

Job candidates getting tripped up by Facebook

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Many students learn the hard way that online image can limit opportunity

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Van Allen runs a company that recruits job candidates for hospitals and clinics across the country. With physicians in short supply, he was happy to come across the resume of a well-qualified young female psychiatrist.

As part of his due diligence check, Allen looked her up in Facebook, a popular social networking Web site, and found things that made him think twice.

"Pictures of her taking off her shirt at parties," he said. "Not just on one occasion, but on another occasion, then another occasion."

Concerned about those pictures, he called the candidate and asked for an explanation. She didn't get the job.

"Hospitals want doctors with great skills to provide great services to communities," Allen said. "They also don't want patients to say to each other, 'Heard about Dr. Jones? You've got to see those pictures.'"

Job candidates who maintain personal sites on Facebook or MySpace are learning — sometimes the hard way — that the image they present to their friends on the Internet may not be best suited for landing the position they're seeking.

Although many employers are too old to qualify as members of the Facebook Generation, they're becoming increasingly savvy about using social networking sites in their hiring due diligence. That has both job candidates and human resources professionals debating the ethics and effectiveness of snooping on the Web for the kind of information that may not come up in a job interview.

According to a March survey by Ponemon Institute, a privacy think tank, 35 percent of hiring managers use Google to do online background checks on job candidates, and 23 percent look people up on social networking sites. About one-third of those Web searches lead to rejections, according to the survey.

Social networking sites have gained popularity among hiring managers because of their convenience and a growing anxiety about hiring the right people, researchers say.

Big corporations long have retained professional investigators to check job applicants' academic degrees, criminal records and credit reports. But until now the cost has deterred the ability of smaller firms to do the same level of checking, said Sue Murphy, a director of National Human Resources Association.

One problem is that there is little to prevent hiring managers from discriminating on the basis of personal information discovered through social Web sites.

"There's just not much legislation on that yet," Murphy said.

New college graduates, the most active social networkers, are most likely to be the target of Web research.

"For people new to a field, companies just don't have a lot to look back on," Murphy said. "They can't call up your former boss. They look you up on Facebook."

Financial services firms and health care providers are among the biggest users of social networking sites, said Larry Ponemon, founder of the Ponemon Institute.

"These industries are stewards of people's property and health, and companies really look for a high level of integrity," he said.

Professional services like law and consulting firms are also big users, because companies care about how employees present themselves to clients and look for clues in how applicants present themselves online.

Risque pictures are not the only way a job applicant can be tripped up. Pictures of illegal behavior like drug use or heavy alcohol use could disqualify a candidate too. Some also suggest poor writing and bad grammar in Facebook profiles and in blog entries can raise a red flag about communication skills. Derogatory comments or complaints or radical political positions also can draw the scrutiny of a prospective employer.

One job applicant indicated in his Facebook profile that he was a leading hacker, and he was applying to be a computer security analyst, said Ponemon. He too didn't get the job.

"It's amazing how many things people just put out there," said Murphy of the human resources association.

Facebook users often don't expect their personal information to be monitored by potential employers, and many consider their online profile information to be private.

A study by Adecco, a work force consulting firm, showed that 66 percent of Generation Y respondents, those in their late teens and 20s, were not aware that the information they put online can be factored into hiring decisions. Fifty-six percent said they think the practice is unfair.

Originally Facebook was seen as a safe "closed circuit" site, in which profiles would only be visible to people in a limited group. The site originally required users to register with a valid college e-mail address. But it loosened the restriction last summer to allow registration with any e-mail account. Facebook networks, which had been relatively small, expanded to include companies and even large geographic areas.

The new policies of Facebook drew public attention this year when Miss New Jersey Amy Polumbo nearly lost her crown after being blackmailed over pictures of her that were taken off her Facebook profile. Ultimately the judges decided not to take away her title, but her crown was tarnished.

"This was meant to be private," Polumbo told TODAY Show host Matt Lauer, referring to photos that showed her fully clothed but posing provocatively and drinking at clubs.

"People have a common misconception about how big their networks really are," said Michael Fertik, CEO of Reputationdefender.com, a year-old startup offering services to minimize the damage of Web background checks. "Nothing on the Internet is private. Period."

Reputationdefender.com offers to monitor one's Web reputation for \$10 a month plus a one-time fee of \$30 to remove from the Web an unwanted item that may have slipped out of the user's control.

In one high-profile case last spring, a group of law school students found that pictures were taken off their Facebook accounts and reposted onto an online discussion board without their permission. Whoever posted the pictures then invited suggestive comments.

The law students tried to have their pictures removed from the discussion board, complaining that they had been shunned in job interviews.

"People also have to understand the standard you will be judged against in hiring," said Fertik. "Employers don't have to believe what they see — they only have to decide not to take a chance on you."

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