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OverThinkedIn

Skills and Professional Development





LinkedIn was a terrific resource for me a few years back when I was looking for a new in-house position. I used it to learn more about potential employers and the people who worked there, to find possible connections in the corporate hierarchy, and to make myself easy to find by recruiters. Before that time and since, I occasionally received invitations to connect with in-house recruiting specialists, all of which I readily accepted because the “why” of the invitation, though frequently unstated, was pretty apparent nonetheless. I’ve occasionally seen comments from those who find these invitations off-putting, expressing frustration at feeling “used” by the recruiter to gain closer access to — or help with finding — a candidate other than the invitee. That puzzles me a bit, because I see that sort of thing as fundamental to networking. Haven’t most of us benefitted from someone making an introduction that helped us along our career path? Aren’t we game to do likewise when the opportunities present themselves?

That said, one element of what I've described above has me scratching my head a lot lately, at least outside the recruiter context: the LinkedIn invitation from someone I've never met, with no accompanying message to explain why the person wants to connect with me. A few years back, my experience was that this sort of invitation would come from someone in the business of marketing services (e.g., eDiscovery, staffing, matter management) of presumed interest to in-house counsel. Like those from recruiters, I understood the implicit rationale for the connection, but the critical difference was that it had the potential to spam everyone in my LinkedIn universe. Once, I received such an invitation from someone already connected to 20 of my in-house contacts. I reached out to a couple to ask whether this was someone I might want to work with someday. Each response was some iteration of "I don't actually know the guy, I haven't worked with him, and I don't even remember how we got connected." I also perceived a subtle undertone of "Geez, why are you putting so much energy into vetting an invite from Chad at Kontractify?" but only from those who don't know me well enough to know I overthink things.

I have a few LinkedIn contacts who I honestly can't place, and more than once this has resulted in awkward situations where someone I do know well asked about the person, or asked to be introduced to them. Those experiences have informed my current approach to both sending and accepting invitations, but I also find myself wondering if this approach (and also the fact that the idea for this column has been percolating in my brain for about three years now) is yet another symptom of overthinking. So, I'm going to tell you what I do, and invite you to share different perspectives with me (my email address is somewhere on this page).

If I'm sending an invitation to someone I think would recognize me on sight in a hotel lobby in a town neither of us lives in, I might send a "blank" invitation, but I'm more likely to include a personal message. If I'm sending to someone I don't know, but want to meet, I'll always explain why, and if applicable, include context about how I know the connections we already share.

For received invitations, I apply the same principles: I accept most any invitation where I'm on the receiving end of the approach I use when sending. Honestly, though, this describes a minority of received invitations. Sometimes, I've responded to invites in the "context-less majority" with a note of my own, thanking the sender and gently asking for context, particularly after large group gatherings (remember those?) where I've met a lot of folks and may simply have lost track. Sometimes, I get a nice note in return, and then we both have context for the future. More often, I don't hear back from them.

Am I being rude or arrogant, or at least reasonably perceived as such? Did I miss the point of LinkedIn all along, or did its evolving culture take a turn that I missed? Should I see each invitation as a gift of connection with someone I might never otherwise get a chance to know, and accept each with gratitude, or is there a middle ground I can't quite see from my overthinking vantage point? I'd welcome any thoughts you have to share on this, and I promise to try not to overthink it while waiting to hear from you!

Jeffrey W. Wheeler



Associate General Counsel

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