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The personal question

Revisiting the issue of our online presence and job hunting

The interview had been going well. I liked the library, the director and the staff, and I had successfully delivered my required presentation. The hardest part of the day seemed to be behind me, so when I sat down in the large conference room for the meeting with the entire faculty and staff, I felt con dent. But midway through the hour, one of the librarians asked, The Question, the one I still relate as my bad interview story. How would your husband feel if you took this job?

I am no human resources expert, but the question immediately seemed inappropriate. Even more upsetting than the question itself though was the fact that I could not answer it. I had been separated from my spouse for nearly half a year and had neither seen nor spoken to him during that time. I am sure discomfort registered on my face, though the librarian who asked the question apparently took my look to be one of confusion, for the junior detective chirped proudly that she knew I was married because my MySpace pro le said so.

Ethical interviewing and hiring practices have come a long way from the days when women faced questions about their marital status or their proclivity toward having children in the near future. Business and human resources literature counsels those in charge of hiring decisions to consider what type of questions are and are not appropriate to ask. *Women in Business* suggests that questions related to marital status, gender, name changes, age, race, or religion may be poor business practice or even illegal.[1] A recent Legal Q & A section of *Personnel Today* offers the same list of taboo subjects.[2] In other words, the articles caution against bringing up those same characteristics commonly discovered on social networking pro les or from a quick Google search.

There have been numerous cautionary tales written recently warning young adults to be careful about their online presence. Awkward moments like the one described above, or worse yet, no job prospects at all, have been blamed on scurrilous personal information being carelessly displayed online.

According to a recent ExecuNet survey, 83 percent of executive and corporate recruiters try to nd digital dirt on prospective employees.[3] Drawing on the information presented in the survey, a Careerbuilder.com article by Selena Dehne offers advice for minimizing the impact of digital dirt and claims that it is up to each individual to determine whether those footprints take a step in the right or wrong direction in cyberspace. [4] However, before we rush to blame interviewees for not avoiding the embarrassment that forays into cyberspace can create, I would like to propose an alternative solution. What if employers ceased prying into the nonwork lives of prospective hires altogether?

I can already hear the arguments against this proposal. The Internet is a public arena. Employers have a right to look at a public arena to determine if an employee is a good t for a position. If interviewees wanted their

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information to remain private they should not have it online in the rst place. It is, after all, their choice to put that information out there, so if it is used against them, then the fault lies with the interviewee.

None of these points is necessarily untrue, and yet I still argue they are poor excuses for Googling someone. My rational is this: all employees have a right to a personal life outside of work, and all of us are forced to some degree to live part of that personal life in the public arena. Groceries stories are open to the public, as is the DMV, and the video store. Should a potential employer happen to see me out in public living my nonwork life, ne it is quite possibly unavoidable. However, should that same employer deliberately seek me out at the grocery store to see what I eat or follow me into a video store to see what kind of movies I rent, she has crossed a very obvious ethical line. In this day and age, a public presence in the virtual world could be considered as natural and necessary as a public presence in the nonvirtual world, and intentionally searching for a potential colleague s non-work presence online is little different than intentionally searching for them outside of the physical library.

It stands to reason that if a work-related individual stumbles across my MySpace page inadvertently and happens to see me in a swimsuit with a beverage in my hand, okay, it happens and is akin to him inadvertently bumping into me at the beach with a beverage in my hand. However, if the same person *deliberately* seeks me out in the public arena of cyberspace to glean information about my nonprofessional life, it is no better than if he deliberately waits for me at the beach to see how I dress and what I drink. I see no reason why either situation would help a potential employer determine my capacity for ef cient work. Thankfully, some employers are in agreement. The Campus Edition of *Financial Mail* quotes Bronwyn Fell, a database specialist at a recruitment company, We don t regard digital information on a person as a legitimate, credible character check . . . We still rely on face-to-face interviews, telephonic references and professional personality tests to ensure candidates are suitable for speci c jobs. [5]

Needless to say, the outcome of my awkward interview was not successful. I am sure my demeanor changed noticeably after The Question, as I explained why I could not answer it. In spite of my obvious discomfort, however, the questioner maintained she had done nothing wrong and said so to the crowded room. I could chalk this incident up to the bad behavior of one person, and leave it at that. Yet the prevalence of attitudes like hers seems to be all too commonplace in the library world, and this interviewer was not the only one who let me know she had searched for me online.

I recognize that hiring decisions are never easy, and it often seems that the more information available about a prospective colleague, the better. Nevertheless, anyone in the library world charged with hiring new workers needs to remember that all fellow librarians or librarians-to-be have personal lives outside of the library. Employers who do not respect the separation between professional and personal lives risk not only legal headaches, but they also risk losing great additions to their team.

Notes

1. What Employers Shouldn t Discuss, *Women in Business* 60, no. 2 (Mar/Apr 2008), 25.

2. Dawn Spalding, Legal Q & A: The Pitfalls of X-Factor-Style Interviewing Techniques, *Personnel Today* (October 18, 2005), 15.

3. Digital Dirt Derails More Job Searches, as Recruiters Use of Search Engines Increases. ExecuNet Press Releases, August 16, 2007, www.execunet.com/m_releases_content.cfm?id=3651.

4. Salena Dehne, 83% of Recruiters Look for Digital Dirt: 4 Was to Clean Up Digital Dirt, Careerbuilder.com, July 1, 2008, msn.careerbuilder.com/custom/msn/careeradvice/ViewArticle.aspx?articleid=1561&catid=JS.

5. Jacqui Wilmot, Your Online Pro le Could Be Your Downfall, *Financial Mail* (July 20, 2007), 22.