



CAN YOUR ONLINE
PERSONA
SURVIVE A BACKGROUND
C H E C K

Meeting Your Digital Self from Employer's Point of View

Joe Mayne

CAN YOUR ONLINE PERSONA SURVIVE A BACKGROUND CHECK

Meeting Your Digital Self from Employer's Point of View

By Joe Mayne

© 2009 Joe Mayne

Feel free to print, forward, post, or otherwise distribute this e-book, as long as you credit the author and leave it complete, unchanged, and intact in its original form.

For more information about me or my work, please visit:
www.MayneSpeaker.com

or contact me at:

Joe Mayne
800.490.9781
Joe@MayneSpeaker.com

INTRO_{DUCTION}

WHO'S **GOOGLING** ME?

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR **ONLINE SELF**

CAN THIS STUFF REALLY KEEP ME FROM
BEING HIRED?

REMOVING **NEGATIVE** INFORMATION

IMPROVING YOUR ONLINE **PERSONA**

INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, an interesting question was put to me: how does a job seeker's online persona – their web pages, blogs, social networking profiles, and any other Internet presence – affect their chances of getting a job? I was preparing for an upcoming presentation to a thousand college students at the time, and the planners had asked if I might be able to address the topic for their group.

Their inquiry led me to research the topic more closely. First, I looked to see what sort of information was available online and in print media. Then, I talked to students, recruiters, and professionals in the field to get their impressions. And finally, I tried to put all of what I'd found together in a way that would be beneficial for today's students and recent graduates. The result is this e-book you are reading now. In it, you'll find out how to get the answer to an important question: can your cyber persona survive a background check?

The question is more important than ever today. With the boom of social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn, not to mention the explosive growth of blogs and personal websites, we are broadcasting more information than ever about ourselves over the Internet every day. Most of it stays archived in one corner of the web or another, meaning that it's all out there for anyone, including our prospective employers, to see.

What they find, and the picture it paints of us, can easily determine whether we get the job. With that in mind, it's critical that we learn to manage our online profiles so that they make us look like great candidates for employment, not people who tend to make very bad decisions very publicly.

In these short chapters, I'm going to show you how to find your online profile, the ways it can affect you, and what you should be doing to build it up – or if need be, repair any damage. I'll tell you upfront that putting your best electronic self forward requires a little bit of time and work, but it's definitely worth it. Because when recruiters finds you online, and they will, the impression they get can have a lasting impact on your career.

WHO'S **GOOGLING** ME?

What do you suppose is the first thing a prospective employer does after reviewing your resume? Well, if they like what they see, you can bet they're going to go online and see what else they can find about you. In some cases, this can be as simple as a quick Google search. But it could just as easily involve a professional background check, including a scan of your personal webpage, social networking profiles, blog entries, and other digitally available background information.

I occasionally speak to students who are surprised by this. They tend to assume, for whatever reason, that those resources are "private" or "personal." Unfortunately, this is a fallacy. It would be great if our personal and professional lives could be kept completely separate, but things don't work like that. Just as a newspaper article accusing you of fraud, or an old conviction for drunk driving, could come back to haunt you in your job search, so too can the existing online information about you.

From an employer's perspective, this isn't a bad thing. Bringing on a new person entails a huge amount of expense and risk – in fact, much more than the average graduate realizes – and so any piece of information that can help recruiters make the right choice (or even keep them from making the wrong one) is worth its weight in gold. Just like your resume, references, and interview performance, your cyber persona helps them fill in gaps about your character and background. They know you might be on your best behavior when you come in to see them, but there are likely to be clues if you're putting on an act. And the best place to find those clues, more often than not, is on the Internet.

And so, it's very rare for any person to be hired these days without at least a minor online background check. In fact, I'd go a step further and say that you should expect that anyone who receives your resume or calls you for an interview has taken the time to look you up on the Internet. The next question, then, is what they're going to find and how you should best deal with these findings. Luckily, that's our next topic...

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR **ONLINE SELF**

You can't really begin to shape and improve your online profile until you know what's there to begin with. Often, though, this can be a little more difficult and time-consuming than you would think. After all, you should remember everything you've posted online, right? The reality is that you probably don't. And even if you did, you might not be aware of all of the information that's been posted about you by friends, clubs, associations, and even the news media.

Considering that, the best first step you can take is to research yourself. Start with a simple Google search (because it's the engine most employers will use), and then move on to other search engines. Try different variations of your name, along with any keywords you think might be associated with you – your college, previous employers, and so on. Once you've done that, take a look back through your own records. Check out your blog posts, online articles, social networking information, twitter posts, and anything else you can think of that may have found its way onto the Internet.

As you do this, try to think about things from a recruiter's point of view. Remember that they are more than a little bit nervous about bringing new people into their company; anything that you think or worry they might be thinking, they are. If you're concerned that something you wrote might make you sound angry or delusional, then it's probably crossed someone's mind. If a photo that shows you being sleepy looks like you're heavily intoxicated, it's safe to assume that's what someone else will see, too.

You're not finished there, either. Just because you haven't posted anything about yourself online, that doesn't mean it's not there. Lots of people fill out their MySpace and Facebook pages by posting photos of other people – sometimes dozens or hundreds of them at a time. If you know you have friends who like to do this, and that they might have photographed you in a less than professional state, or written something that makes you appear to be an employment risk, take the time to peruse their profiles as well. It's not that likely that pictures will turn up in a simple search if you haven't been tagged, but you never know when a mutual acquaintance could happen to recognize you. The peace of mind you'll get is worth the few hours spent finding out what you're dealing with.

Finally, when you've exhausted all the search options you can think of, get some outside help. Ask your friends, colleagues, or relatives to look you up online and tell you what they find. Because they might use different search engines, or think of different terms than you did, you might be surprised at what they dig up.

Now that you have an idea of what items might come back to haunt you, it's time to look at the best ways to deal with them. Can This Stuff Really Keep Me From Being Hired?

Can This Stuff Really Keep Me From **Being Hired?**

Okay, so you accept that employers are going to look you up online. But as long as they don't find out that you've been tried for serial murders, does it really matter? Can this stuff really stop you from being hired?

The answer to that question is absolutely. The things that are written, shown, or even suggested about you on the web can't just stop you from being hired for the best jobs; they can prevent you from even being considered. Most companies, when you factor in things like training, pay and benefits, lose four or five times the salary of a new hire that doesn't work out. And so, they're understandably cautious when it comes to adding new team members – especially young men and women fresh out of college with no evident professional track record.

They aren't going to wager time and money on someone who doesn't seem to be a good fit, or who shows signs of troubling behavior that could come back to embarrass them, cost them money and clients, or

even put their existing employees in danger. What this means to you is that if they come across a photo of you that seems to indicate that you might have a problem with drugs or alcohol, a post or article that contains threatening comments, or some other red flag during the background search, then they are very likely to decide that you're not worth it.

Sure, what they see might only have been from one moment in time, but that's going to leave a strong impression. They simply can't afford to roll the dice on a new hire if they think there's even a remote chance it's going to blow up in their face. This is especially true if they find evidence that you've done something illegal, or even ethically questionable. The recruiter isn't making a moral judgment; just a prudent business decision. If you didn't behave professionally or control yourself in that instance, how can they expect you to act in the office, or on a business trip?

Because I want to be absolutely clear on this point, I'll say it again as plainly as possible: having negative information about you online is a liability. Prospective employers are very likely to find it, and you can be sure it will influence their decision. With that in mind, let's move to the next topic and see how you can think like an employer and do some research of your own.

REMOVING **NEGATIVE** INFORMATION

What's the best way to deal with negative online content about you? Ideally, it's to not have to deal with it in the first place. If you are a younger student, or haven't participated in the social networking craze, it's possible that there isn't that much information about you online to begin with. That can actually be a bit of a problem in its own way, but we'll get to that in the next section.

However, let's assume that you do have an extensive online presence, and that it's not filled up with only things you'd want a perspective employer to see. First, make a list of everything you came across, along with how you found it. From there, you're going to begin a concentrated campaign to have those items removed from the web, starting with the items that create the worst impressions and are easiest to find. For example, if there's a photo of you topless at spring break, or smoking marijuana, and it tops the first page of a general web search, that needs to be your priority. After that, you can move on down the list to items that are less offensive and less likely to be discovered.

The good news is, it's not usually all that hard to have something taken off the web. Nine times out of ten, a polite e-mail to your friend, or even the hosting service, will do the trick. This isn't foolproof; many systems backup frequently, and so it can take several requests to completely clear something from the system.

For a remaining item that you just can't seem to get rid of, there are few options and strategies you can use. First, you should never give up on asking to have it taken down. Policies and webmasters change all the time, and most companies don't want the negative press that would come with refusing to delete a humiliating photo. The second option, and one that you might need in the short-term, is simply to live with it. If it's not something that will completely offend every recruiter you come across, you can give an explanation if it comes up, and otherwise ignore it.

Your third option, and the one we'll look at in the next section, is to simply drown it out by improving the rest of your online presence. If there are hundreds of positive items about you online, then it becomes that much less likely that anyone will come across something you wouldn't want them to find. And even if they do, it might not matter as much if your online persona tells such a great story.

IMPROVING YOUR ONLINE **PERSONA**

It's been said that the best defense is a good offense, and when it comes to your online persona, that's sound advice. When recruiters go looking online to find out more about you, you don't just want them to not find negatives – you want them to find a wealth of evidence that you're one of the best candidates they've ever come across.

To accomplish that, you're going to have to be proactive. If a search of your name yields little or nothing, then you should begin to create pages on personal and professional websites. If you already have them, start changing out your content to make yourself seem more employable. Emphasize your strong points and stay on the positives; make it clear that you're an up-and-coming professional, not someone who enjoys crushing beer cans on your head. This might mean uploading photos of yourself at work in an industry association, blog posts congratulating a friend or professor, and opening up a professional-sounding email account. Find areas where you can put yourself in a good light, and

then add as much as you can. Take advantage of the fact that search engines place so much weight on popular sites; a good profile on Facebook or LinkedIn is likely to show up several places before an obscure blog, or a friend's website.

Another good way to help things along is to get involved. Lots of organizations, and especially those that do good work in the community, regularly post photos and press releases about their volunteers. What's more, they're sometimes reprinted in local papers and magazines – giving you double the exposure for your efforts. Doing charitable work should be its own reward, but it can improve your online persona at the same time. Stack up enough good news, and it will be all that recruiters find about you on the Internet.

This process is going to take time, so get started as quickly as you can. If you're a freshman in your first week of classes, begin adding pieces to your online profile now. If you're farther down the road, simply start wherever you are. As you build more and more positives into your web presence, check occasionally to be sure that it's not being damaged elsewhere. You don't want all of your hard work undone by a stray photo or post, but if you find one, it's better to pull it right away.

Your online persona can be a great asset, or it can be the one thing that prevents you from getting the job you want. Remember, the best way to deal with negative items about you on the web is to not have them in the first place. Cultivate your Internet profile carefully, and it will reward you by saying good things about you, day and night, to anyone who asks.

ABOUT THE **AUTHOR**

Joe Mayne is a professional speaker and author from Minneapolis, Minnesota. For more than 15 years, he's been teaching college students from hundreds of campuses across North America how to stand out in the job search process.

From the beginning of his career, when he was hired by a Fortune 500 firm before he graduated college, Joe has been intrigued by the dynamics of the job hunting process. Later, in his work as a recruiter, manager, and consultant, he conducted thousands of interviews and learned how to evaluate candidates from an employer's perspective. He continues to gather and share those insights today through his books, articles, and keynote speeches.

Joe's articles and e-books have been featured nationally online and in the print media, and he continues to give dozens of presentations to colleges and universities each year.

You can find out more about him and his work at www.MayneSpeaker.com

