Your Web Presence and Employment: Some Effects on Career

It is reasonable to want control over what is said and thought of us. Though perhaps we have never really had confidentiality, the internet presents new challenges in separating our private and public lives. In this opinion piece, I advocate the importance of being aware of one's web presence and how it may shape how you are perceived by others. I focus on employment issues as a growing concern, with employers drawing on what is online to decide about hiring or continuing employment.

Our use of social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, and online communities is where material is posted without regard to the type of audience who my read it. Many may lack interest in what is posted and anonymity can hide online activity. However, as we connect online with more people and disclose more personal and private information about ourselves, the risk of it being viewed by those that pay our wage increases.

Why this issue is important is illustrated by the recent employment termination of an Apple employee in the United Kingdom. He posted angry criticisms on Facebook of the company and its products, particular his iPhone. What is interesting is an assumption that his Facebook profile was private. Therefore, no one from Apple would see his postings. However, a 'friend' passed on the man's rant. This has similarities to a 2010 footballer photo scandal on Twitpic when a 'mate' photographed the player's indecent act, which did shape our opinion permanently of that person.

Is this hypocritical of Apple, which collects our private information and may see, not all, but much of what we post? What happened to the privacy of that person dismissed in the public internet arena? The former employee was named in Forbes.com. We may not care, or dismiss him as just another person too trusting of giving out opinion without being anonymous. However, he will be remembered as someone who violated his employer's policy on social networking.

Obtaining a career or getting one's first job is challenging. The presentation of the glowing professional resume can be invalidated by images of the candidate drunk at the local nightclub. It is highly possible that someone may judge character based on something posted online. Human Resources may not be using Google and Facebook to find your embarrassing moments. However, it is possible staff are online and checking is now considered a rightful human-resource practice.

I argue that there needs to be a balance between judging an online and offline identity. Some decisions may be commonsense. For example, do you hire someone to head your religious organisation when you have seen a photo of them dressed as Satan on the internet? What if that person's experience and reputation are a cultural fit and will bring your organisation the qualities it needs to succeed yet you are concerned at what other's will think? Do you assume the person is actually a devil worshipper or do you, if you have the time, find out that it was simply a fancy dress party? This would be funny and nonsensical if it were not true. Employers are basing hiring decisions on seeing such online postings.

Should employees befriend the boss and co-workers on Facebook or other social media? Our personal privacy can be invaded by others, which is fine when it is consensual. However, what if we upset the boss or co-worker with our posted opinions about anything? We make the decision to friend, but we also can slip up if we are angry or make inappropriate jokes. Particularly, in corporations, at this stage of our economic history, we must be concerned with what the client thinks if we employ those that denigrate our brand. The Apple example shows that the company does have a say in the decision to terminate employment based on what happens out of hours.

During a course in my degree, the subject of online reputation management and crafting a positive web presence was debated. One student, an employer, argued very strongly that businesses have the absolute right to search online as a base to their decision for employment. I responded by stating that if the employer thought the person was right, but was not going to employ because of one drunken picture, that is unethical as it is not indicative of work performance. No, the student rebuffed; this is the future so get used to it.

President Barack Obama in 2009 urged school students to be careful what they write on Facebook as it may be used in the future against one when seeking employment. This advice seems wise when the rise of legal action due to unfair dismissal of what someone posts online outside of work hours is increasing. Some companies profit off this by, for a fee, seeking out your negative online information and eliminating them. Public and private are meshing, and we must be careful or mindful what we post and where we post our private thoughts and images. We cannot always control where we are seen on the internet. However, we have a responsibility if we do not post anonymously to be aware of our image and text presentations online. Perhaps even be less trusting of our 'friends'.

Employers, however, must also be reasonable. Protecting brands and image is wise, background checks have always been common, yet the breeding of an attitude that if it's bad online, they cannot be hired is alarming. Second, do we assume the worst without checking facts about someone? We do now, not always, but this alone is cause for thinking about posting content. I urge to think about our web presence's possible effect on our employment status. I do not advocate being paranoid or cease posting material online. Rather, I advocate being aware as our public and private lives continue to become less separate from possible consequences on one's career path.