

Have You Been Googled Lately?

Your online persona can undermine your resume

Do you know what a simple search query of your name in that cute and colorful Google search box will reveal about you to a potential boss, college recruiter, or in-law? Blogs and social networking websites such as MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, or Friendster have become wildly popular as online connection points for individuals with like interests. These social portals, along with common Internet search engines, are now being used more and more by company recruiters and HR managers to screen prospective job candidates. Surprisingly, what they are finding is that an individual's online persona is apt to reveal more about the applicant than their resume.

According to CareerBuilder, 26% of hiring managers say they have used Internet search engines to research potential hires. The number is even higher for professional recruiters. According to a 2005 survey of 102 professional recruiters by ExecuNet, 75% of recruiters use search engines to uncover information about candidates and 26% of recruiters have eliminated candidates because of information found online. In essence what a company recruiter is looking for in a search is to reveal red flags about a candidate that they might find questionable, conflict with their resume, or that go against the core values of an employer.

The naïve perception by individuals is that only people they are 'connected to' by common interest will ever see and read their exploits, opinions, rants, and obscure theories. What many people simply fail to understand is that anytime you post any type of information on the Internet, including pictures, videos, or text (on a public site), that information has technically been published to the world. Once out there it becomes part of the public domain, is hard to control, and can be searched and accessed in a variety of ways by savvy HR professionals. So, what's the big deal? Just delete those weekend party photos before sending out your resume. Not so fast. Due to the nature of search engine technology, just because something is removed does not mean it is gone for good or does not appear in another location. Information can be stored for months because many search engines, including Google, index new material as well as actually copy pages and files on to their own computers.

But wait—there's more. Potentially incriminating information is not limited to websites. Recruiters are also looking at an individual's proclivity to blog. What type of blogs are they participating in? What kind of information or opinions are they sharing? How many blogs do they host or regularly contribute? How much time are they spending in the blogosphere? Are they being critical of their employer, boss, co-workers, customers, or working conditions? Even if all information is above board, and related to a legitimate hobby, affiliation, or professional endeavor, if there is too much, that could raise a red flag.

So is the goal to completely sanitize your online identity so nothing comes up during a routine search and you become an enigma? The answer there is a resounding no. It can be quite beneficial for a job candidate to demonstrate an association with professional, academic, civic, or volunteer groups that support your background and aspirations. In many cases having a personal website with samples of work, references, etc. is an added plus, and in various fields a necessity. For individuals applying for a senior level position having a respectable degree of online credibility is even more important. An employer would expect that a seasoned candidate with 10 years of management experience that is applying for a director or VP level position would belong to associations and have online credibility. In some cases a lack of online information is also a red flag.

Right or wrong, in this age of instantly accessible information, an individual needs to be aware of what a potential employer may learn about them—or someone who shares their same name—during a simple search query. Be proactive. Know what your online persona reveals. If you discover red flags, perform damage control as required. It is a big deal and only getting bigger as more and more information is available and search engines get more and more powerful.

So what can you do to protect yourself and put forth the best online persona?

- First and foremost—be completely truthful on your resume.
- Always assume a potential employer will “Google” you.
- If you have MySpace, Facebook, or similar accounts make it private so only your friends can access it. But even with this safeguard, don't post anything you don't want a potential employer to read or that could be misconstrued.
- Google yourself. Know what a search will turn up. Be critical of how a potential hiring manager will react to seeing this information. Is it professionally and personally appropriate? Does it present you as an individual that supports your resume, experience, and professional goals?
- Check and recheck all websites you are registered on that have a 'profile' section. Review the material and sanitize it so that it still captures your personality and interests but does not reveal anything that could bring your good judgment or core values into question.
- Register online as an alumnus of your graduating college. Better yet, become involved with alumni committees. You will start getting lots of requests for donations in the mail, but you will also show up online as a graduate of that college or university.
- If there is incriminating information that appears during a search query which is not attributable to you, but to another person with the same name, proactively prepare documentation that informs a hiring manager of the situation. Don't rely upon a hiring manager to make the correct correlations. Remember, they are looking for red flags.
- Let your friends know to 'cool it' if they are posting information about you and using your name. All it takes is for one well meaning friend to post details and photos of your summer road trip to undermine a job search.
- Use the Internet to your advantage. Monitor industry blogs and selectively add professionally relevant postings that are linked to your name. It doesn't hurt to have a smattering of results show up that demonstrate you are informed and engaged in your chosen field.
- Write and submit articles or white papers for posting on industry websites or user group forums.
- What's good for the goose . . . Google your recruiter's name. Find out about them. If you discover a shared interest and drop a mention at the appropriate time, he or she may overlook that questionable MySpace picture.

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