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The Aggressive Online Search

By Stephen M. Winzenburg

Hiring in the Internet age means that applicants often know more about an institution's history than the search committee would like us to know.

Universities have lost some control of the search process now that once-private information is available publicly to potential employees. An aggressive online search can uncover negatives that may keep qualified candidates from accepting interviews or making campus visits.

In my own job search, it took me only a few clicks to uncover departmental unrest at one college where I applied. A simple Web search revealed that a staff member in the department had been hastily fired and a student leader replaced for supporting the dismissed staffer. When the head of the search committee called to invite me to the campus for an interview, I asked him about the shake-up and he seemed dumbfounded that I knew anything about it. He asked how I had found out something the department didn't want anyone to know. He obviously had not looked at his department's Web pages; the new student leader had posted details of the controversy as part of his biography on the department's own site.

It has become so common for hiring committees to use search engines to uncover information about applicants that the members of those committees should not be surprised that their own names are being Googled, in turn, by applicants. What can be discovered about a department or a faculty member is often embarrassing to an institution, and a real turnoff to job seekers.

When I was contacted for a phone interview by a department chair at a small private college, I Googled his name. Fifth on the list was a link to a PDF file of his CV which, when opened, revealed that he, too, was looking for a new job!

Another time I quickly uncovered that an institution had conducted four searches for the same position over the past four years, which screamed "red flag." Then there was a chat-site discussion I found about a search that contained conflicting reactions from applicants who had already had phone interviews there: One candidate praised the department's fairness and generosity while another condemned it for being cheap and asking invasive questions.

Often a university's Web site lacks sufficiently detailed information about a particular program or department. One rural state institution's well-designed departmental pages showed a dozen smiling faculty and staff members in a small program that offered only six to eight courses each semester. I couldn't figure out if that meant it was the most ideal place to work on earth or if the college was trying to make itself look better than it actually was.

During the phone interview for an opening at that institution, I could hear gasps when I described my normal workload, which almost equaled the department's entire output. In response to my questions, a member of the hiring committee eventually admitted

that the department suffered from high faculty turnover and needed a leader to guide its reorganization. When committee members later mentioned the position's ridiculously low salary, it became obvious that the department was far from the ideal that was promoted on its slick Web site.

For a job opening in a television-communications program at a large university, I wanted to see some production samples, but I had trouble finding any student videos posted on its Web site. I had to resort to YouTube videos, which showed students drunk, joking about drug use, and complaining about the university. Later, during a telephone interview for the job, the hiring-committee members asked what I would do to improve their programming, and I told them about the difficulty I had finding information about it on the university's Web site. They responded that their video material was available only to private internal users with passwords. How was I supposed to know what needed to be changed if I couldn't get access to what they were currently doing?

Then there was the committee from a state university that placed a generic advertisement for a faculty member in communications, with no details as to what specific courses the new hire would teach. The department's Web site listed five faculty members, and I accessed the course schedules to check out all the possible classes. Eventually the committee chair responded to my e-mailed questions by telling me the three specific courses that I would teach if hired.

By the day of the phone interview, I had printed a copy of the course descriptions and departmental requirements. In the middle of the interview, I was asked how I would teach a specific course, but it wasn't one of the three mentioned in the committee chair's e-mail. It wasn't even listed as an offering on the department's site. Yet the

committee members wanted to know what text I would use. "Expect the unexpected" appears to be the norm no matter how much Internet preparation you do.

Many campus Web sites contain outdated information that may be misleading to candidates. One college had three different people on three different pages listed as leading a program that claimed to be technologically advanced. When I pointed out the confusion during the phone interview, the surprised search committee chair said, "We are in the process of updating the site," and admitted that some departmental links hadn't changed in years.

Employers in these tough economic times need to be even more devoted to maintaining an updated Web presence in order to attract experienced applicants. Even though the market is flooded with job seekers, the most desirable candidates are using the Internet to discern where they want to apply, and colleges should strengthen their sites to attract the top academics.

I've seen recent searches in which two-thirds of the applicants were desperate job seekers unqualified for the position; the committees were left with only a few mediocre choices. Because some college teaching positions pay only in the $40,000s or even upper $30,000s (less than what some of the faculty members' students will earn after graduating with their bachelor's degrees), those colleges, in particular, need to recognize the importance of using their Web sites to market themselves to candidates.

What a college lacks in pay can be made up for in benefits, cost of living, work environment, and local lifestyle information, which needs to be properly promoted on an HR site. Departmental pages need to be more than just pictures with generic descriptions that

could apply to any institution. Each department needs to clearly communicate details regarding what makes it a truly unique workplace and why someone would want to be employed there.

But most sites today end up raising more questions than answers. The problem for the aggressive academic applicant becomes knowing how to handle online discoveries. Do you raise the issue, point-blank, with the search committee, taking a chance that it may be offended and not hire you? And if so, when is the right time to do that? Should you mention it on the phone to save everyone the trouble of inviting you to campus, or wait for the in-person interview to spring your question on the hiring committee?

Committees are often looking for reasons to dismiss applicants in order to shrink the pool, so discussing any negatives you uncovered on the Web may result in immediate rejection. Even so, I had to often ask myself if I wanted to visit a college where I discovered situations that would keep me from ever taking the job.

As a person who has also headed search committees, I know how important it is for the applicant to be humble, collegial, and not too assertive. (One pompous candidate walked in and started the interview with "What are you going to do to convince me to work here?") But job seekers do need to subtly raise issues that they fear could lead to problems for them in that workplace.

Even after a job offer is made, the potential employee may go back to the Internet to dig for answers as to whether the position should be accepted or rejected. Web information in the technological age, no matter how skewed, is often taken as truth, and I have seen it used as one of the reasons a person turns down a job.

Every search should involve aggressive investigating from both sides. It's the responsibility of job seekers to question the search committee just as much as it's the potential employer's right to question the applicants. The Internet has both helped and complicated the process for those looking for the right fit.

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