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THE JUNGLE

Recruiters Use the Internet To Screen Job Applicants

By ERIN WHITE
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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NEW YORK -- Executive recruiter Peter Bell recently made an unpleasant discovery on the Internet.

He was looking for candidates to fill an investor-relations post at a financial-services firm. To research one promising candidate, Mr. Bell's colleague entered the man's name in Google, the popular Internet search tool. But Google unearthed a surprise: It found another version of the candidate's resume, with two jobs that weren't listed on the resume he'd submitted to the recruiter.

"He just eliminated them and added a little time to the other jobs," Mr. Bell says. Mr. Bell concluded the man had lost the jobs, and tried to cover it up. Mr. Bell didn't submit the man's name for the job.

Internet searches have become common practice for hiring managers and recruiters, who say the effort sometimes yields useful information about candidates -- things employers wouldn't have learned from a resume and cover letter alone. "Smart hiring managers will always Google their prospective people," says Allison Hemming, president of the Hired Guns, a New York interim-staffing company. "If you've got a sixth sense about somebody and you're not really sure why you're feeling that way, Googling can really help you out in vetting a candidate."

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At Chicago-based staffing firm Corporate Project Resources Inc., which places marketing professionals in jobs on an interim basis, "Google is something that we use a lot," says Sheri Karley, recruiting manager. Staffers there often perform an Internet search along with a background check and personality test when they

screen candidates, Ms. Karley says.

But such searches can be a land mine for job-seekers. There's a bevy of information on the Internet, including things you may not realize are out there. Searches can turn up everything from personal Web sites and blogs to old company newsletters to articles you wrote for your college newspaper. "It's almost like a shadow résumé you haven't exactly made but it's following you around," says Pam Dixon, director of the World Privacy Forum, which studies workplace privacy issues. She says some of the worst problems for job-hunters arise when people fire off angry or vulgar e-mails that find their way onto the Internet. "Most Google damage is self-inflicted," Ms. Dixon says.

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Sometimes the damaging information comes from former employers. Ms. Dixon says she has been contacted by a teacher who was fired from a prior job whose school board included her firing in online meeting minutes. Making matters worse, she has an unusual name. So when prospective employers Google her, the minutes pop right up. "She literally has not found a job because of that," Ms. Dixon said.

So how can you sidestep these pitfalls? First, career advisers recommend, search the Internet yourself to see what's out there about you. Ms. Dixon suggests searching for your name on its own, and also in quotation marks. If anything comes up that could harm your job search, you have a few potential remedies. You can contact the owner of the site, and ask him to remove the information. You can also try contacting Google.

If you can't remove the information, prepare a defense in case it comes up in an interview. Come up with an answer that directly addresses the problem, but then segues to a new subject. For instance, if the information involves opinions you'd rather have kept private, "you can turn it into a positive by stating that this is something you feel very passionate about, and remind the person that this is your personal opinion and won't affect your ability" to do your job, Ms. Hemming suggests.

Google says people shouldn't blame it for what users find on the web. "Google is a reflection of what's on the Web so if there's information on the particular Web page that they're not comfortable with, then they should contact the site owner," says spokeswoman Eileen Rodriguez.

Being the subject of an Internet search can work in a job-seeker's favor in some cases. [Bruce MacEwen](#), a New York-based consultant who aspires to get a job as an executive director of a law firm, started writing a blog this year about the business side of law firms. This spring, his blog turned up on a Google search done by William Henderson, an associate professor of law at the Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington. Mr. Henderson was devising a new course on the economics and business of law firms, and decided to see what he could find with Google. "I can't believe I found a blog on point," Mr. Henderson recalls thinking. He contacted Mr. MacEwen. The two are now collaborating on a research project and Mr. MacEwen is set to guest lecture in November.

And sometimes, just because you're blindsided by a search doesn't mean your job prospects are doomed. A law-school student recently interviewed for a summer position at a law firm. One of her interviewers Googled her and found her blog, which included some critical sentiments about big law firms in general, although not this particular firm. "My face went beet red and I lost all of my concentration" when asked about her blog, she recalls. "I just sort of chuckled -- 'oh ha, isn't that funny.' "

She ended up getting an offer. And she took down the blog.

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