How To Look Good When the Recruiter Googles You

By Nick Douglas

You'd best bet everyone at the company is not only googling you, but digging up your MySpace and your blog as well. That doesn't mean you have to stop having fun; it just means you have to take the following steps to keep what's none of their business out of their business.

You were qualified, they could afford you, and they needed you. So why didn't they hire you? They didn't want to tell you, but your boss-to-be rejected you because of the best kegger of your senior year. She saw the photo with the sorority girl with -- is that a tattoo or a third nipple? -- straddling you as you spray Heineken all over her. A new study summarized by CNET says that one in five employers look up job candidates online. In your industry, you'd best bet everyone at the company is not only googling you, but digging up your MySpace and your blog as well. That doesn't mean you have to stop having fun; it just means you have to take the following steps to keep what's none of their business out of their business.

Realize what's unsafe
To put it simply: Illegal activity, very unsafe. Unethical activity, just as bad. Drug use, usually unsafe. Heavy drinking, inadvisable but not always a deal-breaker. Online drama, another red flag, as it's a warning sign that you'll be a "difficult" employee or a bad team player.

Decide if you really want to be safe
Before you prune, realize that an employer's angst isn't really about what's online; it's about your real life as the web represents it. Do you want to be part of a company that doesn't let its employees goof off on their own time? Or say there's a photo online of you smoking up. Most major companies have every reason to reject an illegal drug user. But not everyone -- for instance, smoking up and getting trashed is a requisite for many startups. Even megacorp Google was started by two guys who still attend drug-friendly Burning Man.

So before you clean up your image, see if someone will hire you just as you are. Where would the world be if Hunter S. Thompson had cleaned up for Rolling Stone?

Google yourself
Say you decide you do need to clean up for your boss-to-be. What's the first place they'll look? Like anyone else (unless you're applying to Yahoo), they'll check Google. Google your full name right now, with and without quotation marks. Look at the first thirty results; 90% of searchers don't check results past page 3. Make yourself a chart: List the results under two categories: "in my control" (pages you can edit) and "out of my control." Cross out every item that is "safe." Now to tackle the others, first go down the "in my control" list:

Check your profiles
Someone could check your MySpace, Facebook, and other social profiles without Google. But a lot of your profile may be protected from outsiders. Log out of MySpace. Now look at your own profile and see everything an outsider could. List your profiles under "in my control."
Make your profiles private
The easiest way to clean up your profiles for employers is to set them to private. The most beautiful part of your MySpace should be:

This profile is set to private. This user must add you as a friend to see his/her profile.

Note that MySpace still shows your profile photo and quote. Shouldn't be too hard to make those presentable, no?

On Facebook, click "My Privacy" in the left column. Note that you can be part of several "networks." If you're part of your city's network in addition to your college, you can turn off parts of your profile just for people from the same city who aren't your friends. Of course, an alumnus from your college may check your profile. No worries; you can specifically deny access to alumni. If you want, they'll only see your profile photo, name and networks. Just remember, if you "poke" or request to add anyone as a friend, they'll be able to see your profile.

Check your blog
If you write on a public blog, you have a messier job: Search for any legal scare words like "pot," or "steal." Check for obscenities to find your most vehement posts. Delete offending posts, and realize that deleted posts won't disappear from Google's cache for a few days. If you don't want to delete posts, at least edit any keywords out. They'll at least be harder to find.

Control the pages you don't control
Say the embarrassing photo or the obscene comment is on a page in someone else's control. The best approach is to privately e-mail this person asking that they "temporarily" remove the material. After all, technically you don't have to hide the info forever, and people respond much better to helping someone out for a bit than to permanently sacrificing their right to make an ass out of you. Whether you ever tell them to put it all back is up to you.

Unfortunately, if the material ends up on a journalistic (or even pseudo-journalistic) site, the chances of this favor are small. Journalists generally consider it unethical to clean up a subject's image. (I've had to decline several people's requests at Valleywag.) So please, when you go nuts, stay away from the press.

Run the best defense with a good offense
Listen to lawyer Billy Flynn in Chicago: "What if your hinges all are rusting? What if, in fact, you're just disgusting? Razzle dazzle 'em, and they'll never catch wise!" When you have a polished blog that shows your professional expertise in a presentable manner, Google is your friend. Did United Way write up the charity event you volunteered for? Make sure they spelled your name right. Better yet, link to it from your own site. Use Marketing Pilgrim's resources for reputation managing. Read Paul Boutin's guide to LinkedIn. The Internet is your resum?.

Nick Douglas writes for Valleywag, Bloggebrity, and Look Shiny. He'd take the Hunter S. Thompson route, but he can't find a good mescaline dealer.