

WHAT IS IN YOUR BACKGROUND?

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“Regard your good name as the richest jewel you can possibly be possessed of -- for credit is like fire; when once you have kindled it you may easily preserve it, but if you once extinguish it, you will find it an arduous task to rekindle it again. The way to a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.”

- Socrates

Much has been written lately regarding the revelations about the National Security Agency and their mass collection of electronic information. This should not come as any surprise to anyone. James Bamford’s “The Puzzle Palace” and “Body of Secrets” are but just two books about the NSA’s intelligence and electronic security mission.

Information collected by the government is not as much a privacy issue as what is collected by commercial services who sell it to others. Just about anything you want to know about someone is available if you know who to call or where to look.

But still, this is not the real hazard confronting most people. Indeed, no one knows anything that you don’t tell them or give away. Directly or indirectly most all information comes from the best of all sources – you.

I was contacted recently by a friend in the Navy who needs a Top Secret – Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance requiring what is called a single-scope background investigation that includes a polygraph.

These are comprehensive background investigations that frequently start at grade school. Requirements and standards may vary from one program to another but the baseline is a high standard of documented accountability.

While not to the scale of a government clearance background, many employers today are conducting pre-employment background checks that include criminal and civil court records, credit report, driving records, worker’s compensation claims and a peek into your use of social media.

Facebook and similar social media platforms are some of the best intelligence and marketing tools ever developed. They are free and people voluntarily give up significant amounts of information about themselves for the entire world to see.

It is not uncommon to find on Facebook photographs of questionable activities as well as comments that can be considered bigoted or racial, sexist, hateful or telegraph anger

management problems that can be employment killers. They can also be problematic at your current job.

Do you bad mouth your employer, supervisor or co-workers on the Internet? If so, you had better think about that, particularly if you are doing it on company time and equipment.

Many companies back up their computer systems. These backups include all email and Internet activity. Some employers track and log all Internet activity separately for security. In other words, your activity becomes a record for life.

Blogs can also be great sources of information as to one's character and outside activities. Use of drugs and alcohol, theft, involvement in gangs and militant organizations, poor social discretion and potential for workplace violence are all discoverable within social media.

I recently watched a series of videos posted on Facebook involving employees on the job clowning around, making questionable comments and attracting attention from others outside the office who asked "Do you guys ever work?" How do you explain this to a perspective employer? Worse, how do you explain it to your current boss?

Your credit report is a treasure trove of information. Current and past addresses, current and past employers, loans, UCC filings, liens, judgments and purchasing history are all there. Knowing what your credit report says is critical to your employment potential as well as your credit worthiness.

What you purchase and from where frequently ends up in various data mining databases. Ever wonder why so many programs and services are free on the Internet or what those discount cards are about? They allow third parties to track you, advertise and selectively market to you and profile you from your activities. This is not all bad nor is it criminal; these are legitimate business practices that you agreed to when you signed up.

Try a Google search on yourself. Search your address and Social Security number. Search your telephone number and email address. What returns? What would others think? Is it true? Many employers are doing this routinely now - so are landlords. Do not forget to search images too.

More than one person has found themselves in jail wondering how the police found out what they were doing. Social media is one of the answers. The number of confessions on the Internet is amazing.

Today more and more professional licenses and jobs require a Live Scan. This is an automated criminal history check utilizing your fingerprints. If you have ever been fingerprinted it will show up. In other words, denying something to a perspective employer is unwise because it can be found if someone looks.

Despite Internet ads to the contrary, there is no national criminal history database open to the public. The California Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation both maintain criminal history databases that include arrests and associated entries. Any fingerprinting or applications that required formal backgrounds will appear on this “Rap Sheet” or “Green Sheet” as they are frequently referred.

California has 58 counties and only fifteen provide automated civil and criminal reporting of public records to the national information vendors. Within this group 5 are not reporting current records at all. For those wondering, Santa Barbara does automate their court records and they are reasonably current.

Despite common perception, felonies cannot be expunged, only misdemeanors. A Certificate of Rehabilitation from the Governor is the only way to clean up a felony unless your attorney can have it reduced to a misdemeanor whereupon it can later be dismissed. It is worth exploring if this relates to you because a criminal background will limit your employment prospects.

Many employers are interested in your driving record. An investigator can tell a lot about someone from their driving record. Citations, collisions, departmental actions, traffic related arrests such as DUI's, reckless driving and warrants follow you for years as do license restrictions such as probation and negative child support actions.

The Fair Credit Reporting Act is the primary law regarding credit and pre-employment investigations. Other state and federal laws cover specifics as to what can be asked, how information can be obtained and how long it can adversely impact you. Your medical history is an area that remains more or less confidential – for now anyway.

In the pre-employment background world it is about looking for a lie so don't give them one. Tell the truth, don't omit information such as past addresses or employers and don't lie about your education. Anyone can check your degree claims from virtually every recognized educational institution in the United States for a small fee on the Internet. Remember, if you get caught in a lie your credibility is gone.

Many employers reserve the right to check your background at any time after you are hired. A lie today is a termination tomorrow. Moreover, you can be subject to civil actions by your employer for costs associated with hiring and training you under false pretenses.

What is in your background? Can it stand up to scrutiny? Are you doing things on the Internet that could be embarrassing? Are you talking out of school? If you are, now is the time to stop.

Your background coupled with you social media activity may well cost you your current or next job. Your reputation is everything. Like your health, you need to take care of it.