

Episode #: 06

Episode Title: The power of LinkedIn and the rise of corporate influencers with Chetan Mallik

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Intro

Louise Everett (00:11)

This is ClarityMatters, the podcast where we explore the ideas shaping leadership, communication and influence in today's business world. Today we're talking about LinkedIn — the B2B platform boasting more than 1.3 billion members that has become one of the most important arenas for professional visibility and influence. There's a lot of recent debate about whether LinkedIn's algorithm is working as it should.

LinkedIn is moving away from follower-based distribution towards interest-based discovery. The feed now rewards depth and relevance over shallow engagement. Thoughtful comments and discussion matter far more than likes, while generic or formulaic posts are often filtered out early. Perhaps not good news for AI content. People with large but disengaged networks may see their reach drop, while professionals who consistently share expertise in a clear niche can build real credibility and influence.

That shift is also driving the rise of corporate influencers, employees, and leaders whose personal insights and perspectives often generate far more engagement than traditional company page content. Some research even suggests employee posts can generate up to eight times more engagement than brand posts. For many organisations, the most influential voices representing their brand are increasingly their own people. My guest today is Chetan Mallik, a communications, strategy and operations leader with more than two decades of experience across corporate communications, storytelling and organisational leadership.

Chetan currently serves as Strategy and Operations Lead for Novartis in Hyderabad — the company's largest global capability centre outside of Switzerland — where he works with site leadership to drive operational excellence and strategic initiatives supporting more than 9,000 employees. Earlier in his career, Chetan held global communications leadership roles at Novartis and led communications for Wells Fargo's global services operations in India, after starting his career as a journalist.

What makes Chetan an especially interesting guest for this conversation is his presence on LinkedIn. He's built a following of more than 25,000 people, where his posts stand out for their honesty, insight and storytelling — spanning leadership, communication, and personal reflection. Chetan, welcome to ClarityMatters. It is wonderful to see you and finally meet, albeit virtually.

Chetan (02:50)

Yeah, thank you so much for the warm welcome and inviting me and making me part of this platform. I feel extremely privileged and honoured to share my experiences regarding a topic which is very close to my heart.

Louise (03:05)

Wonderful. Thank you.

Main conversation

Louise Everett (03:07)

We haven't worked directly together yet, but through our work at Claritas supporting Novartis over the past 15 years, we've worked with many of your colleagues, and I've seen how widely respected and regarded you are, both professionally and on LinkedIn.

So, given your professional background and your own experience building a voice on LinkedIn, let's start there. From your perspective, what makes LinkedIn such a powerful platform for influence compared to other channels?

Chetan (03:40)

That's a great question. And I would like to take you back to almost around 19 years now, almost 20 years. In fact, many people get surprised when I tell this piece of information that my personal LinkedIn journey started two decades back.

And when I started my LinkedIn journey initially, like everyone else, I used to look at it as a job search tool. And you build your profile and you look at potential roles when you are looking out. And once you get a particular role, you update your LinkedIn and then you vanish. But then when I was doing it a couple of decades back, I realised, wait, this is not only a job search tool, and it can be a tool to build your personal brand, a tool to make connections within and outside the industry, within and outside the country.

And it can be such a beautiful platform to tell authentic stories. Now, this is what I thought, a couple of decades back. And I started taking baby steps and adding people, and I'm so amazed that this was one of my gut feelings, which has come true. Like anything else. I mean, it just went viral.

I would say my gut feeling went viral. And what makes it a great platform? Number one, it gives you the opportunity and the professional an opportunity to build their own personal brand and tell their own stories. And I always tell professionals that if you don't tell your stories, someone else will tell your story and you will not have any control over that.

So that's point number one. Point number two, it gets leaders and companies to look at professionals beyond their resume. And in the current age, inspired by AI, I feel that every opportunity or every role has three dimensions. Earlier it used to be very one-dimensional. And I'll explain. So every role is human, every role is tech, and every role is functional.

So almost consider it like a triangle. The functional piece of it and the tech piece of it almost, you can get a sense of it reading someone's resume. But the human aspect of it is the story

that someone can tell or someone tells over a period of time which an organisation or a recruiter can look into.

So I think that's what makes it unique because you are able to not only tell about what you know, but also tell about what makes you who you are. So I think that's again, point number two, that it's a great platform for that. Point number three, in this globally-connected world, it just makes you reach out to a very wider cross-section of people, just like you and me have been connected over many years on LinkedIn and like, there's so many other people.

So I think these are the key three differentiators which make LinkedIn such a great platform.

Louise (07:23)

You've articulated it so well. You were an early adopter, you know, of really starting to share that content and the way that you've outlined how it's a platform to show your uniqueness, what you bring as a human.

Other areas, you know, maybe other people have. But that specific pillar, the human pillar, that uniqueness is something that especially now in the current climate with the increase of AI, is so critical, so important. Absolutely. You actually started your career as a journalist, which is fascinating. And storytelling has clearly been a big part of your journey. So do you also see LinkedIn as a platform that allows you to rediscover that passion and use your storytelling ability?

Chetan (08:17)

Absolutely. You are bang on. So the reason I love the platform at the first go is because when you're part of a corporate environment as a communicator, and you will probably understand it a lot more than others, you're bound by certain guidelines, frameworks, narrative frameworks, but you are also limited by your position.

What LinkedIn does, what it gives you, is freedom to experiment as a storyteller. You can write about many more topics as a storyteller on LinkedIn about the very same organisation that you are part of in comparison to your own. For example, I'll give you an example. I was a site communicator for Novartis in Hyderabad. Now, as part of that role, I could only tell a few stories because of my professional role internally.

But as a storyteller on LinkedIn, I can experiment with a lot more, other topics. And point number two is whatever stories that I saw internally, I could also give it a layer of external relevance by picking and choosing stories, which I feel external audiences can also consume. And eventually it will help my employer brand, which is Novartis.

So I think that is a great opportunity if you are a storyteller. That's a great opportunity for anyone who's part of any organisation to either use it as a supplementary tool, which kind of is a great way to tell good stories, which the ecosystem sort of knows, and also a great tool to sharpen your craft because you know what works and what doesn't.

So I think I'm extremely grateful to be part of a community which has allowed me to, within the rules, of course, there are certain guidelines that you have to follow. And, even within those guidelines, then say, in any organisation, any profession you are part of, you can

experiment, you can sharpen your craft. Because like everything else, the more stories you tell, the better storyteller you'll become. I wish there was a shortcut, but there never is.

Louise (10:54)

Lovely. And to keep practicing, it's like a muscle. You keep practicing, and it gets better and stronger. One of the criticisms of LinkedIn right now is that a lot of the content can feel formulaic, the same format, the same sort of storytelling structures. How can people build a credible voice on the platform without falling into that trap of sort of performative posting or sort of algorithm first? What would you advise there?

Chetan (11:26)

See, first of all, I will, and this is my own personal opinion about the craft that I love. First of all, I do not follow any algorithm-specific writing. The algorithm is not something that I look into. In fact, I'm not even bothered about any algorithm. My approach has always been to write authentic content which has 2 or 3 components.

And I'm sure your audience would love this, and I'll give you a prescription for that. And in fact, I have a little bit of a formula which works for me, and which may eventually work for people. And you will see it in all my content. First of all, whatever I write is always my lived experience. I never write about someone else's experience. If I've lived it, if it is my truth, then I write about it. So lived experience is point number one. Second, is there something tangible for anyone to take away and use it in their daily lives or profession, or something? Is there something to take away? A key takeaway. And third, is that story building a small micro community? Okay, so three things: lived experience, something which people can take away as a value, and is it creating a small micro community?

Okay. Only when all the three boxes are ticked, that is when I write. And I write, I'm not a very prolific writer on LinkedIn. Whenever I spot a story, I tell the story. I'm under no compulsion to write every day. So it's not like I have to do a story.

Only when all the three boxes are ticked, I do a story. So that's my key mantra. So in the AI era what is happening is that people want to be seen on the platform and sometimes they do write a story, but probably it is not their lived experience. So probably it doesn't have a key takeaway. Probably it is not creating a kind of community.

Louise (13:43)

This is fantastic insight there. So scrap the algorithms, forget that. If it's coming from your place of truth, your own personal experience, that authenticity will carry through. And it does. I've seen your posts. I love your posts, as do thousands of others. So, this really is your truth.

So if LinkedIn rewards expertise and an authentic voice, it's perhaps not surprising that individuals are becoming more influential than brands. So what do you think has driven the rise of corporate influencers, and what separates those who genuinely build trust from those who don't?

Chetan (14:28)

I think what has led to this era of corporate influencers is something which you can see across platforms. I think it is almost like an active user group or a practitioner group reviewing a product or a movie or something else. So you are most likely to watch a movie or go to a restaurant because you are my friend and I have enjoyed that experience. This is the era that we live in.

So now many of these choices from a professional front are also similar, so you are most likely to either join an organisation or like a programme or initiative because your friend in some other organisation has written about it. So I think that's the reason why it has almost spiralled in popularity. Secondly, it gives you a very inside look at an organisation from very close quarters, as if you are part of it, as if you are in that auditorium at that moment, without actively being a full-time employee.

So that's also something which is brilliant because you're almost getting an insider view of things. And you can take this point of truth and kind of connect the dots to somewhere, create an image of the brand. I think that's something which is so beautiful about this platform. And your second question about what differentiates right from, I think, you know, what happens when people start putting out the same content.

Everyone has seen organisations who have these ambassador programmes where they give free written content, and on a single day you will find 10 people, 15 people writing the same post, and then you lose that, you know, lose that edge and people start seeing the motive on the top layer. Motive is good. You know, everything should have a motive, and it's good.

But if the motive is the last layer, then it isn't good. If it is the top layer and it is way too obvious for people to see, then it becomes a problem. And thirdly, it is not about numbers. Numbers are not important. But if you have more stories, authentic stories, they are just way better than the vice versa.

You have a lot of influencers, those who call themselves influencers, and all they do is copy paste content or five forms of the same content. I think that's something that you should always avoid.

Louise (17:20)

People detect that and then it turns them away from it.

Chetan (17:23)

Absolutely. People detect that, people detect narcissistic behaviour, "I, me, myself" kind of behaviour.

People detect which I call the trophy syndrome, you know, with only victories, only milestones are shared. People do detect all of that.

Louise (17:46)

And your point about that lovely opportunity to get a sort of inside perspective. You know, I've not been to your site in Hyderabad. I've worked with a number of your colleagues, but

from your posts I've seen and I've already got the spirit, I get that essence of what a close community you've got there.

And that comes through what I read in the post that you share. So it really does, it really gives us sort of a perspective of life in that team, that organisation, and that spirit.

Chetan (18:24)

And I'll tell you a little about the business imperatives behind it. So everything is business driven. So for the most part of my career I worked for global capability centres based out of India, and three brands, three very big brands in their own space.

For example, I worked with Deloitte, one of the largest consulting companies, I worked with Wells Fargo, one of the largest banks in the US. Now, if I tell you that, you know, let's say in the banking sector, let's say, for example, I will take Wells Fargo, for example. How will I ensure that my leaders in the headquarters know how things are in the Hyderabad or Bangalore or Chennai?

These are the three offices which I managed during that role. How will they know what's happening here? I mean, ultimately, in a business context, a senior leader will have probably at best one quarterly review with some senior leader or let's say a bi-monthly review or something. That will be for 30 minutes to one hour. How much can you tell in that?

You can probably talk about hiring numbers. You can talk about how it adds to the bottom line, but there is no heart in all of that. So what I realised is that the only way I can disrupt that whole storytelling build all is by creating another channel for myself as a communicator, on behalf of my leaders and for my organisation.

So that, you know, even when my leaders are getting to a quarterly review or a board meeting, they already have some sense of idea of how people are. What's the energy and vibe like, how passionate are the people? So I think that was a very well thought out, in my mind, a very well thought out business imperative behind everything that I did for this period.

So it was never like without any reason. So there was a business imperative. But that business imperative was the last layer. Again, I'm coming to that. The top layer was always authentic stories which people can benefit from, which creates a micro community. And there is something that people can use in their everyday life. And through that there was a business imperative which almost you cannot notice, but it was always there.

Louise (21:13)

And that's your skill. That's the magic in it. But I think it's again, coming back to this beautiful point that you made about, it's about the heart. You know, you couldn't walk into a 30-minute business meeting and then you've just got a long list, a laundry list of things that you've got to get through.

It's all very rational. It's all pretty business focused. So that heart comes through your expressions and the way that you're able to just tell those stories. And connect – it's all about this connection that you have with your colleagues, with your former colleagues, you

know, and the rest of your global network. We talked a little bit earlier about the guardrails, you know, obviously, with large global organisations, there are guardrails.

Employee voices can be incredibly powerful for organisations. But greater visibility also raises questions around reputation and control. And some employees can feel stifled by that. They're sort of paralysed. They don't really know where to go. Especially in highly regulated sectors like pharmaceuticals. So in your experience, what risks do organisations perhaps underestimate if they encourage employee visibility on LinkedIn? And how can those risks be managed without losing authenticity?

Chetan (22:31)

See, first of all, I think sometimes regulated industries like ours - for all the right reasons - there is always the social media handbook and guardrails, which if a person actually reads, it is very difficult to motivate yourself to do anything. I perfectly understand the risks are always there, that if someone puts something wrong about an organisation, there is a reputational risk involved.

And obviously there's a business risk as well, because if you are even getting to marketing your product, there might be regulators who are very closely watching all this. And there might be some instances across. And another thing is that there is a very thin line between telling a story about you with a very authentic lens, speaking on behalf of the organisation.

So at the end of the day, LinkedIn stories are my stories. I don't speak, I'm not a spokesperson, I'm just someone who's living the experience. And it's a very subtle line. And that is where it's very difficult to operate and crack that code. If you are not able to crack that code, then there is a risk involved because, unknowingly, you may be speaking on behalf of the company, which you are not authorised to do.

So obviously there are risks associated with usage of social media platforms like LinkedIn. The benefits are definitely there. But if an organisation can simplify and give some cheat codes to people on how they can do it easily without any risk, I think that would be great. I think my prescription would be that all these guideline documents need to be rewritten as do's rather than don'ts.

So most of the time we write these documents in a manner that it creates fear. Rather than that, keep it brief. Do write about the do's and what people can do. Give some clear examples of how it can be done and then give the don'ts. But mostly it starts with the don'ts and ends with the don'ts, and that is where some of the time, it creates more fear in the minds of professionals.

Louise (25:13)

You're spot on with that point. So it's an enabler, here we are, here's how to do it, here's how to be active rather than, well, already we're going to tell you what not to do. So we're going to instil that fear.

That's a really excellent takeaway. So Chetan, before we wrap up, can we step back just for a moment? I've got a couple of questions that I like to ask all of my guests. If you could go back to your 20-year-old self, what would be the one piece of career advice you would give?

Chetan (25:47)

So thankfully, I have never followed any playbooks, be it storytelling or my career. And the only advice that I would give to myself is trust your gut and follow your path and stick to your own style. I can tell you that in the last 25 years, I have never changed the way I tell stories. Even today, as a journalist and as a communicator, even now, as a strategy and operations professional.

So that is definitely one piece of advice. Second, always have the courage to challenge the status quo, and be playful with platforms, remaining within guidelines. Again, I'm telling you, my LinkedIn is my own personal channel and I'm speaking to you as a communication professional. Yes, I work for a beautiful organisation that I love, but at the same time these stories are mine.

So I think to any youngster and even to my younger self, I mean, if you feel something is your style, if you feel that that's the right thing to do, stick with it. Eventually the power of the compound will kick in and it will get you followers and your stories will reach people. Don't be in a hurry.

Louise (27:20)

Beautiful. Beautiful. And let's look forward. If you could put one idea or piece of advice into a 20-year time capsule, what would it be and why does it matter?

Chetan (27:33)

I think, if I were to give a piece of advice and let's keep the arena the same as storytelling, I think one piece of advice is, storytelling in its truest form has been there since the civilisation began.

We have told stories for years. We keep telling stories to our children. In 20 years, I can guarantee you that we will continue to tell stories, and authentic stories will always reach people. In this mad rush of this complex world taken over by technology and AI, I hope we keep this form of art pure and uncluttered.

And I think, I mean, you're talking about 20, but I can bet you for the next 200 years, this storytelling will still remain relevant, irrespective of the platform. Today, it is LinkedIn. Tomorrow it could be something else. So I hope there are more passionate practitioners who join this club. I hope they keep AI tools just as a help, just as a coach rather than for the core of it. Otherwise, we will all sound very similar, we'll all sound, our styles will be very similar, and we'll take the same topics, and I'm sure we'll just reach a situation where people will get fatigued and they will leave all these platforms.

Louise (29:07)

I think all the takeaways and all the insights that you've shared today will certainly help to keep that legacy going, and for stories to continue. I hope to continue hearing your stories. For example, the Christmas Tree story from the end of the year, which was beautiful. A really fantastic story, I really enjoyed it.

Chetan (29:30)

And I will tell you the story. I mean, every story has a story behind it. And now for your audience, I want to tell my process. So where I work at office, the Christmas tree was very near to my desk, and I could see in front of it, and I could see that people are coming and taking pictures. And this is the edge that I always had as a journalist also.

And I was thinking: what if I was the Christmas tree? Right. What would I be feeling? And so I wrote that story and I started writing and I said, okay, let me write if I'm the Christmas tree. And that is how the story began. And I wrote about it.

In fact, I remember that I once did a story from the perspective of a food plate in the cafeteria. So, every cafeteria across the globe in many organisations has these plates. They get recycled when they are broken, and then some new plates come in. So I told the story of sustainability through the perspective of a plate, which is: I'm a plate, every day someone picks me, puts me on a table, and puts some good food over the top of me. Very warm food. And people talk about their successes, their failures, sometimes their managers, sometimes their life away from work. And then I go into a room where people wash me and to cut the story short, after a few washes, once I'm broken or my life is short, and my life is done, they replace me with someone.

But I'm so privileged to be part of so many conversations that happen around me. So I, the plate, would like to wish all the people in this organisation who come to the cafeteria a very happy New Year. Something like that. Yes, so it just needs a different lens. And there's a little bit of work, a different lens. Keep trying to everyone in the audience of yours, I will tell, keep trying. Look at things from different lenses and you will get

Louise (31:51)

Different perspectives. And you are extremely observant to notice these things and to be able to then come at it from that different lens, which makes the writing so beautiful. Chetan, thank you so much for all of your insight, your examples, your takeaways. I think there is so much there for all of our listeners, for me, to take on board.

Authenticity is the absolute root, and as you've said, looking at things through a different lens. But really that sort of truth - your own truth - that comes through, is what makes those stories so rich, and so compelling. Thank you for taking the time with us today and for sharing all of your wisdom around LinkedIn, and what that means. Thank you so much, Chetan.

Outro

Louise (32:45)

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