

Beware: Potential Employers Are Watching You

By LESLIE KWOH

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Drunken party photos. Insensitive jokes. Foul language. Any employer who uses social media to research job candidates is probably used to stumbling upon such indiscretions by now.

The Internet offers companies a gold mine of information about potential hires—and much of it doesn't make for a good first impression. As social media continues to grow in popularity, however, the challenge for employers is deciding which gaffes are acceptable—and which are deal breakers.

While companies have been cautious about turning to the Internet as a research tool, a recent CareerBuilder study found that two in five companies now use social-networking sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter to screen potential candidates. Most are looking to see that a candidate appears professional and will fit in with company culture, according to the survey, which polled 2,000 hiring managers and human-resources professionals.

These social-media background checks have given rise to a whole new host of deal breakers, career experts say. At one time, spelling and grammar mistakes on a résumé might have taken a candidate out of the running; now, recruiters are much more likely to forgive a typo than, say, trashing an employer on Facebook, says Donna Weiss, a managing director at Corporate Executive Board, a research and advisory firm.

Indeed, 44% of recruiters said that trashing an employer on social media is enough to land an applicant in the reject pile, according to a Corporate Executive Board study of 215 recruiters earlier this year. Just 26% said they view a résumé typo the same way. Inappropriate language was considered unforgivable by 30% of those surveyed; 17% looked at excessive personal information that way.

Subtle Clues

Companies also are using social media to pick up on more subtle clues about job applicants' work styles. Pete Maulik, chief strategy officer at Fahrenheit 212, a New York-based innovation consulting firm, says he was close to hiring an "excellent" candidate last year when he decided to check the man's LinkedIn profile as a final precaution. That's when he realized the candidate probably wasn't a team player, he says.

"He took credit for everything short of splitting the atom," Mr. Maulik says.

"Everything was, 'I did this.' He seemed like a lone wolf. He did everything himself."

Another promising job applicant used his Twitter account to disparage just about every new innovation in the marketplace, he recalls. "It became clear he was much more comfortable as the critic than the collaborative creator," Mr. Maulik says.

The company didn't hire either candidate, he says.

Likewise, ProProfs, a California firm that specializes in online testing tools, was close to signing on a freelance writer when a LinkedIn check showed the candidate was freelancing for another company, says CEO Sameer Bhatia. The candidate confessed to omitting that detail, saying the existing employer had demanded exclusivity.

"We saw this as a sign of dishonesty and lack of loyalty," Mr. Bhatia says, adding that the company didn't hire the writer.

While some employers may be willing to overlook the occasional rowdy photo or off-color tweet, it goes without saying that any post linking a job candidate to illicit activity such as drinking and driving or illegal drugs, or to racist or sexist behavior, won't go over well.

Surprisingly, some job seekers have yet to absorb that message, recruiters say.

Max Drucker, CEO of Social Intelligence Corp., which screens job applicants on behalf of companies, estimates that 5% to 10% of Internet background checks for clients turn up red flags, even though each job candidate must give consent in order to be screened. "You cannot believe the stuff we see," he says. "You'd be surprised how many people still keep their Facebook profiles public."

Life as an Open Book

Millennials, in particular, are vulnerable to these mistakes because they have a greater presence on social media and have grown up sharing their thoughts and feelings online. Many of them are open to adding superiors and colleagues as Facebook friends but don't have enough work experience to understand that certain behavior might be inappropriate for a professional audience, says Brendan Wallace, CEO of Identified, a networking site for young workers.

"The social-media identity they carved out was never created with the end goal of a job in mind," Mr. Wallace says.

To be sure, some companies are reluctant to add social-media checks to their hiring process, saying they believe the negatives outweigh the positives. "It's very difficult to defend yourself when you reject a candidate," says Neil Sims, a managing director at executive search firm Boyden.

By going online, employers expose themselves to all kinds of information that cannot be legally considered in the hiring process, such as religion, race, gender and health status, says Social Intelligence's Mr. Drucker. Some factors could sway the employer, even if only subconsciously. It might be difficult for an employer to hire a pregnant woman, for example, knowing that she might soon take maternity leave, he says.

Still, with so much information available online these days, when it comes to social media screening, "employers are damned if they do, damned if they don't," Mr. Drucker says.

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