

We are living in a time where people are struggling to maintain control over their private information. You often have to jump through hoops in order to get access to *your own* information. With this heightened sense of personal information security, it amazes me that new forms of Internet info sharing, like MySpace or youtube emerge every day.

Just yesterday, I received an Evite, an electronic party invitation. One of the other invitees on the list had attached a profile to her email address. With one click I was able to view her photo, learn her hobbies, the number of children she had, along with other “personal information.”

So you ask, what’s the big deal? Everyone is doing it. Let me assure you that sharing personal information online is a big deal and could have significant impact on your current and future professional aspirations.

I can be a little chatty, so I’ve often been advised to “play my cards close to my vest.” Meaning, you should hold your playing cards close enough to your chest so that no one else can see them. The idea is to prevent others in the game from gaining a strategic advantage over you. You do this by not allowing them even a glimpse of your cards. I have learned that this is good advice and broadly applicable.

There are many employment laws in place to protect your privacy. They spell out the type of information that prospective and current employers can ask you to provide or use in making decisions about hiring, promotion or termination. The problem is none of these laws can stop a supervisor, interviewer or co-worker from forming an *opinion* of you that may have negative impact on the ability to get, keep or advance on the job. This brings us back to MySpace and similar electronic communities.

I have a friend who recently discovered the MySpace profile of his teen aged nephew. On his space, he *bragged* about drug use, school skipping, sexual activity and more. To prove the veracity of his exploits, he uploaded a photo of himself in full party mode. He had laid his cards face up on the table! Needless to say, when Uncle Bill presented this information to Little Johnny’s parents, his profile disappeared and his lifestyle was dramatically changed by mom and dad.

Given the widespread knowledge and use of online networking communities, it is not unheard of that a similar scenario could play itself out in your workplace. More and more employers are using these communities to see what current employees are saying about them.

I recently attended a meeting with a group of other HR professionals who were reviewing info from their corporate community on Vault.com. One of the entries was written by a newly hired employee and spoke very negatively of the company. After 5 minutes of discussion, the employee was identified. His username was a combination of his first and last name and he had provided enough information in his comments to make his identity obvious. His remarks weren’t harmful enough to warrant formal action, but would definitely impact his career options. There are also reports of recruiters searching these sites for the profiles of people who have applied for jobs. Any information they find is used to determine whether a person is a good “fit” with the company values.

A word to the wise... think twice before you launch your profile anywhere or provide your opinion in what you think may be a protected environment. Remember, loose lips sink ships, and that ship just might be your own.