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Facebook Follies Can Hurt Your Job Prospects

By Alison Go

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This summer, Michael Evans went private. Only the 924 people he considers friends on Facebook.com, a social-networking website, can view photos of his latest exploits and track his online activities. Evans, a senior at Ohio State University, wasn't trying to keep predators or even obnoxious busybodies at bay; he was hiding from the prying eyes of future employers.

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Evans's worries may not have been unfounded. According to a recently released study, 40 percent of employers would take into consideration Facebook content when evaluating potential hires. Some reported rescinding job offers after finding incriminating content about the candidates online.

The fact that employers are using the Internet to aid the hiring process is news to few, but what the University of Dayton study did reveal is a growing disconnect between students' and employers' views of the Web. Students tended to label Facebook a reflection of their private lives—a forum for socializing and keeping up with friends. Employers treated much of the Internet as an informational free-for-all. Forty-two percent of students said that for companies to make decisions using Facebook was a violation of privacy; only 21 percent of employers thought the same. "If it's out there, it's fair game," says Johnny Taylor Jr., senior vice president for human resources at IAC/InterActiveCorp.

"We kind of tapped into generational resentment among college students," says Mark Sisson, one of the researchers, a feeling that could be summed up by the notion that "employers just don't understand." Many students appreciate why employers would turn to online resources, but they also fear that what employers find there could be taken out of context. "There's a potential for employers to be misled," says Conor Geary, a sophomore at Siena College in upstate New York, who also created the Facebook group "Dear Employer: I'm an Upstanding Individual Despite My Facebook Pictures." "If employers don't understand the purpose of it, they shouldn't be using it to make negative judgments."

Thirty-two percent of the students also found the practice of Facebook snooping "unethical." This may seem a territorial, knee-jerk reaction, but the sentiment reflects concerns among both students and employers that could play out in the future. Some employers worry that because of the access it gives them to information on race, sexuality, or religious affiliation, using Facebook as a hiring tool may be in violation of equal employment opportunity standards.

Meanwhile, students whose profiles reflect the folly of youth need not fret too much. Despite the website's ubiquity among the younger set—it has 12 million registered users—many employers have not even heard of Facebook, and still more do not have any policies regarding its use. Some companies, like Taylor's, deliberately reject the "inherently unreliable" information gleaned online. "We have no idea what's fact or fiction."

There are industries, though, that are more inclined than others to embrace the technology. Researchers noted that government recruiters reported using Facebook

more frequently than average to check on candidates, and educators also tended to use the website when hiring, if only because they are the most likely to have heard of it. Both Evans and Geary updated their Facebook profiles after being advised to post online with caution while applying for positions at their schools.

Chris Wiley, the study's other author, predicts that the debate over the increasingly blurred line between personal and professional life on the Web will eventually be settled in the legal system: "Facebook is just a small part of the bigger issue of privacy and the Internet." In the meantime, until members of the Facebook generation become the bosses, keep your profile private, advises Kristi Jourdan, a junior at Michigan State University. "Or don't put anything on there that you wouldn't want your mom to see."

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