

WEB OF INFORMANTS

By VIRGINIA BACKAITIS



ALL EARS: Employers know that applicant-supplied references are useless, so some bosses are doing a bit of digging on their own.



July 7, 2008--

Scott Smith pounds the pavement confused. Yesterday he was a highly sought-after project manager, with two top companies bending over backward to get him in for an interview. At one, the interviewer had courted him, touting the company's on-site fitness and day-care facilities and hinting that an offer would be made after Smith met with a top boss the following day.

But that meeting was canceled without explanation.

"They must have gotten some new information about me from somewhere. But where?" says Smith, a 33-year-old father of one. He hadn't even given the company his reference list yet.

Sally Henderson (like Smith's name, a pseudonym) had a distinctly different experience: She left her interview with a major pharmaceutical firm wondering what she could have done or said to get the job, since she hadn't answered many questions at all. In fact, the toughest one she remembers is, "What do we need to do to get you on board?"

"It's like the interview wasn't even necessary," she says. "They knew all about my projects and some of the people I've worked with. I think they decided I was the right person before I even walked in the door."

If it seems like there's some invisible force influencing your job search, we've got news for you: There might be.

By now, most job seekers are aware that if they've got a page on Facebook or any other professional or social networking site, potential employers are going to check it out. But now, many are going a step further, using such sites not only to see what you say about yourself, but also to contact current or former colleagues to get their two cents on who you are, what you're like and what you've accomplished.

After all, who knows you better than your fellow clock punchers? And who would risk their professional reputation or social credibility by telling anything less than the truth to a friend, a business connection or a friend of a connection?

"The world's becoming a very, very small place," says career coach and author Cynthia Shapiro. "The individual you work next to every day, regardless of whether you want them to be or not, is now your reference for the rest of your career."

While in the past these people may have been difficult to identify, they aren't anymore. All a curious party needs to do is to log into a networking site, enter the dates and company names from your resume, and presto, out comes a list of people who worked at each company at the same time as you. If they don't know you, chances are they'll know someone who does. And because many members of such networks have declared themselves willing to be contacted for reference-checking purposes, getting the scoop on you isn't too big an effort.

How often does this actually happen? All the time, say hiring managers and other insiders, although those doing it aren't anxious to be quoted on the subject. And sites like the 25-million-member network LinkedIn.com, which has created marketing pitches around its usefulness for reference searching, report that the practice is growing in a big way.

"Traditionally, reference checks have been done at the wrong time, by the wrong people, for the wrong purpose," says Kay Luo, a spokeswoman for LinkedIn, which has a search tool designed specifically for independent reference checks. The right time to check references, says Luo, is before job candidates even walk in the door, so managers can figure out ahead of time whether they're worth the effort.

It's a thought that may take many a job seeker aback. Don't you get to pick your references? Why else would job applications require that you provide names and numbers and grant permission to make contact?

The problem with such official references is that they're not only handpicked by the applicant, more often than not they're also too muzzled to offer any insight. Because disgruntled job seekers have been known to sue former employers for comments made during reference checks, litigation-weary companies have instituted "verification only" reference policies that prohibit managers from giving out any information about former workers other than their titles and dates of employment (and some will do even this only by snail mail).

Needless to say, such policies leave hiring managers who want to learn more about potential hires frustrated. So frustrated that they go digging. And social networking sites have made finding someone who will speak freely a whole lot easier, since the contact is personal, rather than "official company business."

"When I'm chatting with a Facebook friend, I can say anything I want, about anyone I want - my employer has no claim on the conversation," says a banker whose company has a name-and-rank-only reference policy. "It's like talking about the guys I work with while shooting hoops."

SUBHED: Checks and balances

His company may not necessarily agree, and therein lies a point of conflict. Corporate human-resources departments, whose mandate is to do things by the book, frown on such backdoor reference checking, which muddies the waters where potential legal issues are concerned and may violate company policy. Instead, checking references gets done by the people whose work lives will be directly impacted if you're hired, and who will most likely have the necessary connections to check references without your assistance, permission or knowledge - your prospective bosses.

It's a trend that makes human-resource departments mighty uncomfortable, according to talent-acquisition expert Shally Steckerl. He says staffing managers have expressed their concerns on the matter at over 70 percent of the industry conferences and training sessions he's addressed this year.

Even when companies have policies against such checks, "in reality it happens all the time," says Gregory Reilly of Littler & Mendelson, a labor and employment law firm.

That in itself doesn't present legal issues, says Reilly, since all this behind-the-scenes activity doesn't violate any laws. But what's done with the information obtained can raise issues. Reilly cites a hypothetical example in which a manager at a firm discovers that a potential hire frequents strip clubs in his free time.

"The manager may decide she doesn't like that and therefore doesn't want to hire the guy," says Reilly, even though state law - which says you can't discriminate against people for off-duty activities, as long as they're legal - "prohibits her from making that decision for that reason."

A human-resources professional checking the reference would likely be familiar with the law and react accordingly, possibly not sharing the discovery with the boss-to-be. A hiring manager may discount the job seeker, though, thereby opening the firm up to a potential lawsuit.

It's precisely for reasons like this that employers want the reference checking done by individuals trained to do it. "But trying to reel in cyber-snooping, chatting employees is near impossible," says a human-resources manager at a Madison Avenue marketing and advertising firm who requested anonymity. "First you have to catch them, then you have to lecture them, and even after you do, the minute you forward them a resume, they're off to their networks and onto their phones. I'm left like a cowboy without a rope or corral."

There are companies which have gone to great lengths to take the bull by the horns. City-based recruitment consultant Scherron Brown has worked for at least two of them.

"We've told managers that it's not okay to go out on renegade fact-finding missions, that not everyone is going to have something good to say about anyone, that the context of the relationships needs to be taken into consideration with the comments made," she says. Human-resources managers are also told to consider, he says, "how they would feel if someone was doing this to them."

While Brown may have made some headway with the inquiring minds she's encountered, experts are doubtful that many backdoor reference checkers will be caught, let alone shut down.

So it's best to be prepared (see sidebar). And while you're at it, as long as your future managers and co-workers are going to check you out, why not check them out, too? Next time you have an interview, tap into your own social network and get the inside scoop on the folks who'll be tossing questions at you. Find out what they're like, what they look for and what their shortcomings are. And consider whether these are people you want to spend time with. Remember, these folks will not only be your future co-workers, they'll be your future references, too.

TENDING THE GRAPEVINE

If you want prospective employers to hang up the phone impressed when they call around to get the skinny on you, there are steps you should take to leverage your network.

Be proactive.

Start treating everyone you come into contact with like the reference they may well be, says Shapiro. "Being nasty to the receptionist today could cost you tomorrow. There's very little you can do once an opinion is set."

Be a giver.

Make your mantra "It's all about karma." "Give to your network before you need them," says William Arruda, co-author of "Career Distinction." Arruda suggests you go through your address book and "ask yourself, what's my strategy for adding value to this relationship?" It may be as simple as posting a comment on someone's blog or forwarding an interesting article.

Solicit endorsements.

Sites like LinkedIn have areas for recommendations. Ask your colleagues to post endorsements of you. "If you have glowing recommendations, employers may not go digging," says Shapiro.

Make amends.

If you used to be a jerk or if you treated someone poorly, "go repair the relationship," says Arruda. Do this long before your next job search.