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Instant Background: With Employers Utilizing Google Searches, Job Candidates Discover That They Are What They Post

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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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Plug a prospective employee's name into Google or any other Internet search engine, and you might be surprised at what you find. Web pages may tell hiring attorneys that the person they just interviewed wrote for an undergraduate newspaper or belonged to a specific sorority, but the Web may also reveal the recent interviewee's drink of choice and dating status.

The advent of social networking Web sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Friendster have added a wealth of previously personal information to the Internet, some of which job seekers may prefer to keep private and out of an employer's hands.

For most educated individuals below the age of 35, MySpace and other popular social networking sites have revolutionized the way people express themselves. Instead of pouring their heart out into a journal each night, many young people post their internal monologues on a Web log, more commonly known as a blog.

In the ongoing effort of law firms to identify the best and the brightest, hiring committees would be foolish to ignore the treasure trove of information the Internet offers about prospective associates.

For those who remain among the uninitiated, networking Web sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster and other competitors are virtual communities that allow members to meet and make friends by posting information and pictures about themselves on personal Web pages. Currently, MySpace is the fifth most popular Web site in the world and the third most popular in the United States, with more than 106 million registered accounts and approximately 230,000 new ones created each day.

For legal recruiters, a MySpace user's profile alone can yield a bonanza of biographic information. A single page may reveal a job candidate's photo, location, race, ethnicity, political affiliation, religion, educational background including expected graduation date, extracurricular activities, classes, professors, past work experience and lifelong ambitions, not to mention candid personal pictures, comments from friends and the job candidate's account of last night's blind date -- or even worse, an account of his or her interview with a particular firm.

While MySpace has become the epitome of online interaction, it does not even begin to include the millions of blogs, messageboards and videos posted on countless Web sites available to a recruiter at the click of a mouse.
No more is an interviewer's information about a job seeker limited to a resume, cover letter and professional references. Now, it seems that Google can produce more information about a person than his or her FBI file. And therein lies the rub.

It is important for legal recruiters to remember that Google is also the tool of choice for cyberstalking ex-boyfriends and girlfriends and that the Internet is used to spread gossip about everything from celebrities to co-workers. When Google's algorithms spit out a list of results about a person, his or her academic achievements and journal publications may rank significantly lower than photos of tabletop dancing.

Most recruiters know that dirt on the seemingly perfect summer associate may be out there, and, in turn, law students and laterals know they have to make an effort to edit what personal information exists on the Web.

This puts hiring committees in a still-emerging position when it comes to Internet information. The simple fact is that information is out there about recruits, and hiring committees will find it. But in reality, there is information out there about most people with a public profession, and therefore recruiters must be aware of emerging reliability issues. It is also incumbent upon law firms to use the Web responsibly and know when information about potential hires is noteworthy or simply idle gossip and Internet chatter.

Certainly, what a law student puts on the Web on his or her own volition is fair game. Firms should always be free to hire and fire candidates who are unable to manage their professional reputations by irresponsibly posting indefensible rants, sordid details about personal matters and inappropriate photos. However, recruiters must keep in mind that not all information about a prospective hire on the Web was put there by that person or even with his or her knowledge or permission.

Individuals other than the person in question may post information on other Web sites and blogs and tag photos of the prospective hire without authorization, and law firms should make an effort to differentiate between what a law student allows on the Web of his or her volition and what postings are beyond his or her power.

Recruiters should pay attention to the mens rea of the potential hire, if you will. Postings that were not within the control of the student should be given far less weight in an evaluation of that person's professional character than those that a student clearly put up on his own.

The great irony of law firms' distrust of associates with an Internet identity is that the legal world trains students to rely on the Internet for anything and everything. Research on Westlaw and Lexis, e-mail communication and even newspaper reading are all conducted via the Internet.

Therefore, it is only natural that a generation trained to carry out its professional life on the Web would turn to the Internet for personal and social networking. Firms cannot punish individuals for the blend of private and professional worlds that appears in a basic Google search, when the medium itself allows no opportunity to separate the two.

MySpace is a platform that students know and use. Law firms should think about participating in the technology in an effort to reach students in as yet untried ways.

There is an entire country of law students checking MySpace every hour; why shouldn't law firms offer them the opportunity to check the firms' own MySpace pages?

Recruiters have already realized its possibilities as a sorting tool, using it to identify individuals who may not be
prepared to properly maintain their own or a firm's image. However, recruiters should also realize its potential in both finding new associates who can effectively negotiate an always evolving medium and as a place to expand their own reputation with new and desirable audiences.

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