



Your face is an open book

By Stuart White
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I recently Googled the name of a job applicant from outside the country and found a juicy piece of information - an article on sexual submission he had written for a bondage magazine. Hmm, this had not been listed under leisure activities in his CV. When I finally met the guy he hardly looked the type (not that I am suggesting that people in the know about sexual submission are necessarily a type), but I did however notice in the interview he lacked a certain amount of assertiveness and questioned if he would be able to put his foot down in the job or whether his subordinates might walk all over him and he would secretly enjoy it!

Now, was I cyber-snooping or merely being thorough? Clearly gone are the days when applying for a job was just about tidying up your CV, getting a haircut and laying out your best interview clothes. Perhaps now you need to be making sure your Facebook profile is as clean as your CV profile, because the picture of you holding a jug of vodka half smashed at a university party a few years back is unlikely to score you extra points from the interviewing panel.

And don't be naïve not expecting potential employers not to check you out. It's way too tempting! A quick Google and/or a peek at your Facebook profile will tell you more about a candidate's personality than any CV and such action is on the rise. Forty-five percent of employers reported in a June 2009 Career Builder survey that they use social networking sites to screen potential employees, compared to only twenty-two percent of employers the year before, and eleven percent of employers say they intend to start doing so in the screening process.

Of course there may be legal implications for all of this. Employers may put themselves at risk of being charged with discrimination, invasion of privacy or even violation of human rights. Reject a candidate on the basis of his or her Facebook profile and the lawyers might have a field day, as some already have. Hence, Rent-a Car Europe has implemented a policy banning the use of Facebook in the recruiting process. But in a small market like Botswana where there are few challenges on employment discrimination and fairness, know that it will and can be done. And it may not even stop at the door of the HR department. Only the other day DumaFM made mention of a picture of a senior manager on Facebook drunk and the potential harm that it might do for his employer so the message can even reach the mass media.

So there are two integrity issues here. Firstly, is it acceptable to go snooping around a person's private life collecting information on them and using it to make decisions and judgments of them in the workplace? As one critic says – looking around a person's Facebook profile is like barging into someone's room and looking through their cupboard. It certainly feels like an invasion of privacy but I think that's where we get it wrong. Let's face it – unless the user invokes the blocking option, Facebook isn't private. The other issue is, is it acceptable to have an employee whose Facebook status says – I hate my job – work sucks, etc. when the employer is trying to brand itself as an employer of choice. If you really have work or employer issues, there are better forums in which to air your grievances.

There are countless examples where people have been disciplined for comments they have posted on Facebook like the person who was fired from his job at a "large corporate bank" for using the word "recession" in his Facebook profile and the teacher disciplined over comments she made about being bullied. The growth of social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and MySpace means that people are having private conversations they would have at the pub in an online setting and it is fair to "eavesdrop" on that? Or should they no longer be considered private comment because the discussions are published and distributed publicly and without guile?

Tricky business and a cyber minefield, yet I bet your company does not have a policy to address the use of social networking by employees outside of the workplace. Don't you think its time it did? It's a big part of our world so you had better decide what your stand is on it now and let your employees know. While traditionally companies have shied away from restricting employees' actions off the job, some businesses are becoming concerned about the potential damage and embarrassment caused to the company due to comments on line.

Organisations like the US marines, for example, ban recruits from using Facebook and Twitter on the grounds of personal safety and national security, though this would be hard to instigate in a civilian setting. Some organisations admit to disciplining employees for inappropriate behaviour on a social networking site but where do you draw the line? The debate of what happens out-of-hours and how it might affect work, as well as the extent of pre-interview, pre-employment vetting procedures have been raging for a long time – cyber networking has merely simplified and shortened the process. And naïve or brainless candidates and employees aren't helping their own cause, letting slip their sordid secrets or badmouthing their employers for all the networked world to see.

It used to be said that in space no-one can hear you scream but if you want to land that plum post or keep your current job, I wouldn't bet on it, if I were you.

Agree or disagree with this? Don't twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana

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