and local resources for making meaningful social connections. Recently, I had the honor of speaking to an audience of 100 individuals at TEDxMahtomedi, a local TED forum operated under an independent license, on this topic.

Career Advising in a Virtual Environment

Throughout my 6 years working with virtual learners, I have kept in mind the importance of meaningful social connections to their career development. An important part of meaningful communication is feeling heard and understood by another person. We take a client-centered approach in meeting our students where they are in terms of their career development. We facilitate personalized conversations with them through one-on-one telephone career advising specifically tailored to their needs. While we are happy to answer quick questions by e-mail, we encourage students to schedule a telephone advising appointment for answers to in-depth questions so we can tailor our answers to their situations. We collaborate with them to develop career goals and we discuss possible action steps towards meeting those goals. The advisor records notes of goals and action steps in a student information system to promote accountability in follow-up appointments, whether the student meets with the same advisor or someone else on our advising team.

Expanding Our Reach Through Social Media

In December 2012, I launched our Walden University Career Services LinkedIn group. Our Writing Center and Library have chosen Facebook as their main social media venues with great success. With a small staff of very busy career advisors, we chose LinkedIn instead. As the top professional networking site worldwide, we wanted to encourage our students to create strong LinkedIn profiles and engage in online discussions in a more formal and professional forum than Facebook.

I opted to make it a closed group to ensure that members had a connection to our university and that the content would be related to career development. I moderate this group on a daily basis. I use LinkedIn's e-mail templates to welcome new members and encourage them to connect with others in the group. I check to make sure that members' connections to Walden University are listed on their profile so other members can find them more easily. Finally, I monitor daily questions and comments to keep the group engaging.

We use our LinkedIn group in a variety of ways: to connect students and alumni, to post upcoming events such as webinars, to publicize articles of interest on networking and proactive career management, and to answer career-related

questions from students and alumni. We also post job opportunities as an additional incentive to recruit new members.

In setting group policy, I set specific parameters in place. Our group rules state that this is a forum for Walden students and alumni to share career-related information and build their professional networks. It is not to be used for marketing goods/services or posting content unrelated to our goals. Members are encouraged to engage in positive and constructive discussions.

Our LinkedIn group has grown to more than 1200 members. There have been *hot topic* questions prompting a dozen responses from other group members, such as whether to find a job before or after relocating to a new city.

The rewarding results of our LinkedIn group include online community building, networking, branding, marketing our services, educating our learners and keeping our fingers on the pulse of their interests and needs. Through members' comments and questions, we uncover topics for our webinars, blog and website content. It is highly rewarding to see students engaged in peer-to-peer career advising.

Four years ago, we launched our Career Services Blog to supplement our website. We personalized it by adding staff bios and areas of expertise. We contribute timely and interesting content to our blog through using it primarily to publicize success stories of our students and alumni. When we hear good news from students, we interview them, write up their stories, and obtain their written permission to post their stories on our blog. Students enjoy the opportunity to see their stories online. Success stories have ranged from presenting at an academic conference to landing a great job after being unemployed to getting published. Recently, we have attracted more traffic to our blog by running a special series of *how to* career articles with their hyperlinks promoted in the university's monthly electronic newsletter, The Ponder. We also have a presence on Twitter where we typically post announcements and links to career articles. We plan to expand the use of Twitter for post-webinar Tweeting to continue questions and answers after the live event ends.

Conclusion

In career development, we have a valuable opportunity to view many facets of our clients' lives, including their professional and personal social connectivity. While we typically consider professional networking as vital to career development, it is important to take a wider and more holistic approach. Clients may be facing social isolation. Feeling socially disconnected can occur in

numerous life situations, including unemployment, working or studying in a virtual or solitary environment, or undergoing a life change such as a geographic move, a divorce, or retirement. We can have a major positive impact in helping these clients through making them feel heard and understood through career advising, whether it is a face-to-face, a telephone, or even a virtual interaction. It is important that we educate them about strategies for and the value of continuously forging meaningful social connections vital to their mental and physical health.

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