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A new tool for human resources; a caution for job seekers

By Paperitalo Staff

This week's column, despite direct application in our own beloved pulp and paper industry, has implications far beyond our world. You just may want to pass it along.

I have spent a great deal of time lately looking at some of the Internet phenomenon loosely called "social networking." We use some of these tools ourselves over on the Cellulose Community and I plan to talk more about Twitter in the July 1 issue of the Thompson Private Letter.

In this column, however, I want to focus on "Facebook", "Myspace" and "YouTube." It is amazing to me what people will post. Permanent records of behaviors that would not have gotten outside a barroom door a couple of generations ago are in cyberspace for anyone to see. Clearly, what happens in Vegas does not stay in Vegas.

This is a rich vein for human resource recruiters to tap as they evaluate candidates for positions. I expect there will be (if it hasn't happened already) a whole new subset of industrial psychology devoted strictly to analyzing people's social network pages as a predictor of future employment behavior. Evaluation services used by recruiters will open entirely new divisions devoted to this field.

Just start with the picture of themselves people choose to post on their pages. People give a great deal of care to their own likeness. A picture says much about the inner workings of an individual's mind--what they think about themselves, what they want others to think of them. Trained psychologists can learn much about you from this picture choice alone.

Another one for the psychologists--people seem to find it acceptable to post their mood on Facebook. I have seen enough of these postings to think it might be possible to determine if someone is manic-depressive or perhaps paranoid. Probably most damaging to a prospective employee? An amateur such as me draws a psychological conclusion and walks away from a prospect without bothering to obtain a professional opinion. After all, do you need a professional's opinion to determine whether or not you want to hire someone who is "up" or "down" several times a week or even several times a month?

The activities they record and talk about will reveal many pitfalls and future problems. Are they engaging in illegal behavior? Using drugs? The uninhibited seem not to be concerned about revealing such matters.

Who are their friends, and how do they behave? One's associations can tell much.

Then there are the "hate" pages--pages whose title is something like "I hate John Doe." Does your prospect post on such pages? What do they say there? Do you want a person with these attitudes working for you?

There are much more subtle matters, too. College students bragging about cutting class or cheating on an assignment. Where one spends their weekends. Sleeping habits. And on and on and on.

How does a recruiter obtain such information? All they have to do is put on the application questionnaire the following questions: (1) do you have any social networking site pages and (2) how will I find you there? Lying about these questions can lead to immediate dismissal any time in the future, should one be so lucky as to be hired.

The nefarious employer can also use their research to illegally discriminate (illegal at least in the United States) against a prospective employee without being detected. Facebook asks for matters such as political leanings, religion, and sexual preference. Fill these items out and an employer can use them to make employment decisions. The prospective employee will never know these items caused them to lose a job opportunity.

In the past, when I gave speeches to those about to enter the workforce, I talked about dress, tattoos and body piercings. Little did I visualize the day would come when there was an even more cautionary and important message to be told.

Some will yell "unfair" about of this. It may be, but just as certainly, learn to live with it.

For safety this week, it is summer here in the northern hemisphere and time to put on sunscreen. I heard somewhere recently that a significant majority of our exposure to the sun occurs before age eighteen--so watch your little ones.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##