

Blaine 1

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Should Data Posted on Social-Networking Sites Be
 "Fair Game" for Employers?

Intro

The popularity of social-networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook has exploded over the last several years, especially among college students and young professionals. These sites provide valuable opportunities for networking and for connecting socially. At the same time, potential employers, human resources professionals, and even college admissions officers have begun to use these sites to help them evaluate applicants. Because of the ease with which social-networking sites can be accessed, and because of the valuable information they can provide, this use seems certain to become more widespread in the years to come. Some people are concerned about this trend, arguing that social-networking sites should be off-limits to potential employers because they do not have the context they need to evaluate information. As long as this information is freely posted in a public forum, however, it should be considered "fair game."

Thesis

Background

At present, both employers and universities use social-networking sites to evaluate candidates. A recent survey found that 10% of college admissions officers acknowledged visiting such sites as they review applicants' dossiers, and 38% said that what they saw there "negatively affected" their "views of the applicant" (Hechinger). This practice can also be seen in the business world, where recruiters look at sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn to help them evaluate potential employees, a practice that is sometimes referred to as "informal reference checking" (Athavaley). In a recent study, the U.S. National Association of

A parenthetical reference identifies the source, which is included in the works-cited list.

Blaine 2

Colleges and Employees found that "27 per cent of employers have Googled their job candidates or checked their profiles on social networking sites" (George 51).

Not everyone is happy with this practice, and college students in particular seem to have strong objections. Interviewed in the school newspaper, one Tufts University student points out that people use social-networking services to "share uncensored aspects" of their lives, but "now that this system is being used as a way to spy on on [their] lives for the professional sphere, [they] are all in danger" (qtd. in Dince). Writing in the Texas Christian University *Daily Skiff*, David Hall argues that the "time has come for a line to be drawn in the war for Internet privacy." Although Hall acknowledges that there is no law barring employers or universities from looking at Facebook and MySpace accounts, he points out that the fact that the practice is legal "doesn't necessarily make it ethical." Posts on such sites, writes Hall, are like a "conversation between friends" and should therefore be "granted the same level of respect" as "private business." For this reason, these exchanges should not affect a person's "standing with an employer or university." To support his view, Hall also cites the example of a university student who was denied a teaching certificate because of a seemingly innocent photograph posted on her MySpace page.

Despite these objections, admissions committees and job recruiters who visit sites like Facebook and MySpace for "informal reference checking" are acting reasonably given the realities of the digital age. As a practical matter, it would be impossible to prevent employers from reviewing online sites as part of informal background and reference checks. More important, those who believe that it is unethical for recruiters to look at the online profiles of prospective job candidates seem to expect

Opposing argument:
unethical

Parenthetical documentation indicates source quoted in another source.

Source of information from Hall identified by author's name in text; Internet source includes no page number.

1st argument - practicality of the digital age

Blaine 3

the benefits of social-networking sites without acknowledging that these new technologies bring new responsibilities and liabilities as well as opportunities. Moreover, the potential problems associated with employers' use of social-networking sites would not be an issue if users of social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace took advantage of available measures to protect themselves.

Part of the problem is that the Internet has fundamentally altered our notions of "private" and "public" in ways that we are still only beginning to understand. As Alison George writes in *New Scientist* magazine, "The sheer volume of personal information that people are publishing online—and the fact that some of it could remain visible permanently—is changing the nature of personal privacy" (50). On a site such as MySpace, people can reveal intimate details of their lives to millions of strangers. This situation is unprecedented and, at least for the foreseeable future, irreversible. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman observes, "When everyone has a blog, a MySpace page or Facebook entry, everyone is a publisher. . . . When everyone is a publisher, paparazzo or filmmaker, everyone else is a public figure." Given the changes in our understanding of privacy, and given the essentially public nature of the Internet, the analogy that Hall makes between a MySpace post and a private conversation does not hold up. In the Internet age, more and more of "what you say or do or write will end up as a digital fingerprint that never gets erased" (Friedman).

Rather than relying on outdated notions of privacy, students and jobseekers should accept these new conditions and take steps to protect themselves. They must realize that a sensible approach to the Internet demands both "a caution and an empowerment," in the words of Jobster CEO Jason Goldberg (qtd. in Athavaley). The editors of Clemson University's *Tiger* agree,

2nd argument:
Internet is public

Because the source is identified in the text of the paper, only a page number is needed in the parenthetical documentation.

Ellipses indicate that words have been left out of a quotation.

3rd argument:
Personal responsibility

Blaine 4

noting that services such as Facebook “make clear the importance of two principles: Responsibility and caveat emptor” (“Beware”). Social-networking sites have features that restrict who can see a profile or access a person’s network and private information, but “recent research shows that many users don’t make use of these tools, even if they’re worried about privacy” (George 51). Simply using such easily available restrictions might drastically reduce the chances of having an indiscreet or unflattering post or photograph remain on a site. In addition, a service called ClaimID allows Internet users to “track, verify, annotate, and prioritize the information that appears about [them] online” (George 50).

The most important way for people to protect themselves against possible misuse of personal information is for them to take responsibility for the information they post online. As one college guidance counselor advises, when they are writing in Facebook or MySpace, users should ask, “Is this something I want [my] grandmother to see?” (Hechinger). A potential employer coming across an applicant’s humorous membership in a Facebook group such as “I Sold My Grandma for Crack-Cocaine!” or a picture of a student posing with an empty liquor bottle may not understand the tone, the context, or the joke. Students should also be careful about the “friends” who have access to their online social networks. Specifically, they should consider whether these people really know them and would have good things to say about them if a prospective employer contacted them for a reference. As Steven Rothberg, president and founder of CollegeRecruiter.com, says, “If you’re going to have friends who are at best questionable in dealing with a potential employer on your behalf, you are probably better off not having those friends visible in your network” (qtd. in Achavaley).

Conclusion

Brackets indicate quotations have been edited for clarity.

Concluding statement

Blaine 5

The ease of accessing social-networking sites, which is potentially a downside, also has an advantage: these sites provide an excellent opportunity for jobseekers to connect with potential employers and to get their names and resumes in circulation. Just as Facebook and similar sites are fair game for potential employers, they are also fair game for prospective employees. For example, a job seeker can scan the LinkedIn networks of a company's executives or human resources staff, searching for mutual connections. In the past, a recruiter or company might not only check a job candidate's references but also place candidates in social situations to learn more about them. In today's job market, people should think of their networks as an extension of themselves. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, Anjali Athavaley cites the example of Chandan Mahajan, whose LinkedIn profile displayed his previous work experience and included several recommendations from former colleagues. Mahajan credits the site and his extended online network for helping him land a job at a large information-technology company. His experience is a good example of the advantages that the Internet can offer jobseekers. 8

As Thomas L. Friedman argues, access and open information creates opportunities as well as problems. Friedman suggests that the most important opportunity may be the one to "out behave your competition." In other words, just as the Internet now allows negative information to travel more quickly than ever, it also allows positive information to spread. So rather than fearing the dangers of snooping recruiters, students and job seekers should remember to be careful but should not miss the opportunity to take advantage of the possibilities that social-networking sites provide. 9

Blaine 6

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The works-cited list includes full information for all the sources cited in the paper.