How Will Your Online Profile Affect Potential Job Offers?

Exactly who is looking at your social media profile on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and LinkedIn? There is no way to be sure - and therein lies the problem.

Job seekers should remember - it's not just their friends who view their profiles. Because most social media sites provide an informal environment for information sharing, they tend to disarm users and provide a false sense of safety and privacy. In fact, social media sites are no different than any other site on the internet. Unless your privacy settings are carefully managed, the information you post is publicly available. And even the strictest privacy settings are no guarantee that your information will stay away from unintended viewers.

Employers *Are* Viewing Your Profile
The statistics tell us that online profiles are being scrutinized by a significant number of potential employers during the hiring process. In fact, according to a 2009 Career Builder survey, 45% of HR professionals and hiring managers use social media sites to screen and background check job candidates (and that was back in 2009). In the same study, 35% of employers said they had rejected candidates after discovering information on social media sites, such as inappropriate pictures, postings about drug and/or alcohol abuse, or instances where someone had spoken negatively about their former employer.

But What If I Keep My Information Private?
While controlling your privacy settings can help maintain a certain level of privacy, your information can still end up being viewed from those outside your intended audience. Facebook, for example, has come under fire by privacy advocates for not doing enough to keep users' information confidential. The company has been criticized for altering its users' privacy settings and adding features that increase information sharing, often without their users' knowledge. Also, did you know that if you press "like" or comment on a photo or status update of a friend, you cannot prevent that action from appearing in the news feeds of all the users' friends, even non-mutual ones?

In other words, your information is never really private. In the context of a job search, if your information gets into the hands of those it's not intended to reach, the effects can be devastating. Be aware that the pictures, blogs, and journal entries posted on the web are public information and could have a profound effect on your search for employment.

What Should I Do Then?
While social media sites can provide an effective way to communicate, stay-in-touch, and entertain, job seekers should take the following precautions when sharing their information online:

1) **Use privacy settings** – while strict privacy settings cannot guarantee complete privacy, utilize the settings appropriately to reduce the chances of your information being shared beyond their intended audience; and because some sites alter their privacy settings over time, be sure to check your settings frequently.
2) **Watch your pictures** – certain pictures may be considered humorous when shared among friends, but in the context of the workplace they may convey immaturity or an unprofessional demeanor. Be careful what you post.
3) **Stay positive** – no one wants to hire an employee who is always complaining or who has a generally negative outlook. Watch your comments online and never complain about a current or past employer.
4) **Utilize LinkedIn** – if used correctly, LinkedIn can enhance your job search. The site allows you to post a professional picture, create an online resume, and receive recommendations. This is the type of information you want in front of potential employers.
5) **Assume your information is public –** a good rule of thumb is to never post information online that you wouldn't want to appear on the front page of the newspaper. Follow that advice and you *almost* can't go wrong.

Source: *"How Will Your Online Profile Affect Potential Job Offers"* By Kevin Gray