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Digging in the Digital Dirt

Vet yourself online and get ahead of unflattering information.

Consider these scenarios: A CEO sued his employer for breach of contract; a CEO was accused of discrimination and lost the case; a CEO's sexual proclivities became the hot-button topic in a nurse online chat room; and a hospital administrator received a conviction for driving under the influence. Each incident occurred, and each could be discovered by anyone with a computer or smart-phone and Internet access who enters the individual's name in a search engine.

What is not found by the search engine are the circumstances surrounding each scenario and the final disposition. As users of electronic media, we are left to draw our own conclusions based on the information available, which may or may not be true. The Information Age may be upon us, but dealing with the information and seeking the truth require a great deal more effort.

Think of the information about *you* that is lingering in cyberspace thanks to the evolution of personal Web pages, blogs and social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn. Clean as your personal history may be, it is important to know what digital dirt is published on the World Wide Web and to do your due diligence in unearthing it, being transparent about

it, tidying it up, burying it or washing it away. This effort is warranted whether you are being interviewed for a position or conducting an interview of a potential candidate yourself.

Unearthing Your Information

Today's thorough background checks not only investigate matters of public record, such as an individual's criminal record, driving record, credit report, reports of any sexual offenses, degrees, licenses and legal suits (to name a few), but they also employ search engine queries to uncover other areas of a person's life.

Although many academic, government and credit sites make records available online, generally a social security number or another form of identification or clearance is needed. A lot of information exists online, however, that does not require much more than a name to access.

Just as you would surf the Internet for easily accessible information about a prospective employer, the organization's staff is doing the same about you. Either as a candidate or a prospective boss, make sure to e-search for information about yourself, and do it *regularly*. Start today.

Because different search engines use varying indexes, query yourself in

several engines such as Google, Yahoo!, MSN and AOL. Also, take advantage of the free alerts programs that search engines offer (for example, Google Alerts, Yahoo! Alerts). Here you can enter a phrase of your choosing for the engine to automatically search at a given time interval and send you results electronically. Be sure to use quotes around your name (such as "J. Larry Tyler") so the engine knows to search for the phrase rather than single words. Working in the healthcare field, you also may want to query your name in modernhealthcare.com, healthleadersmedia.com and ama-assn.org.

Being Transparent

Say you have found negative or erroneous information on the Web about yourself. Or, you have discovered you have a cyber twin, someone with the same name as you but with a less-than-desirable past—what do you do now? How do you divulge information without turning the disclosure into an issue that detracts from your candidacy? Think of my opening scenarios: their headlines may seem indigestible without more explanation to make them palatable.

For starters, you must assume the hiring organization will find the negative information eventually. You should *not* assume that a sleeping dog will continue to lie down. Get in front of the information and make sure the hiring authority is informed

of it. The best time to do this is right before the interview. That is when most people will reach for their favorite search engine to find out as much as they can about you.

If a search consultant is involved in the process, make sure you inform the consultant of the information during your interview so he or she can document it in the interview notes. For example, after I have recited to the candidate the litany of steps we will take to vet him or her, my final question when conducting the candidate interview is: "Will anything come to our attention that will embarrass you?" This is the time to fess up.

Second, e-mail an explanation so that the information is not misconstrued through verbal retelling. The e-mail likely will be circulated among the executive team and will serve as a preview of what its Internet search may lead to. Your explanation of the circumstances will go a long way toward alleviating any negative information found in cyberspace as well as give the whole picture. For example, if you have found information about someone who shares your name, ask that parties search for you according to a specific phrase (i.e., your name including a middle initial). Or, simply disclose that you are not the only Jane D. Overachiever and briefly explain any negative findings belonging to your cyber twin.

Third, if you indeed made a mistake, own up to it. Most potential employers are willing to forgive if someone takes responsibility and has paid the price. I know of one hospital chief financial officer who went to jail and was later hired by the city in which the hospital

is located. In an age when spin control has replaced honest discourse, saying "I made a mistake, and I am sorry" carries some weight.

Tidying and Burying the Mess

Be sure to clean up any embarrassing photos or posts on social networking sites by removing, deleting or untagging. This includes asking your friends to do the same with regard to pictures of you. Also, change your security preferences so that only confirmed friends can see your profile(s).

If you are willing to put in extra effort, post more favorable comments on interest- or industry-specific blogs and other social networking sites to overshadow any questionable information.

Washing Away Digital Dirt

Do not be fooled into thinking that time heals all wounds in terms of information evaporating from the Internet. Many of us witnessed the advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and are following its evolution. Today hundreds of millions of Web sites exist. At our fingertips is once nearly inaccessible information, of which more is being uploaded every single day.

For example, while certain driving violations are sometimes expunged after a number of years, state laws vary. Also, an e-search usually uncovers announcements of short-term appointments, so refrain from omitting positions from your resume even if you spent less than one year with an organization. In cases where you have found erroneous information posted with the intent to ruin your reputation or defame you (libel), take action. In lieu of a costly civil suit, consider the following, less

expensive yet still effective, ways to remove false statements online, according to makeuseof.com.

Communicate directly

By communicating calmly, nicely and directly with the person who posted the information, you usually can resolve any misunderstandings. Stay cool and friendly; do not insult.

If that approach does not work, identify the name and contact information of the person who registered the Web site where the information appears. You can do this at <http://whois.domaintools.com>. Jot the Web hosting company's name and surf its Web site for contact info and its terms and conditions. Identify terms you believe the Webmaster violated, and contact the Webmaster to address them.

Escalate your action

If talking with the Webmaster has led to another dead end, attempt to shut down the site by escalating the problem to the Web host. Be sure the violation goes against the host's terms and conditions policy. Many times libelous information will be removed immediately if identifying personal information about you is posted without your permission. Indicate your seriousness by mailing your request (return receipt requested), calling and following up via e-mail.

Hit them where it hurts

Getting delisted from Google essentially squashes any chance of online visibility. Through its Web page removal request tool, Google will remove a site from its listings for six months if any of the following privacy violations are published on a Web page:

- Your social security or government ID number

- Your bank account or credit card number
- An image of your handwritten signature
- Your full name or the name of your business published on an adult-content site that is spamming Google's search listings

The World Wide Web is nearing its 20th birthday, and it is growing and evolving as it ages. Legislation tries to keep pace, companies pledge privacy and hackers strive to find ways to get their share. If you consider all the information that passes through the Internet—from your search engine queries to your e-mails and everything posted in between—it makes good practice to proactively uncover and address any online information that may get in the way of your career success. ▲

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Editor's Note: J. Larry Tyler is author of *Practical Governance* and *Tyler's Guide: The Healthcare Executive's Job Search*, published by Health Administration Press. For more information, visit ache.org/HAP.