MySpace vs. Workplace

During the day you're all business; at night you like to let loose and have some fun. No problem with that -- unless you share your adventures with others on the Internet.

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff  |  May 29, 2007

At 35, Eva Montibello is not exactly ancient, and she considers herself reasonably Internet-savvy. Still, it never would have occurred to her to scrutinize a MySpace page the way she would, say, a resume.

When she did so, she found it an eye-opening -- and eye-widening -- experience.

Montibello, the marketing manager at a Newton-based consulting firm, was screening job candidates last year when an application came in from a recent college graduate. As she prepared to set up an interview with the applicant, one of her younger co-workers asked a fateful question: "Did you check out her MySpace page?"

Montibello did so, and there on the applicant's public profile she found what she calls "all kinds of compromising photos," including one of her applicant Jell-O -wrestling. Still, that "wasn't necessarily an issue" to Montibello or her boss. "The real issue came when my boss was interviewing her and mentioned it, and the person was like 'Oh, yeah, it was so funny,' and was so cavalier about it, instead of being responsible," she says.

They ultimately hired someone else. The applicant's blase reaction to questions about her MySpace photos "wasn't the deal - breaker, but it was a factor," says Montibello. "We had another candidate who was equally qualified, and who..."
showed up at the interview and was professional all the way. When you're comparing two or three people, everything matters."

Like it or not -- and many employees emphatically do not -- social-networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are creating an increasingly murky workplace terrain.

What happens in Vegas may stay in Vegas, but what happens on MySpace can make it into the wider world, whether it is office gossip, racy photographs, or first-person accounts of weekend revelry. Conversations -- about work, about bosses, about co-workers -- that used to take place at water coolers or on barstools now potentially have a much larger audience. With one high-speed collision after another between MySpace and the workplace, the personal and the professional are converging in new and unpredictable ways.

Yet there is no consensus on where the line should be -- or even if there should be a line.

"Whatever I do outside or after work shouldn't be brought up against my work review," contends Lydia Fabiano, 23, of Braintree, who has a MySpace page she allows co-workers to see. "Just about every person has their own thing that they do outside of work. As long as it doesn't hinder your work performance, it should be two separate things. Whatever I do at 10 o'clock on a Saturday night shouldn't matter at all to my boss."

However, employers don't necessarily see it that way. The clash between the interests of employers and the private lives of employees has been on vivid display recently.

The Defense Department, citing concerns about too much "recreational traffic" on MySpace and a dozen other websites, announced that it was cutting off access to the sites by military personnel. A supervisor in an Olive Garden restaurant in Florida was fired after she posted photos or herself, her daughter, and other restaurant employees hoisting empty beer bottles. (The restaurant contended the photos could damage the company's brand). A university in Pennsylvania, contending she had promoted underage drinking, denied a 27-year-old woman a teaching degree just before graduation after she posted a photo of herself that was titled "Drunken Pirate."

She filed a lawsuit against the university, but Harvey Schwartz, a Boston attorney who specializes in civil rights and employment discrimination, says that in general, he doesn't think sites like MySpace will be considered private from a legal standpoint. "I don't really see it as much of a legal issue," says Schwartz, of Rodgers, Powers & Schwartz. "If you're putting something up on the Internet, anybody can read it. I don't think you should complain if somebody reads it who you hadn't planned on reading it.

"This is something that people are going to be learning. It's a
new area," he adds. "It's just like when e-mail first happened. People were wild and crazy with what they said on e-mails, and it came back to bite them. People are going to learn the same thing about MySpace."

On the most basic level, employers worry about lost productivity. Lynda Slevoski, vice president of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, says she hears increasing complaints from employers about employees dawdling on MySpace during company time. "Because you can do so many things on MySpace -- you can get e-mail, you can do chat groups, you can have a virtual baby shower -- there are more ways for an employee to be sidetracked at work to do all this stuff," Slevoski says. "At some companies, people are spending more than half their time on MySpace, as opposed to working. And they're utilizing company equipment."

Employees, meanwhile, have their own set of concerns. Some wonder whether employers are using MySpace profiles to violate the privacy of employees or applicants and obtain personal information to which they are not entitled. Warren Agin, a Boston attorney who specializes in Internet law, says employers would run afoul of antidiscrimination laws if they use a MySpace page to learn, say, that a job applicant is gay, and decide not hire him or her on that basis.

"There are many aspects of MySpace profiles that are not legal on job applications," notes Jody Kordana, an administrative assistant at Pittsfield Community Television. "Say a woman goes for a job interview, and she passes the standard recruitment process, and someone goes to her MySpace page and discovers she's a single mother or she had stated something about her difficulties in finding good child care." That, Kordana says, could lead some employers to unfairly conclude "she might not be reliable."

"MySpace is a social site. The whole idea is to make some friends, or to have old friends find you, on a social level," says Kordana, 34, who also works as an actress. "And we should be completely free to do that. But on a professional level, we're having to censor ourselves from potential future employers. How much control do we want the companies to have over our private lives? If you are proving yourself in the workplace and you are not putting the image of your employer at risk, I feel that your private life is yours."

While the issue sorts itself out, there will continue to be episodes that illustrate how MySpace has complicated the relationship not just between employers and employees, but among employees as well.

Take the case of Dana Schaeffer of Burlington. When she started a new job a year ago, Schaeffer, now 42, required training from two co-workers who were in their 20s. At home one night about two weeks after she started the job,
she was on her own MySpace page when, she recalls, she thought to herself: "Hmm, I wonder in anybody in my office has it. They seem like a pretty techno-savvy place." So she typed in the name of one co-worker, checked out his MySpace page, then typed in the name of another, and went to that page . . . and was stopped cold. There was a vituperative message about her, directed to a co-worker. She went to that person's page, and found an even more vicious reply to the original message.

It was devastating for Schaeffer. "They went back and forth on how much they couldn't stand working with me," she says. "I was absolutely, absolutely horrified. It was very hurtful."

She said nothing to her co-workers, and still hasn't. But in hindsight, Schaeffer has figured out what she should have said to them -- and they are words that could stand as a mantra for the modern workplace: "I have a MySpace page, and I know you do too."

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