

AWWP JOB LIST

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How Writers Can Use Social Networking to Find Jobs

by Woody Lewis

Social networking is a fundamental human process. The formation of personal and business connections through regular contact with existing and new acquaintances has influenced every civilization in history. In that context, information has been a commodity whose value derives from timeliness as well as content: the faster it's received, the greater its worth to the recipient.

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Here in Silicon Valley, social networks built on electronic media have existed since the advent of computing. From small user groups exchanging messages on a mainframe, to communities of programmers using private e-mail and list servers, technologists have always shared data, ideas, and job opportunities. During the second half of the 1990s, the Internet

enabled social networking on a massive scale. People started connecting through the Web in ways that spawned new industries and job categories. Writers and editors became "information workers," a group whose mission was to create content (as it came to be called) for a readership migrating to the Web.

After the dot-com crash in 2000, many of these information workers

joined online communities in search of jobs. Early experiments such as Ryze, a popular network started in 2001, demonstrated that there was a strong demand for virtual meeting places where people could make new professional connections. Though it was still mostly the province of technologists, the networking phenomenon had taken hold.

Craigslist upped the ante. Drawn by biblical levels of unemployment, jobseekers recognized that the freshest, most plausible leads might be found online. Corporations and small businesses that had previously used the classifieds began advertising on the web, an ominous sign for newspapers. By the beginning of 2008, companies such as Monster.com and HotJobs had proven their viability, but too many resumé's flooded into these sites, overwhelming potential employers. As the economy began to contract, human resource staffers experiencing their own downsizing searched for tools to improve their efficiency. They used LinkedIn to post job openings, which often included a preference for referrals from other members. When word spread that the odds of hearing back from an employer were better than on the "traditional" job sites, LinkedIn experienced an exponential increase in membership.

At the same time, Facebook evolved from a grassroots college alumni community to a full-blown social network. Compared to LinkedIn's text-driven layout, Facebook's framework of public messaging and shared photos projected a more personable image. It became the preferred way to communicate with friends, while LinkedIn attracted more corporate users.

As the economic downturn extended into the second half of 2009, every industry and service category experienced a net loss of jobs. Writers, particularly print journalists, were among the hardest

hit as seismic changes in the newspaper business added to the carnage. In what many saw as the final blow, Twitter started scooping the newspapers with text messages and images delivered on its real-time network. The pundits quickly dubbed this “crowdsourcing,” though the term had been bandied about for several years.

How Do Writers Network?

Today, social networking provides a critical communication channel to jobseekers. What does this mean for writers and editors? How are they using this new medium to find work, and what are the best tools?

Facebook and LinkedIn remain the most popular overarching networks, mainly because of their large memberships and the many groups that have been created. The sheer number of listed groups, however, can be overwhelming. A search on the term “writers groups” (apostrophe deliberately omitted) produced over 500 results on Facebook, and over 800 on LinkedIn. Since the strength of these two networks lies in their one-to-one or one-to-several communication model, extremely large groups can dilute that effectiveness. Facebook’s Poets & Writers Registry, for example, lists over 29,000 members.

The number of smaller websites and blogs focused on writing can be even more intimidating, but a few familiar names stand out. There’s the AWP *Job List*, of course, as well as *Poets & Writers* magazine, the host of <http://www.pw.org>, which lists jobs, contest deadlines, and other important information. Similarly, *Zoetrope All-Story* hosts The Virtual Studio (<http://www.zoetrope.com>), a collaborative workspace where creative writers network and get feedback on manuscripts. Mediabistro (<http://www.mediabistro.com>), a site focused on publishing, lists jobs, and other resources, while Paidcontent (<http://www.paidcontent.org>) is more focused on digital media. The Poynter Institute, a nonprofit journalism organization, offers a list of print- and web-related positions that’s surprisingly populous, given the state of the industry (<http://careers.poynter.org>).

Freelancers can visit <http://freelancewrite.about.com> and <http://www.freelancewritinggigs.com> to find leads, advice, and support, while <http://jobs.problogger.net> is a good destination for those seeking paid blogging assignments. While a detailed analysis of blogs is beyond

the scope of this article, it’s important to keep track of sites such as Harper Studio (<http://theharperstudio.com>), because this is an effort by a major publishing house to reach out to the online community. The writer who ignores such a resource reduces her exposure to the literary social network.

The best examples of how these networks are used come from the writers themselves. Roz DeKett, who manages a team of marketing communications writers for consulting giant Deloitte, uses the photo-sharing network Flickr in addition to Facebook and LinkedIn. “I have had photos picked up from there and used in a community publication,” she reports. “I’ve also been contacted via Flickr messaging by various people.” Here we have social contact on an ancillary network producing leads that might not have come from her primary Facebook community.

Mariela Perez-Simons, owner of Perez-Simons Content Solutions (<http://www.perezsimons.com>) and a recent graduate

of the Bennington Writing Seminars, uses Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, but she also follows, and has followers on, YouTube, Digg, Slideshare, and others. Perez-Simons says, “I hardly e-mail my freelancers anymore. I Facebook them or send them a PM (personal or private message) on Twitter.” Again, we see a heterogeneous network presence: a combination of messaging, sharing images

and links, and managing lists of followers. This raises an important question: how and when should you make contact with someone you don’t know, either for a job opportunity, or just to network? In a recent post on Mashable, a widely read blog covering social media, Soren Gordhamer outlines a very pragmatic approach (Visit <http://mashable.com/2009/08/01/facebook-vs-twitter>). “If I want to connect with someone I don’t know,” he writes, “either for business, social or personal reasons, I first look the person up on Twitter.” He goes on to say that this allows him to get a better sense of that person: their online personality, and their interests. While it’s also possible to do this through Facebook, the likelihood of an answer decreases in this relatively more private context. Facebook friendships are typically formed on the basis of historical relationships or virtual introductions by a third party.

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There’s no shortage of ideas about what the social networks should do next to improve their communities. Ophelia Chong, a gifted art director and user interface designer who also writes the blog KCET 404 (http://kcet.org/local/blogs/404_city), would like “more communication on a private level which blooms out into the wild, like seeds, you plant it quietly and then nurture it into a flower for all to see.” This is an elegant

restatement of the “viral” communication concept, a model that does in fact illustrate cross-pollination of knowledge. Social networking is an abstract term meant to describe human group behavior, an inherently prolific process.

A Case Study

My own recent experience with social networking illustrates the potential of this medium. In January 2009, I left a technical management position at Stanford. Having made several false starts at a blog during my years as a web architect and software developer, I decided to write about the intersection of social media and the newspaper industry. My work at a nonprofit focused on diversity in journalism, together with my extensive web experience, gives me a unique view of current events. I started <<http://www.woodylewis.com>> and broadcast an announcement on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. After posting several pieces, I received an e-mail from a startup looking for a software engineer. Because I had installed that company’s product on my server, the director of human resources had seen the address of my site and read my blog. The position turned out not to be a fit, but I made a good contact and got important feedback on my writing.

Several months later, I began writing for the social media blog Mashable, again using the pieces on my site as a portfolio. I recently published my fifth piece (<http://mashable.com/2009/07/31/traditional-media-online-video>), and though this is not a paying assignment, I received a very real inquiry from an east coast publisher about working for his newspaper. While there wasn’t a geographical match (I’m planning a move from California, but to New York, not south Florida), I made another great contact.

I just finished my third consulting project since leaving Stanford in January. The managers at my first assignment had read my Mashable pieces, which heightened my credibility going into the project. We’ve remained in touch, and I continue to receive inquiries about working with them again in the future. It’s important to note that while I’m a recent MFA in the middle of a novel, I’m an experienced Web architect now specializing in the Drupal content management system. That might be Greek to you, but it’s a skill set that continues

to be in demand, even here in the Valley, where unemployment is now said to be higher than during the first dot-com bust. I am by no means out of the woods, but I’ve made myself a lot more visible by what I consider to be a modest effort at social networking. I have yet to work on my site’s search engine optimization (SEO), an important part of any self-promotion, and my Twitter use has decreased dramatically, but I’ve extended my personal network into a visible community of journalists and bloggers.

Reclusive writers might still succeed, but it’s no longer possible to ignore the social requirements of our craft. It’s essential for any serious writer to build a network.

Visit sites like Social Media for Writers (<http://social-media-for-writers.com>) to learn about the tools you’ll need. Go to blogs like Maud Newton (<http://maudnewton.com>) every now and then for a shot of virtual caffeine. Above all, reach outward and upward, because that’s where the future lies.

Woody Lewis is a social media strategist and Web consultant. He holds a BA and MBA from Columbia, and an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars. He currently lives in the Bay Area, where he is also at work on a novel-in-progress.