# SYNCEDIN: TOOLS FOR STRATEGIC NETWORKING ON LINKEDIN

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## LINKEDIN: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REDESIGN

LinkedIn is unique from other social networking sites, e.g. Facebook and MySpace, because of its focus on networking in a professional context. Users of the site connect to each other based on their professional rather than personal affiliations. The site focuses on career development, job hunting, and finding professional contacts in a similar industry. Many interesting features such as user tagging, forums, and Question & Answer can be expanded upon to create innovative improvements. As of October 2009, LinkedIn had more than 50 million registered users, spanning more than 200 countries and territories worldwide. Stand-alone mobile applications have been developed on the major platforms (iPhone, Android, Palm). According to a 2008 report by Anderson Analytics, 66% of users are decision makers or have influence at their companies.

While the site's design encourages adding and meeting new people in your network, it is not especially effective at getting users to explore and tap into that network's collective knowledge and meet professionals within a particular domain of expertise. This presents an excellent opportunity to create and develop tools for the site that facilitate knowledge-intensive processes such as strategic networking.
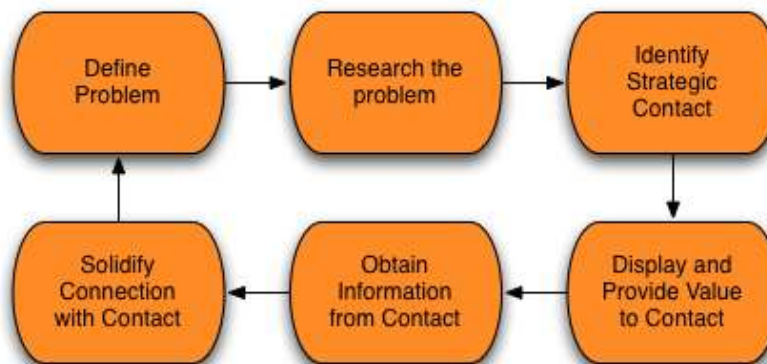


Figure 1 Networking is an iterative process dependent on constant problem redefinition and contact searching.

This highlights the need for the key features we developed for the LinkedIn site promoting and supporting strategic networking functions, such as the gathering of important information for the future and finding individuals who can help reach needed information. Our design strategy was informed by a number of research studies that we initially conducted on how strategic networking occurred in the everyday activities of professionals.

## THE RESEARCH

We conducted three research activities that examined existing strategic networking strategies during both in-person and online encounters. The first activity included *deep hanging out* at particular venues where we observed and engaged with others in a networking environment.  The second activity consisted of *interviews* with people we identified as strategic networkers, for whom part of their professional work was identifying future trends for the benefit of their organizations.

## ACTIVITY #1: DEEP HANGING OUT.

We conducted this research through two different venues where professionals and students from the User Centered Design community congregated at a local tavern and pizza place.  The first was an event hosted by a local chapter of the Usability Professionals Association and the other social event was organized though MeetUp.com.

From this first round of observations, key insights were noted that informed our redesign SyncedIn efforts:

- People have a difficult time initiating and solidifying meaningful connections with others they don't know, even with moderated icebreakers.
- Strategic networking requires a certain level of skill and tact in face-to-face encounters.  There's a significant chance you won't reach the right people.  Or worse appear so desperate to promote an initiative that it turns people off rather than piques their interest.
- Information sharing is rudimentary and primarily remains at the level of exchanging business cards or displaying nametags.   Follow-up with LinkedIn or Facebook sometimes happens, but is not automatic.

What these observations made apparent to us is that face-to-face networking is hard.  It's even hard to do between individuals who share interests or professional backgrounds.  We wanted to provide an online context where people's interactions with one another would be promoted and supported, and we wanted those interactions to be meaningful for strategic networkers.

## ACTIVITY #2: INTERVIEWS.

As we continued our research, interviews gave us several additional insights that shaped our design strategy in more specific ways.  In particular, they provided us the data to create a map of strategic networking processes that is presented below.
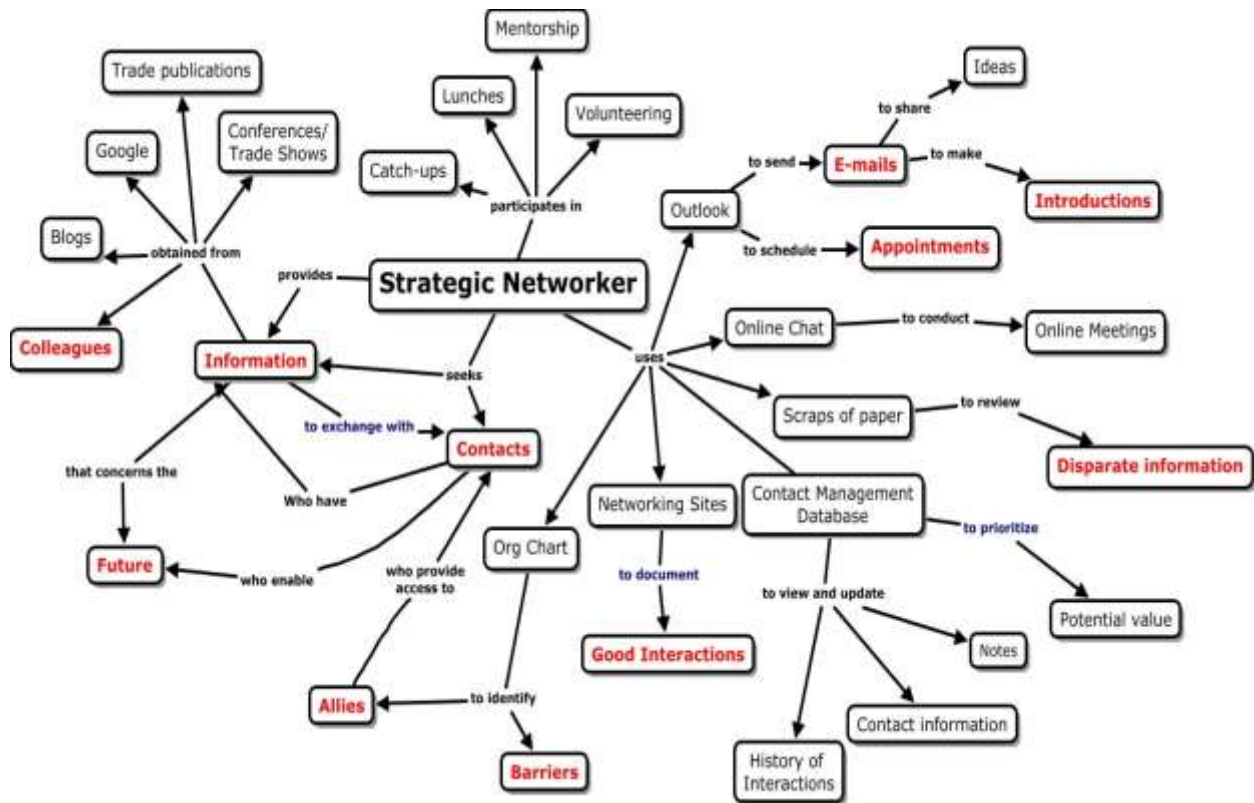
Figure 2 Mapping of strategic networking processes.

Note that our interviewees, many of whom conducted strategic networking as a primary task in their jobs, were accessing important information from a variety of sources including other contacts, events, and in online environments.  These efforts also required multiple technologies to organize and manage important incoming information.  A social networking site focused on professionals would be an ideal place to host a tool that would highlight the importance of these strategic networking functions and support users needs.

## ACTIVITY #3: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In this phase, we were ready to try some of our designs out on participants  developed from our concept prototype (see **Concept Prototype** below).  We took a unstructured approach in getting feedback from users to gauge how useful our ideas were to their strategic networking efforts.  We then presented them with a number of mockups of each of the screens we drafted for our redesign efforts and asked for further feedback.

Participants expressed general interest in the idea of an area on the LinkedIn site where they might engage with it more often.  Some of the feedback we received on the mock prototypes we presented to them included:

- Present stop and start dates to quickly see start and stop dates for jobs held in profile section.
- Display questions relevant to participants in grouped categories so they are easier to read.
- Rollovers would include information about contacts with details rather than company profiles.
- Other specific feedback on display of MissingLinks and SearchedIn features of site.

## CONCEPT PROTOTYPE

Our intervention aims to create a highly personalized experience for the users by focusing on connecting them to the knowledge and individuals who would be most helpful to them as well as who they could be most useful to. In order to do this, the system tries to obtain a thorough understanding of the user.

Because an understanding of a user is not derived simply from what is said, but also what is done, the design of the site relies on three types of analytics:

- **Profile Analytics**: analyzes a users profile as well as the profiles of those to whom they are connected.
- **Content Analytics**: analyzes a users questions, answers, and search queries.
- **Behavior Analytics**: analyzes the browsing patterns and level of participation of a user.
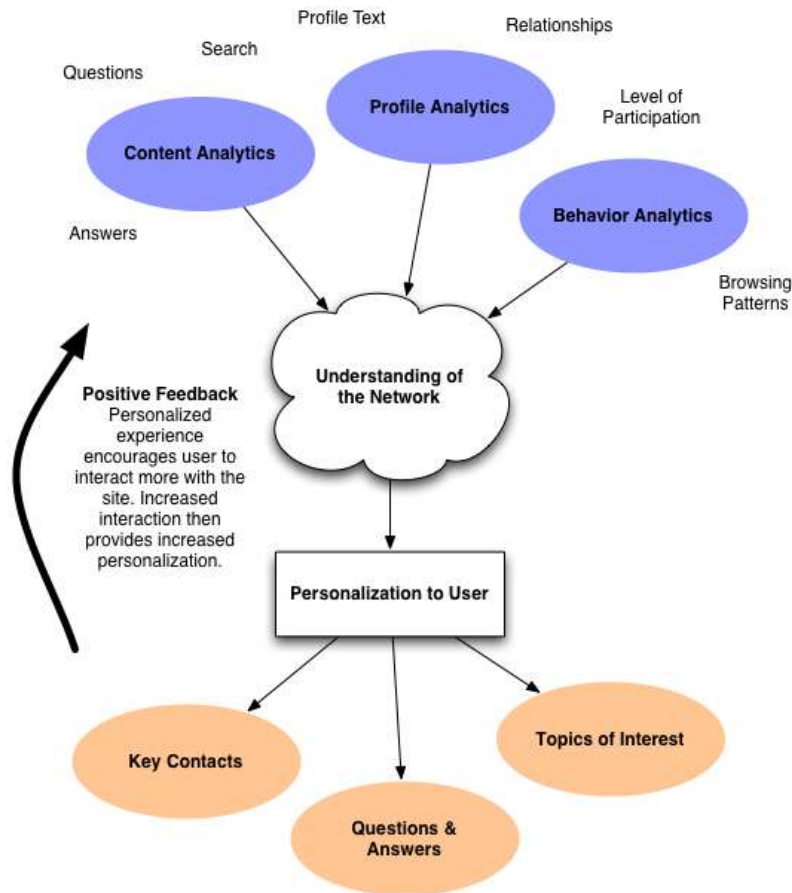
Figure 3 Concept driving SyncedIn.

Interacting with the site sets off a positive feedback loop. The more that a user interacts with the site, the more data is collected about that user. The more data collected about that user, the better the analytics can help paint a clear picture of that user, thus ensuring that the content served to the user is the most relevant for them. Thus, one of the biggest design goals was to create a site that would engage a user.

Three tools, collectively titled SyncedIn were developed to encourage such interaction:

- **I'mIn**: Profiles that allow users to portray and classify their experiences in ways that emphasize the diversity of their interests and abilities, including concurrent activities.
- **Missing Links**: A manager that delivers questions that the user might be able to answer, keeps track of questions that the user has asked, as well as follows the progress of the question in which the user is interested.
- **SearchedIn**: A visual knowledge exploration tool that enables user to enter a search term, visualize its various nuances, as well as the people and questions surrounding that nuance.
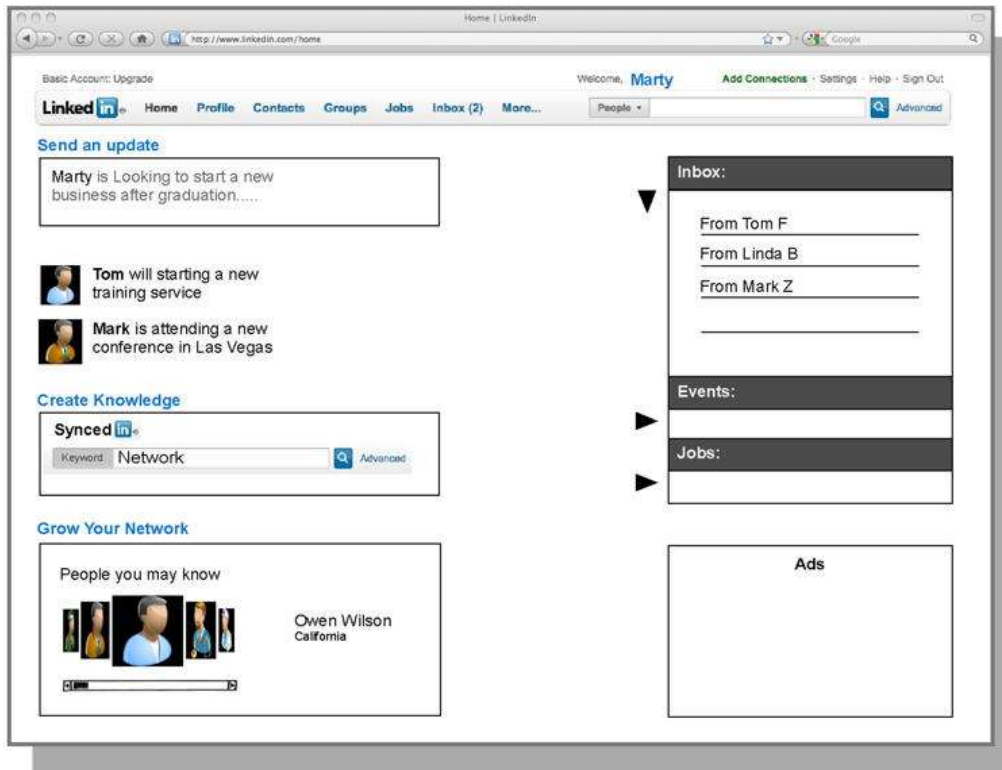
Figure 4 Revised mockup of LinkedIn homepage that links to the SyncedIn tools.

SyncedIn is a personalized portal that encourages users to contribute and explore the knowledge of their network in a directed manner. What makes SyncedIn unique is that it not only captures the knowledge conveyed through explicit communication between LinkedIn visitors, but also the knowledge contained in a user's online activities. These activities provide a window onto their interests, habits, and preferences; these can all be a signal to their potential value to a network and provide a base of knowledge about the user to the system. Because of the associated value of users' online activities, SyncedIn encourages the user to interact continuously on the site through a number of methods we describe in the following sections.
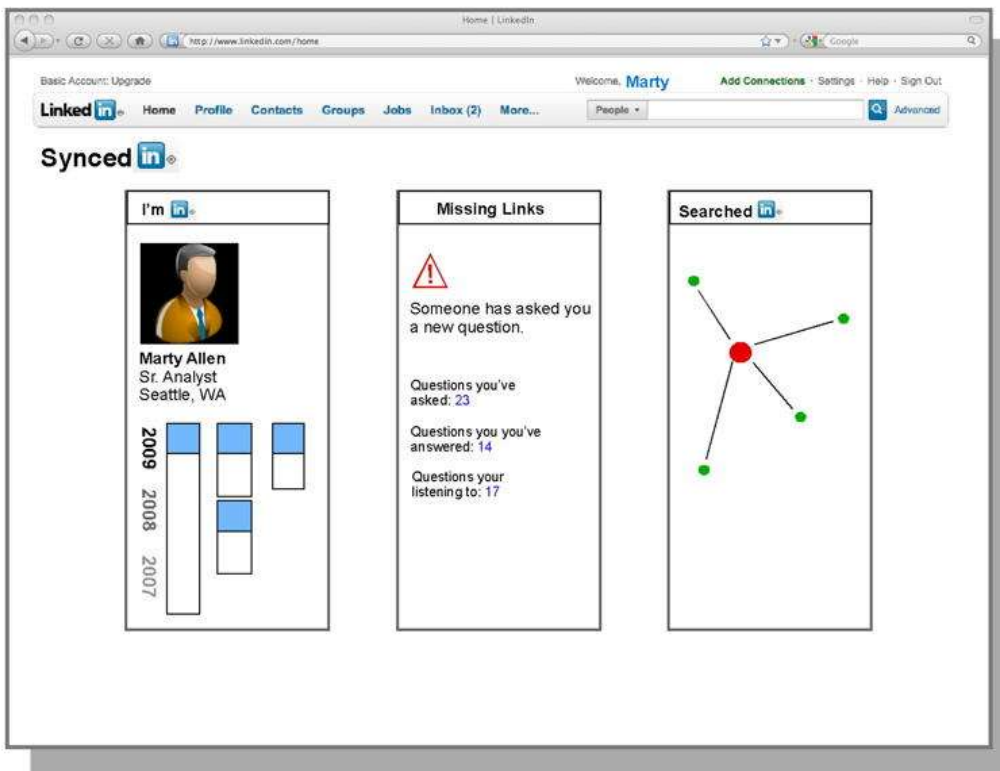
Figure 5 Mockup of the SyncedIn portal.

## THE POWER OF PROFILES (AND I'MIN)

In a traditional resume-based chronological format, only the current job position is listed at top; extra-curricular activities, active interests, higher education, and even concurrent employment tend to be listed at the bottom. Therefore, we redesigned the way one could present themselves, moving away from the uni-dimensional approach by allowing users to be represented in multi-faceted ways.  This allows emphasis on multiple aspects of areas of expertise or interests, which can provide a broader view of a person's career.  We recognized through our research that many people have business skills beyond what their resumes can illustrate, and we hope to allow them greater visibility by including technical skills they may be using elsewhere in their lives.  In addition, the issue of maintaining multiple static resumes at a time could be minimized with such a design change.  We labeled the profile section of the site as I'mIn.
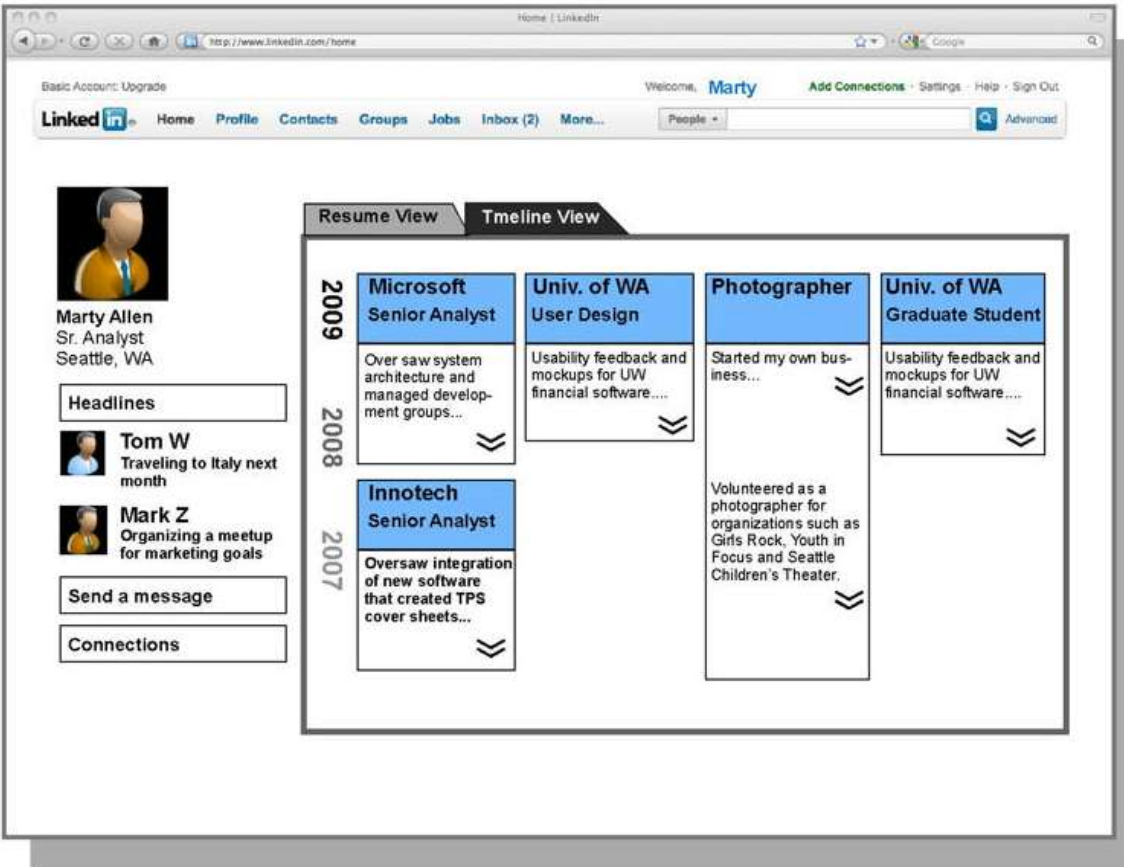
Figure 6 Mockup of the I'mIn profile page.

## WHAT ARE THE MISSING LINKS?

With the information collected by I'mIn, the system begins to develop a better understanding of the user's interests and expertise. This understanding drives the function of second SyncedIn tool: *Missing Links*. Missing Links allows users to pose questions to other users, as well as answer questions posed by other users.

*Asking a question.* Questions are distributed not only to relevant contacts in a user's network but also to other of LinkedIn members who might be able to provide an insightful answer (even if they're outside the user's industry). Responses are likely to be wide-ranging and thought provoking, allowing users to consider their problem space in untraditional and novel ways.

*Answering a question.* Users receive questions that the system identifies as relevant to their background skills and experiences, using the comprehensive I'mIn profile. In addition, the system gauges expertise through online activities and content the user produces.
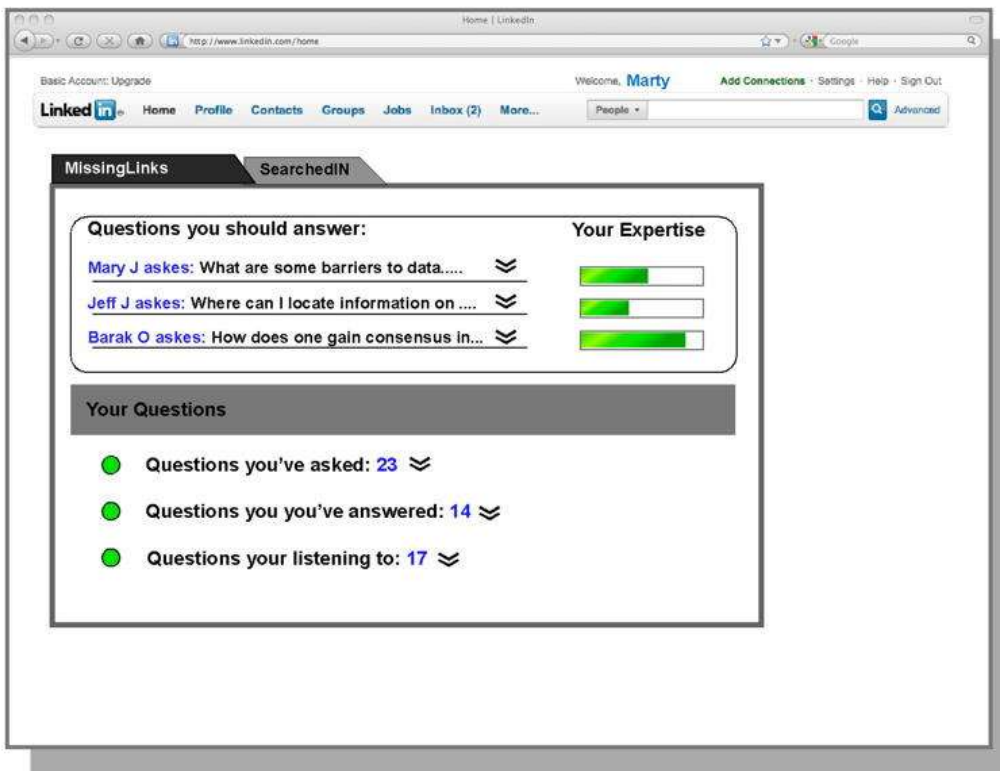
Figure 7 Mockup of Missing Links page.

Users can actively choose to answer the question, refer it to someone else, or "listen in" to track its responses and discussion. Users will also be able to see who has received or is listening to the question, allowing them the opportunity to make new contacts. In this way, answering questions not only benefits those who ask them, but also potentially benefits those who can potentially answer it as well.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LAY OF THE LAND WITH SEARCHEDIN

SearchedIn is a search function featured on the SyncedIn area of the site. With a given search entry, SearchedIn provides a visualization of connections with associated fields and meanings as well as people associated with that entry. The primary value of SearchedIn is that it allows a user to gain knowledge of relevant jargon, areas of study, and people associated within a selected topical area. This approach to online searches is distinct from the traditional approach of showing results with a relatively low number of "hits," or up to several thousand in a cascading menu structure.

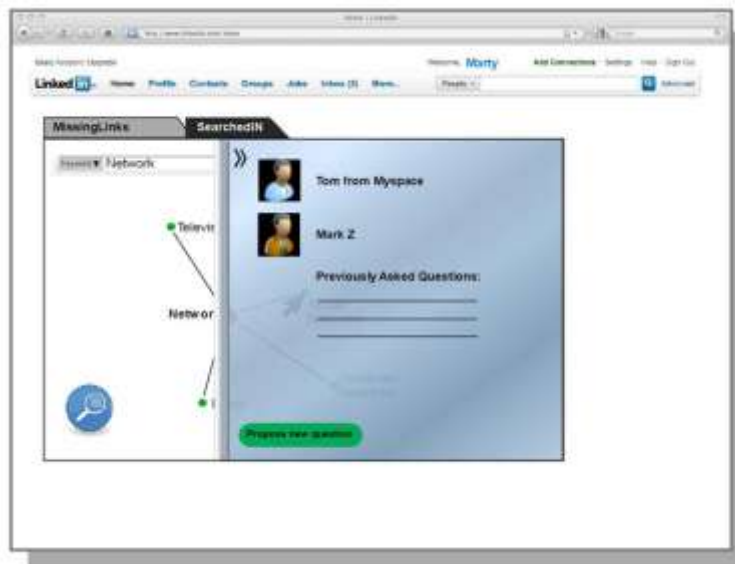Figure 8 Mockups of the SearchedIn page featuring an explorable visualization of a topic



Figure 9 Clicking on a topic shows key contacts and previously asked questions in that space.

Searching by topic, e.g. photography, will display a tree built around the search terms with words associated with that term.  Hovering over associated terms in the tree will allow the user to view LinkedIn users who have expertise in that area as well as archived conversations on the LinkedIn site around the topic.  Clicking on associated terms in the output will allow the user to explore greater levels of depth in the same manner for the area chosen.

## EVALUATION OF DESIGN PROPOSAL

In strategic networking, finding the necessary knowledge and information is often initiated with a particular question about the future followed by identifying the individuals who can bring about that future. Currently, LinkedIn is designed to focus on individuals or group members first and the information they know second. The profile-centric site encourages to users to move from profile to profile, which is a time-consuming process.  In the language of Goldratt and his *Theory of Constraints*, having to sift through profiles or groups first is a constraint to the process of obtaining knowledge.
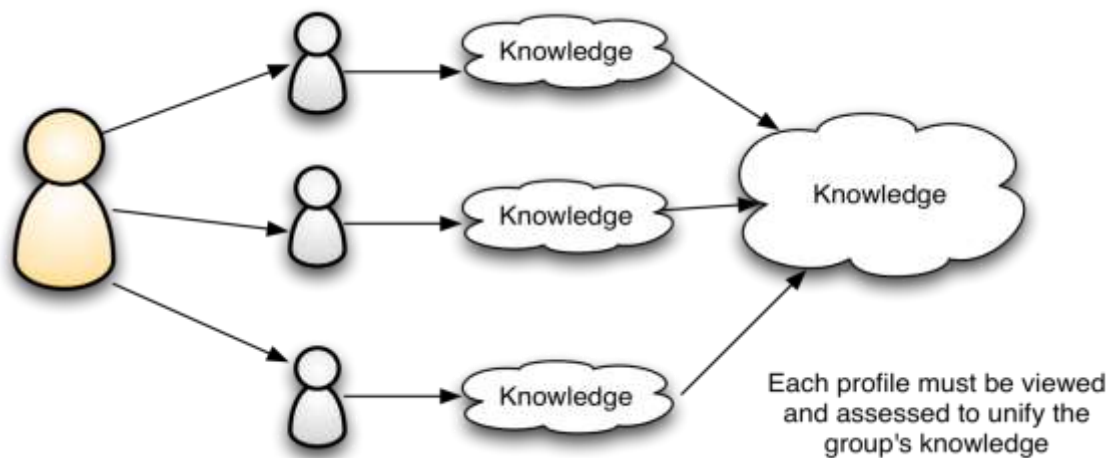


Figure 10 Current knowledge-seeking model with LinkedIn.

SyncedIn attempts to make the strategic networking process more efficient by giving the users tools to access the knowledge first, and then allowing a user to find out who the individuals associated to that body of knowledge.
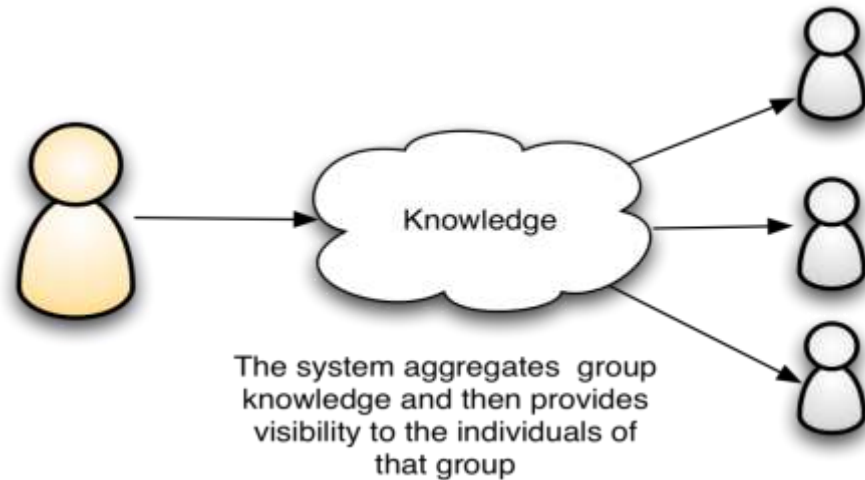
Figure 11 New knowledge-seeking model puts knowledge at the forefront of the networking process.

In addition, LinkedIn has an "Answers" feature that allows users to pose a question, categorize it, and have it be answered by experts. The best answer is then chosen by the asker, which gives special status to the expert, thus signaling their expertise. Our design takes a different approach to handling question and answer by making it more dynamic and personalized to each user.
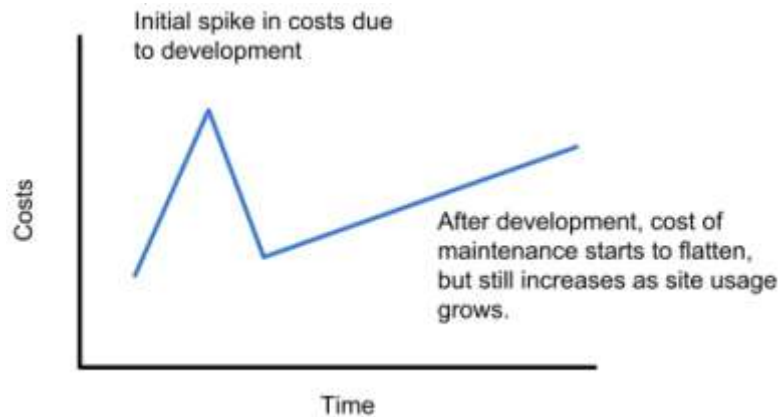
## MONETIZING LINKEDIN



Figure 12 Overview of development and maintenance costs.

The cost of implementing the design may be potentially significant due to the added functionality of the analytics engines, as well as that of the design and functionality of the SyncedIn features. However,

once this infrastructure is established, it is anticipated that there will be a fairly constant cost of maintaining the system, which grows as the user base grows.
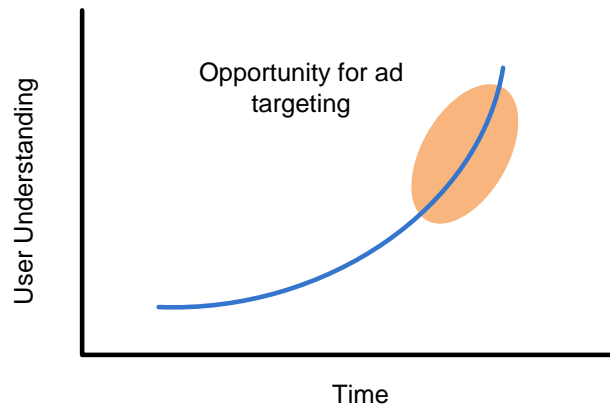


Figure 13 As more users engage with the site over time, the system's understanding of the user increases. Ads can then be highly targeted to these members.

The opportunity to monetize this redesign lies in the rich understandings that the system obtains about the users. The positive feedback loop presented in **Error! Reference source not found.** shows that use of the system encourages additional use of the system, thus enabling the system the system to provide content that is increasingly relevant to the user.

These insights into the user can be highly desirable from a marketing standpoint. By extending the concept of providing personalized content to users, advertisers can use this data to deliver highly targeted advertising, similar to Google AdWords.  We would then charge advertisers a premium for doing this.

## POSITION STATEMENT

SyncedIn is a powerful strategic networking tool that allows users to find information about the future they need and to connect with the people who can provide that information.  Accessible through the LinkedIn site, SyncedIn harnesses the knowledge base of its 50 million members to provide needed and timely information to its users.  It differs from traditional Q&A forums and discussion groups because the site introduces only relevant and targeted content to information seekers.   SyncedIn supports the creation and exploration of knowledge, thereby increasing the value of personal networks as well as engagement with the LinkedIn site.