

**SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES AND HUMAN RESOURCE  
PERSONNEL: SUGGESTIONS FOR JOB SEARCHES**

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SOCIAL NETWORKING ONCE meant going to a social function such as a cocktail party, conference, or business luncheon. Today, much social networking is achieved through Web sites such as

MySpace, FaceBook, or LinkedIn. Many individuals use these sites to meet new friends, make connections, and upload personal information. On social networking Web sites (SNWs) that focus more on business connections, such as LinkedIn, individuals upload job qualifications and application information.

These SNWs are now being used as reference checks by human resource (HR) personnel. For this reason, SNW users, particularly university students and other soon-to-be job applicants, should ask the following questions: Am I loading information that I want the world to see? Is this really a picture that shows me in the best light? What impression would another person have of me if he or she went through my site?

Although SNWs are a great way to be connected with friends, family, and friends-to-be, they can present problems when potential employers begin to search through them for information concerning job applicants. Many potential employees would be mortified to learn that employers could potentially read the personal information posted on MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, or other SNWs.

Searches on SNWs allow employers to look into what is done “after hours,” socially or privately, by the applicant. A résumé may be just a snapshot of a job applicant, while other personal information may be found online. Many job applicants have learned the hard way that what they post may come back to haunt them (Rodriquez, 2006).

### **Human Resources and SNWs**

Many companies that recruit on college campuses look up applicants on MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other SNWs. What they find on these sites presents a dilemma for the recruiters. Students post comments that they may think are private but can be read by many. These posts can be provocative comments on any subject from drinking to recreational drugs to sexual exploits. Although they may seem innocent enough to the students who have posted them, college recruiters or graduate admission officers may look at these postings as immature and unprofessional. Recruiters are warning universities’ career resource centers that they are looking at SNWs and that it would be best to work with students about how they are presenting themselves on these sites. The lifestyle the students are presenting online may not be what corporate recruiters or graduate school admission officers want in potential applicants (Finder, 2006).

Unfortunately, many job applicants have placed themselves in vulnerable positions by placing inappropriate, unprofessional, and/or unappealing material on publicly accessible SNWs. For example, a recent job applicant for a hospital psychiatrist position was well qualified based on application materials, but the HR professional not only reviewed the applicant's application package but also decided to look her up on a SNW. The HR professional found inappropriate pictures and called the job candidate for an explanation. The candidate did not get the job (Du, 2007).

An owner of a valet company began using MySpace to network with potential drivers. She found this was an easy way to communicate with potential employees at little expense to her. She could also do a background check on these potential employees by checking their SNWs to see if they displayed reckless behavior, such as expressions of drug usage (Navas, 2006).

Companies that have included searches on SNWs such as LinkedIn as part of their job searches include Microsoft, Starbucks, Goldman Sachs, and Deloitte. LinkedIn has been particularly helpful for some of these companies in finding out additional information about job applicants (King, 2006). If one is wondering how legal these types of searches by potential employers are, remember that the information posted is voluntarily posted by the applicant for anyone to see. The only legal responsibility the potential employer has to the applicant is to ignore any information that would be considered in protected categories, such as race or age. Potential employers would need to consider the truth and legality of the posted information. A third party could also have posted information or it could be part of a blog (Baker, 2008).

What is discussed in blogs or profiles could also hinder job prospects for job applicants. Potential employers might view job applicants less favorably if they have posted radical political positions, made derogatory comments or complaints about others, or written statements that might imply questionable ethics (Du, 2007). At one university, a law student was asked by a career counselor to remove a page from her Web site in which the student complained about classes being boring. Such student behavior could be perceived by employers as juvenile and flippant. A law student at another university had trouble getting a job after graduation because of his affiliation with a

Web site that made disparaging remarks about female law students. The student had not posted any remarks, but his association with the Web site was viewed unfavorably (Samborn, 2007).

### **Marketing Yourself Online**

Marketing oneself online has been labeled *personal branding* by Beal and Strauss (2008) in their book *Radically Transparent*. They discuss the importance of creating a personal reputation using the Internet as your medium. Social network Web sites provide a unique way for people to develop their own personal brand.

These authors suggest that individuals control their online persona by putting information out there on several online resources such as MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, or other SNWs. Beal and Strauss (2008) make the compelling case that online activities can affect one's reputation. They provide the following suggestions for creating a personal brand:

- Identify stakeholders—Who do I want to influence (family, friends, co-workers, potential employers)
- Identify who I am and how I want to be perceived
- Identify career goals—short, intermediate, and long-term
- Identify how much personal information to reveal online

### **Concluding Thoughts**

SNW users should respond to the warnings given by HR personnel. For example, one simple rule that captures the essence of their advice is to avoid posting what one would not want one's mother or grandmother to read or pictures one would not share with the world—which is the “grandma test” (Lupsa, 2006). Similarly, prior to applying for a job, applicants might consider taking a close look at what is posted on the Internet about them or others and identify what potential employers are likely to view.

Of course, job applicants should not only emphasize avoiding certain online practices but also focus on personal branding efforts. They could consider posting items that enhance their reputations, such as pictures of an awards banquet or charity event participation, a current résumé, a copy of newspaper articles or announcements that

mention the applicant or the link to these articles or announcements, or positive social or family outings. Job applicants should ensure that all posted information on SNWs enhances their job prospects.

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