Is Your Digital Footprint Squashing Your Reputation?



Over the past few years, several studies have been conducted looking at social media and employer hiring habits. One of those studies, conducted by Microsoft, showed that 70% of employers in the United States screened out potential employees because of information found online. The study also showed that the majority of recruiters and HR professionals indicated that they think it’s appropriate to consider personal information found online in screening potential job applicants.

This raised several questions in my mind: What procedures are in place to ensure that the information found online relates to the job candidate (there’s a Donna McNamara who was recently arrested and isn’t me)? Do they differentiate between information voluntarily posted by an individual versus information someone else posts about them? Is the information validated for accuracy? Are there potential legal ramifications of online searching?

In several of my classes, we discussed the importance of having a digital footprint and using various types of media to convey your personal brand. I’ve been to various speaker engagements that encourage job seekers to create professional websites and use Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. to build a personal brand online. This way, when employers Google you, they find content you’ve created. For some recruiters, a lack of digital footprint is viewed as a negative; suggesting the applicant hasn’t written articles, created a website, blog or LinkedIn profile.

For potential employees, online information can be especially troublesome as in the case of personal networking sites like Facebook. Here, people openly post candid photos of themselves and allow others to tag them in photos. This often means drunken escapes are captured for general public consumption (think Jackass star Ryan Dunn tweeting a photo of himself drinking hours before reports of a fatal car accident). A potential employer may decide to screen out a candidate after seeing some questionable photos or posts. Here are a few common reasons why employers have screened out potential job candidates:

* Falsifying information about qualifications
* Poor communication skills (spelling and grammar count!)
* Discriminatory comments were found on posts
* Posts about excessive drinking or drug usage
* Provocative or inappropriate photographs or information posted
* Bad mouthing of previous employer, co-workers or clients
* Sharing of confidential information from previous employer

And, here are some reasons employers have hired potential candidates:

* Solid communication skills displayed
* Profile provided a good feel for the applicant’s personality and fit
* Creativity displayed
* Awards, accolades and good references posted
* Profile supported applicant’s qualifications

Issues with online search don’t just impact potential job candidates. Recruiters and HR staff doing the searching can open themselves up for trouble by obtaining too much information. For example, personal networking sites often include information about race, religious beliefs, age, sexual orientation and marital status; factors NOT to be considered in pre-employment screening. By searching potential candidates’ personal sites, recruiters become exposed to information that does not pertain to the applicant’s ability to perform the job and may inadvertently consider factors such as age, race, etc.

I’ve experienced the use of waivers and releases at the point of application to circumvent such issues so employer concerns may become less problematic. In addition, some organizations put blocks on social networking sites so that information may not even be available to them. So what can you do to make sure your online image is what you want it to be? Bottom line – clean up your social networking sites.

* Don’t have photos you wouldn’t want an employer to see.
* No drunken escapes, no profanity, or slurs.
* Don’t bad mouth former employers, bosses or co-workers.
* Make your social networking sites private.
* Sweat the small stuff. Your email address, spelling, and grammar speak to your maturity and communication skills.