



Reputation Management in the Internet Age

Seven Tips for Staying Out of Trouble On-Line

By Katy Montgomery
Managing Director
Associate Practice Group

A lawyer was interviewing for a new job. He connected with the interviewer, received positive feedback on his resume, and perfectly articulated why he was interested in the firm. He thought a callback was in the bag. That was until the interviewer confronted him with a compromising picture from his MySpace page. Asked to explain what he was doing in the picture, the attorney froze. Not surprisingly, he didn't receive a callback from the firm.

Employers Surf the Web

As a legal recruiter that places associates I can truly say that due to the explosion of the Worldwide Web, you are more than just a resume and an interview. You are a searchable item on the Internet. Anyone can "google" you and find out your club memberships, school alumni activities, and even your recent time in a local 5k race. Some employers make sure the issue is front and center from the very beginning. For example, one of the questions asked in the vetting documents for a position in the Obama White House is: "Please provide the URL address of any websites that feature you in either a personal or professional capacity (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.)."

According to a survey by CareerBuilder, more than 25 percent of hiring managers search the Web before deciding to hire a specific candidate. And over half have decided not to hire someone based on what they found. Here are some of the things that were discovered on-line: Candidates lied about their qualifications, had links to criminal behavior, bad-mouthed or revealed confidential information about their previous company or a fellow employee, indicated they had used drugs or alcohol, showed provocative or inappropriate photographs, used tasteless screen names, etc. The bottom line is that what appears on-line may have serious consequences for you personally and professionally. No matter how hard you work on your resume, how great your references are, or how brightly you shine in an interview, you need to make sure everything about you will pass muster. Therefore, you need to work hard to make sure anything that could be construed as negative or questionable is not posted anywhere on the Internet.

Even If You Already Have a Job

This may sound like something that is only threatening up-and-coming lawyers. Wrong. Many law firm and in-house recruiters are creating "dummy" Facebook and MySpace accounts – not only to research potential summer and lateral associate candidates – but also to monitor current employees. Poor Internet decorum can kill your current career just as easily as it can ruin your future job prospects.

What can you do to manage your reputation in the Internet age?

1. **Run an Internet status check.** Stop what you are doing and run an Internet search for your name. Be sure to visit popular networking sites including Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn. If there is something questionable on the Internet involving your name, take immediate steps to remedy the situation.
2. **Don't put anything on the Internet you would not want your employer to see.** This includes text, in addition to photographs and videos. Everything should pass the mother or grandmother test. If you wouldn't want your mother, grandmother or employer to see it, don't let it get on the Internet!
3. **Be particularly circumspect about photographs.** Photos can be particularly embarrassing, and even damaging. This doesn't mean you have to be a wallflower everywhere you go. You can have fun, but remember we live in a digital age. So when you are at a party and people are walking around taking pictures, think long and hard about posing inappropriately. Remember that it could end up on the Internet. And it isn't just the people with the obvious cameras taking pictures. There are amateur photographers around every corner and most people own a cell phone with a camera function. Always maintain a sense of decorum. Always!
4. **Be careful what you say in blogs & don't blog at work.** Just like it is inappropriate to conduct on-line trading or view pornography at work, you should not blog while on the clock. If you choose to blog during off-hours, make sure the content is clean and of course never blog negatively about your current or former employers and don't trash your co-workers. If possible, keep your identity anonymous. As I'm sure you've heard, not only have people been fired for blogging at work, they have also been let go because their employer didn't like what they wrote in a blog or on a website (even when it was produced on personal time). The word for this is "dooced" – meaning to lose one's job because of one's website or blog. In an ironic twist, even a social networking site (Friendster) fired one of its employees over statements included in her blog. A Google employee was also fired for blogging about his job and co-workers.
5. **Remember that work email is work email.** Forrester Consulting reports that nearly 60 percent of companies have a written policy restricting the use of social networks in the workplace, and even more have policies regarding the use of the Internet. Violating these policies is usually cause for dismissal. According to Forrester, one-third of companies read or otherwise analyze employees' outbound email, 28 percent have fired an employee for violating their email policies, and 5 percent have fired an employee over their use of a social networking site. Don't forget: Everything you do on your work computer belongs to your company. In fact, computers are often subpoenaed as part of litigation so lawyers can look at emails and hard drives. Even if you delete it, it is discoverable, and can almost always be recovered by cyber forensics teams.
6. **Always proof your emails, especially the "to" line.** We tend to get sloppy in emails and forget about proper punctuation and grammar. Remember emails are part of your work product. Since most email systems, including Microsoft Outlook, automatically populate

a recipient's name and email, always double-check the "to" line. If you were hoping to email Mary Jones, make sure you did not accidentally email Mary Johnson.

7. **Be aware of keyword searches.** Remember what you were taught in your first semester Legal Research & Writing course about keyword searches. If you create a profile that includes your employer's name, then it's likely your employer will discover the site when searching the Internet.

In the end, you should enjoy the Internet and take advantage of all it has to offer. Just act responsibly and conduct your Internet behavior with an eye on your current and future career prospects.

In fact, you can turn the tables on the process by determining what people see about you on the Internet. Make sure there is at least one Internet page that paints a positive image of you. Tout your professional and personal achievements, describe all the great community service work you've done, show you are articulate, include raves about you (particularly from employers and clients), list awards you've won, etc.

It all comes down to reputation. Make sure you're the one managing yours, instead of the Internet.

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Katy Montgomery is a Managing Director in Major, Lindsey & Africa's Associate Practice Group in Washington, D.C., and a former practicing attorney. She may be contacted at kmontgomery@mlaglobal.com or 202-292-1842.