

## A big boost for online networking sites

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In a growing economy, online networking sites like LinkedIn generated increasing interest by some professionals, and ambivalence by others.

In shrinking economy, business people are packing conference halls to hear how they can use online networking tools they had until now kept at arm's length.

Groups in Westchester County and neighboring Fairfield County, Conn., have sponsored gatherings in the past few months to help their members wade through the merits – and perils – of joining networking sites like LinkedIn, Plaxo, Facebook and others.

Organizers say the biggest deterrent to date has been the fear that such sites will monopolize time that would be otherwise spent in running a business – or cutting into personal time. As corporate layoffs mount, however, business people say they are witnessing a rush of people registering with such sites, and soliciting connections.

“I have been on LinkedIn – oh gosh – I think for four years now,” said Carol Wallace, a communications manager with Stamford, Conn.-based Pitney Bowes Inc. “I have seen a marked increase (of users) in the past four months.”

The CEO Roundtable, a networking group of Fairfield County business owners, hosted a discussion last month on the topic, as did the Westchester County chapter of the Society of Human Resources Management and the Soundview Innovation Cell in Stamford. The consensus? While a majority of executives were already registered with such sites, particularly LinkedIn, relatively few said they used sites to their fullest capabilities, exploring the relationships their contacts have with other people.

CEO Roundtable co-founder John Engel said he suspects most use LinkedIn in the way he does – as a “rolodex in the sky” for occasional reference. Still, he prefers the LinkedIn Web site to Facebook and others that strike him as more geared toward personal connections.

Approaching its sixth anniversary this May, LinkedIn currently has more than 38 million members. The Mountain View, Calif.-based company says a person joins every second, and to expand its reach the company has been adding capabilities to integrate with other applications or content feeds – most recently with software sold by Armonk-based IBM Corp., and before that with the CNBC channel owned by Fairfield-based General Electric Co.

For more than a year, LinkedIn has also been developing online tools to assist recruiters mining its network, allowing companies to post profiles and list open jobs – in the past six months, responses to job postings on the network have doubled.

Not that old-fashioned networking has gone out of vogue – Fairfield County has seen a mini-boom of networking groups for out-of-work professionals, according to David Lewis, co-founder of the CEO Roundtable and CEO of OperationsInc, a human-resources advisory firm. His Stamford company has co-sponsored two “pink slip parties” in Norwalk, and is planning a third such gathering April 21 at Hula Hanks in Stamford to help jobseekers connect.

Matthew Bud, who runs the Westport-based Financial Executives Consulting Group L.L.C., also chairs Financial Executives Networking Group, a national organization. Since taking leadership of FENG in 1996, Bud has increased the membership base to 35,000 people – and credits the power of the Web for the rapid expansion.

As new tools like Twitter take root on computers, allowing people to exchange random thoughts on the fly, professionals are trying to gauge how many connections – and channels – they can manage.

Wallace said most people in her Pitney Bowes department are on Twitter, but she to date has stayed old school with regard to “tweeting.”

“My gut feel there is I’m managing enough inbound communications as is,” Wallace said.