

# The Social Web and Careers Work

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Whether you like it or not, you probably have a social web footprint – most people have one! Even if you don't belong to any online social networks, and have never left a comment at any website, other people may have mentioned your name in passing – perhaps in minutes of meetings or in a caption to a photo. A growing range of 'people search' tools help users locate details of someone's identity and activities (see Endnote 1).

The implication for careers and advice work is that every client we offer advice and guidance to has a social web footprint, the content of which might help us understand the client better. More importantly, their footprint may help or hinder them in their future job search or career development. Thirdly, the social web opens up networking opportunities for both clients and advisers, enabling connections, referrals and introductions which can help people access opportunities and obtain advice and support directly from their network. This should bring the social web firmly into the realm of the professional adviser, but for many reasons advisers have tended to shy away from getting involved with this aspect of the client's identity.

## The rise of the social web

We need to recognise that people's behaviour online has changed dramatically in recent years. The web is now primarily social and interactive in nature, rather than being a collection of expert-published content to be read or otherwise passively consumed by viewers. People now prefer connecting with others, discovering information collaboratively and sharing ideas and resources. In the United States research found 29% (40m) of American broadband users over the age of 13 now regularly contribute to social networking sites. Over three quarters - 76% (105m) - contribute to the social web while only 24% (33m) of passive consumers don't contribute (Netpop, 2008). Advice services which ignore these trends, risk a shrinking audience for the content they publish. Use of the social web does correlate with age, and younger people spend more time and are more engaged as social web contributors than the general population. 75% of 18-24 year-olds use social networking sites. Other

age groups are catching up: 57% of 25-34 year-olds, 30% of 35-44 year-olds, 19% of 45-54 year-olds, 10% of 55-64 year-olds and 7% of those 65+ use social networking (Lenhart, 2009).

## How young people use the social web

The social web activities young users report they are engaged with are not hugely surprising. They like to keep in touch with friends and family; share content, such as photos, video, and audio; make new contacts; hang out, surf, just pass the time; explore their identity; and sometimes they might even engage in a little informal learning (NYA, 2008).

The 'Digital Youth project' found social networkers were mainly connected to the same friends they have in real life. They simply use social networking sites as a convenient means of keeping track, communicating and extending real world friendships. This runs contrary to the views espoused by scaremongers that social networking teens are in danger because they build relationships with complete strangers. Young people like to connect in order to talk about shared niche interests. They like building their online reputation with their peer group and beyond. They see the possibility of sharing their accomplishments much more widely, through the viral nature of the social web. This study also found some evidence of peer to peer learning, and concluded there is a real role for adults facilitating interest driven use of the social web by young people (Mizuko *et al.*, 2008).

## Allaying the concerns of personal advisers towards the social web

I surveyed a group of personal advisers in 2008 to ask them about what their concerns were in relation to use of the social web. Some of the issues emerging included a lack of staff confidence in using social web tools. There was also a concern that encouraging staff to use this technology might lead to lost productivity. Some were concerned of the danger of identity theft and impersonation. A few mentioned service provider liabilities and some felt the danger of exposing clients to social media might put them at risk from sexual predators. Many felt cyber bullying would be a problem, and that asking advisers to go onto social networking sites would amount to an invasion of teenage space. By far the most widely held concern though was about reliability of information. Advisers feel concerned that the social web is full of misinformation (Larbalestier, 2008).

These concerns are frequently used to justify non-engagement by personal advisers and, in some organisations, the total banning or blocking of certain types of social content. This unfortunately denies advisers from accessing an enormous wealth of information, and

contacts. It also means they may not be able to help clients make best use of the social web, due to their unfamiliarity with the medium. There is no doubt that everyone who uses the social web needs to be aware of issues around online safety. Thankfully, there are many resources to support teenagers and the professionals working with them, which provide excellent information to educate internet users on how to use the web safely (see Endnote 2).

### Why 'managing your online presence' should be part of young people's careers education today

Management of online presence is becoming more important because much of the social web is public. Employers can see what their employees say and do online. Staff see what their colleagues do. Recruiters are actively checking people out online, and using this information for headhunting, and candidate screening. Customers can see what a company's staff say online, and authorities can see what people do and say. Job seekers, those researching careers and those seeking career development can all develop their online presence positively through blogging and updating social network pages in order to improve their chances of employment. A blog (short for weblog) is a type of website, where people add regular entries – text, images, video, or audio, link to other blogs and web content, and usually encourage comment, feedback and discussion. In some cases bloggers publish 'news' or comment about specific topics of personal interest or passion. For others, their blog is more of an online journal or diary.

Producing a blog, or updating your social networking site pages can help people establish greater control of their online identity. At present many employers and admissions tutors search online to see what they can find out about individual applicants to supplement application forms and CVs. Such searches might trawl up *Facebook* entries, photographs, *YouTube* clips, as well as professional profiles on sites like *XING* or *LinkedIn*. If you are active blogger, any web search could also draw recruiters or those searching for you to your content.

As careers professionals, we should be well placed to help our clients audit their online identity. We can help clients re-evaluate their web presence from a recruiter's perspective. We can discuss a number of attributes of online identity: presence, what's being shared, reputation development and the relationships with others that are exposed.

### Key issues for individuals managing their identity on the social web

For many people, 'presence' could be important as recruiters are looking to see whether they are engaged in the social web at all. Not being 'present' could mean an

individual not being shortlisted for a job, and a reduction in their chance of being approached by headhunters.

What individuals share is important too - the links, files, content, ideas that they post. They should be reflecting on whether they post content which is meaningful, legal, and relevant to the identity they seek to create.

Activity on the social web builds personal and professional reputation. If others comment positively on your blog posts, or give feedback on your *Facebook* profile, or refer to your content from their own sites, you may be considered knowledgeable or expert in your field!

The social web also reveals details of our relationships. In a blog, people often display a 'blogroll' or list of other bloggers they like to read. In social networking sites, people's contacts or friend lists are often displayed to anyone visiting someone's profile.

The relationships we make visible online say something about us. For example if you follow industry leaders, employees from a company you want to work for, it demonstrates you are keeping yourself updated professionally, and might have some insight into how the company operates, and its values and priorities. Following people in your industry, or the career specialism you aspire to gives you access to social labour market information. This is different from the statistics about employment in different fields which some advisers share with their clients. You cannot interact with employment statistics, but you can ask a direct question of a blogger, or fellow member of a special interest group in *Facebook*. You can also comment on what others say in their blogs or social network profiles.

Recruiters are growing more interested in who you are linked with, who inspires and influences us. For example a relevant professional network could mean you'll be perceived as well connected - someone who can bring business with them to a new employer, or be able to solve problems more easily because you can call upon your network for support.

Views vary wildly on the extent of social web vetting. A recent recruitment firm survey found that 20% of employers said they checked out applicants online (Rowe, 2007). The study also listed the top ten social networking turn-offs for recruiters:

1. References to drug abuse
2. Extreme or intolerant views, especially racism and sexism
3. Criminal activity
4. Evidence of excessive alcohol consumption
5. Inappropriate pictures, including nudity
6. Foul language
7. Links to unsuitable websites
8. Lewd jokes
9. Silly e-mail addresses
10. Membership of pointless or silly groups.

These simple but avoidable mistakes offer advisers a practical checklist with which to help clients enhance their online identity.

## Ways to use the social web in a careers context

There are a number of simple ways to use the social web in a careers context with clients:

- Social web footprint audits: help your clients evaluate their social web presence, and identify how to develop an online 'personal brand' which supports their aspirations.
- Online Groups: signpost clients to join or launch online groups of people interested in their chosen fields. Most social networks provide the facility to create or join existing niche interest groups. On Facebook there are more than 500 occupationally specific groups and many related to specific employers and organisations.
- Answers sites: encourage clients to talk with an adviser and evaluate the answers they receive from web communities. *Yahoo Answers* is one of a number of Q&A focused communities. The site allow anyone to put their question out to the world-wide web. It is possible to ask people in your chosen career field for views on your career plans. The advice users receive certainly does not conform to any IAG standards or frameworks, but our clients are accessing this content every day. You can get almost instant response to any question, so there's no need to wait for an appointment next week with a careers adviser. Answers can be very subjective, there's often a lot of missing information about the question and questioner, and may not always consider diversity issues important.
- Blog feeds: A quick search at *Technorati.com* can lead you to find and subscribe to blog feeds from people who work in a sector of interest. This can be valuable for professional advisers as they seek to keep updated with developments in specific industries.
- Online Video: *YouTube* is probably the most well known video sharing site. Here users can view a video clip from recruiters, or unofficial university video guides, and see work experience reports from students.

*Abilitynet* has criticised the popular social web sites in the past for failing to address accessibility in their tools. It is fair to say that some of the bigger sites have made some improvements over the last few years, but they still have a long way to go if they are to be truly inclusive (*Abilitynet*, 2008).

## The need to be there

The social web offers huge potential benefits to users – but there are also risks. Learners are already out there in force, using the social web to support their career and education decision making. Careers and personal advisers need to be there too. They need to gain greater

awareness and confidence in working with the social web. Advisers can promote and model safe, productive use of the social web, help learners interpret the advice and opinions they find online, help clients make better use of the connections their networks create and shape their online personal brand to support not hinder their career aspirations.

## Endnotes:

- (1) Example people search sites: <http://www.pipl.com>, <http://www.123people.com/>, <http://www.zoominfo.com>  
 (2) Online safety resources: <http://www.chatdanger.com>; <http://www.childnet-int.org>; <http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk>

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