Why cybervetting is becoming a new norm and how job seekers can use it to their advantage

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It's incredible to think how distinctly our lives have been divided to times "before" and "during" COVID. Although it is quite hard to predict for sure in just what direction our world will head "after", it is safe to assume that it will continue, whether by inertia or by free choice, moving towards a more digitalized future, where new times dictate new norms. This reality has hit many a people hard and multiple companies across the globe were faced with the harsh reality of the rapidly changing world: to go digital or to go home.

However, some digital transformations are not always as straightforward and flaw-free as many might think.

Let's take, for instance, interviews. Many job-seekers in 2020 (myself included) have had interviews with recruiters, HR managers or with other decision-makers directly via Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams. In fact, according to forbes.com, more than 60% of 502 companies surveyed use or have used video interviewing in their hiring process in 2020. Statistics are not yet available for 2021, but we can only assume that they have increased.
Although interviews both in person and via video have their similarities: you can see/hear the candidate, you can converse with them, evaluate their replies and determine an overall impression, you cannot see what's beyond the screen. For instance, a candidate's interaction with others in person is a gray zone. The same goes for character assessment, which is more or less altered by additional stressors: lack of tech-savviness, delays and difficulties caused by connection issues, as well as the added pressure of having to see your own face during a conversation. Because of the above-mentioned reasons and not only, companies might feel as though they do not have the "full picture".

It is evident, that with the rapid progression of the world's digitalization and by becoming techier and techier, both companies and candidates are unraveling new ways of mutual assessment.

While candidates have owned (websites and blogs), paid (ads) and earned (reviews and mentions) media at their disposal in determining whether the company is a good fit for them, companies have social media. In fact, according to a survey done by CareerBuilder, the number of organizations in the United States that use social media to screen job applicants has increased from 11% in 2006 to 70% in 2018. Of course, the numbers will vary from country to country, but the trend here is very clear. Companies are starting to feel as though they can get the "full picture" by cybervetting.

Broadly speaking, cybervetting can be described as the acquisition and use of online information to evaluate the suitability of an individual or organization for a particular role. When cybervetting, an information seeker gathers information about an information target from online sources in order to evaluate past behavior, to predict future behavior, or to address some combination thereof (Oxford Research Encyclopedia).

The primary objective of cybervetting seems to be the desire to validate candidates' qualifications and determine if they present themselves professionally. Additionally, there are secondary motives, such as making sure the candidate does not represent values and ideas that may be harmful or damaging. In the sense of the latter, cybervetting, mostly thanks to the availability and publicity of social media, can be seen as a means of cheap, quick and often time fairly effective risk management.

But what makes cybervetting surprising, is that despite candidates knowing (according to Root and McKay (2014) as many as 80%) that their social media is being screened, only 2% of social media users thought that their social media posts have caused them to get fired or not be hired (Smith 2015). We can only assume why such a large discrepancy exists. However, if I were to be so bold to do so, I would think that this is due to the fact, that companies are hesitant to let interviewees in on the screening processes in fear of receiving accusations related to privacy violations. Although it being quite common, cybervetting is still a gray zone.

Knowing this, what can job seekers do to not only protect themselves from unwanted scrutiny, but also to increase their chances of being hired?

In my mind, the first step has been taken already, as being prepared means being informed. However, there are additional things that one can do. Let's jump into them:

**1. Determine your digital footprint**

While people may think employers only go to LinkedIn for hiring, in actuality, they go to almost all the social media sites when screening for prospective employees.

So start off with a quick Google search of yourself and see what comes up. What you see now is what your interviewer or potential employer might find in 30 seconds. Ask yourself — is this information something that I would want my boss to know? Is this something that can hinder my chances of getting employed? If you are not sure, as a rule of thumb it is worth minimizing the access to:

- controversial and/or radical ideas;
- sexual or provocative content;
- offensive or damaging remarks and/or comments;
- public derogatory criticism of past employers or anyone, for the matter.

But I can be more precise than just that. According to the previously mentioned CareerBuilder's survey, these were the top reasons employers decided not to proceed with a hire:

- job candidate posted provocative or inappropriate photographs, videos or information: 40%;
- job candidate posted information about them drinking or using drugs: 36%;
- job candidate had discriminatory comments related to race, gender, religion, etc.: 31%;
- job candidate was linked to criminal behavior: 30%;
- job candidate lied about their qualifications: 27%;
- job candidate had poor communication skills: 27%;
- job candidate shared confidential information or fellow employees: 25%;
- job candidate's screen name was unprofessional: 22%;
- job candidate shared confidential information from previous employers: 20%;
- job candidate lied about an absence: 16%;
- job candidate posted too frequently: 12%.

While looking through your digital footprint, I also think it's worth considering deactivating or deleting old accounts that are no longer in use, as well as deleting information that no longer represents your ideas and beliefs. We often forget that this kind of information is still out there, so this can be a good chance to "declutter".

Apart from simply arranging what information is available on you upon search, make sure to also determine where it can potentially lead. Can an interviewer find your e-mail address? Make sure you e-mail address lead to your Reddit page? Make sure you also aware of this.
2. Keep private things private, but avoid being a ghost

Social media users have found many creative ways to go around social media screening: using fake names on Facebook, creating untraceable nicknames on social media sites and/or forums, as well as creating "finsta" is on Instagram and not only.

A finsta is a secondary, usually private, Instagram account where users are more lax in deciding what they post. It's a private space that might be more personally authentic and is shared with close friends. This is a contrast to someone's main account, which might have more heavily curated content.

Nowadays social media users understand the necessity of having both "private" and "public" pages. However, according to a survey done by CareerBuilder (2018), fully removing your social media profiles while job searching is a bad idea. 57% of employers are less likely to call someone in for an interview if they can't find a job candidate online.

Of that group, 36% like to gather more information before calling in a candidate for an interview, and 25% expect candidates to have an online presence. Therefore it is an ideal place to "sell" yourself.

Working on a personal brand is not an easy task, however, you will be going into the right direction if you ask yourself the following questions:

- Who am I? What do I stand for?
- What is my expertise? What can I do well?
- What qualities and traits do I want to show? What kind of beliefs do I want to convey?
- What makes me stand out? What are my unique selling points (USP)?
- What kind of content can help others see 1—4?

For those who are just starting to work on their personal brand, I recommend looking into PwC's Personal Brand Workbook for more insights and tips:

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