

# Digital spying on jobseekers

Recruiters warn applicants to be vigilant with their online profiles if they want employment

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- **CAMPUS NOTES**

International government agencies are doing it. Online advertisers are doing it. Stalker-types are doing it. And that company you just submitted a CV to for a job is probably scouring your MySpace, Facebook or Twitter account at this very moment to figure out who you really are.

Yet young jobseekers and teenagers — the most tech-savvy people of this digital age — are least aware of it. Oblivious to the professional, and to some extent, social consequences, their online profiles hold all kinds of sensitive information and pictures that could affect their employability.

"We have had a situation where a client working in a very conservative industry had interviewed a candidate, prepared a job offer, and after viewing profiles on social networks retracted it," said Jennifer Campori, Charterhouse Partnership's managing director for Europe and the Middle East.

"The client claimed the photos on the site were unacceptable to the calibre of person they wished to hire," added the head of the boutique recruitment agency.

However, as the desire for fame and attention grows, we see more people inviting members of the public to get a glimpse of the most intimate moments of their lives.

Yet, recruitment professionals are warning young graduate jobseekers as well as those in the workforce to become increasingly vigilant about how they build their personal online brand because watchful eyes may be upon them.

## **The virtual reality**

"I think people need to be aware of the power of the internet and realise that their actions can have a longer term impact on their social and professional career," said Campori.

But this has yet to impact these youngsters and become a reality, said Jackie Smith, 19, a first year student at the Rochester Institute of Technology Dubai.

"Everyone has things on Facebook that can't be erased and once my generation starts looking for jobs I think it will hit some people hard," she said. "We don't yet see our posts

as a threat because we haven't entered the workforce and it hasn't become a reality," Smith added.

However, it is not only the youth grappling with the realities of their online posts. The concept of somebody monitoring online activities is still somewhat generally hard to fathom psychologically said, Annie Crookes, senior lecturer of Psychology at Middlesex University Dubai.

"It is hard to visualise that there are people out there, like employers, watching what you are doing," said Crookes.

"It is difficult to comprehend what that means because as humans we are used to face to face communication," she added.

Crookes added that a recent study conducted on students' attitudes towards privacy showed no correlation between the amounts of personal information they revealed on SNS.

"These were the same people putting intimate personal details out there on the net and suggesting they still have a level of privacy," she said. "They didn't realise and weren't fully conscious or comprehend how much information about them people can access," Crookes added.

### **Raising awareness**

Yet if the online self-portrait has now become as important as some suggest it is, why are career service departments at universities slow to act on raising awareness, Smith asked.

"During freshman orientation tutors talk to us about how employers will evaluate our GPA, but they don't tell us we will be evaluated on our social networking character which is becoming even more important," she said.

However, some institutions have integrated it into their curriculum. At Murdoch University, Dubai, students in media and public relations courses are exposed to the realities of social networking, said Chris Pilgrim, head of student affairs.

He said the career services department, which Pilgrim oversees, aims to bring all students to a level of understanding that social media can be either friend or foe when it comes to sustainable employability. "We try to make them understand that they shouldn't post online what they wouldn't reveal to a potential employer or put on their CV," said Pilgrim.

He added that postgraduate students are more conscious of portraying themselves as employable professionals through social media compared to their undergraduate counterparts. "I've seen many jaws drop when I start talking to some students about this,"

he said. "There is probably a lack of understanding of the magnitude of social media and that potential employers are using it to check out potential candidates," added Pilgrim.

### **Staying safe**

However, some students exercise a level of caution when it comes to what they reveal online, for concern over their safety, not because they are mindful of their professional image.

"Some people will stalk Facebook profiles because they can and because people ignore their privacy settings; letting everyone know exactly where they are and what they are doing through applications like foursquare," said Mohammad Obaid, a student at the University of Wollongong in Dubai. "When you join SNS you are asking to be stalked and I've thought about that, which is why I try to keep my settings as private as possible," he added.

Yet, for Khalifa Al Muhairi, a student at the American University in Dubai, signing up to SNS with a fake name was the way to go.

"I don't use my real name because I don't like everyone to know who I am for many reasons which can lead to personal problems," he said.

However, as a photographer, Al Muhairi believes it important to have a professional online profile to gain exposure to help in a job search. "It is important not to combine online personal matters with work because some things need to be kept private, but if it's all out there on the net there is no privacy any more," he added.