

CHARACTER MATTERS

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*“Wealth without work
Pleasure without conscience
Science without humanity
Knowledge without character
Politics without principle
Commerce without morality
Worship without sacrifice.”*

— Mahatma Gandhi

Interestingly, of all the articles I have written, few, if any, have generated more comments than my column two weeks ago “What Is in Your Background.”

This was not the first time I have addressed employment issues. Last year my column “You Hire Your Problems” addressed what happens when you take on the wrong person and the damage they can cause an organization.

I suppose various events in the news today have sparked an interest in *who* people are, not *what* they say they are. More and more people are wondering how so many clearly questionable individuals are overlooked or ignored even though the information is right there for the taking. The short answer: Complacency.

All too often it is after a negative or embarrassing event that the facts are exposed whereupon it is too little too late. Without a doubt we are not paying attention when and where we should be.

However, not everyone is asleep. More and more employers, landlords, even business associates are conducting background investigations. Considered by many to be due diligence and sound business practice, these investigations can be quiet, comprehensive and potentially embarrassing or worse for those who are reckless with their reputation and character.

All too many people have not considered what social media is and understand that it is not private. The posting of photographs, comments, videos and cartoons may appeal to a select group, but to others they can be offensive and become a job killer.

I was told recently of a disgruntled employee who walked off the job, went home and started to type feverishly. What she did not know was she had failed to remove some of her “friends” from the account prior to sending her rants. Whatever civil case she thought she had was destroyed with her diatribe, Facebook provides a permanent record providing date, time and source. No doubt she will be reading her writings in the future.

Today’s search engines are truly amazing. You can find most anything on the Internet and search extraordinarily large volumes of documents in seconds for names, key words or selected content.

The commercial uses of these programs are obvious, but what about other uses such as identity theft, kidnapping, extortion and harassment? One has to wonder why so many people make public so much of their personal and private lives? Narcissism is one answer, lack of understanding and risk is perhaps another.

On January 1, 2012 California's Cyber Bullying law took effect. The law includes those who engage in a "severe or pervasive physical or verbal act or conduct." We do indeed live in strange times if we need to legislate such laws.

Just because something is on the Internet does not make it true. "Trust but verify" should be on the minds of anyone utilizing the Internet or self-created documents as to skills, background or accomplishments.

In today's world, few things can cause you more trouble than email. Consider for a moment those emails that you may have sent *or received* that you would not want others to read. The common mistake of using the "return all" button can become an embarrassing or career ending moment.

One of the most potentially damaging aspects of email is that once you send it you have no control of it. The recipient can easily forward it to anyone. It can be copied and pasted on blogs, websites, Facebook, almost anywhere. Do you want your office flirtations out for public consumption?

Email is also a permanent record. Most companies back up their systems daily. Thus, what you send and receive is part of your employer's permanent record. Moreover, employers have the right to read what is on their system. While this seems obvious, people continue to send emails that contain content that they would never want anyone outside of the intended recipient to read.

Email can be recovered many ways other than the simple send and receive transaction. Common examples are audits, internal investigations and document control. A key word search can turn many emails that otherwise would have gone unnoticed into a public spectacle.

Perhaps the worst situation for some would be a discovery subpoena requesting "any and all documents" related to the matter at hand. This can easily suck up embarrassing emails that authors may not appreciate in public view, particularly litigation. Such emails can also create significant problems for a company's corporate council.

Homemade videos are another growing trend that can quickly cause problems if they are viewed by third parties. Sending and receiving large files through corporate servers will almost always catch the attention of the Information Technology department. What one may find funny, others may find offensive. Utilizing company assets to produce *or watch* such videos can also be problematic for both the sender as well as the recipient.

Your hard drive is another source of information for the trained investigator, hacker or unintended guest. “Delete” does not mean gone forever unless you destroy files correctly. Image files can be easily recovered. Good security dictates proper disposal techniques.

“It can’t happen to me” is a common symptom in our society – but bad things can and do occur. There are simple solutions to help protect you, your employer and your family. However, the best protection is free – don’t write or post content you would not say or show in public. Don’t use the Internet for activities you would not tell others about. Do not share any personal information except in trusted and secured circumstances. Most importantly, always assume that someone is watching.

Character has been described as what someone does or does not do when no one is watching. Today, more than any time in our life people are watching, machines are watching, cameras are watching.

In reality nothing is truly secure, particularly your reputation if you are reckless with it. Once again prevention is the answer. In this case, if in doubt, don’t.