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NETWORKING FOR BUSINESS EASIER ONLINE

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Mike Curreri is familiar with the ins and outs of executive recruiting. With a law degree and two different high-tech start-ups to his credit, Curreri, who describes himself as a "law-tech pioneer," has plenty of contacts in the upper echelons of the software industry.

Even so, when he began looking for new opportunities in the Washington, D.C., area, Curreri got help from an unexpected source. Thanks to the online networking community LinkedIn.com, Curreri was able to obtain a meeting with a venture capitalist he'd never met before. "There was no way that I would have even known of this person's existence," says Curreri, who just took over as CEO of Hartford software company AVIcode. "I certainly wouldn't have found him any other way."

Curreri was job hunting when the venture capitalist suggested to him an area of potential interest in AVIcode's product. The information helped cement "my decision to go to AVIcode," said Curreri.

For the job searcher who has labored to build a professional network through traditional means - poring over business directories, cold-calling potential employers, negotiating with receptionists for contact information - services like LinkedIn are nothing short of revolutionary. Using the same "six degrees of separation" principle as Friendster, the social networking site that generated so much buzz in 2003, they make it possible to leapfrog from contact to contact with astonishing ease.

LinkedIn and its main competitor, Ryze, connect people who can help one another professionally. Both offer a free basic membership service and claim to have around 80,000 members.

"I've used it to meet people doing all kinds of interesting things," says Susan **Kaup**, an event planner and coordinator of Ryze's Boston community. "The people I know on Ryze come from a variety of backgrounds and have years of experience."

Imagine pulling up a list of contacts and seeing everyone they're connected to, and their connections, in an ever-expanding web. Click on a name and instantly see where that person has worked, who he's worked with, and who he knows who might be able to help you find a job.

"If there's someone with whom I have common business interests, I add them to my list of friends, and then a link to their page appears on my page," explains **Kaup's** friend Anne Fitzpatrick, executive director of the Boston-based Rock & Roll Library and a Ryze user. "If I meet someone in the music business, I can go through their friend list, and there's a likelihood that some of those people will have the same business interests as I do."

Even as services such as Friendster and Tribe.com jostle for dominance in the social realm, the world of business-oriented online networking remains fairly circumscribed. Although several companies promote software packages and the career site Monster.com is expanding its networking functions, Ryze and LinkedIn are each other's primary competitors. With the global "e-recruiting" market expected to top \$13 billion by 2005, according to IDC, a technology research firm in Framingham, there's plenty of room for both services to grow.

A LinkedIn or Ryze profile looks a lot like a resume. You can mention where you've worked, provide testimonials by former coworkers, and describe your business or work interests. Most importantly, you don't have to come right out and declare that you want a new job. Unlike standard career sites, Ryze and LinkedIn allow you to prospect for job leads without tipping off your current employer about your intentions.

"Being on LinkedIn is not the same as being on some job board. It's more like when you go to an industry

association meeting," says LinkedIn cofounder Konstantin Guericke.

Recruiting consultant Tom Wadlington from Rye Beach, N.H., has used LinkedIn to connect with contacts in the technology field. "It's a fantastic way to network with the movers and shakers within high technology around the country," he says. "The fact that you can search on so many different criteria allows you to not only find people based on current company or title, but based on mutual interests. It allows you to sort geographically and pretty much any way you can think of."

Hooking up with people who can hook you up with a job is a matter of gradually building your contacts list. But because of their pyramid structures, online services work better if you manage to join the network of someone who is well-connected. Social networking specialists refer to such people as "hubs." They have lots of contacts, so gaining access to their contact list increases the chance that you'll eventually find someone who can help you.

How do you connect with a "hub"? That depends on how you find your way to the service in the first place. If you're lucky enough to be invited to join by someone, you're automatically connected to their contacts. If you sign up out of the blue, you have to grow your own network.

That's what mechanical engineer Bruce Wood, 40, of Holliston discovered when he set out to transform his existing professional contacts into an online network. Wood, who has been looking for a job since October, was intrigued by LinkedIn's "six degrees" concept, but he found that winning over his existing contacts was a project in itself.

"I've extended several invitations, and gotten people to join, but the next tier of connections - people that I've invited inviting other people - hasn't really happened yet," says Wood, whose job search continues.

Fortunately, there are other ways to make those all-important connections. Both services have methods to help you locate existing contacts in their databases, such as searching for others in your city or industry. On Ryze, there are many city- and industry-specific bulletin boards where people post information and simply chat.

"It's a lot easier than people think to offer something and start building a good reputation," Ryze founder Adrian Scott says. "A college grad can start building up a reputation by making some thoughtful posts on the bulletin boards."

LinkedIn has an elaborate system through which members can guard their privacy, shielding themselves from uninvited solicitations and guarding their contact lists from view. Ryze also employs a privacy feature, allowing users to select from three levels of accessibility. These features allow the most well-connected users to participate without revealing too much about themselves or being deluged with requests for contact.

For all their innovations, online networking services still have many of the drawbacks of the old-fashioned approach. They may give you a way to contact top executives in your industry, but they don't guarantee you a hearing.

Face-to-face meetings remain the best possible means of networking. Ryze sponsors offline get-togethers for its users in several major cities, such as the Boston-area meet-and-greets **Kaup** has begun coordinating.

As in real life, it takes time to build relationships online that can eventually lead to a job.

"We always tell people to build relationships first instead of trying to 'sell' first," Scott says. "The biggest mistake that people make, and it's amazingly common, is to go in and try to get something for themselves at first, rather than trying to offer something to other people."

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