

Is social media a friend or a foe? How you optimize your social media presence impacts your future. Employers are increasingly researching job candidates online to dig deeper than the traditional face-to-face interview.(CAREERS)

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The cliché of the modern era is true: What you post on the Internet is forever. Some items are cute and harmless and will matter little in the future. But other things you post online can become huge mistakes, haunting you without end and having the ability to hurt you in one of the most important aspects of your life: your career.

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Now more than ever, employers are looking at your online presence. For this reason alone, you must be smart about what you post across all social media platforms. But what does that mean exactly? Social media is nuanced. Some of it is personal. Some of it is professional. For even the most vigilant job seeker, it can become a complex prospect to "clean up" your online presence to ensure you're putting your best self out there.

For those with careers in accounting and finance, the hiring outlook is good, making it particularly important for you to present yourself online in the best way possible. Even if you're employed and not actively looking for a new job, neglecting your on-line presence could hinder opportunities for advancement and growth.

Consider the numbers: In August 2013, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported an addition of 614,000 jobs to the professional and business sector over the past year. The BLS has also labeled many finance occupations, including accountants, financial analysts, and tax professionals, as having "bright outlooks." This means that these jobs are expected to grow "much faster than average," with an increase of 29% or more until at least 2020.

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Also consider the changing landscape of the finance and accounting workplace across the globe: 67% of these professionals intend to look for a new job in the next year, according to the 2013 Kelly Global Workforce Index Report. Eighty-five percent are

showing some type of career movement, and 44% changed employers within the last year, taking the initiative to seek better opportunities amid the better job market. Close to half are using social media to help make the transition. Close to half say they've also been contacted by a potential employer in the last year through social media. And this number might surprise you the most: Within the last year, 15% say they successfully secured a new job opportunity that originated via a social media site.

That 15% may be smaller than the other numbers, but it's certainly significant and highly indicative of how important social media has become in the employment process for both employers and employees. In fact, social media has become the way to connect, with 67% of American adults using Facebook and 20% using LinkedIn, according to Pew Internet Project. And according to a 2012 CareerBuilder survey, at least 37% of all employers are using these two sites to research job candidates.

These statistics only bring us back to the earlier question: How can you make sure that employers are seeing the best "you" online despite the complex world of social media?

First of all, it's important to recognize that employers aren't always looking for the best you when they look online. They want to dig deeper than a traditional face-to-face interview, which is why they often look for online evidence that you can present yourself professionally, fit in with the company culture, are qualified for the job, and are a well-rounded individual. Remember, accounting and finance professionals receive additional scrutiny on ethics and behavior given the massive judgment errors of some financial professionals recently.

But the CareerBuilder survey indicates that 12% of hiring managers admit they're also looking for reasons not to hire a candidate when they research social networks in the hiring process. Seventy-one percent have found something online that convinced them not to make an offer. The worst online offenses have often included provocative information or photos, drug and/or alcohol use, indiscretion in the form of bad-mouthing employers and coworkers, and poor communication skills.

Make a game plan for tackling your online presence and fixing the things that could make or break a job opportunity. First, search your name on Internet search engines to get a benchmark of your online presence. You can't fix things if you don't even know what's out there. This may sound like simple advice, but it's possible for your name to show up in places you never thought possible (and maybe through no fault of your own).

Next, understand that the details matter most. Go through your social network profiles and delete inappropriate photos, information, or posts that would conflict with your professional life. It might not be possible to erase everything that could hurt your job search, but you can change privacy settings to make sure that certain things remain private.

Last but not least, know that fixing your online presence isn't just about looking for something negative and deleting it. Your online profiles also need to continually help build a positive picture of you to prospective employers. On LinkedIn, which is an important social networking tool in the financial sector, start to build more professional credibility by listing associations that you belong to, specific licenses that bolster your skills, noteworthy projects in which you played a significant role, and experiences outside regular expectations that show what you're really made of. Are you a financial analyst who was involved in remodeling the corporate structure? These positive details will show someone that you're flexible and capable of earning the trust of your colleagues.

As you start to grow more aware of how your online presence affects your career goals, it will become easier to discern what's appropriate--and what isn't--for your specific circumstances. Remember to monitor your profiles regularly. And above all else, don't ever take the world of social networking for granted. It's a reality of the modern working world, and it can certainly make us all a little worried at times.

At its heart, social networking is a powerful force that can move you to where you really want to be. By making your online presence as positive and as strong as you are in the real world, you'll be more than prepared to face every career opportunity and challenge.

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