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How Social Media Is Muddying the Waters for Jobseekers

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Caution People! How Social Media Is Muddying the Waters for Perfectly Good Jobseekers ... and How Companies are Letting it Happen

Invited to an interview, you step into the room and unload that heavy photo album you've been clinging to onto the conference table. In addition to a resume and brag book, you have pictures on your iPhone of your dogs and the neighbor's cat stalking the birds enjoying your new bird feeder. The interview progresses by you opening and flipping through the pages of your album, pointing to your family and friends. You gladly draw the interviewer's attention to those older pictures taken during your college days ... and to the many of your drunk, sleeping positions your friends encapsulated forever through one click of a camera.

Eeerrrk!!!

What? Personal items presented during an interview?

Why not? Isn't that basically what hiring companies are doing rummaging through your public social media accounts, learning more about you and your online activities?

The next few years are certainly gray, uncharted waters for jobseekers. The issue of whether a person's personal life and involvement online should have any place in the hiring realm is definitely a topic that will be battled over for years — *maybe even decades*. Some might unexpectedly find themselves entangled in lawsuits, as privacy experts grow increasingly concerned that disqualifying a candidate based on information gained online can introduce certain forms of discrimination into the hiring process.

Jobseekers have every right to be concerned about protecting their online identities from prying eyes, but where should the line be drawn? Employers shouldn't be given uninhibited access to a jobseeker's private life, should they?

Interestingly, a recent study released at Microsoft's 4th Annual Data Privacy Day identified that 70% of those surveyed in the US indicated they had disqualified a candidate based on online information. What was the incriminating online information that caused the disqualification? Of course this was not made public ... and behind the curtain of hiring, only HR managers and recruiters seem privy to such information.

The deeper issue is whether employers should be allowed to open that flood gate by bringing social media activities into the hiring world in the first place. I'm reminded of a line from the movie *Jurassic Park*. When referring to scientists, Jeff Goldblum's character says, "*Yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they*

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should." Maybe employers poking through a jobseeker's online activities are so preoccupied with the fact that they could that they never stopped to think whether they should.

Ahh, but hiring companies won't find my online activities. Think again. Technology giants have only just begun leveraging the social media phenomena; and not surprisingly, for financial gain.

Microsoft announced the integration of Social Connector software, which will be released mid-2010. The add-on software is designed to let someone like me readily see the online communications from those who send me email. Microsoft's Group Product Manager, Dev Balasubramanian, was quoted as saying: "*As you communicate you can see their social activities; you can see all the folks in your social network and it updates as you are reading your e-mail.*" Certainly it appears to offer great benefits to the masses, but for jobseekers, it just might leave an unpleasant sour aftertaste.

No doubt, employers will soon be given a larger spy glass — and unfortunate for jobseekers, Microsoft isn't the only company abuzz with developing new applications that will take public social media data and translate it into something that can be researched and used, for good and evil.

Regardless, employers need to take a long look at their current hiring practices to determine whether a drunken party photo showing Joe Jobseeker has anything to do with the value Joe brings to the table professionally, and how well he performs while on the job.