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Abstract

The popularity and growth of social networking sites (SNSs), particularly among the college-aged demographic, makes them logical tools for university career centers to use **to** connect with students. The authors surveyed 78 university career centers to determine how they use SNSs, the benefits and drawbacks, and the advice they would give **to** a career center considering using SNSs. The most commonly used SNSs by this sample include Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, mainly to provide career information. Benefits included students' responsiveness to the SNS posts and increased visibility and attendance at events; the main drawback was time required. The most common recommendation was to determine goals and plan implementation.

Keywords: social networking sites, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, university career centers

Social networking sites (SNSs) have been defined as "Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Jencius and Rainey (2009) identified Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter as examples of SNSs that are becoming increasingly popular, each having millions of users, seen as "tremendous vehicles for connecting with others, be it socially or professionally" (p. 22).

Facebook is the most frequently used SNS, with over 901 million monthly users, 526 million daily active users, and more than 125 billion friend connections (Facebook Statistics, 2012). Facebook's purpose is to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (About Facebook, 2012). Individuals provide information on a profile page and can upload links, photos, videos, notes, or brief status updates and connect with others when invited to "friend" another Facebook user or by personally initiating the invitation. Facebook includes job search applications, or apps, including LinkUp (companies can post job openings on Fan Pages), virtual business cards, Inside Job, My LinkedIn Profile (connecting with a LinkedIn account), and Work With Us (by Jobvite).

Twitter is a microblogging tool, through which a person may "tweet" about their lives in 140 characters or less. Twitter, unlike Facebook and LinkedIn, allows for asymmetric relations, that is, a person can follow another without that person having to follow in return. Twitter is "the fastest, simplest way to stay close to everything you care about" (About Twitter, 2012). Although Twitter does not provide statistics, according to a blog on msnbc, Twitter now has over 140 million active users who generate over 400 million tweets per day (®technolog, 2012).

According to Jencius and Rainey (2009), LinkedIn differs from Facebook and Twitter because it is used for more professional purposes, similar to a business card exchange. LinkedIn lists over 161 million members and more than 2 million companies, with all Fortune 500 companies represented (About Us, 2012). They provide a "gated access" to members, in which contacts must know each other or be introduced to each other from a common contact. Members can write endorsements of other contacts, which serve as brief letters of recommendation and can be seen by employers. According to their website, LinkedIn will help members (a) reconnect: "find past and present colleagues and classmates quickly," (b) power your career: "discover inside connections when you are looking for a job or new business opportunity," and (c) get answers: "your network is full of industry experts willing to share advice" (Get The Most, 2012).

College students regularly use SNSs. In a study of 7,705 college students, Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) reported the following characteristics of those students: 97% owned a computer, and 68% had a Facebook account and logged in at least twice per day. Students' comfort with online tools may result in an expectation of instant accessibility to information and service 24/7 (i.e., 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; Shier, 2005). Given students' comfort with technology and the expectation of instant access to information, it follows that career centers should explore how to connect with students using these types of technology. However, Junco and Cole-Avent (2008) and Kleinglass (2005) found that very few student affairs professionals are using technology to engage with students. Venable (2010) suggested that deciding to provide services online is complex, involving cost, technical

support, time, staff openness, constituent desire/openness, confidentiality issues, and training considerations.

SNSs may be used as a job search strategy for students. According to the 2009 Student Survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE; 2009), 35,000 students use online resources in the job search, with 96% visiting company websites, 91% checking job postings on company websites, and 85% checking career center job postings. Most college seniors (86%) had an account on Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn, but the researchers surmised that SNSs were not being used effectively for job searches. Given that networking is still a strong predictor of career success (Blickle, Witzki, & Schneider, 2009), offering many opportunities for the job seeker (Clark, 2009; Strehlke, 2010), and that employers often examine the SNSs of student applicants as part of the job search process (Giordani, 2006), this may be an area in which career centers can strengthen students' skills. Despite the influx of SNSs, empirical studies on the use of SNSs by university career centers are lacking. The purpose of our study is to address this gap through the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How are university career centers utilizing SNSs?

Research Question 2: What is the composition of the users/followers of the university career center's SNSs?

Research Question 3: What do university career centers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks to using SNSs?

Research Question 4: What can university career centers share about their own experience that would be helpful to other centers?

Method

Sample and Participant Selection

A June 10, 2010, Google search for "university career centers" produced 62 results before the list began to deteriorate (unrelated sites began emerging, indicating the search was no longer optimum). Next, we conducted a search [ofwww.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com) for 4-year public universities with more than 15,000 students, which produced a list of 137 universities. We added these sites to the original list, eliminating duplicates ($n = 28$), resulting in a list of 171 universities.

Instrument

We developed a survey to answer the main questions regarding which SNSs were being used by career centers and in what ways. Specifically, we developed questions to elicit information on how career centers were using SNSs; the types of and goals for SNSs being used, SNS benefits and drawbacks, followers' composition, posting frequency and subject areas of posts, sites the center connects to, and SNS advertisement. We carefully worded the questions so that they were not too intrusive and did not cause participants to feel inadequate regarding their technical skills. In addition, one of the authors attended a webinar on the topic of SNS and career centers. Based on the issues being discussed in the webinar, we decided that our questions were comprehensive and appropriate. Many of the questions were multiple choice and included an "other" write-in option, and some were open-ended. Questions included: (a) Do you use social networking for your career center? (b) Which SNSs does the career center

use? (c) What was your primary goal in using social media? (d) Are you using it in the way you intended? (e) What suggestions do you have for career centers that are just beginning to consider using social media? (f) Does the career center have workshops for students on how to use social media in their job search? (g) Does the career center deliver any workshops via SNSs (e.g., a resume writing workshop via LinkedIn)? (h) What have been the benefits and drawbacks of using SNSs in your career center? (i) How satisfied are you with the outcomes of using SNSs for your career center? Other data gathered included the position of the person completing the survey, the number of followers per SNS, the types of followers (e.g., students, alumni), frequency of posts to the SNS daily, frequency that the SNS is checked daily, whether the career center uses SNSs mostly to respond to connection requests or to initiate connection requests, percentage of posts that are directly related to job postings, the subjects of posts other than job postings, and how the center advertises its site.

Procedure

We located university career center websites via Google by typing in the university name, followed by "career center." We used the director's e-mail, and, if it was not available, we used the general center e-mail. If no e-mail was available, we made contact via an e-mail link or telephone call requesting an e-mail address. We made two telephone call attempts. Five universities failed to respond to either an electronic or telephone request for an e-mail address. We excluded centers without English-speaking personnel ($n = 1$) because we only speak English. We also excluded universities without career centers ($n = 4$), because the existence of a career center was essential to this study. This resulted in a final e-mail list of 161 career centers. We assured confidentiality as part of the informed consent. More specifically, we assured participants that their data would not be connected to their identity and would be combined with other participant data in the published article. Although Survey Monkey collects participants' IP addresses, they were eliminated from the data set after they were used by Survey Monkey to prevent duplicate responses. We fully informed participants about the purpose of the study and possible risks. The university's institutional review board approved this study.

We created an online survey and e-mailed an electronic link, with seven returned as undeliverable. We sent a follow-up e-mail 2 weeks later to all centers, resulting in a final count of 78 out of 156 responses, for a 50% response rate.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using a mixed-methods approach. We calculated percentages for Likert scale items. It should be noted that, in many cases, the total number reported differs because some participants did not answer that specific question. More specifically, of the 78 participants who began the survey, 68 (80%) completed it, including the 3% ($n = 2$) that did not use social media. Instead of deleting the entire profile because of missing data, we chose to keep the profiles because of the exploratory nature of this study. Furthermore, we were comparing percentages within each category and not to other categories. We used qualitative theme coding for open-ended responses using an inductive approach, in which we briefly summarized individual statements and then created themes based on categories that were repeated (Thematic Coding and Analysis, 2008). Because we were using an inductive approach

to coding the data, we used a data-driven form of thematic analysis, in which the themes emerged from the data rather than from our efforts to fit the data into a preexisting frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

The purpose of this research was to provide a preliminary glance at how university career centers use SNSs. The respondents included directors ($n = 16$), career counselor/information specialists ($n = 15$), assistant/associate directors ($n = 14$), manager/coordinators ($n = 10$), and 20 participants who did not answer the question. Most career centers ($n = 75$; 96%) reported that they were using SNSs for service delivery. To answer this question, we asked centers to identify which SNSs they use, how they advertise the SNSs, how often they check and post on the site(s), the primary goal for using SNSs, and whether they are using SNSs in the way they originally intended.

Research Question 1

SNS usage. The average number of SNSs used per career center was 2.7, with the median/mode of 3.0. Therefore, most career centers used more than one SNS. The SNS types used included Facebook ($n = 56$; 93%), LinkedIn ($n = 46$; 77%), Twitter ($n = 42$; 70%), other ($n = 10$; 17%), and MySpace ($n = 3$; 5%). Examples of other included blogs, You Tube, Ning, Google Maps, and Foursquare. Centers ($n = 42$; 84%) mainly used SNSs to provide information - specifically, general career information ($n = 19$; 45%), including job search tips, links to career-related articles ($n = 18$; 43%), information related to employment or internships ($n = 5$; 11%), and connecting with employers ($n = 1$; 2%). Other uses included connecting with students ($n = 37$; 62%) and promoting career center services ($n = 22$; 37%).

Career centers were asked to identify the percentage of their tweets or posts that were directly related to job postings. Seventy-eight percent ($n = 103$) of the centers reported that 25% or less of their tweets or posts were directly related to job postings. Other SNS topics included promoting career-related events, activities, or information ($n = 49$; 98%); one center (2%) reported having a LinkedIn group for parents. Sixty-four percent of career centers ($n = 38$) offered workshops on how to use SNS in their job search, and a small percentage delivered these workshops via SNSs ($n = 6$; 10%).

SNS advertisement. The majority of centers ($n = 58$; 74%) reported advertising their SNS implementation. Out of these 58 centers, the majority used the career center website. More specifically, 96% ($n = 53$) of centers using Facebook, 83% ($n = 30$) of centers using LinkedIn, and 95% ($n = 40$) of centers using Twitter advertised their SNS via the career center website. Also, of these 58 centers, 31% ($n = 18$) reported using methods other than SNSs or the career center for promoting their SNS implementation. These included signature lines for staff ($n = 5$; 28%), print ($n = 4$; 22%), direct contact with students ($n = 3$; 17%), e-mail ($n = 3$; 17%), marketing materials ($n = 2$; 11%), workshops ($n = 1$; 6%), and Guerilla marketing using students ($n = 1$; 6%). Hashtags, used in Twitter to categorize tweets, were used by 39% ($n = 15$) of the centers using Twitter.

Daily checking and posting on SNSs. Thirty-nine percent of the centers reported checking their SNS once per day, regardless of the SNS type. For centers using Facebook, 22% ($n = 11$) checked less than once daily, 40% ($n = 20$) checked once daily, 26% ($n = 13$) checked two to three times daily, and 12% ($n = 6$) checked more than three times daily. For centers using LinkedIn, 34% ($n =$

13) checked less than once per day, 42% ($n = 16$) checked once per day, 21% ($n = 8$) checked two to three times per day, and 3% ($n = 1$) checked more than three times per day. For centers using Twitter, 26% ($n = 11$) checked less than once daily, 36% ($n = 15$) checked once daily, 21% ($n = 9$) checked two to three times daily, and 17% ($n = 7$) checked more than three times daily.

The majority of centers (average across SNSs, 90%) posted or tweeted one to two times per day, with the remainder posting or tweeting three to 10 times per day. Specifically, 43 centers (92%) posted one to two times daily on Facebook, 33 centers (97%) posted one to two times daily on LinkedIn, and 32 centers (82%) tweeted one to two times daily on Twitter. Nine percent ($n = 4$) posted three to 10 times per day on Facebook, 3% ($n = 1$) posted three to 10 times per day on LinkedIn, and 8% ($n = 7$) tweeted three to 10 times per day on Twitter. Centers also were asked to indicate whether they mostly respond to or initiate contacts. For centers using Twitter, 19 (46%) responded more often and 22 (54%) initiated more often. For centers using Facebook, 25 (47%) responded more often and 28 (53%) initiated more often. For centers using LinkedIn, 26 (74%) responded more often and nine (26%) initiated more often.

Goals for using SNSs and evaluation of goals. Primary goals for using SNS included providing students with information ($n = 42$; 84%), connecting with students ($n = 37$; 62%), and promoting career center services ($n = 22$; 37%). Fifty-four (92%) centers indicated that they were using SNSs in the way they intended, with five (9%) stating that they were not.

Research Question 2

Career centers had more followers on Facebook and Twitter than on LinkedIn. Approximately one third of centers using Facebook and/or Twitter had over 500 followers (Facebook, $n = 21$; 38%; Twitter, $n = 13$; 32%) compared to 17% ($n = 6$) of those using LinkedIn.

As for composition, 43% ($n = 24$) of the centers using Facebook identified over 75% of their followers as students compared to centers using LinkedIn and Twitter, whose demographic was more evenly spread among students, alumni, faculty, other career centers, and other career professionals. One exception was that alumni tended to favor LinkedIn, with 21% ($n = 8$) of the centers using LinkedIn reporting that over 75% of their followers were alumni. When averaging the number of unknown followers across categories (e.g., students, alumni, faculty) approximately one third of the centers did not know who their followers were. These percentages were highest for centers using Twitter (41%), followed by LinkedIn (36%), and then Facebook (29%).

University career centers tended to follow other career centers ($n = 12$; 32%) and employers ($n = 7$; 18%) on Twitter compared to Facebook (other career centers, $n = 8$; 19%; employers, $n = 3$, 7%) or LinkedIn (other career centers, $n = 4$; 12%; employers, $n = 5$, 15%). Centers only used Facebook ($n = 7$; 17%) or LinkedIn ($n = 8$; 24%) to follow faculty. Regardless of SNS type, centers also followed professional organizations ($n = 2$; 38%), students ($n = 2$; 38%), other campus offices ($n = 1$; 19%), and employers ($n = 1$; 19%).

Research Question 3

Fifty-three percent ($n = 32$) of centers reported being mostly satisfied with their SNS usage, 33% ($n = 20$) reported being satisfied, and 10% ($n = 6$) reported being mostly unsatisfied. Three percent ($n = 2$) reported being extremely satisfied. Of the 78 centers, 47 reported either benefits or drawbacks. Using the qualitative approach described in the methods section, several benefits and drawbacks were identified. Benefits were students' responsiveness to SNSs ($n = 22$; 47%); increased visibility and attendance at events ($n = 10$; 21%); increased

communication ($n = 7$; 15%); increased connection to alumni, professionals, and employers ($n = 6$; 13%); and cost-free/easy to use ($n = 4$; 9%). Other comments ($n = 1$ each; 2%) included providing information that typically would not be provided (e.g., web links), promoting services and events, being viewed as current by peer institutions, increased credibility with students and colleagues, encouraging students to network, benchmarking against other centers, and allowing student staff to research and publish findings. Drawbacks included time required ($n = 18$; 38%), lack of metrics ($n = 2$; 6%), students not knowing how to use SNSs professionally ($n = 2$; 4%), and difficulty in targeting messages ($n = 2$; 4%). Other drawbacks ($n = 1$ each; 2%) included ethical/legal issues with job posts, receiving negative press, lack of clear vision on how to use tools, lack of effectiveness for the older generation because of a lack of technical skills, limited to one-way interaction, sometimes misleading student responses (in that students may indicate they are going to attend an event but then not show up), privacy concerns, those who are not students taking advantage of the events, losing deeper connections with students, and a concern about invading students' social space.

Research Question 4

Out of the 50 centers that gave advice regarding the implementation of SNSs, several major themes were identified using an inductive approach to analyzing the data. The most common recommendation was to determine goals and plan implementation ($n = 20$; 40%). Some centers ($n = 5$; 10%), however, recommended a more experimental approach, stating that centers would not know what worked until they tried it. To address issues of time, some centers suggested that a knowledgeable student ($n = 8$; 16%) or other staff member ($n = 11$; 22%) be assigned to update and maintain the site. Three centers (6%) recommended consulting with other career centers or SNS experts. One center recommended using SNSs for providing resources and helpful links, rather than marketing services.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide an exploratory look at the use of SNSs by career centers. Career centers are using SNSs to deliver services, with Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter as the primary sites. The majority of career centers use three SNS sites to connect with students, promote the center's services and events, and provide career information and links to career-related articles. This suggests a divergence from what some researchers called a reluctance of those in student affairs to engage in the technology that students are using (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Kleinglass, 2005).

Career centers did not use SNSs for job notices or to connect with faculty or other career centers, with less than 2% reported connecting with employers. This is surprising considering that a main purpose of career centers is to connect students with employers (Villar, Juan, Corominas, & Capell, 2000), and connecting with faculty could present valuable networking opportunities—one of the most effective means of finding a job (Castella, 1990; Villar et al., 2000). Perhaps career centers are not using SNSs to their full potential to help students connect with employers. LinkedIn, for example, has a forum within its groups for job notices. This could offer one explanation for the 2009 NACE summation that students do not use SNSs to their full potential.

The composition of SNS users/followers consisted of students, alumni, faculty, other career centers, and other career professionals. Facebook fans of career centers were mostly students,

whereas LinkedIn connections seem to be mostly composed of alumni, suggesting that these two sites serve different needs. In addition, almost 25% of centers indicated that they did not know who their fans/followers were. If a purpose of using SNSs is connection, it would seem to be important to find a way to identify individuals who are part of a center's SNS.

There was high consistency among the statements about the positives and negatives of using SNSs, as evidenced by the low number of themes that emerged. SNSs were regarded as having a value-added benefit mainly in the area of fostering a relationship between the career center and students and other constituents such as alumni, professionals, and employers. Career centers also noted that the SNSs are cost-free, easy to use, and gave the perception of being cutting edge. The primary negative was the amount of time required to maintain SNSs, with participants suggesting the designation of a student or staff member as a possible solution to this challenge.

The main recommendation of career centers was to make a plan for implementing SNSs and to identify goals related to SNSs. This assertion confirms the recommendation of other researchers (Sampson, 2008; Venable, 2010). Sampson (2008) suggested a comprehensive eight-step implementation model that begins with evaluating current career resources and services and ends with ongoing evaluation and accountability. Venable (2010) also suggested a needs assessment to establish the purpose for using such technology and to allow for service evaluation. Although the usage of this technology for career centers is still emerging, there are some implications for career centers and counselors. Because of the popularity of SNSs among college students and the hesitation and uncertainty expressed in several of the responses, career centers and counselors will need to spend more time with this technology to increase their comfort level. Perhaps centers could hold SNS training classes for staff to help increase the comfort level. Because SNS usage has been described as time-consuming by several participants, centers should also focus on ways to evaluate the effectiveness of their SNS usage, so that their time is used effectively. Similar to the ethic of conducting an assessment on oneself before using it with a client, career center staff should be encouraged to explore the different SNSs before using them to deliver services to explore their benefits, drawbacks, and possibilities. Furthermore, by joining professional groups via SNSs, career center staff also can become informed about the issues faced and solutions offered by other career center professionals.

Research regarding the use of SNSs and career service delivery is beginning to emerge. For example, Strehlke (2010) reviewed web-based articles on the opportunities and risks associated with using SNSs for a job search. However, empirical outcome and evaluation studies on the use of SNSs in career service delivery are missing. Future research also should focus on the user end, examining preferences and uses of SNSs for career development and job searches. & student services continue to identify how the needs and preferences of constituents (e.g., 1st year, senior, graduate, alumni, varying genders and ethnicities) differ, services (including SNSs) can be designed to specifically meet those needs. Junco and Cole-Avent (2008) suggested that student service professionals' work with and connectivity to students will be enhanced by understanding the how and why that underpin students' use of technology.

As a tool, SNSs provide an opportunity to examine how traditional approaches compare to technology-driven ones. For example, Clark (2009) identified networking as the most

important skill in managing a person's future career success and outlined six principles of networking, including "do face-to-face networking at every opportunity" (p. 345). How does this apply to SNSs? There are individuals who seem to tweet or post about every move that they make, from getting coffee to going to bed at night and everything in between. Common sense suggests that this is not an effective networking strategy, but is there an optimum balance? How do general networking strategies apply in the social networking world?

Some limitations to our study exist. At 50%, our response rate was higher than the response rates reported by Kaplowitz, Hadlock, and Levine (2004) in their study of mailed and online surveys with advance mail and follow up notification, which ranged from 20% to 32%. They found that response rates increased slightly when postsurvey postcards were sent. Our rate was somewhat lower than that of Morganson, Jones, and Major (2010), who had student participants and used weekly reminders and extra credit for their web survey, resulting in a 68% response rate. Still, our survey was much higher than two other research studies using web-based surveys. For example, Vespia, Fitzpatrick, Fouad, Kantamneni, and Chen (2010) surveyed members of a national professional organization, beginning with an e-mail invitation that included a supporting letter from the organization's president, a link to the survey, and an option to enter for a \$20 gift card drawing. One e-mail reminder was sent and yielded an 8% response rate. Busacca, Beebe, and Toman (2010) surveyed graduate student members in two professional organizations and sent one reminder 30 days later, yielding a 14% response rate. The most effective methods for using online surveys for research are still being determined and seem to be somewhat dependent on the population. Methodological details for collecting online survey research are needed.

Other criticisms of web-based surveys include an inability to determine if a person has completed the inventory twice and incomplete surveys. To address the first concern, the survey was configured to not allow duplicate responses. A second limitation was that approximately 18 participants chose not to answer various questions. Although forcing an answer to each question was possible, we opted not to use that approach in an effort to increase overall participation in the study. Other limitations included our sampling method, which limited the generalizability of the study to career centers that had a website and had at least 15,000 students, as well as our research design, which included a survey that we created. Despite these limitations, this study is among the first to examine the use of SNSs by career centers. When examining how career centers provide services, the motivation of most centers for using SNSs is to increase connectedness with students. SNSs can provide many opportunities and challenges for career service delivery, but, in the end, it is not up to technology to chart the path; career center professionals are the ones who have the knowledge, skills, and responsibility to lead the way.

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