

Your future employer is watching you online. You should be, too.

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Welcome to the Permanent Job Search. From now on, all of us will be "looking" for a job even when we're not actually looking for a job. Employers are researching each of us digitally 24/7/365. Our resumes are perpetually available online in various forms, some of which we control and some of which we don't. Those of us who exert the necessary effort to maximize our digital reputations will be rewarded: opportunities will find us. Those of us who don't will miss out.

Here's how it works:

1. Our information is collected online. All of the information about us — from social media profiles, to digital CVs, to credit card transactions, to app usage to the rest of our digital "footprint" — is being collected by third parties. This includes information that we choose to publish ("I'm a small business owner in Florida."), information that others publish about us ("Sarah is a great team player."), and information that is aggregated and shared behind the scenes without our knowledge ("Jonathan spends 400 minutes on sports websites and \$300 on specialty foods per month.").

2. The data is analyzed. Machines compile demographic and psychographic profiles of each of us, based on all of the available data out there. We are all "scored" in different ways. One of the most familiar "scores" is for marketing purposes: data brokers tell advertisers whom they should target for ads about, say, hiking gear. But increasingly, the same data sets about us are being scored for other, much more important reasons, including employability.

3. Employers use the data analysis to evaluate us. Already, recruiters and hiring managers are relying heavily on the internet to research candidates for employment. Multiple studies* show convincingly that more than 75% of employers actively research candidates online. They show further that more than 70% have decided NOT to hire a candidate based on what they've found. Recruiters have been shown to not just look people up on search engines, but to dig very deep, through social media profiles, shopping profiles, online gaming sites, classifieds and auction sites (think eBay and craigslist) — and even in virtual worlds like SecondLife! This type of employer behavior is pretty similar across the world.

4. But, wait — there's more... Now these same employers, who have become adept at manually researching and evaluating candidates through their digital footprints, are getting machine-based number-crunching tools that will make the entire screening process faster. Employment is joining other fields like higher education (heavily dependent on standardized test scores for admissions), where machine-based scores will determine or all-but-determine our fate.

We can illustrate the impact. Using today's technology, an employer can search 1,000 submitted resumes for keywords such as university name, previous employer name, and specialty. The computer can serve up the three people who fit the employer's criteria. The employer reaches out, interviews them, and hires one. More than 99% of candidates didn't even get at bat. No human evaluation — for subtlety, interesting career paths, etc. — was needed or utilized to get to the top of the pile.

Let's imagine what this looks like with tomorrow's technology. The computer knows the digital profiles of top employees at the employer's company. It knows their backgrounds; their reputation on the internet for professionalism, hard work, and achievement; their previous patterns of work history and tenure; their collaboration styles; what the internet thinks their personal interests and habits are; what their friends are like; what their family lives are like, etc. The employer tells the machine that she'd like to get a terrific new employee for the Customer Service department. The machine then researches the million people who live closest to her office, surfaces three names based on their digital reputations and how similar they are to top employees at the company, and she reaches out to them. She and the candidates are mutually delighted with the result.

That's good news for the three candidates with the sterling digital reputation. It's bad news for the 999,997 others.

The future of employment and digital reputation is likely going to be a one-way ratchet. Employment decisions are already being made based on our online reputations by people. But more and more, those decisions will be made or all-but-made by machines.

So what do you do about it? The good news is that the Internet Giveth, and the Internet Giveth Some More.

Here's how you can start to manage your online reputation:

1. Make sure your online persona matches your offline persona. If your passion and education are in environmental engineering, make sure your social media profiles reflect those facts. LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter accounts that emphasize your tastes in food will seem incongruous to the people seeking to hire you.

2. Curate your search results. Recruiters and other key career decision-makers in our lives rely chiefly on our top-ten Google search results to make decisions about us. It's amazing how powerful even the top five results are! (See this heatmap for a visual depiction of where people are looking and clicking most often on Google search results.) Instead of leaving those search results to fate, or to the sometimes random-seeming Google algorithm, proactively shape the first results for your name. Build a simple website for yourself with the URL firstnamelastname.com (or similar), so that your site shows up high in search engines for queries of your name. Likewise, set up your Twitter and LinkedIn accounts to be twitter.com/firstnamelastname (instead of, say, .com/partyguy44) for the same reason.

3. Use the internet to establish your credibility on the topics that matter most to the job search you are actively (or passively!) pursuing. Participate in the online forums and digital communities that matter most to your specialties. You don't have to be the forum's most active participant. But over time, periodic, thoughtful contributions will confirm your reputation — in the eyes of both humans and machines scouring the community — for thought leadership in the field.

4. Don't rely on privacy settings in social media to "segregate" facts about your life. We've seen over and over that privacy settings either fail to work altogether, or fail to protect your personal data from third-party data brokers who compile profiles about you behind the scenes. In the same way that you are careful about what you put in email, even in "private" emails, you now have to assume that anything you publish "behind a privacy setting firewall" will leak.

5. Take charge of your photos. Just a couple of years ago, we thought that leaving compromising photos "untagged" would prevent third parties from finding them and identifying the people in them by name. Facial recognition technologies have changed that. Now you have to anticipate that any photo your friends or kids post of you — however hilarious it seems at first — will carry your name and could be found by anyone.

6. Don't make the mistake of assuming that because you live a righteous life offline, you will appear righteous online. Unless you are famous, your reputation online and offline will not naturally converge. (Well, some famous people have wacky online reputations, but at least they are discussed enough to have a real shot at getting the "true picture" out on the web over time.) Left on its own, your online reputation will be hugely incomplete or obsolete. Moreover — much more so than in your offline life — your online reputation can be heavily influenced by the digital contributions of just one other person. Whether that person is a current friend, a former colleague, a former spouse, or just someone who shares your name, his or her stray or intentional remarks about you will usually dominate your online reputation unless you prevent them from doing so.

It's time to adapt to the permanent job search. Use the steps above to get to know and dominate your digital reputation. And make sure that you — and your potential future employers — like what you see.

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