Warning: Social Networking Can Be Hazardous to Your Job Search
Kate Lorenz, CareerBuilder.com Editor

That cute, affable guy who brags of his drunken exploits on FaceBook.com may be meeting a lot of other partiers online, but he's probably not getting added to the "friends" lists of many corporate recruiters. A recent study by the executive search firm ExecuNet found that 77 percent of recruiters run searches of candidates on the Web to screen applicants; 35 percent of these same recruiters say they've eliminated a candidate based on the information they uncovered.

"You'd be surprised at what I've seen when researching candidates," says Gail, a recruiter at a Fortune 500 company who recently began looking up potential hires on the Web. "We were having a tough time deciding between two candidates until I found the profile of one of them on MySpace. It boasted a photo of her lounging on a hammock in a bikini, listed her interests as 'having a good time' and her sex as 'yes, please.' Not quite what we were looking for."

"Another time I went to a candidate's site and found racial slurs and jokes," Gail continues. "And there was yet another instance where a candidate told me he was currently working for a company, yet he left a comment on a friend's profile about how it 'sucked' to be laid off, and how much fun it was to be unemployed!"

As the amount of personal information available online grows, first impressions are being formed long before the interview process begins, warns David Opton, ExecuNet CEO and founder. "Given the implications and the shelf-life of Internet content, managing your online image is something everyone should address -- regardless of whether or not you're in a job search," he says. Because the risks don't stop once you're hired.

Twenty-three-year old Kara recently took a job as a management consultant at a high-profile practice in the Los Angeles area. An Ohio native, with no friends or family on the West Coast, Kara put up a profile on MySpace in the hopes of meeting new people.

Kara was judicious in how she set up her site: "I didn't fill out that cheesy questionnaire many people post, where you describe your best feature and say whether or not you shower every day." she says. "I used a photo that was flattering but not at all provocative and was even careful what music I chose."

Within a few months, Kara met many others online who shared her interest in biking and water sports. One Friday morning, Kara decided to call in sick and go surfing with a few of her new pals. That weekend, unbeknownst to Kara, her friend posted some of the day's pictures on her profile and sent Kara a message saying, "We should call in sick more often."

Unfortunately for Kara, her boss happened to be patrolling MySpace to check up on her college-age daughter and came across Kara's site and the dated photos!

Mortified, Kara says she learned an important lesson -- not only about honesty, but about how small the world of online social networking can be and how little control you have over any

information put out there.

Not all employers search candidates and employees online, but the trend is growing. Don't let online social networking deep-six your career opportunities. Protect your image by following these simple tips:

1. Be careful. Nothing is private. Don't post anything on your site or your "friends" sites you wouldn't want a prospective employer to see. Derogatory comments, revealing or risqué photos, foul language and lewd jokes all will be viewed as a reflection of your character.

2. Be discreet. If your network offers the option, consider setting your profile to "private," so that it is viewable only by friends of your choosing. And since you can't control what other people say on your site, you may want to use the "block comments" feature. Remember, everything on the Internet is archived, and there is no eraser!

3. Be prepared. Check your profile regularly to see what comments have been posted. Use a search engine to look for online records of yourself to see what is out there about you. If you find information you feel could be detrimental to your candidacy or career, see about getting it removed -- and make sure you have an answer ready to counter or explain "digital dirt."

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