

Websites Troll for Personal Information

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



They “crawl the web.” That sounds pretty creepy....and it is! But to the entrepreneurs who are creating an increasing number of “people finder” Websites, it’s just “legal” big business that collects “public information” about people like you and me!

Try looking yourself up on Spokeo.com, or Pipl, or ZabaSearch, or BeenVerified, or USSearch. The list goes on and on, with more sure to be added.

There is an ongoing fervor over the privacy settings of the popular Facebook social networking site. However, we should probably be more concerned about the information that “people finder” services are putting out on the Web about all of us. Whether we're a job applicant, or an employer looking to hire, the information superhighway is fraught with pitfalls.

In addition to your name, you might find your address, aerial photos and value of your house, cell phone number, e-mail address, income, marital status, the number of children you have, recent purchases, court records, employment history, education, investments, birth date, hobbies, and interests.

Social Security numbers aren't public information, but consider how many times you're asked to provide yours for identification. That makes these numbers within reach of people search sites who will publish them to others.

Consider Spokeo.com, which is positioning itself as the premiere online phone book. It’s “tagline” boasts: “Not your grandma’s phonebook.” It sure isn't!

Spokeo co-founder Harrison Tang recently told *Chicago Tribune* columnist Kristin Samuelson that his company’s original intent was to create a one-stop-shop for social networking. But the demand for people-related information was so great that his Website was changed a few weeks ago to focus more on public records searches. (“Should I be worried about Spokeo.com,” May 28, 2010)

As with most people search sites, some information is available for free on Spokeo, with more in depth reports requiring the purchase of subscriptions.

Many people are so alarmed by the amount of personal information that now is available online, they are complaining to the Federal Trade Commission and advocacy groups, such as Privacy Rights Clearinghouse. Tips on how to “opt out” of being listed on these sites are can be

found at www.privacyrights.org. A word of caution: Many Websites have procedures for “opting out,” but that’s been found to be easier said than done.

How strange that just a few years ago, the California Legislature made a big deal out of blocking the disclosure of personal information from some public documents to prevent identity theft, stalking and acts of violence against celebrities and public figures. But all it takes today is a personal computer to easily find intimate information about nearly everyone.

And if this problem wasn’t so scary, the **misinformation** found on these Websites could provide a few laughs.

I typed in “Barack Obama” on a few people search sites. One site came back with the address 700 Pennsylvania Ave. (the White House address is 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.) Another reported Obama’s age, gender and ethnicity are unknown...and that he is childless!

Some employers and corporate recruiters have become too reliant on the Internet. One confided that he throws away resumes if he cannot find the applicant on Facebook or Myspace because it takes too much effort to investigate.

Not long ago, we were lecturing jobseekers to be careful about what they share on social networking sites since recruiters could see compromising information. But it’s not just what you share that can be damaging. With the proliferation of the creepy crawling "people search" Websites and the misinformation that can be jumbled by technology glitches or intentionally posted by mean-spirited people, a job search can be killed **before** it even begins.

Employers who do not independently verify information found on the Internet, or who do not conduct professional background checks may be passing on hiring talented, hard-working people. Unfortunately, they may end up hiring someone less than ideal for the job. Either way, banking on such information can be risky business.

Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. Culhane’s company performs applicant background checks. She can be contacted through her Website www.PASassociates.com/

P•A•S Associates has expertise in human resources and other areas involving employment issues. **P•A•S Associates**, in providing this website, does not represent that it is acting as an attorney or that it is giving any form of legal advice or legal opinion. **P•A•S Associates** recommends that before making any decision pertaining to human resource issues or employment issues, including the utilization of information contained on this website, the advice of legal counsel to determine the legal ramifications of the use of any such information be obtained.