

# Building Professional Relationships for Auditors Using Online Social Networks

By Jim Kaplan, AuditNet.org

*Networking is a proven method for building business relationships. Today, it has taken on a new face through the use of online technology. Probably not a day goes by when you do not hear or read about Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn or Twitter. As a professional auditor, you can benefit by using one or more of these Web sites known as “social networks.” This article will provide an overview of the role of online social networks in today’s business world, a review of the leading professional-oriented social networks and why social networking is particularly useful for those in the audit profession.*

## Offline Networking vs. Online Social Networks

Most people think of networking as two or more individuals meeting in person to get to know each other, exchange business cards, and informally promote their company or services. Professionals who excel at networking are highly valued in their company for their ability to bring in business and build relationships with clients and colleagues. Noted management thinker and Professor Peter Drucker described the value of networking by saying, “More business decisions occur over lunch and dinner than at any other time, yet no MBA courses are given on the subject.”

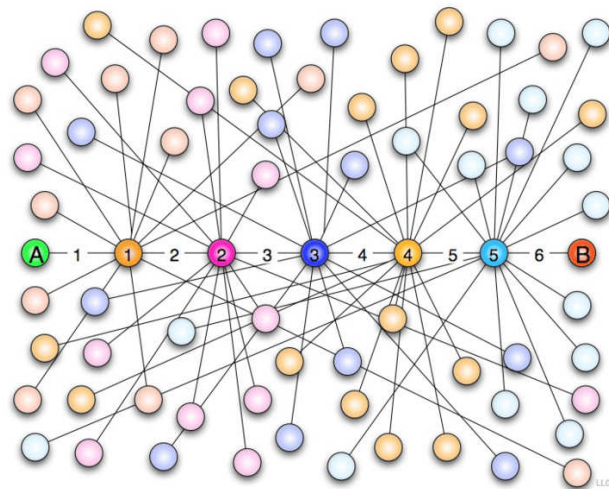
While in-person networking will always be a valuable skill, the growth of the Internet, especially Web 2.0 with its broadband and interactivity capabilities, offers a vast new world for networking. Starting with Yahoo! groups and the Web site MySpace, many new Web tools have been created to help people connect, stay in touch and share knowledge. The term “social networks” was coined to describe how the first of these sites were dedicated to helping their audiences – originally consisting mostly of teens and college students – socialize with each other. The sites made it easy to chat, share photos and build a vast spider’s web of connections among friends, the friends of your friends, *ad infinitum*.

Social networking rapidly caught on, and in the last few years alone several new networks have been created especially for businesses and professionals. These are still referred to as social networks, but do not be misled by the name – they are dedicated to professional purposes. In many ways, these professional social networks add new capability to traditional networking because they allow business people to build and maintain a much larger set of connections on a continuous basis than in-person networking can accomplish. Social networks effectively help people create a “community” of like-minded peers, colleagues, clients and potential clients with whom they can chat, share information and learn.

Another unique aspect of professional social networks is how they make the concept of “six degrees of separation” come alive. This refers to the idea that anyone in the world is no more than six connections away from you. If you are seeking to find someone and do not know them, one of your connections might know them, or one of their connections, and so on until the person can be found within six links from you.

For example, if each person in a social network has an average of 142 contacts, a single individual effectively has the potential to access nearly three million people using just three degrees of separation, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Six Degrees of Separation



LinkedIn Connections	142
Two Degrees Away	20,164
Three Degrees Away	2,863,288
Total Network	2,883,594

### How Social Networks Work

Joining a social network takes only a few hours of initial investment. The first step requires you to set up a personal profile, which includes, at your discretion, any data you want to share with other members, ranging from the colleges you attended to your professional affiliations to your personal hobbies. (Businesses also can have profile pages, too.) The more data you share, the better. Powerful search capabilities then allow you to seek out other members in the network who have similar backgrounds and professional interests. Some networks automatically notify you of other members who went to your college or worked at the same company so you can decide whether to contact them to begin building your network.

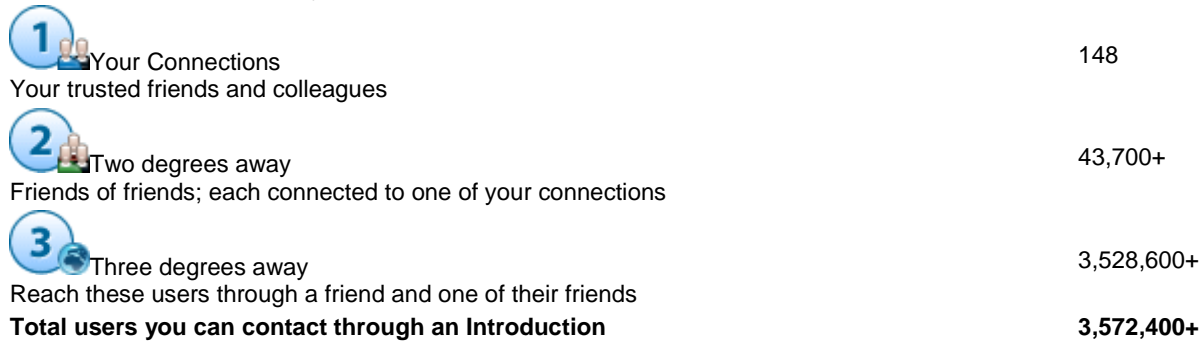
Most professional social networking sites also offer a wide range of specialized sub-groups, each focused on a specific topic or issue. Group participants can take part in discussion forums, post questions and receive answers, upload documents and videos to share, and conduct interactive group conversations. Various other features are offered on some networks to encourage community building and knowledge sharing. However, a tacit etiquette exists in professional networks that make blatant self-promotion and marketing taboo.

These are the leading social networks intended for professionals and businesses:

- LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com))** – This is by far the premiere professional social networking site. Its more than 40 million members make one’s potential networking capability enormous. In fact, LinkedIn provides a personalized breakdown of how many people you can contact within three degrees of separation based on your actual contacts. (See Figure 2 for an example, based on this author’s LinkedIn network.) The site also automatically matches people who share college or place-of-work backgrounds, by listing them on your profile page so you can contact them if you want. When you are linked to someone, you can see their links and query their contacts, thus expanding your own set of links. The current members of LinkedIn have already formed a vast array of specialized sub-groups. Auditors, for example, can join dozens of these, including sub-groups for fraud auditors, healthcare auditors and even a group for current and former auditors of a specific company. Each group has multiple offerings, such as news articles, discussion threads, and job listings. Group members can ask for advice, share information, locate an expert, receive or give referrals and browse for potential clients.

Figure 2. LinkedIn Network Example

You are at the center of your network. Your connections can introduce you to 3,572,400+ professionals — here’s how your network breaks down:

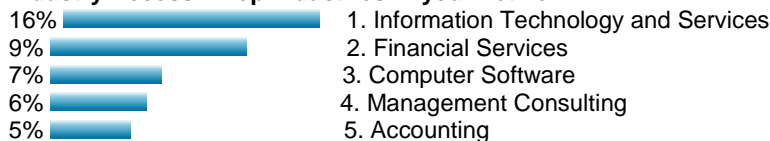


**More about your network**

**Regional Access – Top locations in your network:**



**Industry Access – Top industries in your network:**



**Caption:**

LinkedIn provides a personalized breakdown of your network based on your own contacts. This diagram illustrates this author’s network on July 27, 2009.

- *Facebook* ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) – This Web site originated as purely a social network for young people and its popularity mushroomed quickly to become the top social networking site. Today, it is being increasingly used by entrepreneurs, freelancers and small businesses that are setting up their own Facebook pages. It is worth watching closely for its potential value to business.
- *Ning* ([www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)) – Ning was created to allow anyone to set up his or her own social network. The site provides tools needed to administrate a network, allow others to join, put up profiles and manage discussion groups. Several auditing groups exist on Ning, including one this author founded that has more than 150 members. You can join any of these auditing networks or start your own.
- *AuditNet* ([www.auditnet.org](http://www.auditnet.org)) – AuditNet was founded more than 15 years ago before any other social networking site to help auditors connect. While the site does not allow members to profile themselves, it offers news, discussion groups and shared information.
- *Twitter* ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) – Not technically a social network, Twitter is a fast-growing communication tool that lets people send out short messages (just 140 characters long). Members can subscribe to receive “tweets” from anyone who interests them. In the business context, Twitter might be compared to a “micro-blog” that gives individuals and companies a new platform to attract followers and demonstrate their thought leadership.

### Benefits of Social Networking for Auditors

Whether you work internally, for a firm, or on your own, social networking leads to a multitude of potential benefits for anyone in the auditing profession. Here are seven benefits:

1. *Auditing is an information-intensive, complex profession.* Many issues require auditors to keep up to date on rules and regulations, and auditing procedures can be difficult to master. Joining a social network facilitates your ability to stay on top of news and trends, to ask questions and receive answers and to share knowledge with peers.
2. *Many specializations of auditing require very high levels of knowledge.* Joining a network allows you to find other specialists in your field who can help you learn more. Or if you are an expert at what you do, joining a network gives you a platform to become more recognized for your own expertise.
3. *Tracking down the answer to an auditing question can take hours or even days using standard methods of online and offline research.* Joining a network hooks you up to a wide range of colleagues, one of whom is likely to have the answer you need or who can lead you to the right person (within a few degrees of separation), saving you time and money.
4. *Finding the time to do traditional networking (meetings, lunches, phone calls) can be difficult and requires everyone to be available at the same time.* In contrast, your online social network can be accessed at any time. Matching schedules becomes moot, as connecting with people and getting information can be done asynchronously.
5. *Companies and individuals in today's world increasingly seek out leads, customers, referrals and partners on a national and even global basis.* Business ventures can be conducted “virtually” through online connections. Joining a social network opens the doors to this new global world, offering opportunities to find new business, new partners, or to collaborate with others on projects.
6. *The old methods of persuasion marketing and hard-sell advertising are shifting.* People today prefer to build relationships with the companies they do business with. Joining a social network gives you the capability to form relationships with potential clients and colleagues. Many large accounting and auditing firms already recognize this and are establishing a presence on social networks where they offer free workshops and answer questions to demonstrate their expertise and build trust.

7. *Social networking is already the accepted form of connecting with others for the 'Millennial' generation of young auditors entering the workforce.* As social networks become increasingly used by them, the stakes will rise for those who continue to be reluctant to join. In other words, if you do not have a presence on a social network, you will simply lose ground to those who do.

An example illustrates the business results gained from being part of a social network for auditors. The Institute of Internal Auditors (The IIA), set up a LinkedIn group for Board of Environmental Auditor Certifications (BEAC), an organization that certifies EHS auditors, to promote the site and build its membership. BEAC was formed as a joint venture in 1997 by The IIA and the Environmental Auditing Roundtable (EAR). Whereas The IIA was having difficulty attracting new members before this, the LinkedIn BEAC group has been averaging three new members per day, including a good mix of seasoned professionals and those new to the profession.

### Networking Skills – and a Few Caveats

The skills to be an effective online networker are essentially no different than they are for offline (in-person) networking. Whether offline or online, successful networkers follow these guidelines:

- *Have a "joiners" attitude* – You need to feel comfortable and willing to meet others.
- *Circulate and talk* – Just as in the world of offline networking, this means not spending all your time with just a few people; expand your relationships and links to others.
- *Get involved* – Participate in discussions and events to maximize your presence.
- *Be visible* – Log on often to contact others; maintain a frequent presence, not just once a month.
- *Take a chair or serve* – Offer to take the lead on a committee or to help with a discussion forum or online event.
- *Pay it forward* – Share your knowledge and information. Being a network member is a two-way street; it is easy to get information from others, but you also have to offer something to be a fully contributing citizen.

Note that participating in an online social network also comes with a few caveats. First, ensure that your computer is protected by a firewall and anti-virus software, as you cannot risk exposing yourself to hackers, phishing expeditions or malicious downloads. Second, think carefully about what information you offer to share with others; a seemingly valid request for information can be a disguise to obtain confidential data from you. Finally, whenever a second- or third-degree contact requests to link to you, use due diligence to ascertain the person's identity. Just as with email spam, you cannot tell who is on the other side and what their motives are for contacting you.

### The Upside of Networking

Joining a social network does not mean that your in-person networking needs to cease. We are human, with an inherent need for face-to-face contact with people to create deep relationships and trust. Business networking groups, lunches and golfing outings will always be enjoyable and valuable. However, there is no doubt that online social networking will gain acceptance into the mainstream of business protocol. Online networks offer professionals many advantages, including ease of use, flexibility of schedule, and the capability to connect with a large number of people throughout the world to build a vast personal community that can boost you and your business to greater success.

**About the Author**

*Jim Kaplan, Founder and CEO of AuditNet<sup>®</sup> the global resource for auditors is an Internet for auditors pioneer. As the founder and principal of AuditNet<sup>®</sup>, he developed an Internet Web site that links auditors around the world with over 1,300 audit related resources and over 2,000 audit work programs. The AuditNet<sup>®</sup> Web site [www.auditnet.org](http://www.auditnet.org) is used by auditors at Fortune 500 companies, public and private companies, government agencies and organizations, around the world searching for audit-related information. This article is a natural outgrowth of his original idea of developing an online information network for auditors. Jim can be reached at [info@auditnet.org](mailto:info@auditnet.org).*

**Article from Protiviti KnowledgeLeader – [www.knowledgeleader.com](http://www.knowledgeleader.com).**

*KnowledgeLeader is a subscription-based website that provides audit programs, checklists, tools, resources and best practices to help internal auditors and risk management professionals save time, manage risk and add value. Free 30-day trials available.*

Protiviti ([www.protiviti.com](http://www.protiviti.com)) is a global business consulting and internal audit firm composed of experts specializing in risk, advisory and transaction services. The firm helps solve problems in finance and transactions, operations, technology, litigation, governance, risk and compliance. Protiviti's highly trained, results-oriented professionals provide a unique perspective on a wide range of critical business issues for clients in the Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East.

Protiviti has more than 60 locations worldwide and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Robert Half International Inc. (NYSE symbol: RHI). Founded in 1948, Robert Half International is a member of the S&P 500 index.