

MAKING SOCIAL MEDIA SITES WORK FOR YOU: AVOIDING THE PITFALLS WHILE BUILDING YOUR NETWORK

By G. Ross Allen

We have all heard the warning from our career services advisors: “Be careful what you post, law firms monitor popular social media sites.” But how real is the danger? With the rising popularity of social media sites, such as Facebook[®], MySpace[®], and Twitter[®], there is now a wealth of personal information on the Internet about potential employees. Many law students and young lawyers, however, fail to adequately consider the consequences of personal information in the public domain. Not being careful about what you post can end up costing you a job and can do long term damage to your career. Thus, it is imperative to monitor your social media sites and use them to your advantage, not your detriment, in the legal employment process.

The Risks of Social Media Sites

While most employers may not have a formal process for monitoring social media sites for potential employees, all legal recruiting offices and attorneys have access to the Internet and varying levels of skill uncovering online information. By simply searching for a candidate’s name, an employer can access a host of information from social media sites. For example, using a potential candidate’s location and school, anyone can view the public version of the candidate’s Facebook[®] page. This includes access to the candidate’s picture and, based on what the candidate chooses to allow “everyone” to view, group memberships and types of music, restaurants, celebrities, public figures, or sports teams of which the candidate “likes.”

It would be foolish to suggest that firms make employment decisions based on a candidate’s love of or disdain for a particular celebrity or restaurant. But one important quality can be gleaned from searching a candidate’s social media site: *judgment*. Firms want to ensure that a candidate will be able to properly represent the firm, existing clients, and potential clients. Because competition is high and résumés start to look very similar, many interviewers may search for a candidate to predict whether the candidate would be a good “fit” for the firm. Although searching for a candidate’s personal information may raise potential discrimination issues, it would be unwise and unrealistic to think it does not occur. Thus, a potential candidate should be aware of an interviewer’s possible curiosity and take adequate safeguards. If a potential candidate is displaying a risqué profile picture or belongs to groups promoting drugs, sex, or missing class, this inevitably raises red flags to the employer. No firm wants to hire risky associates – and the Internet now allows employers to quickly disqualify candidates who show a

lack of judgment online. A candidate, therefore, must assume that every potential employer will search the Internet for more information than is listed in a résumé.

Making Social Media Sites Work for You

Despite the potential pitfalls, a savvy candidate can turn social media sites into effective marketing tools. A candidate need only follow a few simple, common sense suggestions. First, keep profile pictures professional. Refrain from posting pictures you would not feel comfortable sharing with a complete stranger. Second, delete memberships or restrict viewing capabilities for information that is controversial or politically charged. This does not mean that you should not join political organizations or debate issues on public forums. Just be cognizant that an interviewer may make snap judgments based on his or her own personal biases, whether or not appropriate to the employment process. Third, join professional sites such as LinkedIn[®] and Plaxo[®]. These allow you to add more information than what will fit into a one-page résumé. Because many have struggled with adjusting margins and font size on a résumé, professional networking sites provide the perfect alternative medium for potential candidates to fully promote themselves. LinkedIn[®], for instance, allows members to draft short biographies, display work and educational experiences, display honors and awards, join networking groups, and add references (known as “recommendations”). And fourth, monitor your online content. In some cases, this means you must be aware of individuals with the same name who may be confused with you. All social media sites are easily searchable and must be monitored to ensure you are conveying the appropriate message to potential employers. Simply using these common sense principles will help you connect with others and make sure you are best situated to gain employment.

Conclusion

The Internet provides employers with access to vast amounts of personal information about a potential employee. Law firms seek individuals who are aware of the potential ramifications of material posted on the Internet and who do not pose a risk to the firm or its clients. As a law student or young attorney, it is imperative to closely monitor the content on social media sites to ensure that it positively reflects that you are a good candidate for employment.

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