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Facebook friends as job references?

These days, hiring managers can talk to anyone about you

By Eve Tahmincioglu

Time was you could control the references a prospective employer contacted because you provided them with a well-thought out list of colleagues and former bosses you knew would provide glowing recommendations.

But with the proliferation of social networking sites loaded with lists of your contacts, and your contacts' contacts, it's like the Wild West of references for job seekers. You never know whom a hiring manager may end up talking to about you.

Almost every human resource professional I talk to lately admits to using these social networking sites to check out applicants, beyond just public profiles and resumes. In many cases, if an HR person shares a job seeker's connection on a networking site, they'll just e-mail that contact to find out the dirt on the applicant without permission from the applicant.

The thinking is, there's nothing illegal or unethical about it because you're flaunting your connections in the public domain.

Cybersleuthing

Indeed, Sergio Alvarez, executive vice president of Internet sales for Internet advertising firm Ambassador Media Group, recently used LinkedIn to get the skinny on a candidate he was considering hiring.

"This sales person was on LinkedIn and he had a contact on there from one of our competitors. Since everyone knows everyone in this industry, we contacted someone there directly," he explains.

The job applicant had no idea Alvarez was doing the stealthy online reference check, but it worked out well for the candidate because he got a positive recommendation and the job.

Honing your references

Creating a list of recommendations on your site helps give you back a bit of control, says CBIZ's Jennifer Berman. "A lot of hiring managers are kind of lazy, so if you give them a lot of good information, odds are they will be less aggressive in finding things out on their own," she adds.

Be sure to hone your references to people who are specific to the industry you want to enter, and place the most influential contacts at the top of your list.

That said, don't get mired in cyberspace. Just because you have a long list of virtual recommendations doesn't mean you should be dropping the ball on the traditional development of your three-person reference list, which is still a key hiring tool for many human resource managers.

As Chuck Pappalardo, managing director of Trilogy Search, a retained executive recruitment firm headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area, says: "At this juncture, Facebook is simply not a serious site for business at the level I place folks. LinkedIn, however, is becoming increasingly more useful as a networking tool and in identifying candidates. But any posted reference can't be taken seriously on any level."

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