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For Workplace News

Ask any parent of an i-generation child and you will hear that the Web is both a curse and a blessing. If you think they're just being overly protective, watch the NBC show *To Catch a Predator*. When it's over, you might think of taking the computer out of your home if you have children under 15.

The Internet has revolutionized our ability to access information, communicate, and make connections. There's always been a dark side to that, but inappropriate e-mail looks quaint compared to what makes it onto blogspots, YouTube, and Internet sites like MySpace, Facebook, Xanga, and Friendster. Andy Warhol once said that in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes. Well, the future is here. College students, in particular, are becoming notorious for throwing wild details of their most intimate private thoughts and experiences onto the Web, complete with pictures and video. Today's youth think it's fun and cool to be outrageous and expressive online. Besides, when you're young, low on

## MyValues.com Reference checking that blogger

inhibitions, and everyone else is doing it, too – why worry? Ah, but then you graduate and look for work only to discover your secret past is not so secret after all.

A recent New York Times article notes that companies are beginning to look at those blogspots and College Student Gone Wild Web sites when they're recruiting. According to the article, New York University's career development center surveyed recruiters from about 30 different companies and discovered they're searching candidates' Web sites for information. And what they find on those sites can give them pause. On the one hand, the recruiter has a very impressive resume in front of them; on the other hand, they're staring at a Web page of their model candidate chugging tequila surrounded by half-naked friends. Evidently, this compels recruiters to ask whether the candidate is the right fit for the organization.

Implicitly, this is a values question. The recruiters are hesitating to interview candidates who ostensibly demonstrate values contrary to the firm. The deeper questions, however, are whether the students are actually demonstrating their real values, what companies can and should expect in terms of values alignment in one's private

affairs, and whether recruiters are guilty of a double standard. How would they like to be judged by how they spend their leisure time?

### **To Google or not to Google**

First, why are recruiters putting in the extra effort checking out candidates' online personas? It's not just salacious curiosity. One of the most difficult tasks to execute today is the reference check. Between privacy legislation and the refusal of most corporations to allow current employees to provide a job reference, finding out about an individual using traditional methods is no longer an option. As a result of this, firms are turning to third parties to conduct background checks. But this can be expensive and time consuming as well. Doing a local police check can take a few weeks and slow down the job offer; doing a more comprehensive background check takes even longer. One security chick I had to complete to work on a contract with a client took nine months. All of that was complicated because of the number of cities in different countries we had lived. As a result, it has become popular for a prospective employer to simply "Google" a candidate. As anyone who's ever Googled an old flame, long lost friend, or former spouse can tell you, there's a lot of stuff out there to find.

### **Are students really that stupid?**

Any college student who's not chained to a desk in the library or lab will experiment with life – often in silly and even reckless ways. But acts of social rebellion and outlandish blog entries look very different out of context. Consider how radical and unsettling the passionate political beliefs you held in college may seem to you now that you're a little older.

The students believe that since you must have a college or university e-mail address to join these sites they are safe from the prying eyes of "adults" (i.e. parents, employers, etc.). But as many recent grads have learned, alumni associations have influenced these institutions to maintain e-mail addresses as an easy means of contact.

1984 has arrived. Prospective employees, recruiters, professional associations and graduate school admissions counsellors are searching by these addresses, and learning unacceptable, embarrassing and sometimes shocking things about candidates that can cause them to reject that person.

### **What's a student / employer to do?**

I remember my college days in undergraduate school almost clearly. After all, I went to university between 1965 and 1969! I was the editor of the college newspaper. I spoke my mind on a range of topics, many of them unpopular at the time with the community in southeastern Iowa. But, beyond some local politicians and business people, no one knew of my writings and rants. And no one cared.

The question is should anyone care today? Yes the access to the information is easier but the information is more or less the same, perhaps only more outrageous in that more people know about it. Yes, students over-indulge in alcohol and partying; yes, they explore their sexuality; yes, they profess radical political or social views. God help us if they didn't!

For a recruiter, manager, or employer to render a great candidate invalid because of his or her Web trail is a dubious moral decision. Have we become so politically correct that we believe the act of growing up must occur in the straightest and narrowest range of acceptable behaviour?

In the end, any assumptions we make about a candidate's values based on their web activities are highly dubious. The only things that current graduates should be measured on are those behaviours and experiences relevant to the job. Employers with roles that require security background checks will go deeper, as they have always done, and students applying for those roles should understand that. But the vast majority of openings should be filled without moral tribunal, as long as serious laws were not broken, and no one was hurt.

Doing a values check on the web as a way of screening candidates will give you a pool of candidates who might fit your narrow range of acceptable behaviour. But I bet it eliminates a lot of people with the creativity, drive, passion, sense of risk, and life experience to give you that competitive advantage.

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