

Job References You Can't Control

By ANJALI ATHAVALEY

Job interviewees, beware: Your prospective boss may have called your references before you walk through the door -- and they may not be the contacts you provided.

Professional networking sites such as LinkedIn Corp. and Jobster Inc. are making it easier for employers to get in touch with people who have worked with job candidates in the past or know them personally. Recruiters say they use such sites -- where people create online profiles and then link to professional colleagues who are also members -- to find mutual connections they can hit up for information. Many hiring managers say they even check to see if they have mutual connections with a candidate on Facebook and MySpace, the popular social-networking sites.

The trend, which started mostly with Web-savvy recruiters in the technology industry, is now spreading to other industries such as human resources and financial services, says Cathy Henesey, talent acquisition leader at appliance maker [American Standard Cos.](#) Recruiters typically use networking sites to check on entry-level and midlevel job seekers, she says. But even professionals and CEOs have experienced the practice, often referred to as "informal reference checking."

Traditionally, recruiters call references after a thorough face-to-face interview. The contacts are provided by the job seekers and are typically people who are likely to provide a positive recommendation.

But for a growing number of job seekers (LinkedIn now has 14.8 million members), networking sites have "completely changed everything," says Dennis Smith, senior recruiting manager at T-Mobile USA, a unit of [Deutsche Telekom AG](#). Now, recruiters can access entire personal networks, says Mr. Smith, who checks Facebook, LinkedIn and Jobster for mutual connections before he interviews a candidate in person.

Checking the List

Because online contact lists are typically viewable right on members' profile pages, hiring managers can quickly identify relevant contacts and confidentially message these people through the networking site.

Such reference checking exposes job seekers to certain risks. Many site users routinely connect online to people they have only a glancing relationship with -- say, someone who simply works at the same company -- and there is no guarantee that the references will be favorable.

But such checking can work to a job seeker's advantage, too. Chandan Mahajan says his LinkedIn profile -- which lists his previous work experience, displays eight recommendations -- from former colleagues and shows that he has more than 100 connections online -- helped him land a job in May as a business-development manager for Wipro Technologies, the global information-technology-services business of [Wipro Ltd.](#) The recruiters at Wipro "did say there were a couple of people they knew in my network," says Mr. Mahajan, 28 years old, of East Brunswick, N.J.

Wipro Technologies confirms that it contacted some of Mr. Mahajan's connections after the first interview. "We did every informal reference check," says Madhulika Goel, the

company's manager of strategic resourcing. In fact, Wipro didn't ask him for a standard résumé during initial interviews, opting instead to use Mr. Mahajan's online profile.

For job seekers, "it's kind of a caution and an empowerment," says Jobster CEO Jason Goldberg. If your online profile is clean and you are connected to people through social networks who would say favorable things about your abilities, it may help you land the job, he says.

Some recruiters believe the tactic can backfire. "You have to be careful referencing people who have jobs because you might blow them out of their jobs," says Chuck Wardell, managing director at executive recruiter [Korn/Ferry International's](#) Eastern Region. He says he may perform an initial Google search, check whether the job candidate has written any articles, and make sure the candidate has the degrees listed on the résumé -- but he doesn't use networking sites. And he doesn't call references "before they have a bona fide job offer." The risk of tipping off the candidate's current employer is too high.

The practice -- which recruiters say helps save companies time and money on face-to-face interviews -- is the latest way employers and recruiters are using popular sites to hunt for talent. They are already scouring Facebook, [News Corp.'s](#) MySpace, and LinkedIn for passive job candidates and using the sites to learn more about active job hunters, whether it be from information in their profile or the photos they post online. "It's just an aspect of what we can do because we are all so connected," says Mr. Smith at T-Mobile. "A person's online presence is just an integral part of their life at this point."

Adding Recommendations

Social and professional networking sites are adding features that make it easier for recruiters to learn more about prospective job candidates and their connections. Jobster is planning on launching today a feature that allows job seekers to invite colleagues to write recommendations online that would be visible to recruiters. LinkedIn, which already has a similar recommendation feature, plans to announce today that it will allow users to add photos to their profiles -- a feature that could help make job seekers more recognizable to industry recruiters who may know them.

Recruiting experts say that job seekers should be careful about choosing people to connect with on networking sites. This month, Charles Moore, managing partner at Abba Wireless Executive Search Group, used LinkedIn and MySpace to contact two customers and a former co-worker of a job candidate who was interviewing for a director-of-sales position at a large company. Mr. Moore says he typically contacts references he finds online before sending a candidate to a client.

"What I found out through reference checks is that the person was tough to work with and get along with," says Mr. Moore. He didn't pass on the candidate to his client.

Steven Rothberg, president and founder of [CollegeRecruiter.com](#), a jobs site for college students and recent graduates, recommends extra precautions for job hunters who are worried that their online profiles could hurt their chances. Some sites allow members to adjust the privacy settings on a profile so that your contacts can't be viewed by other members, he notes.

'Questionable' Friends

"If you are the kind of person who has good friends who will reflect well upon you, then it's a good idea for the employer to be calling those friends," says Mr. Rothberg. "If you are going to have friends who are at best questionable in dealing with a potential employer on your behalf, you are probably better off not having those friends visible in

your network."

Even top brass can be subject to thorough reference checks. Dan Nye, chief executive officer at LinkedIn, says that the company did 23 reference checks on him without his knowledge before calling him in for a face-to-face interview with former CEO Reid Hoffman. Mr. Nye says he wasn't bothered by the company's digging. "In the year 2007, it's fair game," Mr. Nye says.

"Hiring is such an important decision and information about people is very public these days." He joined the company in February.