

Can social media get you fired?

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Employees sometimes fail to realise their bosses are watching them online. (Thinkstock)

We've all been there. Scanning one of your social media profiles, you notice a photo posted by a respected colleague in a less-than-professional situation. Maybe you cringed a bit, knowing the photo didn't match the professional persona you know your colleague wants to convey.

Increasingly, as personal and professional lives become more enmeshed, even talented professionals run the risk of getting fired or not getting a new position because of what they post on social networks.

Even so, there is little doubt — whether found accidentally or purposefully — that what you post online can impact your career. One in 10 job seekers between the ages of 16 and 34 have been rejected for a job because of something posted on their profiles, according to a recent survey from London-based mobile research firm On Device Research. That figure is expected to grow. Two-thirds of the 6,000 jobseekers in the US, the United Kingdom, China, Nigeria, Brazil and India who were polled for the survey said that they were not concerned that their current use of social media could harm their career prospects.

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But now more than ever, it is important for the career-minded to retain tight control over their social media profiles.

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What is acceptable?

What passes for acceptable to one person may not be to others who scan a profile. While most people realize a professional network like LinkedIn is not the right place to post about a wild party, not everyone recognizes the danger of doing so on sites like Facebook or Habbo.

“Whether it’s their views about religion and politics to personal feelings, some people don’t understand what’s appropriate and inappropriate to post on social media,” said Heather R Huhman, founder and president of Washington, DC-based consulting firm Come Recommended.

One gauge: ask yourself if you would want your grandmother to see the information, said Kathleen Brady, a New York City-based career management coach and author of GET A JOB! 10 Steps to Career Success. If not, refrain from posting.

Complaining about a boss or your job on any social media website is almost always a mistake. Many people think their employer will never see such posts, but you never know when someone will forward something you have posted or simply repost it elsewhere. Such behaviour on Twitter or Facebook could end up costing you a job, said Huhman.

Some social media networks allow you to have separate profiles for your personal friends and family and a more professional page for acquaintances and anyone browsing the web looking for information about you. But this is no guarantee that inappropriate posts or photos from your personal page won’t be shared by someone with more lax privacy settings.

If you do find out that racy photos of you or your negative comments about your boss ended up being shared, you should try to delete them. Remember, though, that content on the Internet rarely disappears for good and the wrong person may have already seen it.

“No excuse can cover up one of those mistakes,” Huhman said. You’re much better off admitting the mistake and letting your boss know that it won’t happen again, she said.