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That Tweet Just Doomed Your Wall Street Career: William D. Cohan
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By William D. Cohan

July 25 (Bloomberg) -- As if it weren't difficult enough to find a job in this still-struggling economy, prospective employees have a new hurdle to overcome: the dreaded -- and highly sophisticated -- social-media background check.

Thanks to an increasingly popular service provided by Social Intelligence Corp., a year-old company in Santa Barbara, California, an applicant's every faux pas, every bit of perverse logic, every bit of a tongue-in-cheek comment that falls flat -- to say nothing of overt or implied prejudice and lewd personal photographs -- can now be easily scraped off Internet networking sites including Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter and LinkedIn, and compiled in an attractive dossier that can easily be used to zotz you from any potential job.

We have heard warnings for years, of course, about how seemingly innocuous, or highly personal, utterances shared with friends on social networking websites can live on forever and potentially doom a budding professional career. And we were all recently treated to the jarring spectacle of Congressman Anthony Weiner's well-deserved self-immolation -- in 140 characters or less.

No Buried Secrets

But these days, thanks to Social Intelligence, whatever challenges employers once faced by having to search site after site to find information about prospective employees has been solved by -- and outsourced to -- the company's algorithms, an inevitable consequence of the power of search engines in the Internet Age.

"We are not detectives," Max Drucker, the chief executive officer of Social Intelligence, told the New York Times in a much discussed article. "All we assemble is what is publicly available on the Internet today." A sobering observation for sure.

If the message were not already crystalline, there is no longer any doubt that extreme vigilance with regard to social networking is no longer an option -- it is a necessity. Who knows how many budding presidents of the U.S. or CEO's of Goldman Sachs have already been nipped in the bud by Drucker's handiwork? He told the Times that he found one prospective employee searching for OxyContin on Craigslist, and other background checks found damning evidence of racist and anti-Semitic remarks.

Good Old Days

Once upon a time, before the Internet, such sleuthing would have been nearly impossible, meaning that many people happily and productively employed in the highest ranks of corporate America no doubt have committed inchoate acts of foolishness that today would be punished early and often.

Can this be considered progress or evidence that Big Brother is very much a part of daily life? To help people begin to grapple with the implications of this kind of digital monitoring, a review of a few of the more insightful online comments about the Times story is instructive.

Basic Internet Hygiene

A "John Doe," in New York City, wrote that he thought schools should teach "basic internet hygiene," including to "assume that everything you post under your true name will forever be in the public domain, because, well, it will be" and to "never post a photo of yourself online unless it is bland and you can absolutely control access to it."

"Doe" has little use for social networking. "In general, the less of yourself that appears online, the better off you will be," he wrote. "Facebook? No thanks." He also wrote that he expected legislators to do little to protect us from the more heinous aspects -- mistaken identity, for instance -- of Social Intelligence's dossiers. "If they get it wrong," he wrote of Social Intelligence, it could destroy "a person's life with no possibility of appeal. Naturally, our leaders in Congress can be expected to do nothing about this. After all, we are not wealthy bankers."

Very Slippery Slope

Other commenters simply see this new service as the beginning of a very slippery slope. "This is us, giving up a little essential liberty -- one photo, one text, one post, one status update, one Tweet at a time," "K. Johnson" wrote. Added "DCS": "I've never said or done anything online that anyone could possibly take offense to. I just hope I don't have to interview with the one person who takes offense at people who have never said or done anything offensive online."

"John," in Northern California, worries that the new dossiers will be used, and candidates rejected, but no fingerprints will ever be left behind. "They won't tell you that's why they aren't hiring you," he wrote. "You'll just be skipped over, the same way people or groups routinely are now if they don't fit a certain ethnic, racial or physical (fat, thin) profile. They won't admit this, however, and you can't prove it."

A Private Diary

Then there is the slightly perverse but well-taken logic that "Gramercy" displayed in a comment. "I actually applaud this," it read. "It may be because I consider myself as an adult who uses social media just to keep in touch or because I am getting older, but I am actually glad to see that indiscretions and bad judgment exhibited online can and will be held against those pinheads who use the Internet as their private diary. And while I am at it, we should set standards: anyone who has seen a full episode of Jersey Shore or the Housewives of whatever, or can identify the names of the Kardashians should not be allowed to hold a real job or to drive for that matter."

Given the existence of companies like Social Intelligence, it just makes common sense not to put anything in an e-mail or social

networking post that you wouldn't be proud to see on the front page of the New York Times.

(William D. Cohan, a former investment banker and the author of "Money and Power: How Goldman Sachs Came to Rule the World," is a Bloomberg View columnist. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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