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After all these years, the warnings feel so cliché: The Internet is forever, so be careful about what you put on it. But the warnings are clearly still needed. Time and time again, we hear stories about people who have lost their jobs because of something they posted online -- particularly on [social networking](#) sites. And there's no telling how many people have been passed over for the jobs they wanted thanks to Internet faux pas.

Perhaps some believe that with so many people vying for jobs, potential employers simply don't have the time to find out what candidates are doing online. Surely, they don't have the time to troll Facebook pages, right?

Wrong.

More and more employers have made looking at social networking sites a part of their candidate search. In fact, studies show that at least one-third of hiring managers regularly use the information they find on Facebook as a screening tool.

Lisa Layne of Lettuce Public Relations is one of them. The main reasons she relies on a social networking search when looking for employees is because the information she finds online can augment the somewhat scripted responses that she gets from candidates during the hiring process.

"People can nail interviews and can have the most incredible sales pitch, but then what you don't see in front of them is how they present themselves outside of the office," she said.

And what should these candidates present online? When looking through prospective employees' Facebook pages, Layne says that she pays special attention to their writing skills, whether they display an interest in the [public relations](#) industry (which helps to weed out people who are willing to take any kind of job that they can get), and their knowledge about Internet trends.

In addition, Layne says she looks for evidence that a candidate may behave unprofessionally if she does hire them. Although she wants outgoing employees who understand the value of networking, anyone inclined to swing from the chandelier after a couple of drinks -- and post evidence of these exploits on Facebook -- need not apply. Public relations is all about image management and Layne says she wants employees who can discern not only what is appropriate to do in public, but also what is appropriate to share with the world on Facebook.

"Your personal and professional lives, even though they are very different, are intertwined significantly," she said.

## Personality on Facebook

Layne's belief that the personality a potential employee displays on Facebook may be indicative of future job performance is not unique. In fact, a study recently published in the Journal of Applied Social Psychology looked at just that -- the correlation between job performance and the information that can be learned through an employee's Facebook photos and wall posts.

In order to make this connection, the Facebook pages of 56 employed college students were rated based on

five personality traits: extroversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness and emotional stability. These characteristics, which psychologists call the "Big Five" personality traits, were chosen by researchers because they often predict organizationally relevant outcomes -- including how an employee will perform on the job. What researchers found was that students who received favorable personality ratings for their Facebook pages also received positive performance evaluations from their employers.

This correlation exists, says lead researcher Don Kluemper of Northern Illinois University, because the Big Five personality traits are an integral part of who we are, and as a result, will manifest themselves all the time -- whether we are posting on Facebook or performing our job duties.

"People have certain personality traits and that's going to lead them to engage in certain types of behaviors," he said. "For example, a neurotic person is going to engage in neurotic behaviors all the time -- and if they do it on Facebook, they're also likely to do it on the job. If they behave this way on the job, it's going to affect their job performance."

### **What does your facebook page say about you?**

What messages are you communicating to potential employers through your Facebook page? Are you projecting a personality that will [help you land a job](#) -- or make employers look elsewhere? Here are some ways that the Big Five personality traits may be represented on your Facebook page.

***Extroversion.*** What are you doing in your Facebook photos? Do they show you enjoying the company of friends? Do you chat up a lot of people online? If so, potential employers are likely to see you as someone with an outgoing personality who would easily fit into any company culture.

***Agreeableness.*** What do you say to people on your Facebook wall? Do you argue all the time? Do people leave you messages describing your nasty disposition? Discord on your Facebook wall can be a red flag to employers that warns them of a potential office troublemaker.

***Emotional stability.*** Do you always ask your Facebook friends for help with something? Do you seem down in the dumps one day and on top of the world the next? Displays of moodiness like this may show employers that you're not emotionally stable enough to handle the stresses of the workplace.

***Openness to experience.*** Have you posted photos from your latest vacation to an exotic locale? Have you learned a new language or taken up playing an instrument? Posts like these will show employers that you are open minded and have intellectual curiosity, which demonstrates that you would be willing to learn new things on the job.

***Conscientiousness.*** Did you post on your Facebook wall about a household project that you're happy you finally finished? Do you take pride in the words you use online, being sure to carefully edit everything you write? These things tell employers that you are conscientious and professional enough not to embarrass the company with online antics.

### **Employers beware**

Although social networking sites provide an invaluable look at potential employees' character, Kluemper advises employers to tread with caution. Along with personality traits, hiring managers can also learn things like someone's race, sexual orientation, and disability status -- all of which cannot be considered when hiring.

"If hiring managers who are viewing online profiles end up not hiring a lot of people with disabilities, for example that can backfire on the employers," he said.

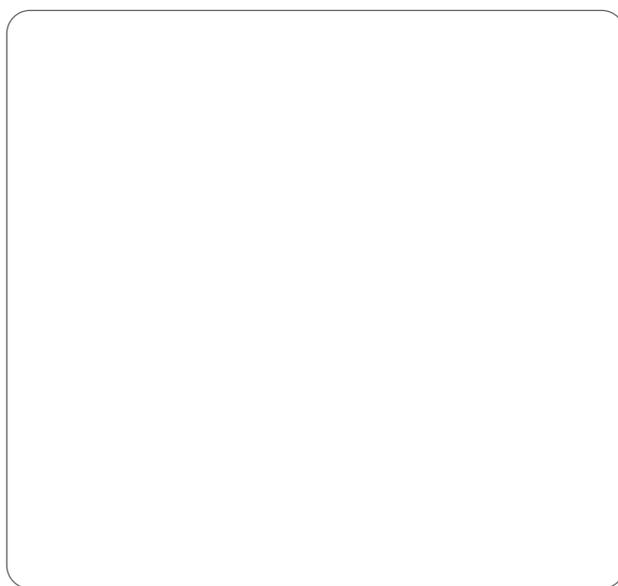
In order to avoid the impression of bias, Kluemper suggests that one person in an organization view candidates' social networking sites and pass along only relevant information to hiring managers. Since the people doing the hiring will not know any of the protected information, this can reduce the appearance that a company is not hiring candidates based on things like race, gender or other protected characteristics.

### About the Author

*Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer based in California.*

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