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# Social media or social minefield? Surviving in the new cyberspace era

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## KEYWORDS

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Authenticity;  
Impression management

“Social media - more like social minefield, difference being if you step out of bounds, it’s recorded for posterity, interestingly if you don’t use it you’ll still be judged negatively.” Independent Business Owner

## SOCIAL MEDIA IS TRANSFORMING OUR CAREERS

Online social media represents a new social space where professional reputations can be built and destroyed. Survey after survey demonstrates that social media is transforming the way we assess people’s employability and career potential. In a recent CareerBuilder survey of 2300 hiring man-

agers, nearly 40 percent of respondents said they used social media to screen potential hires and examine cultural fit with their organization. On the one hand, nearly 30 percent found reasons to hire candidates who appeared well-rounded or showed a wide range of interests and creativity. Moreover, more than half of employers noticed that those candidates conveyed a professional image – in other words, they used a consistent and relevant strategy on social media. On the other hand, nearly half of hiring managers rejected candidates after viewing provocative or inappropriate photos and comments, or because of candidates’ drinking or drug use, bad-mouthing a previous employer, making discriminatory comments or lying about their qualifications. Another survey by the Society of Human Resource Management reported an even higher proportion (56 percent) of employers who used social media to screen candidates. While most of them used LinkedIn, which is entirely professional, 58 percent and 42 percent used Facebook and Twitter, both of which are networks that mix the professional and the personal.

To better understand how people craft social media strategies and what the key success factors are for doing so, we

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interviewed top managers and executives, middle managers, entry-level employees, graduate students entering the job market and self-employed individuals. We then conducted surveys on social media behaviors and analyzed over 450 public comments that were made in response to a blog that cited some of our work on online boundaries that appeared on a public LinkedIn post, *Psychology Today*, and the *Huffington Post*.

### Successful Social Media Strategies

We start with some examples of successful social media strategies. Anand Mahindra, the chairman and managing director of the multinational automobile manufacturer Mahindra Group, was recently listed by Evan LePage as one of five non-tech chief executive officers (CEOs) using social media to drive business results. Mahindra has over 844,000 Twitter followers. His posts are both professional and personal: he posts about his company, but also about cinema and American politics. Recent posts include "There are times you meet someone & your only emotion is one of gratitude for being blessed. Archbishop Tutu, thank you for being in our midst," "1.5 hrs in Mumbai traffic to a wedding; 1 min to wave to the couple; 1 hr drive home. Incontrovertible evidence that Homo Sapiens is irrational," "Sunset at a vineyard near Capetown. Colours that would have stretched the imagination of a renaissance painter..." and "The ultimate irony? Anti nuclear activists building explosive devices to express their protest. This is a strange world." As Mr LePage puts it, "Mahindra is a great example for executives to follow as he is one of the rare CEOs who publicly shows his true colors. Followers love him for it."

Doug Conant, former CEO of Campbell Soup, is also cited by Evan LePage. Unlike Mahindra, whose comments range from the professional to the personal, Conant's social media presence is focused on business and leadership. Conant tweets up to ten times a day and is said to tweet in person and to thank followers who retweet him. He has a well furnished Facebook profile featuring leadership articles, blog entries, and a photo with Warren Bennis.

### Less Successful Social Media Strategies

While Anand Mahindra and Doug Conant's professional reputations seem to thrive on social media, Bob Parsons, a Vietnam veteran, celebrated American entrepreneur and founder of the GoDaddy group of companies, had a very different experience with social media. His 2011 tweet of a video in which he shoots and kills an elephant in Zimbabwe made the top of the 15 Social Media Disasters of 2011 ranking. After PETA responded by shutting down its GoDaddy account and asking others to do the same, Parsons had to quit as CEO.

Like Bob Parsons, Gary Stein, a U.S. Marine sergeant and an Iraq veteran, may bitterly regret his social media strategy. He had been a Marine for nine years and was based at Camp Pendleton when the Marine Corps administrative board recommended that he be dismissed with an other-than-honorable discharge and his security clearance be taken away. Veteran Stein had created an Armed Forces Tea Party Facebook page, where he had criticized President Obama. Ignoring warnings from his superiors that he was violating the

Pentagon policy that limits the free speech rights of service members, he also posted on Facebook pages where he could influence junior Marines. He allegedly put the president's face on a "Jackass" movie poster, wrote that Obama was the domestic enemy and declared on Facebook that he would not follow orders from Obama. He later clarified that statement, saying he would not follow unlawful orders prejudicial to good order and discipline. Despite support from his lawyers as well as former Marine congressmen, Stein was given a desk job with no access to computers. The military issued directions for troops on how they could stay social media savvy during the election season. Stein, who risked having his career wiped out for "15 words on Facebook," is turning to appeal courts outside the military.

### WHY IS SOCIAL MEDIA SO POWERFUL IN BOTH ACCELERATING SUCCESS AND CRASHING CAREERS?

A key challenge that individuals face in managing their careers is navigating the opportunities and pitfalls presented by social media. This new communication medium has the ability to disseminate information widely and in a way that gives a broad audience access to the individual. However, as illustrated by the above examples, taking advantage of the opportunities provided may not be straightforward. There are several reasons why social media may have such a powerful influence on either promoting or crashing careers.

#### The Collision between Professional and Personal Worlds

First, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Google+, or Twitter are social spaces where the lines between the personal and the professional are often blurred in that information disclosure and interactions can be personal as well as professional. For instance, Mahindra Group Chairman, Anand Mahindra, shares his political views quite often on social media, revealing his personal side to the public. This results in a potential collision of professional and personal worlds that can open up opportunities as well as create challenges for business executives and employees alike. On-line social networks that are personal or semi-personal in nature essentially put people in one large, invisible room with "friends" or connections from various social worlds. People have, on average, 130 connections on Facebook and are connected to an average of 16 co-workers.

#### Non-Tailored Information Sharing

Second, interactions on social media differ from off-line interactions in new ways. In face-to-face and other individualized interactions such as phone calls, disclosure is tailored to the other party. We usually reveal more of our personal selves to friends than to colleagues, and we dress in different ways when attending professional meetings than when enjoying down time with our families. Moreover, we fine-tune the amount and nature of personal information we disclose to professional contacts over time, according to the particular relationships we have built with each individual.

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