

Q&A: LinkedIn Etiquette Guide for Students & Recent Grads

Etiquette rules in the offline world are pretty clear: Say please and thank you; shake hands firmly; keep your elbows off the table. But what are the rules for interacting professionally online? Here are some guidelines for managing your e-manners.

Q: How often should I check LinkedIn?

A: While logging in daily is ideal, what's most important is that you maintain a consistent presence and respond to messages and connection requests in a timely fashion. LinkedIn will send you a Network Update once a week or once a day -- you can use that email as a reminder to log in and send someone a note, respond to a request or post to a group discussion.

Q: How do I make sure my LinkedIn profile is professional?

A: First, be totally truthful and never stretch the facts -- remember that your profile is public. Next, post a photo that is professionally appropriate (no pets, quirky backgrounds or funny expressions). Finally, write up your experience and credentials as you would present them on a resume or cover letter. Your writing can be a little less formal on LinkedIn, but proper grammar, spelling and proofreading are essential.

Q: What's the best way to request to connect with someone?

A: LinkedIn provides a basic message "I'd like to add you to my professional network on LinkedIn," but it's a good idea to customize your requests. You'll get a better response rate if you write a brief, personalized, polite note to each potential connection reminding them how you met (if necessary) and explaining why you're interested in connecting -- e.g., to ask for advice or to keep in touch after meeting at a conference.

Q: How do I ask for an introduction?

A: When you request an introduction, you'll be prompted to write a note to your mutual connection and then a separate note to the person you want to meet. In both cases, draft a compelling subject line and a short note that introduces you and explains why you hope to connect. Just remember never to ask directly for a job -- it's not polite or appropriate.

Q: What should I do if someone doesn't respond to my connection request or message?

A: There is no guarantee that everyone you want to connect with will want to connect with you. If you haven't heard from a potential connection in over a month, it's okay to send that person an email to say that you've reached out and would like to connect. If that doesn't work, it's best to move on to people who are more interested or responsive.

Q: How do I handle a request from someone I don't know or don't want to connect with?

A: You can either reply with a short note requesting an explanation ("Hi - can you remind me how we know each other?") or you can click "Archive" to ignore the request or save it for the future. If you definitely don't want to connect, simply click "Archive" and move on. If you want to report the person as a spammer, then click "I don't know this user." Users who receive several of these clicks are removed from LinkedIn.

Q: Will people know if I un-connect from them?

A: If you unconnect from someone, that person will not be alerted. Of course, if that person looks through his or her contacts or attempts to send you a message, you will no longer be shown as a 1st-degree connection.

Q: How many groups should I join?

A: The number of groups you belong to on LinkedIn should reflect approximately the number of professional affiliations you have (or want to have) in real life. For instance, if you attend college, are an accounting major and love social media, it would be great to join your alumni group, an accounting group or two and a social media group or two. To get the most benefit from group participation, quality trumps quantity.

Q: What is the most polite way to ask someone to write a recommendation for me?

A: Most importantly, you want to request recommendations from people who really know you and your work, such as former bosses or professors. Customize each Recommendation Request with a polite, gracious and personalized note, and provide a few words outlining the accomplishments or qualities this person might mention about you. And, of course, always thank the person for writing the recommendation.

Q: What's appropriate to write in my LinkedIn status updates?

A: Although LinkedIn status updates can cross-post with Twitter, be careful only to post professional comments to LinkedIn. This means no posts about the weather or your crazy cat. The best status updates are like snippets from a networking conversation: quick notes about events you're attending, accomplishments you're proud of, articles or books you've read and professional announcements like a new position.

Overall, use your judgment, be polite and act maturely. If you wouldn't do it in person, don't do it on LinkedIn!