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Facebook Research Revisited

07.02.2009 | Culture and Society, Research Researchers at the University of Dayton who study how students and employers use Facebook found that employers are much more aware of the social media site and that students are more realistic about how others use it.

But their study found that job-hunting students are missing out by not participating in LinkedIn, a social media site geared to professionals that a significant number of employers use to search for candidates.

Following up on 2006 research that uncovered a wide gap in perceptions and usage between students and employers, the survey found:

- * Ninety percent of students say their profiles accurately reflect "the real me" but only 34 percent of employers believe the profiles are an accurate portrayal.
- * While 57 percent of employers use LinkedIn, a social media site for professionals, it is used by only 13 percent of students.
- * Many more students are using privacy settings; that number increased about 25 percent.
- * The percentage of students who believe it is unethical for potential employers to check their profiles dropped by about half to 18 percent.
- * And 22 percent of students say they have never posted anything about their alcohol use or made inappropriate comments.

"What this survey shows is that students are being more realistic and they're being more cautious," said one of the researchers, Mark Sisson, associate director of career services for the University of Dayton. "A smaller number is bothered by the idea that this is not just their world and that others can see into it."

In contrast, in 2006 a large percentage of the students viewed Facebook as their own world, said researcher Chris Wiley, also associate director of career services at the University of Dayton.

The results of the survey were presented in June at the annual conference of the National Association of Colleges and Employers in Las Vegas. Wiley and Sisson polled 2,058 students at the University of Dayton, Wittenberg University, Wright State University and 798 employers from several college hiring networks.

"In the earlier survey, nearly half the students thought that it was a violation of their privacy for potential employers to use Facebook, and nearly one-third thought it was unethical," Wiley said. "That dropped significantly in the new survey."

Employers reported that students' job prospects have been hurt by negative information on Facebook, either because they decided not to interview the student or didn't hire them after the interview or brought it up during an interview, Wiley said.

"When employers find negative information, 50 percent of the time it ends badly," she said.

Jonathan Kenney, a rising senior in political science, said his usage of Facebook has evolved as he's gone through college and began applying for jobs.

"When you first start a page, it's more about being perceived as fun-loving and less serious," he said. "But when I wanted to crack down and look for jobs, I was very involved in editing my page. I took out any photos or comments that might be considered rude or inappropriate."

"It wasn't that anything was really that bad, but I'm conscious that lots of people besides employers, like friends and family, can see it. I wanted to be perceived as a more serious person," Kenney said.

As a result of the survey, Sisson and Wiley said they will be sharing this advice with job-hunting students about social networking sites:

- * Employers will continue to increase their usage of social media and use it in different ways.
- * Job hunters should use LinkedIn for networking because that's where employers are looking.
- * Both employers and students should become more knowledgeable and aware of privacy settings and policies about how long information is retained.

There's one finding that does leave them scratching their heads: 90 percent of students say the profiles reflect "the real me," compared to only 34 percent of employers who thought student profiles reflect the real person, Sisson said.

"More employers were giving them the benefit of the doubt," he said, but noted that it could be that the adults may have been reflecting a common attitude toward college in the U.S.

"There is a belief that your time in college is Fantasy Island, that it's a crazy time and doesn't really count as real life," Sisson said.

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