



Paul Jacobs is the director of Wellington-based talent sourcing strategy business, Engage. Paul has maintained a blog on recruitment innovations (www.engageonline.co.nz/blog) for the past couple of years.

building an online community

People by their very nature are tribal. We congregate. Group membership is a big part of our lives – family, school, sport, work, clubs, politics, religion, the place in which we live, etc. Within each of our tribes, we form a close collection of allies. We unite with people who share our interests and beliefs. This is not a new phenomenon; according to the history books it has been like this since the dawn of civilisation.



Enter the internet, a relatively new phenomenon. Over the last few years it has evolved very quickly. We've witnessed a shift from static brochure-like websites to the 'social' web.

There's now a plethora of tools and platforms at our disposal to showcase who we are, and connect, share information, network, and collaborate with others. This trend isn't restricted to social networking platforms like the popular Facebook (450,000 New Zealanders are now members). Enterprises are starting to catch on and use a mix of blogging, micro-blogging, video and photo sharing tools, project management collaboration tools, and a range of ever-increasing web 2.0 related features to connect with employees, jobseekers and consumers.

Even the 'traditional' social networking sites like LinkedIn are getting in on the act. Members can now use the recently implemented group discussion features and collaborate on projects using a range of third party applications. We're even seeing variants of the traditional email and MS Office suite of programs with collaboration-based features and plug-ins.

The old assumptions no longer apply. The user demographic is expanding beyond just the Gen Ys. People are entering into

meaningful conversations beyond their immediate network and tribes are forming within tribes. With the help of technology, we are becoming more connected than ever before. People are starting to use social networking features without necessarily even knowing it. Though technology is the enabler, the principles of human communication still apply.

There's a lot of negative press about social networking. We've all heard the concerns around privacy and security. Some of this is justified, but most concerns can be mitigated. It does not help when a lot of the angst comes from non-adopters and companies who provide cyber-safety services.

"Going Live"

I decided to establish an online community after speaking with other New Zealand recruitment strategy professionals about the current state of the recruitment market. We believed that there was a lot of innovation happening overseas and in New Zealand in the recruitment and employer branding arenas, from new recruitment and talent sourcing approaches to advancements in recruitment technology. In the US, in particular, there was a lot of online networking. However, we felt there was a real need in New Zealand for a place to share ideas, discuss and debate, and network with other like-minded professionals.

NZ Recruitment 2.0 went live on the Ning (www.ning.com) social networking platform in June 2007.

The early days

The community started off with a few early adopters. It became obvious from the outset that many members were happy to just use the community to link up with people they knew or reconnect with those they have lost touch with. They would sign-up, become 'friends' and that was it. However, I envisaged a dialogue, especially from these technologically savvy members.

It was at this point that a couple of quieter contributors said to me: "Paul, there's not much activity, what's the point in continuing?"

Growing the membership base

NZ Recruitment 2.0 now has around 250 members, with

certainly more conversation and activity than in those early days. The membership includes anyone from external consultants, right through to general managers inside an organisation. The membership base is now starting to broaden beyond recruitment and HR. Marketing, advertising, social media and technology experts are joining the community. This reflects the cross-disciplinary nature of recruitment 2.0.

There are now pathways to the community via dedicated NZ Recruitment 2.0 portals and satellite communities on Facebook, LinkedIn, and the micro-blogging platform Twitter. This is encouraging greater reach.

Growing an active membership base takes time and effort!

Member participation

For many members NZ Recruitment 2.0 is the only social networking platform they've ever visited. To them NZ Recruitment 2.0 'is' social networking. They can see the professional value in belonging to the community, even if they don't make any attempts to actively contribute. Some of the members that did not say 'boo' early on, are now starting to add their voice, out of the blue.

On average, about 70 different members log into the community each day. They're visiting, but not necessarily always contributing. Instead they update their profile, or send private messages via the system to their close allies.

Is 'showing up' enough? Would you go to a party and stand in the corner, facing the corner? One of the challenges I've had is to get many members to load a profile photo. It could be of themselves, their pet, anything that defines the essence of who they are. Who wants to communicate with faceless people? I don't. As a community leader I feel it's my responsibility to create an environment where people want to put up their photo and communicate.

A number of social media commentators have spoken about the

one percent rule of social networking participation. They believe 90 percent of users are lurkers, nine percent contribute sometimes, and one percent actively participate and are responsible for almost all the action. I have seen a gradual improvement in participation in the NZ Recruitment 2.0 community over time. Members often tell me that they found their first community contribution to be slightly stressful, but the value of entering into a conversation with other members was well worth it.

I don't believe the community will ever reach 100 percent participation. You may belong to the Catholic tribe for example, but that doesn't mean you are a regular churchgoer. However, you still feel a connection with other Catholics.

The introduction of a weekly email update to all members has worked to remind members of the community's existence. The email prompts about 40 – 50 percent of members to log into the community. Once logged in, members enjoy seeing activity of any kind. Their feedback to me indicates it's a key reason for them to come back.

The rewards and the future

I can't speak for other members necessarily, but I have got so much more back than I've put into it. I've met lots of talented professionals via the community and learnt heaps from others. Many members have challenged my thinking and I hope I have challenged theirs. In the future, many of the NZ Recruitment 2.0 developments will be user-generated. For example, members have requested an opportunity to post recruitment 2.0-related jobs.

There's no rush to enlist thousands of members. What will be of more importance is the quality of the relationships and conversations within the community. ■

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