# Other people's profiles: Using LinkedIn as a teaching tool

Bernice M. Purcell
Holy Family University

ABSTRACT:

  Faculty encourage students to create LinkedIn profiles and to use LinkedIn for job searches, but often realize that as soon as the profile is created, many students abandon LinkedIn. The project changed the approach to incorporate a series of assignments in which students not only revised an existing profile but then were required to develop a search strategy of their own, explained the search strategy, found three people with positions the students aspire to, and analyzed the profiles to explain why these people are suited for their positions. The approach required use of several different soft skills and enabled students to share and discuss their results. Most of the students were engaged in the project and had a beneficial overall experience.

Keywords: LinkedIn, careers, career development, career preparation, job search
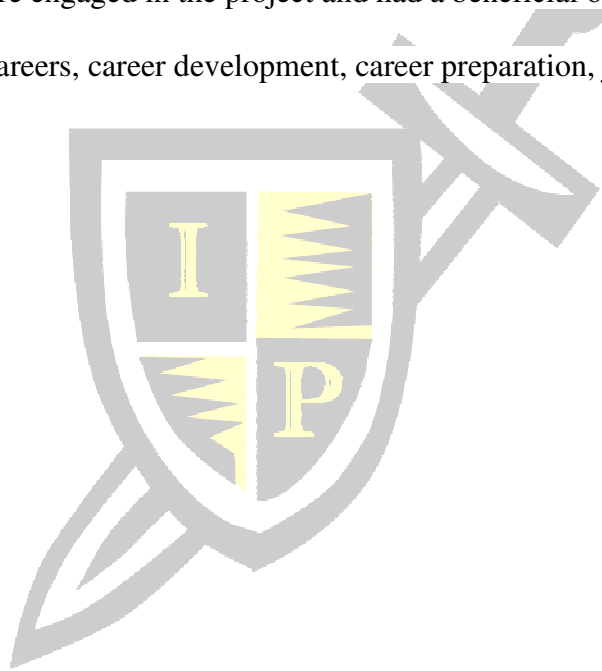
INTRODUCTION

Faculty encourage students to create LinkedIn profiles and to use LinkedIn for job searches, but often realize that as soon as the profile is created, many students abandon LinkedIn. While creating a profile in LinkedIn is useful, it is not enough to engage students with the social media application. Students are comfortable with use of social media in their daily lives but are not necessarily able to translate their experience to using social media to start their professional lives. As early as 2010 researchers studied the use of LinkedIn by business students to prepare the students to establish a professional social media presence (Wankel, 2010). A key theme in use of any social media platform in higher education classrooms is the idea of creating a robust and engaging exercise or series of exercises in the platform. It is not the comfort with social media alone that will lead students to use it in a professional way but the active engagement exemplifying the "how" of professional use.

The project under discussion is a multiple part project. The project involved revision of an existing LinkedIn profile then use of LinkedIn for specified career research. Students then related their research experience to the instructor and separately on a discussion board, where the class comments on each other's strategies and findings. The exercise allowed students to explore their creativity, marketing skills, critical thinking skills, and written communication skills while seeing how social media can be used in their career.

LITERATURE SEARCH

Several researchers and instructors have shared their experiences with use of social media as a tool in the classroom. Some concentrated on specifically using LinkedIn within the classroom setting and its effectiveness as a teaching tool. Another area of study examined actual use of LinkedIn within the context of career development and enhancement.

A study conducted at a college in Bangalore, India examined the impact of classroom use of Facebook and LinkedIn. The researcher examined perceptions of the social media as learning tools, the impact of the social media on classroom interactivity and student-centered learning, and whether social media was found to be a distraction in the classroom. The findings indicated that social media effectively increased student interest and classroom participation and that balancing social media with more traditional teaching methods produced a class with a personal touch (Anitha & Augustine, 2019). The incorporation of the social media tools in the classroom was part of a proposed research study of the role of social media. Two social media tools were employed and the two-fold focus on student engagement and student perceptions of effectiveness indicated the effectiveness of social media use. LinkedIn was also specifically studied as a tool within a marketing course. A connection was established for use of LinkedIn to fulfill several of the course outcomes – branding, market research, relationship building, sales, and business communication (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). The study detailed the strategies to successfully incorporate LinkedIn to support the course outcomes, indicating that LinkedIn use in the classroom could extend beyond a job search tool. All the researchers cited successfully employed LinkedIn within classroom settings and experienced positive results regarding student engagement.

The key application of LinkedIn is within the realm of career management. Due to this, students tend to view LinkedIn as a professional tool and not useful to them at present. Student challenges when first using the tool include unfamiliarity, difficulty building their network,

engagement, content creation, and self-branding (Mogaji, 2019). To aid students, one researcher developed a Social Media Job Search Cycle and a Social Media Job Search Model, emphasizing goal setting, biography creation, posting recommendations, fully participating in groups, and using measurements to determine relevance and context of the person's profile (McCabe, 2017). An understanding of how LinkedIn is used by recruiters helps in creating a biography and was the focus of research within the information and communication sector. The researchers addressed the issues pertaining to the structure of the profile and the relationship between the profile and professional performance. Results of the research indicated the importance of breadth of professional experience as well as breadth of LinkedIn interaction as important factors in successful use of LinkedIn (Aguado, Andrés, Garcíá-Izquierdo, & Rodríguez, 2019). Together, the studies emphasize that successful use of LinkedIn involves the quality of the profile and experience using the social media software.

Therefore, LinkedIn has successfully been employed within classrooms as a tool. Use included career-oriented exercises as well as use within marketing-oriented courses. If the emphasis of the course is a career orientation, knowledge of how LinkedIn is used by professionals within their careers as well as how it is used for recruitment can indicate areas of importance. Based on the literature reviewed, development of the profile and actual hands-on use of the software are key to user success.

THE LINKEDIN PROJECT

The LinkedIn project involved three related assignments integrated into an internship experience course. The course in past iterations typically employed a combination of reflective journal entry assignments evaluating each week's experience and discussion board analyses of career-related readings. Due to the CoVid-19 pandemic disruption of the typical offering of the course, a more intensive career-related assignment was developed to replace reflective journals with the assumption that most students would not continue the work experience.

The description of the assignment in Table 1 (Appendix). Students first edited an existing LinkedIn profile based on tips in an assigned article and then in the discussion board explain their changes and comment on other students' changes. The second activity for the project focused on other peoples' profiles (providing the name for the project) and required the students to find three people with positions to which the students aspired and analyze these peoples' profiles to explain why these people were suited for their positions. Students were not required to follow a specific strategy or set of strategies. Based upon the search activity, the written assignment required a journal reflection describing both the process and the profiles. Students needed to explain the strategy used to find the three people and then to examine the profiles and comment on the experiences and skills these people had that made them qualified for their position. The third assignment in the project entailed a discussion board in which students focused on their search strategies and results. Students were permitted to use the same strategy description as in the second assignment. After posting their own strategy, students needed to comment on at least two other students' posts regarding how it compared with their own strategy.

PROJECT RESULTS

The data from this project was examined using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Due to the small sample size of twenty students, quantitative analyses were limited to counts and percentages and were performed on the data pertaining to positions and search strategies. Qualitative analysis was performed on the position and search strategy data.

Twenty students participated in the project, all of whom were full-time students. The students had majors in four different business areas: Accounting (ACCT), Computer Information Systems (INFO), Management Marketing (MNMK), and Sport Marketing Management (SPMM). A breakdown of students by major indicates that Accounting and Sport Marketing Management majors each accounted for 30% of the class, with Management Marketing majors at 25% of the class and Computer Information Systems majors at 15% of the class. All students were full-time students. Only Sport Marketing Management majors were required to complete an internship; therefore, 30% of the students were required to complete the course and 70% took the internship experience as an elective.

The students were required to find profiles of three people who held positions in the students' respective fields of professional interest. Table 2 (Appendix) Analysis of Positions presents an analysis of positions including the titles of the professionals whose profiles the students examined, and Table 3 (Appendix) is an analysis of the position similarity – whether students chose all three professionals with the same position, two differing positions, or all three different positions. Of the twenty sets of positions, 15% had all three professionals with the same or similar positions, 60% of the sets had two similar positions and one different, and 25% had all three positions being different. The three different categories provide different benefits for the students. If a student is very certain of the job which they want to hold, the focus on one specific job title gives the student a view as to how three different professionals arrived in a similar position. As every career trajectory is different, the student sees different potential paths to the same goal. For example, Student 9 found three Athletic Directors profiles; the student has established this as the specific job of interest and now knows the experiences and skills which three professionals accrued to acquire the position. Unfortunately, two of the students, Student 3 and Student 10, did not quite follow directions. Student 3 listed two fellow interns and an accounting clerk as the aspirational positions, and Student 10 never shared specific information on the position titles. The data is relevant for future consideration of the project.

The students choosing two different positions (60%) or three different positions (25%) do not have as specific a target. The trade-off is that these students have two or three different career paths that have been examined. Most of students chose two similar and one different position, which provides both the ability to see two professionals' paths to similar careers and one different possible career path. By examining either two or three different positions, the students were able to see career options within their major. Comparing and contrasting the backgrounds of the professionals with different positions allowed the students to see if different positions emphasized similar or diverse skills. Students could also assess whether their educational plans were a better fit for one position or the other. For example, an accounting student searched on different positions and found that not all three senior accounting professionals both became a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and possessed a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. The student still planned to attain both credentials but was pleased to see that both were not necessary for advancement. Unfortunately, Student 4 only analyzed two positions; again, the data is useful for future projects.

The search strategies employed were another focus of the project. Table 4 (Appendix) is an analysis of search strategies which indicates how many students used the search box, how many used connections, and how many used a combination of the two. The data indicates that 90% of the students concentrated on using only the search box or only connections, whereas 10% used the search box for some profiles and connections for the search for other profiles. A total of 65% of the students used connections and 45% used search boxes.

Search box terms employed are analyzed in Table 5 (Appendix) is an analysis of search terms. Examination of the nine search box terms used, 10% were on the student's major, 30% were on job title, 30% were on a keyword, and 20% were on employer. When compared to the total number of search strategies (22), the statistics are 5% of strategies involved a search on the student's major, 14% each of job title and keyword, and 9% on employer.

A qualitative analysis of the positions and search strategies indicates many students taking the time to get as much benefit from the assignment as possible. Student 1conducted a broad search on the major Sport Marketing Management and chose to examine profiles of three diverse professionals. While the positive of Sport Scout is highly aspirational, those of Event Coordinator and Physical Education Teacher are both positions that are reasonable based on our Sport Marketing Management program and our athletics program division. Student 2 searched through personal connections and focused on a Web Developer and two Systems Engineers. Both tracks are realistic based on the internship experience and our Computer Information Systems program. While Student 3 also used personal connections, the connections were essentially "lateral" positions rather than aspirational. Student 4 also did not completely follow directions and only found two profiles searching personal connections; both, however, were aspirational and realistic based upon the student's internship. Student 5 interned at an accounting firm, and analyzed one personal connection, then a connection of that person (second degree connection) and finally a connection of the second person (third degree connection). The positions had some variance and were directly related to the accounting field. Student 6 used both a keyword search on "Gym Manager" and a personal connection who was a Gym Manager. While the three titles are diverse, The CEO of a Gym and the general manager of a gym were both essentially gym managers, while the account manager has skills essential for a gym manager.

Searching through connections, Student 7 analyzed the profiles of a junior and a senior level executive at the internship site – a utility – and the president of another utility, concentrating on the skills and education of each of these professionals. Students 8 and 9 once again were off-track, one concentrating on fellow students and the other not identifying specific profiles examined as directed. Students 10 and 11 both used keyword searches; the Sport Marketing Management major searched on the title "Athletic Director" which is a realistic position for the major, and the Computer Information Systems major searched on "Python," a computer language taught in the program, and found two similar programming jobs and one analytic position. The search by Student 12 was similar to the Accounting search by Student 3, but although the positions were different, all three were relatively lower level positions than the Senior Accountant sought by Student 3. The search on the organization "Philadelphia Eagles" returned to Student 13 profiles of employees at the National Football League franchise; the profiles analyzed all related directly to marketing and included two Vice Presidents and one manager. Student 14's search of two people known to the student and one of these people's connection provided three different positions at different levels, with the Sales Specialist and

Director of Marketing and Advertising directly related to the Management Marketing major and the President at Web Design narrowly related to the Digital Marketing course within the major.

Students 15 and 16 were both accounting majors. One searched on three different accounting-related job titles and the other on connections. Both had people at varying levels within the profession, and Student 16 may be considering teaching someday as the student analyzed the profile of an Accounting instructor. Student 17 used the term "Human Resources" and found three different professionals. Student 18 was another person who searched fellow students but did turn up one professional profile that is aspirational. Student 19 searched personal connections and found mid-level professionals. Student 20 first searched on organizations where the student would like to work then searched the organizations for someone who either worked where the student is an intern or attended Holy Family University. The search strategy likely not only provided interesting profiles but has also provided the student with some useful new connections.

Reviewing the above analysis raises some important points. Some students profiled other students; while a search on other students did get some good profiles, it must be better explained that the profiles must be in positions they would want to hold in a few years. Students developed interesting search strategies, with some showing a great deal of creatively and understanding of the assignment. Some strategies, like Student 20, used a two-tiered approach and clearly described the strategy. A few students thought to search on a connection they made at the internship site.

The combination of assignments allows students to strengthen their own profiles, analyze profiles of successful professionals, and gain experience using the software. Profiles or biographies and engagement with the software were found in the literature search to be key to successful LinkedIn usage. The project therefore engaged students and prepared them to use LinkedIn in context of their future careers.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The data analysis indicates that the overall project was a success. Most of the students were engaged and it is expected received great benefit from the exercise. The analysis also indicates some students who either did not understand the assignment or were not sufficiently engaged to complete the assignment correctly. The number of student profiles that appeared in the searches is the evidence for this conclusion. While the students did receive credit reduction for this, the goal is not just that the students complete a string of assignments – the assignments should be able to provide benefit to the students. One possible strategy to address the issue would be re-wording of the assignments to specify that the professionals must be in their careers (but not necessarily their current position) for at least three years. While one or two students did have some people in the careers for one or two years, and these profiles likely provided a good idea of possible entry-level positions, the idea was to show a career path, so the strategy would be consistent with the intent of the project. Another strategy would be to use a rubric that specifically addresses all requirements as a checklist. The difficulty with this strategy is that it takes some of the creativity away. It is also possible that the students who did not follow the directions would not review a grading rubric when doing the assignment.

The project could also be changed or broadened to incorporate oral communication skills. One of the discussion boards could be changed to an in-person or synchronous online classroom discussion. If the first discussion board is converted, each student could present their LinkedIn

profile to the group and have a discussion revolving around revisions made and classmate recommendations. If the second discussion board is converted, students would talk about their search strategies and results interactively. The approach of broadening the assignment could entail an additional assignment involving a classroom discussion how students felt they benefited from the overall project. This approach would involve the process of metacognition, and so would employ critical thinking skills in addition to the oral communication skills. In light of McCabe's (2017) research, the project could also be broadened to incorporate students joining groups, developing connections with professionals, and engaging in discussions in the social media software.

Another consideration is the course or other use for the project. The research is based on the series of assignments within a classroom structure supporting the internship experience. Many institutions require junior or senior majors to participate in a seminar course, part of which includes discussion of careers. A capstone course in a major or a school could integrate the project into the capstone course discussion of careers. The project could be moved outside the classroom and be given as a three or four session workshop sponsored by the program, department, or school. Finally, the project could be removed from the academic area altogether and adopted as activities or a workshop within the institution's career guidance office.
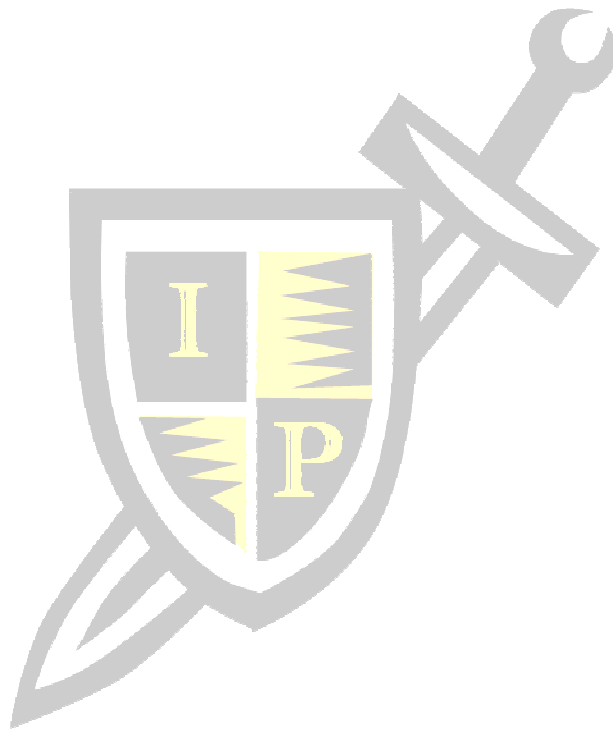
CONCLUSION

The LinkedIn social media platform provides instructors with a valuable tool for use in career exploration within the framework of an appropriate college or university course. An engaged student could have the opportunity to use a variety of skills to help in exploration of possible career alternatives. The skills include creativity, marketing skills, critical thinking skills, and written communication skills. The project can be made more robust with better detail on what a professional profile would be, detailed grading rubrics, or addition of an oral discussion. While the research focused on application within an internship experience course framework, such an assignment could be used within seminar courses for specific majors, capstone courses with a career search component, or as an exercise in a career guidance office.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 - Assignment Descriptions

Assignment One – LinkedIn Profile Revision Discussion Board (Note: students all had profiles)	First, read the LinkedIn tips from US News (article attached), then either create or revise your profile in light of the tips. Make changes as you see fit in the profile. Then post as your discussion changes you made and why (should be 50 word minimum). Then post comments (25 words minimum) to at least two other students about their changes (is this something you want to add to yours, or do you have another suggestion for them?). Consider commenting back and forth like a real discussion; that hasn't really been something we have been doing, and a real discussion could make your profiles better. Make sure you send me a connection request through LinkedIn and I will review your profile as well and send you comments through LinkedIn messages. This last step is optional.
Assignment Two – Other People's Profiles – Profile Analysis	Get into LinkedIn and look for profiles of three people who are in positions that interest you (are in a field similar to your internship position or who graduated with your major or are in a field you want to get into. Start your journal with the peoples' names and LinkedIn profile contact (this information does NOT count as part of the word count. For the date, put the first and last dates of your searches (or the date you did the three searches if you did in one day). Write a reflective journal entry (minimum 200 words long) covering two overreaching topics: - What skills do these people have that make them well suited to their positions, which of these skills would you personally like to build, and how would you go about building the skill(s). - What was your strategy for searching (did you use one of your existing contacts (did you have to add some contacts first)? did you search on a job/job category (and if so, what was it/what were they)? Reflect on your overall experience searching as well. Did you reach out to ask for a connection (or reach out to an existing contact to ask for an introduction)? Tip: Your faculty may have contacts including people who graduated in previous years.

Table 1 - Assignment Descriptions (continued)

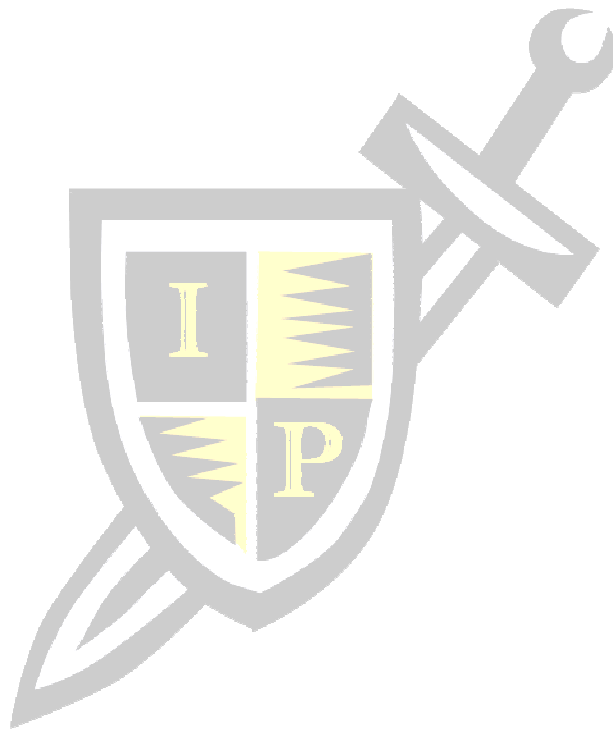| Assignment Three – Other People's Profiles – Discussion Board Posting	As a second part to the Other Peoples' Profiles Journal, post a 150-word description of your experience searching LinkedIn for people in your field. It would be appropriate to use material from your journal; you may revise that to exclude any parts as you feel appropriate (or use exactly as is).Then, review at least 2 of your classmates' post and respond (minimum 30 words) about their post (how was their experience the same as or different from yours; if the person is in the same major, what did you do differently then you? Could you make a strategy recommendation to them?).

Table 2 - Analysis of Positions

	Major	Positions Person 1	Person 2	Person 3
Student 1	SPMM	Event Coordinator/Event Experiences	Sports Scout	Adapted Physical Education Teacher
Student 2	INFO	Web Developer	Systems Engineer	Junior System Engineer
Student 3	ACCT	Accounting Intern	Accounting Clerk	Accounting Inter
Student 4	MNMK	Assistant Buyer	Head Buyer	-
Student 5	ACCT	Senior Tax Accountant	Senior Tax Accountant	Assurance Senior
Student 6	SPMM	CEO of Gym	General Manager of Gym	Account Manager - Fitness Organization
Student 7	MNMK	Vice President, Marketing and Sales, Utility	Director, Residential and Commercial Sale, Utility	President and CEO, Utility
Student 8	MNMK	Post Closer	Student	Student
Student 9	ACCT	-	-	-
Student 10	SPMM	Athletic Director	Athletic Director	Athletic Director
Student 11	INFO	PHP/ Python Lead Developer	Python Full Stack Developer	Data Scientist III
Student 12	ACCT	Accountant	Intern	Audit Associate
Student 13	SPMM	Vice President of Marketing	Content and Production Manager	VP, Content & Production
Student 14	MNMK	Sales Specialist	Director of Marketing and Advertising	President at Web Design
Student 15	ACCT	Junior Financial Analyst	Underwriter	Budget Analyst
Student 16	ACCT	Contract Specialist	Tax Consultant	Assistant Professor
Student 17	MNMK	HR Generalist	Director of HR	Supervisor of HR
Student 18	SPMM	Lead Quantitative Analyst, Integrative Baseball Performance	Student	Student

Table 2 - Analysis of Positions (continued)

	Major	Positions Person 1	Person 2	Person 3
Student 19	INFO	Programmer	Software Developer	Web Developer
Student 20	SPMM	Clubhouse Assistant	Coordinator of Athletic Facilities and Game operations	Administrator, Minor League Operations

Table 3 - Varieties of Positions

	Varieties of position		
	All three the same	Two similar	All three different
Student 1			x
Student 2		x	
Student 3	x		
Student 4		x	
Student 5		x	
Student 6		x	
Student 7			x
Student 8		x	
Student 9	x		
Student 10	x		
Student 11		x	
Student 12		x	
Student 13		x	
Student 14		x	
Student 15		x	
Student 16			x
Student 17		x	
Student 18		x	
Student 19			x
Student 20			x
Number of positions	4	11	5
Percentage of positions	15%	60%	25%

Table 4 - Analysis of Search Strategies

	Major	Search Box	Connections	Number of strategies	Description of strategy
Student 1	SPMM	x	x	2	Search on major "Sports Marketing Management"
Student 2	INFO		x	1	3 of student's own connections
Student 3	ACCT		x	1	3 of student's own connections
Student 4	MNMK		x	1	1 person student knew; 1 of that person's connections; neglected to do third person
Student 5	ACCT		x	1	1 person student knew; 1 of that person's connections, and one of the second person's connections
Student 6	SPMM	x	x	2	Search on job title "Gym Manager; 1 person student knew
Student 7	MNMK		x	1	2 people from internship company with different positions and 1 person from another utility
Student 8	MNMK	x		1	Search on "Holy Family University"
Student 9	ACCT		x	1	Looked at profiles of people in student's classes and searched through their connections
Student 10	SPMM	x		1	Search on job title "Athletic Director"
Student 11	INFO	x		1	search on keyword "Python"
Student 12	ACCT		x	1	Student's connections
Student 13	SPMM	x		1	Search on company "Philadelphia Eagles" then searched within that on Content Development
Student 14	MNMK		x	1	2 people the student knew and 1 connection from second person's profile
Student 15	ACCT	x		1	Search on three different job titles
Student 16	ACCT		x	1	3 people from student's past courses (2 students, 1 instructor)

Table 4 - Analysis of Search Strategies (continued)

	Major	Search Box	Connections	Number of strategies	Description of strategy
Student 17	MNMK	x		1	Search on term "Human Resources"
Student 18	SPMM		x	1	1 person student works with and 2 fellow students
Student 19	INFO		x	1	3 student's connections
Student 20	SPMM	x		1	Search on organizations and then connection to either student's university or current employer
Total Strategies		9	13	22	
Percent of students using search box				45%	
Percent of students using connections				65%	
Number of students using one strategy				18	
Percent of students using one strategy				90%	
Number of students using two strategies				2	
Percent of students using two strategies				10%	

Table 5 - Search Box Term Analysis

	Major	Search on Major	Search on Job Title	Search on Keyword	Search on Employer
Student 1	SPMM	x			
Student 6	SPMM		x		
Student 7	MNMK				
Student 8	MNMK			x	
Student 10	SPMM		x		
Student 11	INFO			x	
Student 13	SPMM				x
Student 15	ACCT		x		
Student 17	MNMK			x	
Student 20	SPMM				x
Number of Search Box Strategies		1	3	3	2
Percentage of all Search Box Strategies		10%	30%	30%	20%
Percentage of all Strategies		5%	14%	14%	9%