

Optimize Your Virtual World

Creating the right image about yourself for career purposes used to be easy. Now the internet is creating its own world—a virtual world—that makes it tougher to maintain a high quality individual image, one that always ensures that you look good.

Problem is, in all likelihood there are things posted online about you that may be making you look bad, or worse yet, that could even devastate your career, even if these postings are only affiliated to you, or were put there by someone other than yourself.

The main reason that you need to be concerned about such possibly intimidating evidence is that others in your career arena may find this information distasteful, incriminating, and unprofessional—and then use it against you. The wrong kind of information—whether written or graphic—could cause you to be fired, prevent you from being promoted, or destroy your career altogether. The only way you can be prepared for it is to know what is posted out there about you and what is out there that may affect you in some negative way. You need to also be aware that the amount of information about you is always grow-



ing, too, especially if you use social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs. So regular internet health checkups should become an important part of life, just as important as your annual medical checkup, as what you don't know is being posted about you on the internet can be very unhealthy jobwise.

In a recent study by Harris Interactive for CareerBuilder.com, 45% of employers pre-screened candidates by looking at the candidates' social networks. This was more than twice the number from the year before. The same survey of more than 2,600 managers, found that as many as 35% did not hire someone based on the information they found from those networks. Moreover, 22% of supervisors checked up on their employees through the same social networks.

Using Google to look for your name can also be very revealing to a potential employer who may follow individual breadcrumb trails to learn what others are saying about you on the internet. It is extremely important that you know what a hiring manager, a HR person or your bosses will find out about you on the internet, especially if you are looking to change jobs, get a promotion or enter into a new career field. It really is not that uncommon for company staff members to regularly search online to discover what is being said about their company, a manager or other employees. You can be sure that if it is negative then someone is going to be affected by

it, whether or not the information is true. The Harris Interactive survey listed some reasons as to why employers chose not to hire a candidate after searching for information online.

They reported that the primary reason for not hiring (53%) was that the pictures or comments were inappropriate. Another 44% found pictures or information related to drinking or using illegal drugs. Thirty-five percent said they found the candidate bad-mouthing a previous employer. Others found things like candidates who had poor communication skills, lied about their own qualifications or shared what was considered to be confidential information from a previous company. And these were just the findings based on the candidate's own postings. Imagine what more they would have to consider if they saw what others were saying about you.

Search Yourself

In order to discover what there is online about you, it will be necessary to take some time to do it right, and to be thorough about it. Here are some things that you need to do in your searches.

Use your real name in searches, along with any nicknames that others use when referring to you. Check your maiden name, too, along with any aliases. There may be things you posted years ago that you had forgotten all about—remember that party when you turned 16—or that Spring Break? Now imagine all the pictures of you taken by others tagged with your name on them.

Use multiple search engines such as Google, Yahoo, Bing, Ask and Dogpile. They really do use different algorithms and will often produce different results.

Use variables with your search. This could include a fellow employee or friend's name with yours, your name with your current or past company or



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affiliation's name. You will probably be surprised at the different results you will get if you try creative search strings.

Find out what is being said about people with your same name. While it may not be you—others may not know that it is not you. You must be aware of what is being said, nevertheless, and actually read the web pages. If there is a reference to some kind of undesirable or illegal activity, you should be prepared to offer an explanation that proves it is not you. Remember that a potential employer may not know what you look like.

Broaden Your Search

It is quite possible that the main search engines will not bring up every occurrence of your name. This will mean that you need to perform individualized searches to see what may be there. The most common places where changes occur daily are Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter and blog sites. Perform checks for pictures or videos on places like Google Images, YouTube and more. Many things online can affect how others perceive you. Unfortunately, many of those things you will not be able to change. The good news, however, is that there is a lot you can do to make sure that a possible employer finds the good things – the things that you want them to find.

Here are some things you can do to market yourself in a good light.

Close down any social sites that you are not using or keeping up. Remove pictures or comments that will cast you in a negative light or make you appear less than professional.

Erase old resumes that are not current or do not have information that will do you justice.

Make sure that the privacy settings on Facebook will prevent the public from viewing your pictures and content. Using a nickname will also help, instead of using your real name. Be careful whom you friend. You may even want to pay for a background check through

providers such as Radaris. This will let you know about things that may cause trouble. And there are even services that will offer to help you clean out derogatory information and postings, but always remember “buyer beware.” Don't pay for these services just because they promise—seek proof of their success first.

Even on its own blog, Google recommends that you get proactive about your own online reputation. They advise you to do this three ways: by removing bad publicity (contact webmasters for material you do not control); think twice about anything you do post; and by creating enough good content about you that will enable the search engines to find more good content than bad.

Finally, learn more about the Deepnet—where some surprisingly real deep secrets about you can be found. For more information about this, see the article by Money.CNN.com called “Employers may do creepy web searches about you.” It is sure to be a real eye opener