

Netreps: managing your online reputation

A Badenoch & Clark guide

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Are you Facebooked? Is your face on MySpace? What about LinkedIn? Do you tweet? Have you posted a comment on a company's website or news page? Is your online CV up to date – do you even know where it is?

The chances are that even if you're not a regular blogger or social networker, it'll be still possible to find something about you on the web. And if you're looking for a new job, what's found could make the difference between an offer and a rejection: it's estimated that over a quarter of HR professionals have rejected an applicant on the basis of what appears on the web.

Google yourself and see what comes up. With an estimated 60% of employers doing just that, you'll get a feel for what they may learn about you.

In this guide we look at how to manage your internet reputation – your netrep – effectively.

1 Why your netrep is important

Netreps are all about perception, which is never more important than when you're trying to create the right one. Whatever your name throws up on Google, be it about you or a doppelganger, will give an instant picture of your wider personality and interests. Information stays on the web for a long time, and negative publicity generally can't be deleted from the search engines either. So, when you publish that video of you downing pints and start blogging about how you hate your job, think about the impact that might have - your employer, or next employer, is only a few clicks away.

It's probably worth deciding if you want a netrep in the first place. If you decide to build a netrep that works to your advantage, consider what you'd like your name to be connected to. What impression of yourself you want to project. Then spend as much time managing your online reputation as you would on crafting your CV. If it all sounds like too much hassle and you'd just prefer to stay firmly offline, remember to close down your accounts from Facebook to Flickr before forsaking the online world.

2 Employers do look and make decisions

Whether or not an employer actively uses social media as part of their recruitment process, you can be pretty certain that you've been checked out online. With the current appetite for wearing our hearts on our electronic sleeves it's not surprising that when you join an organisation your new colleagues will know much more about you already than you might be comfortable with.

Professional networks like LinkedIn and Xing should pose little problem – assuming your details are backed up by your CV and the “real” you. Your Bebo, Facebook and YouTube activity may give an employer a very different picture and there's not much you can do once the impression is made. Employers do run some risk in vetting potential recruits via their online footprint, but as long as the decisions they make are not based on any legally discriminatory grounds – age, sex, religion and the like – then you're going to have a tough job proving that your ill-considered remarks or pictures contributed to the nicely worded rejection letter.

And it's not just potential employers who are checking you out. It's highly likely that your current boss and colleagues will have done so too. And clients you are dealing with. Now, are you still sitting comfortably?

3 Dealing with bad netreps

Unlike tattoos, comments you've made online in the heat of the moment or that picture of you dancing on the bar on holiday can be cleaned up to improve your netrep. Some professional sites such as LinkedIn and Xing will let you remove comments or edit your profile accordingly - Facebook will let you remove comments you've made. Forums or blogs where you might have complained about

customer service, for example, may not. It is often harder to remove pictures and video in which you've been tagged – contact the person who posted it and ask them to un-tag you or, better still, remove it altogether.

For those comments you are not able to do anything about, don't worry, time is a great healer. The longer a web page has little or no activity, the lower down the search results it will go so older comments about less topical items will have less of an impact. Post worthwhile questions or add sensible and considered comment to discussions on your own or other people's blogs and professional discussion groups. You'll not only position yourself better professionally when you do come up in a search, but also push more of the outdated poorer content further down the search results. If all else fails hire an expert who will clean up your profile for a fee.

4 Get positive

If you create the right perception, it can only help in opening the right doors. So consider actively cultivating a positive online presence. Decide what you want your netrep to look like, and target media that will help you achieve it.

Professional networks give you a great opportunity to demonstrate what you've done and how others regard you. Write helpful articles, post insightful reviews or answer someone's burning question. By actively contributing to online forums, social and professional media networks, you can position yourself as an industry authority. But be mindful to stick to the site rules to avoid expulsion.

Consider speaking at events or getting involved with CSR initiatives also. Offline initiatives often end up getting internet coverage, and by demonstrating values that mirror your employer's and linking to well-known influential people, you are likely to reinforce your attractiveness as an employee.

5 Make sure your content is appropriate

The best piece of advice is: if you wouldn't want your mother to read or see it, don't put it on the internet. Making sure your web content is appropriate is one of the very first steps to managing your netrep effectively. Applying common sense to censoring your views and images can mean that a flippant or angry remark does not become a black mark on your character.

Remember that not everyone shares the same values, particularly if they are of a different generation. What may seem like harmless fun to you and your friends, may cause others to see you in a different light.

Here are some simple rules to bear in mind:

- It's easy to get carried away by the banter on social networking sites. Be careful not to be drawn into expressing extreme views that you may later regret.
- Take care when updating your status. It may well have been a difficult day, or a colleague may have upset you, but avoid making

derogatory or personal comments. And constantly talking about your glee at going home time may draw into question your commitment.

- Think twice before posting embarrassing, funny or risqué photographs of yourself and/or your friends. If you wouldn't display them on your desk, don't display them on the web.
- Avoid posting during the working day. Many sites show the time and date of a post – a sure giveaway that you've wasted time at work.
- Abide by the rules. If your employer has strict rules about the use of social networking sites, then stick to them.
- Moderate your comments and feedback. Ten years ago letters of complaint to organisations were private affairs. Today, many companies have comments pages or individuals will have established sites dedicated to criticising leading brands. While you may not wish to work directly for the organisation you're criticising, remember that it may be a customer of a future employer.

6 Network, network, network?

For someone who truly nurtures their relationships with contacts, social media can be the biggest referral network available. But networking online also has an impact on your netrep – particularly recommendations. It's important that you manage any online recommendations effectively. Remember how important it is to decide on your references – online recommendations are no difference. Below are a few guidelines to follow:

- Remember that asking for or getting recommendations is normally a sign that you're looking for work – this means that any current colleagues that are on your network will know that you're on the market. Do you really want people asking those questions yet? One suggestion is to ask a manager or contact at the completion of a specific project you've worked on – that way they're providing a recommendation based on a particular piece of work you've completed and not necessarily asking for recommendations at the time of sending your CV to recruiters.
- Think about whom you ask for recommendations – both their position and how many people you ask are important. As with anything, more doesn't necessarily mean better! People looking at your profile will look at not only what has been written about you, but by whom. Who should you approach for a recommendation? Senior management who clearly have a link to the role you did; clients that were in a senior or decision making role; employees who worked for you if you're in a management role. Avoid asking work colleagues that you shared drinks with on Friday evenings – it will be evident from their own position or what they've got to say about you.
- As with references, a recommendation is as much about what isn't said as what is said. Think very carefully about asking people to make a recommendation – if you ask someone who isn't in a position to give you a glowing recommendation, they may use words or terms that at first glance appear fine, but in

effect make evident areas that you may be lacking in. For example – “Jamie is enthusiastic about any new project” – may suggest to some readers that Jamie isn’t a completer.

And don’t be offended if people decline your request for a recommendation! Just as this offers advice on how to manage your netrep, even those you approach for a recommendation may be concerned about their own netrep. A recommendation for you remains in the public domain for life!

7 Access limits have their limits

So you’ve done what you can to protect your own reputation; you’ve commented in a professional manner and where it is most appropriate; managed your “fun” profile so that only friends can see it; restricted your rants and raves to only those closest to you or, where you’ve unwittingly gone off the boil online, you’ve done it anonymously. But is it enough?

Sadly, the answer is no. Even though you may have been a digital saint and limited whom you network with and how you network with them, this doesn’t make you bullet proof.

The nature of social networks is such that the conversations you are having with friends and the pictures that are for their eyes only, are not necessarily going to stay that way. There is always the threat you will be found through your friends; your friends’ friends; your friends’ friends’ friends – you get the picture.

However, by following a few simple rules you can limit the damage done:

- Employ the strictest privacy settings and set the highest levels of security. This is no guarantee but there’s no point in making it easy.
- Remove any personal information, pictures or references you’d rather employers didn’t see. It’s obvious but the best way to start.
- Ask your friends and colleagues to remove any damaging or disparaging statements, pictures or comments that feature you. This limits the damage done by your extended network.
- Keep up to date with what is being said about you and act accordingly. It’s not about ego, but knowing where to go.

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