

Lorenza Alessie, associate director at HVS Executive Search, investigates how professional and social online networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn are affecting the face of recruitment

Big Brother is watching

As headhunters, when we first approach candidates we have identified via research some are surprised about how much we already know about them. These days headhunters can find information about candidates not only through referrals and general networking but also through online research. The amount of information available online is vast and recruiters are creative in researching and identifying potential candidates, especially when it comes to using the internet. Recruiters can now access candidate's personal and professional profiles either via google searches or through professional and social networking sites and blogs.

With just a mouse click one can find out an incredible amount of information about candidates. Press releases, published speaker bios from conference lists, articles, staffing updates are just some of the tools headhunters use to identify candidates and do an initial screening. The boom in user numbers of professional and social networks has further increased the amount of information readily available online. It is actually contradictory that, on the one hand, in order to promote equal opportunities regardless of someone's age or religion, for example, there is an increasing amount of legislation protecting the privacy of job applicants asking them not to disclose personal information on their job applications. On the other hand, there are an increasing number of people who are happy to put online, readily available to all, this information and more – including their relationship status, their sexual orientation and even a few pictures of a Saturday night when they had a few drinks too much!

People question if these professional and social networks are changing the face of recruitment – the answer is 'it depends on the level' and 'maybe not yet'. At the college graduate level, some companies have found it useful to recruit from these networks as well as advertising on these communities. Companies such as KPMG and PwC have realised that some people manage their lives in these communities (using it as an e-mail address, posting pictures, etc.) and hence have decided to advertise their entry level positions here – even creating employment blogs about work life in the companies so that potential candidates can ask existing employees open questions about the company without feeling they are putting their chances to get the job at stake. In terms of searching for middle management and executive

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talent and in the eyes of a headhunter, how useful are these online networks to an average user?

Professional Online Networks

There are a number of professional networks but the most established and well known network is LinkedIn. LinkedIn is only five years old and currently has over 23 million members and is adding 1.2 million new members every month. The average LinkedIn member is 41 years old with an annual income of \$109,000.

LinkedIn is useful to recruiters since one can search people in the system via a key word search – either by job title, location, industry and other. Users can also look into the network of their contacts and build on their network by inviting them to theirs, write recommendations, join professional groups – and many more. One will probably not find the profile of a top CEO or CFO in LinkedIn – but this can be found in press releases or annual reports. The benefit of LinkedIn, to recruiters and users, is that it gives access to people further down the corporate ladder that would have otherwise been much more difficult to identify. Thanks to the professional summary, it helps identify if they are in a similar role to that being recruited.

Therefore, in the eyes of a user, one of the benefits of LinkedIn is that it gives them greater exposure to the job market so that they can eventually be approached for interesting and suitable opportunities without having to proactively go out and job hunt. On the other hand, LinkedIn has also got its dangers since the professional profile is publicly available to everyone – including current employers and competition. Keeping this in mind, an employer may be concerned if they see a highly detailed and updated professional profile since it may mean their employee is keen to find another job. Adding to "working in California" the 'interests' section when currently working in Finland might not put someone first on the list for a promotion, and detailing in the employment record the ins and outs of a big deal that has been closed might be of too much interest to the competition.

Social Online Networks

Especially when it comes to social networks, most of the information is irrelevant to a recruiter, and information found on these websites must be used with caution since some information can be false – especially for the non password protected networks such as MySpace where anyone can post anything on another user's page. However, with the increasing number of users joining these social networks, this phenomenon cannot be ignored. There are a number of social online networks and the popularity of each differs from country to country, however worldwide two of the most popular social networks are MySpace (around 110 million users) and Facebook (around 80 million users).

There are an increasing number of people happy to put their relationship status, even sexual orientation online

The average user spends at least 20 minutes a day on these networks and the latest moves and developments are first updated here. Even though these networks were initially targeted mostly to high school and college students, there has been a good deal of growth in older users.

Even though the information contained in these sites is not of much relevance to recruiters, given the cost of hiring and firing, employers are starting to take more notice of "net reputations". Posting or being tagged on a number of possibly embarrassing pictures, constantly updating your profile/page showing you spend most of your work time hooked to the network, talking badly about your employer on your wall are some of the "faux pas" that can give someone a bad "net reputation" which could indirectly affect their reputation in the market.

Online networks, especially social online networks, are a sort of an online "Big Brother". Information is available to all – either because this information was personally posted or a "friend/contact" decided to tag a picture that one would have rather not tagged or written something on someone's wall they shouldn't have. These networks are also starting to fade the line between personal and professional life – which is both good and bad. This is why fewer and fewer people have decided not to join these networks, but at the pace these networks are developing the number of users will just continue increasing. Having said this, if you decide to go "Big Brother" or are already part of the online communities, here are some tips in order to benefit from professional and social online networks, or at least avoid awkward situations:

At all times, remember that these networks can be seen by everyone – your family and friends, your past/current/potential/future employer, clients, competition and partner!

Avoid entering non-password protected sites and enter restricted privacy settings when needed

Try and use the sites with moderation. For example, obsessively updating your status on Facebook may mean your mind isn't at work.

Having said this, even if online networking can play a role in recruitment, it does not compare to the good old traditional job hunting methods such as networking in social events, submitting well-written resumes and cover letters, diligently following up with hiring managers since, at least for the moment, these tactics still remain the best to land the ideal job.