

# Take Charge of Your Online Reputation

11–14 minutes

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Managing one's online reputation is important for anyone in the workforce today. Advice for students entering the job market is equally applicable to those in other career stages looking to successfully manage their online reputations.



*Credit: Tetiana Yurchenko / iStock © 2018*

This is a primer about online reputation management, which can be shared with students entering the job market. The advice provided here is also useful for others who may be further along in their careers.

Many of us have devoted our careers to higher education, proudly watching class after class come in and work their way through college toward graduation. We support them with learning and extracurricular activities to develop well-rounded people. We hope that we've given them the best education and the best opportunity to succeed as they begin their own careers.

Those graduating this year are already turning their attention to recruiting fairs and future employment. As they begin the job search, they will likely go through an initial screening process. Imagine that as applicants are screened, a potential employer sorts them into one of three piles:

- **Left:** Applicants about whom negative information was found online. This could represent nearly half of the applicant pool.

- **Middle:** Applicants with no negative information found online. In fact, there was no information online. The applicants did everything possible to erase their digital footprints.
- **Right:** Applicants with no negative information, and the screener finds an abundance of information about their interests, experiences, and aspirations, providing a glimpse into a potential new team member. The online information includes experiences that support the applicants' qualifications and bolsters their application materials.

After the screening and sorting, the employer decides whom to bring in for interviews, starting with the applicants sorted into the pile on the right. The reality is that the employer may not need to go any further than that pile to find a perfect fit for the open position.

Most applicants do not realize that this screening is done early in the hiring process, long before they might have a chance to explain or provide a view of their abilities. Students generally don't think about

a scenario unfolding this way and are often unprepared. If they have learned about online privacy, they might understand the benefits of remediating negative information. That is a start, but it isn't enough. As educators, we need to help students go further—students need to know how to land in that right-hand pile of applicants by creating a positive online reputation.

## **What Is Your Online Reputation?**

Most of us have accepted that living and working in the high-tech era means that we have digital footprints—a collection of data that represents our online presence. Take a moment to search your name online, and you can find examples of posts and articles, images of you and family or colleagues, videos, tweets, public records data, as well as links to your profiles in professional organizations and on social media and other online platforms. If you don't assess your digital footprint regularly, you should.

As you search you'll recognize not only information

that you've put online but also information added by others—by colleagues and friends, and also by virtue of your having participated in public events. If you were to look even closer at what the public can see on your social media accounts (and you should), you might find comments that others post about you, geolocation information that you broadcast, and even images that you didn't know were publicly available. Your online information may not be as private as you thought. Your digital footprint yields information about you; your online reputation is how that information is interpreted by others to form an opinion of you as a person.

## **Why Does It Matter?**

Your online reputation can affect relationships and potential jobs, and you may not even be aware that it's happening. The practice of doing online background checks is becoming routine for recruiters and employers as students graduate and apply for that first career position. Remember, recent graduates may not have much of a job

history. Depending on what they find, an applicant's online reputation can make or break an offer.

The percentage of companies with hiring policies that encourage recruiters to check an applicant's online reputation is high—some reports indicate as many as 70% use this practice to screen applicants, and even more indicate that they expect hiring decisions to be made based on these practices for the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> Employers are using the digital thoughts and judgments that applicants make available to the public as a reflection of how that applicant will act with clients and team members. More than a third of employers who screen candidates via social networks will find information that causes them not to hire a candidate<sup>2</sup> (see figure 1).



**Figure 1. Four common reasons to pass on a**

## **candidate**

### **First, Partition and Clean Up Your Act**

Today's students have grown up online. There's no going back, and any advice we give must recognize that. The best approach is to be diligent with privacy settings, using them to partition the personal presence from the emerging professional online presence. Sometimes it is best to keep a social media account for personal use rather than even attempt to mix in professional contacts. In other cases where the content is all under our control, it is easier to allow content to be blended, with the caveat that one must always keep one's reputation in mind.

The first step is to get an idea of what's out there. If any posts or pictures could be taken out of context, consider taking them down. Be sure to use multiple search tools. While you may start by searching for your first and last name, be ready to augment your search with other terms, such as cities and schools. Search for any usernames or nicknames

recruiters and schools might have access to, such as your email account. Look for inappropriate information on your social media accounts, dating site accounts, retail wish lists, message board posts, blog articles, comments, mentions, and other web service accounts. Use the checklist below to thoroughly review your digital footprint for anything that should be cleaned up.

### **Cleaning Up Your Online Presence**

- Search for your name and other identifiers with Google, Yahoo, Bing, and Spokeo
- Subscribe to Google Alerts to receive an email as soon as your search phrase (such as your name, school, or work) enters Google's index
- Work together with friends who aren't in your social networks to check your work
- Ensure everything online complements your reputation
- Frequently check and update your social media privacy settings



# Then, Take Charge of Your Online Reputation

Now, let's turn your attention to landing in that right-hand pile of applicants. It's important to think about what you want your reputation to be online, and it's best to start now. This is where you can use technology to your advantage. Recruiters often use networking and social media sites to find talent, with many indicating that they hired a candidate that they found via social media. A majority of employers have reported hiring a candidate for the good things they found about them online.

A good place to begin is by learning what employers want to see. Certainly, they want to see your personality come through online, but also consider showcasing examples of positive traits that would prove your ability to contribute to a team effort. This might consist of examples of helping organize an event, holding leadership roles in organizations, writing articles and research papers, or conducting presentations.

If this information isn't online, consider collecting it for preparation to put it online. Also, consider any comments and posts that could serve as short references from friends, administrators, faculty, and employers. Search and save links for online mentions of awards and accolades.

Once you've collected a good assortment of information online or staged to go online, you need a place to put it. Actually, you may want to consider having multiple places online in order to increase your footprint and showcase your information in different ways. If you are just entering the workforce, you should consider creating a visually oriented online portfolio of your talent and experience. Students in any discipline can create a portfolio of their best work, leadership opportunities, travel abroad, and other special program opportunities. Many colleges offer online or electronic portfolio websites for students that are available as career portfolios after graduation. The advantage is that materials collected as part of academic or extracurricular programs can be

repurposed and built upon to create a career portfolio. Alternatively, many website platforms offer online portfolio formats and can be used to build a career portfolio by combining online materials with uploaded content. Online portfolios can be very creative and include rich content (including multimedia) to showcase your personality and talent.

While an online portfolio is a terrific opportunity to showcase your talents, a professional networking site is essential to your online reputation. In its most basic form, it's an online version of your résumé, but it can be much more than that. Sites such as LinkedIn can be used to collect links to other online content and upload reports, presentations, and other multimedia creations. You should include a professional photo of yourself and create a collection of professional connections. Your connections may also be a source for creating online recommendations or recognizing your skill sets. There are numerous professional groups that you can follow to help you stay on top of current

information and trends relevant to your career path. The items that you share, reshare, or like provide a view of your interests. Your site should portray an articulate, intelligent, and friendly professional.

Once you have your online sites, you need to keep them current and work to increase your digital footprint and online reputation. Attend to your sites regularly to add new content. Add professional connections from internships, volunteer activities, committees, professional organizations, and conferences. Use professional networking sites as news aggregators, not only to read and post comments but also to share current and compelling news from other sources. Participate in group or event pages that showcase your interests.

Having an organized process for cleaning up and partitioning your online presence, as well as intentionally developing a robust online reputation, is a practice that should be cultivated early in your college career. As time goes on and information is reshared, it becomes more difficult to remediate negative information that lands online. It's also

much easier to collect and post positive examples of good work each semester than it is to create a collection at the end of college.

With a little organization and ongoing effort, you can land in the right-hand applicant pool. As educators, we want you to have the best opportunity to succeed as you embark on your career.

## Notes

1. Rachel Nauen, ["Number of Employers Using Social Media to Screen Candidates at All-Time High, Finds Latest CareerBuilder Study,"](#) CareerBuilder Press Room, June 15, 2017; and Diane Domeyer, ["How to Manage Your Online Reputation,"](#) BestColleges.com ↩
2. Isabel Thottam, ["These Social Media Mistakes Can Actually Disqualify You from a Job,"](#) Monster.com. ↩

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