
Facebook, LinkedIn: Meet Human Resources

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Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn can have positive and negative impacts on future job prospects for employers. Learn how to use your profile to your advantage.

Since the Internet evolved in its infancy from a government pet project to a widespread digital superhighway, there have been plenty of stories of employees who got booted for posting their unvarnished opinions online. These days, however, it's those naughty vacation pics from Cabo that might sink any chance of a second interview.

But not all online profiles are deal breakers. If an Internet aficionado is able to create a digitally-based identity that's rife with thoughtful insight and maturity, it could actually help a career, rather than derail it.

"If you approach online profiles as a way to present your professional side to the world, then you have a great opportunity," says John Challenger, CEO of outplacement consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Facebook may have started as a way for college students to get more information about each other, but it has become a standard in the business world, Challenger adds. Recruiters regularly surf its online pages and read about potential candidates, and many profiles tend to be more professional than that wild West of online profile sites, MySpace.

Even more respected is LinkedIn, which allows users to post resumes and make connections in order to share networks with each other. Potential employers can scan a candidate's connections list and job history, and make initial decisions about their "fit" for a company.

"Recruiters are taking a close look at those networks, since it's like going through someone's Rolodex," Challenger says. In the past, he adds, proprietary databases were unique to a search firm, including information on larger networks, but these days, most rely on LinkedIn instead.

He notes, "They're always swamping that site, because it allows them to search on very specific information. And as younger people move from MySpace and Facebook, it's likely they'll spend more time on places like LinkedIn."

But these sites are just part of a larger online identity, adds Tuck Rickards, who leads the Technology Sector for the Americas for Russell Reynolds Association, a firm specializing in CEO and other senior-level recruiting.

"People have to think about their online footprint," he says, a tactic that can usually be done easily by inserting one's own name into a search engine. Facebook and blogs might come up, but also likely to pop into the results are comments written on an alumni page, executive bio pages, press releases, and other random bits of digital data.

Much like tweaking a social site to reflect a more polished personality, these other sites can be used to create a broader image of an individual, giving an idea of writing style, for example, or personal philosophies.

"You have to be careful about what you say, but at the same time, you can have a level of control, based on the site," says Rickards. "You can leverage these networking sites and other sites as tools to create a nice profile of yourself, with controls wrapped around it."

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Because online sites like Facebook, MySpace, and blogs are open to anyone, they can provide an opportunity for people to present a certain image to specific employers, in addition to looking good to the whole professional world, notes Steven Rothberg, founder of CollegeRecruiter.com

"Write about your passions and ideas, and employers who search Google or other sties can find your page, and get to know you," he advises. About 75 percent of employers admit to using Google to do background research on candidates, he notes, and a growing number are using the sites to include candidates rather than exclude them.

But although carefully crafted online identities can be useful in selling oneself to a potential employer or zipping through an annual HR review, it's possible to be a bit too much like a used car salesman when it comes to promoting the better aspects of a personality.

For example, some LinkedIn users have grouched about the strangers that attempt to make a "connection" although they've never had any contact in the past.

Having an impressive roster of contacts is usually proof that a person can cultivate important professional relationships and nurture them through steady attention; but it's much less praiseworthy when the cultivation involves only sending invites to strangers and hoping for the best.

Also, there's the danger of looking too wrapped up in one's online self, adds Dr. Terry Gudaitis, Cyber Intelligence Director at security firm Cyveillance.

"Most employers would be alarmed if I took out a billboard along the highway, showing off my photos and opinions," she says. "But that's just what a page in MySpace or Facebook is doing, and often, that's how it's viewed."

People who are particularly open about discussing their personal life may spark concern in managers who fret about them being equally candid about details on a project, client, or other sensitive work matter.

"If I'm working for a company serving vendors who are careful about disclosure, I wouldn't pick someone for a project who tells the world everything about themselves online," says Gudaitis.

Individuals who show a high level of maturity and professionalism, however, can prevent this type of reaction by simply being selective about what kind of information they share.

Gudaitis adds, "How you present yourself online is a snapshot of your decision-making ability, and your integrity."