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COLUMN

Nurture your online persona

The Internet offers ways to broaden your contacts and assist you in your job search, says **Peter Fiske**.

Many academic scientists believe that a CV is the only document that they need to communicate their accomplishments and advance their careers. Few exploit the Internet's potential, even though scientists were the first to use it to share information and collaborate. Some even consider online networking to be a waste of time.

As an early-career scientist, you need to understand that such a mindset can impede your career progress — especially if you are aiming for a position outside academia. As a scientist-turned-entrepreneur who has recruited numerous PhD-holders for jobs in industry, I use online networking tools such as LinkedIn daily to identify potential recruits

and evaluate job applicants, and I see that early-career scientists often put themselves at a disadvantage to those outside academia in terms of their online presence — or lack thereof. They have much to learn.

Part of this disinclination towards online networking is based in the culture of academia, where your entire professional story is represented in your CV (literally: curriculum vitae means 'course of life'). Under these unspoken guidelines, an online presence consists simply of posting a version of your CV on your group's or department's website.

To effectively search for jobs outside academia, and to manage your online presence, you need to develop an 'e-persona' that goes far beyond your CV. Your e-persona is the summation and entirety of every bit of online information about you or that involves you — both written and visual. In today's networked society, someone else has probably already posted some of that information. But you can still shape and control a great deal of the visible online information about you — and the image that this information creates — by actively managing the information over which you have some control.

The first place to focus on developing and managing your e-persona is on your employer's or institution's websites. Nearly all research groups maintain a site that describes their research and recent publications. If you have access to that site, or can have a web administrator post content for you, do not add a CV. Instead, summarize two or three significant accomplishments and research interests in a one- or two-paragraph biography. For important publications and patents, provide links, because many viewers outside academia do not have easy access to a research library. Also provide a short synopsis of each, including why the result is significant and important to the world at large. These synopses will greatly help non-experts, such as industry recruiters, to understand and appreciate your research contributions. If you do not have direct access to your department's or institute's website, at least be sure that all the information you are allowed to provide is accurate and up-to-date.

A headshot — a professional-looking photographic portrait of your face — is another important component of your e-persona. A medium- or high-resolution portrait taken by a friend or colleague with reasonable photography skills is usually sufficient. Images of you, including those posted by friends and colleagues, are likely already to be present ▶

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► online, but their resolution, quality and context is out of your control. You need to be the source of an attractive image that clearly shows your face and projects a friendly, professional demeanour. If you post an image of medium or high resolution, most viewers searching for an image of you (say, for a poster to publicize a lecture that you are giving) will choose that one.

All this work — updating your group's website, adding PDFs and links and getting a good headshot — should not take more than a few hours. Once you have established the format, you can continue to add and update as necessary, which will not be as time-consuming.

TAKE CHARGE

You cannot properly create and manage your e-persona just by tweaking your department's or research group's web page. You need to create your own profile too. The social-media site LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is by far the largest and most commonly used professional networking service online, with more than 300 million registered users. Unlike your departmental or institutional website, your LinkedIn profile is yours to construct and maintain forever. LinkedIn is well established in the scientific and academic community and is even more widely used in industry and government.

Your LinkedIn profile allows you to present a summary of your professional history, skills and interests. It contains much of the same information as your CV. But while those documents are oriented towards job seeking, your LinkedIn profile is more of a snapshot of your accomplishments, analogous to how a colleague might introduce you as a speaker. Along with your work and educational history, your LinkedIn profile can and should include lists of your publications and patents with links to each.

Your LinkedIn profile represents a crucial juncture at which viewers from academia and those outside it will encounter your e-persona. This duality sometimes poses challenges for young PhD graduates who wish to remain professionally connected and credible to peers and

supervisors while simultaneously exploring career opportunities outside of academia. How do you maintain a consistent e-persona when you may be considering — and want to signal interest in — both a research and a non-research career path?

The answer is to strike a balance between the depth of your research and the breadth you wish to provide for non-academic employers or collaborators. For example, by offering synopses of some of your key publications or patents, you can help non-experts to appreciate your research's impact. And, by drawing attention to some of your non-research professional activities, you can project the image of a potential employee who is more than a scientist narrowly focused only on experiments in the lab.

For example, one young PhD-holder in neuroscience highlighted how her research connected to current therapies for traumatic brain injury, indicating her interest in translational research, and how a post-degree entrepreneurship programme had provided her with budget-management, leadership and marketing skills, signalling her interest in technology commercialization. Her research colleagues saw the profile of an accomplished and productive young scientist, and potential industry employers saw one of an ambitious and capable researcher who was eager to apply her skills in the commercialization of new therapies. The profile helped her to nab her current industry position.

Another area of great value for researchers is LinkedIn Groups. There are more than 2 million professional networking groups within LinkedIn that cover numerous professional and technical fields, companies and topics. LinkedIn members themselves create the groups, and because members use their real identities, discourse is almost always cordial and professional. Many areas of scientific research have corresponding LinkedIn groups in which members post questions, raise topics for discussion and alert other people to new information. Joining groups that align with your interests is an effective and fast-track way to become part of that community, at least virtually, and to make valuable contacts who can help you in your job search.

There are other networking and social-media sites that target scientists, including ResearchGate, PubPeer

and Academia.edu. Facebook remains the pre-eminent social-networking site, and many early-career researchers maintain active profiles on the site. But from a professional networking standpoint, I find LinkedIn to be the standard-bearer.

Of course, the main value of an online environment such as LinkedIn is that it provides a location in which to build your professional network and to tap into that of others. This is vital for early-career researchers, particularly those who are contemplating a career move beyond academia. Most young scientists start with a professional network oriented almost entirely toward research science. To make connections and learn about career opportunities beyond academia, you need to discover 'friends of friends' — the larger network of people whom your friends and colleagues know. These contacts are often willing to help you because you have a friend in common. LinkedIn provides you with an instantaneous way to illuminate that larger network and, most crucially, to reveal those who are in a career field or organization that interests you.

CREATE AN IMAGE

As you build and expand your network, however, you must remember that your interactions are as important for establishing your e-persona as any information about you. Networking is about forming relationships with others. It is crucial to establish online communication practices that project a thoughtful, positive and professional persona. If you want to expand your LinkedIn network, for example, never use the generic message text supplied by the site. Instead, write a brief personal note that explains who you are and why you would like to link to that member. It is also important to be prompt. If you meet someone in person to whom you would like to send a LinkedIn invitation, do so within 24 hours. Professional interactions have a short half-life: delay too long and the person you wish to connect to may not remember you.

The academic culture teaches PhD-holders that their record of research and publications is the sole means by which they will be evaluated and advance professionally. Yet even in the world of academic research, this is only partially true. Professional networking through a positive and professional e-persona will help you to establish your credibility and reputation within the community of research science. And, to expand your opportunities in the world beyond academia, it is absolutely crucial to create and administer a well-managed e-persona. Do not let academia's early lessons dissuade you from embracing and capitalizing on this opportunity. ■

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