Staying LinkedIn with ICT Graduates and Industry

Aaron Steele
School of Business & Computing
UCOL
a.r.steele@ucol.ac.nz

Sandra Cleland
School of Business & Computing
UCOL
s.cleland@ucol.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the implementation of a LinkedIn alumni group for maintaining contact with ICT graduates, tracking graduate destinations, and engaging with industry. The LinkedIn professional networking environment was selected after an analysis of existing approaches used to maintain contact with graduates were found to be insufficient. The LinkedIn alumni group was found to be an effective method for maintaining contact with ICT graduates who had moved into the ICT industry. The group provides a reasonably accurate list of graduates as well as their current place and position of employment. Beyond this, the alumni group has also allowed for interaction between faculty and graduates through topical discussions and polls which has provided an additional avenue for industry engagement.

Keywords: Alumni relations, graduate destinations, industry engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently the need to maintain documented relationships with graduates has increased within the New Zealand tertiary education sector. This has been driven by reporting requirements both within institutions and for external bodies. The NZQA Tertiary Evaluation Indicators (NZQA, 2010) used for programme self-assessment include both Outcome indicators and Process indicators that necessitate reliable data on graduate destinations.

Within UCOL's School of Business and Computing relationships with past graduates from the BICT (Bachelor of Information and Communications Technology) degree have been informally maintained by individual faculty members. Although substantial information was collectively held by members of the faculty, this information was not readily accessible or centrally organised. Therefore, any staff attrition would potentially have an impact on currently held graduate destination data. Beyond this, difficulty was often experienced in keeping up-to-date with graduate career progression. Consequently, an alternative system was required in order to effectively manage alumni and overcome the issues identified with the existing approach.

Accordingly, this paper reports on the selection and implementation of a LinkedIn alumni group for maintaining contact with ICT graduates, tracking graduate destinations, engaging with industry, and answers the underlying question: can a social networking tool be harnessed to effectively manage alumni relations?

2. BACKGROUND

Initial attempts by the faculty to formalise the collection and maintenance of graduate destination information were unsuccessful. This included a central spreadsheet that was intended to house a list of graduates, their contact information, and current employment position. Faculty were encouraged to liaise with administration staff in order to keep the list up-to-date whenever graduates provided new information. Students were also asked to provide contact and employment information at graduation each year. However,

this data was often inaccessible or incomplete. Additionally, graduates were invited to provide their details to School administrators through a static web page on UCOL's public website. Unfortunately, despite the best of intentions none of these methods proved to be an effective means for capturing and maintaining reliable links with alumni.

An examination of the literature surrounding alumni relations tended to indicate that social networking sites were emerging as an effective avenue for maintaining relationships with graduates.

The use of social media to engage with alumni and prospective students is reviewed by Kowalik (2011). The author highlights how social media provides institutions with a new level of engagement with prospective students, alumni, donors, and community members. Interestingly, the study has an underlying focus on utilising alumni for fundraising and donation purposes.

An article by Lowe (2012) discusses how student organisations can continue to engage and communicate with alumni through the use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The resulting communication channels are noted as being effective, however the author also warns of the dangers of over communicating with busy alumni. The primary focus of the article is on maintaining alumni contact and does not explore employment destinations.

A research project by Lauder (2013) examined alumni engagement through social media, with a particular focus on the professional online networking platform LinkedIn. The study evaluated the extent to which LinkedIn served to foster engagement, build community, and maintain relationships between alumni and their alma mater.

A recent study by Case, Gardiner, Rutner, and Dyer (2013) examined the extent to which LinkedIn profiles were able to provide an accurate picture of entry-level jobs held by information systems graduates and their subsequent career progression. The study found that the LinkedIn profiles were able to provide valuable graduate destination and progression data. The results also suggested that the profile information could also be used to develop a long-term assessment of the outcomes of the researchers' information systems program.

The use of social networking sites to connect with chemistry alumni was investigated by Farmer (2013). The study examined the use of both Facebook and LinkedIn and found

Figure 1. The Conversation Prism (Solis, 2013)

both were effective and necessary for maintaining reliable connections with alumni. The study found that a number of alumni had either a Facebook profile or a LinkedIn profile, but not both. An additional advantage of LinkedIn was also noted in that both current and past employment information is available on profile pages.

Interestingly, the conversation prism (see Figure 1) that has been developed by Solis (2013) distinguishes LinkedIn from other social networking sites such as Facebook by reason of LinkedIn's business and professional focus.

A large scale Egyptian study used LinkedIn social networking information as a means for capturing national ICT graduate information (Tantawy, Farouk, Mohamed, & Yousef, 2012). The study concluded that the LinkedIn social networking site was a reliable source for alumni data for Egyptian universities.

An article by Lavrusik (2009) explores the different ways in which social networking sites can be used by universities to engage with alumni. The article covers concepts such as: helping alumni find jobs, collaboration and connecting alumni with students, fundraising, meeting alumni where they're at, providing tools to share information, alumni-generated content, and alumni related events.

To summarise the literature, the use of social networking sites has clearly emerged as an effective tool for connecting and engaging with alumni. LinkedIn, due to its professional focus has also shown to be ideally suited to targeting alumni in the workforce, particularly when employment history information is required.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the literature, as well as UCOL's increasing use of social networking to engage with students, it was decided to replace the schools currently ineffective alumni relations system with a social networking solution. The criteria for selection included:

- Professionally focused
- Ability to manage membership
- Provision of discussions
- Access to up-to-date work history

Consequently, LinkedIn was selected over Facebook for a number of key reasons. Anecdotal evidence from existing students suggested a hesitancy to engage with the academic staff using personal, socially focused, Facebook profiles. LinkedIn also stood out from Facebook with its focus on educational background, work history, and professional endorsement, as opposed to socially driven content.

Before creating the LinkedIn alumni group, an analysis of existing alumni information was conducted. The purpose was to determine which previous graduates were likely to be able to be reached during the initial set up. Based on the available information, graduates dating as far back as 1995 were identified. Interestingly, this task proved to be slightly more difficult than expected due to changes in record keeping processes, and a degree renaming and rewrite in 2004. The decision to include graduates from embedded qualifications also added to the complexity.

Once this information had been compiled a LinkedIn alumni group was created by the researchers. The group was set up as a closed group which allowed faculty to verify and control group membership. In order to join the group, alumni needed to be specifically invited, or have their request to join approved by the group manager (a faculty member). The group was also set up to allow existing members to send invitations to other alumni. This allowed further utilisation of existing social networks used by past graduates in order to help build and promote the alumni group.
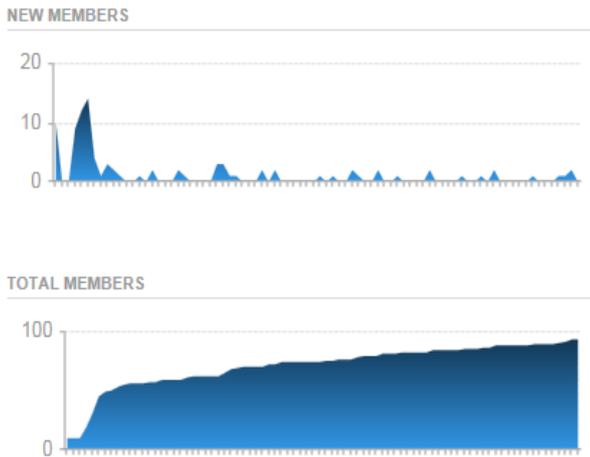
Figure 2. LinkedIn Alumni Group Membership Growth

The first step after creating the group was to begin inviting past graduates to join. An effective approach to group recruitment was for the researchers to individually connect with alumni who were already engaging with LinkedIn. Once individual connections were established, alumni were then invited to join the group through LinkedIn. This resulted in an initial influx of group membership followed by gradual fluctuations in growth as subsequent graduates were invited (see Figure 2). Figure two shows a summary of LinkedIn alumni group membership since the group creation in December 2012, through to the date of publication (July 2014).

Membership of the alumni group is now at 93 members with 25 outstanding invitations. The current set up of the BICT alumni group is shown in Figure 3. Also visible are two active discussions.

4. DISCUSSION

The initial motivation for creating the LinkedIn BICT alumni group was to provide a way for faculty to access up-to-date information about graduate destinations. Interestingly, once the group was set up, not only was the information accessible, but the group proved to offer far more benefits than what was originally expected or even intended.

Group discussions quickly emerged as a hub of activity within the group. To begin with discussions were primarily started by faculty members and focused on technology and education related subjects. As the group membership increased, alumni members began starting new discussion around topics of employment, job seeking skills, and industry practice.

Occasionally there has been the need to moderate certain members' contributions to group discussions. Fortunately, the LinkedIn group settings allow for group managers to tag a member as requiring moderation. This results in any discussion comments from tagged individuals requiring approval before becoming public. This feature was utilised for a particular graduate who had previously demonstrated an inability to self-filter.

An additional feature which has since been removed from the LinkedIn group environment was the ability to poll group members. While it existed, the polling mechanism was used to quickly survey the opinions of group members. One such poll focused on the teaching and relevance of mobile app development technologies.

The group has also proven to be a useful communication tool with regards to graduating students. News articles and discussions focused on recent graduates are promoted each year. Beyond this, recent graduates who join the group have also been seen to use the group as a means for keeping up-to-date with fellow graduates now that they have moved into industry and are no longer in regular communication.

Beyond communication, the individual LinkedIn profiles accessible through the connections made, provided access to not only current employment, but also a history of previous employers and positions. This information has been particularly interesting as it has allowed faculty to explore career progression for individual graduates. The LinkedIn group statistics also provides data relating to employment seniority (see Figure 4).
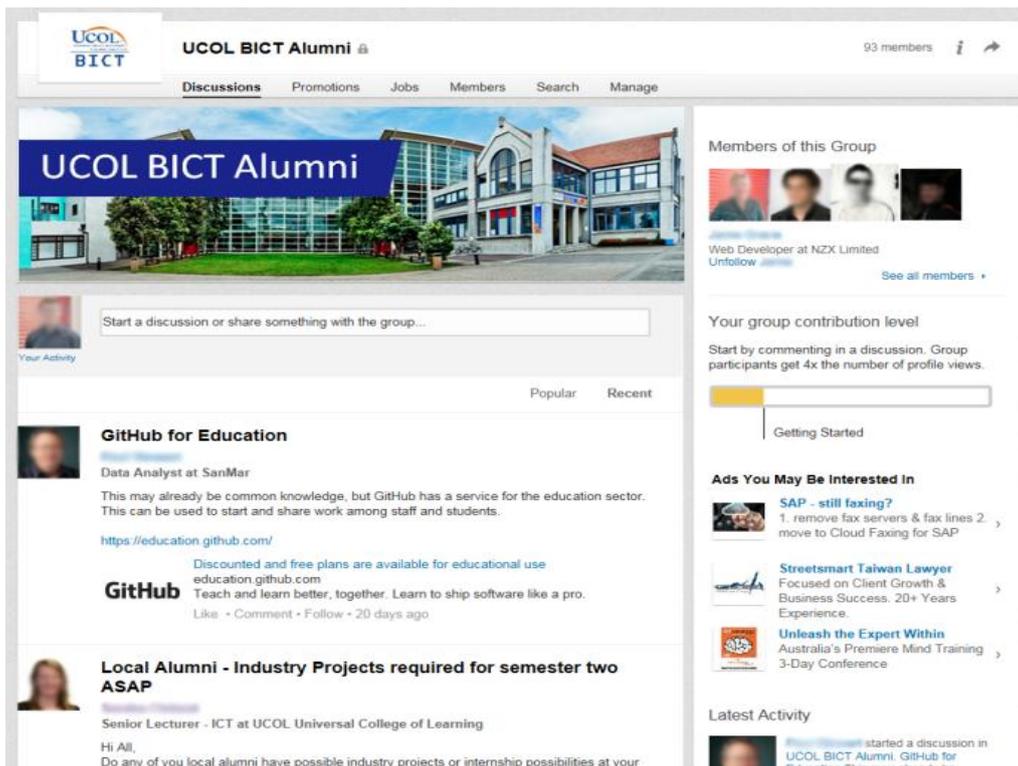

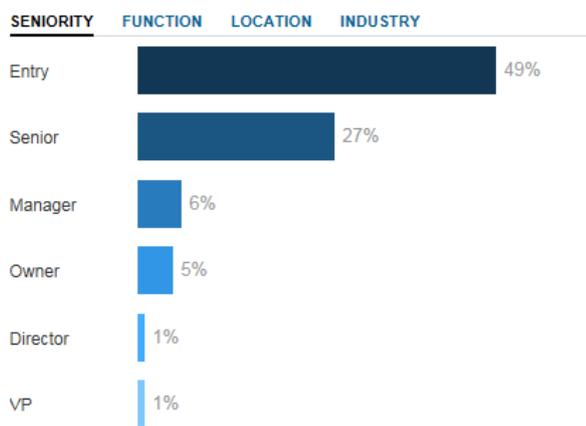**Figure 3. Screen Capture of BICT Alumni Group**

Figure 4. Alumni Seniority Distribution

The skill endorsement feature of the LinkedIn profiles has also proven to be a popular and useful aspect of the system for both faculty and alumni. In particular, new graduates are able to rapidly build up skill endorsements through connections with faculty and peers. Faculty members are also able to provide graduates with written recommendations that can be featured on their respective profile pages. Furthermore, faculty members have received the added bonus of having their own skill set endorsed by alumni members.

Job promotion, internship, and employment opportunities have also featured within the group environment. These opportunities have been posted by both faculty members and existing alumni on behalf of their employers. This has had the added benefit of providing a way for faculty to promote graduate recruitment programs to the current student body.

In a related theme, the alumni group has also been utilised for sourcing of potential industry based capstone project and internship opportunities for current students. A significant aspect of the BICT degree involves third year students undertaking a 45 credit industry project or internship during their final year of study (Steele, Cleland, & Englebrecht, 2013). Consequently, alumni members are acutely aware of the importance and usefulness of these opportunities from both student and employer perspectives.

Industry engagement has been achieved through a culmination of the previously mentioned features of the group. Alumni have made suggestions for tools and strategies that could be potentially useful within the degree and for students preparing to enter the workforce. These suggestions have included strategies for increasing work experience through contribution to open-source projects, as well as information relating to career progression and interview techniques. Alumni have proved to be an excellent source of industry feedback due to their unique ability to relate industry experience directly back to academic courses, course content, and assessment.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a summary of the implementation of a LinkedIn alumni group for maintaining contact with UCOL's BICT graduates, tracking their graduate destinations, engaging with alumni in industry, and has address the question: can a social networking service be used to effectively manage alumni relations? An analysis of existing approaches used at UCOL to maintain contact with graduates was found to be insufficient. The LinkedIn professional networking environment was selected after a review of the literature. The alumni group was found to be an effective method for maintaining contact with BICT graduates who had moved into the ICT industry. The group has provided a reasonably accurate list of graduates as well as their employment history. Beyond this, the alumni group has also allowed for interaction between faculty and graduates and has ultimately provided an additional avenue for industry engagement.

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