

Young job seekers, check your privacy settings

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Social media websites can be a boon for employers scoping out job applicants, and that's bad news for certain groups of young people, according to a new Northwestern University study.

Researchers found that—among young adults—men, Hispanics and those with lower Internet skills are the least likely to keep employment-related audiences in mind when it comes to their online [profiles](#).

Women, whites and those with higher Internet skills are more likely to actively manage their [social media](#) privacy settings as they seek a job or maintain employment.

This is the first study to analyze how different [demographics](#) of young adults approach online [reputation management](#) strategies during a [job search](#). It was published online in June in the journal *IEEE Security & Privacy*.

"Young people could benefit from understanding the implications of these issues," said Eszter Hargittai, lead author of the study. "Without adequate privacy settings, inappropriate pictures or comments posted on a social media profile could be seen by an employer and cost you a job opportunity."

Hargittai is an associate professor and Delaney Family Professor in the department of communication studies at Northwestern.

"Managing the privacy of your social media profiles can be complex,"

she said. "A site's settings can change quickly, and if you are not keeping track and checking in on your settings regularly, you could inadvertently leave parts of your profile open to the public even if you had set them to more restricted access earlier."

Because a significant portion of the young people in this study seemed at risk in regard to privacy management practices, there may be a need for more formal training from career service organizations, libraries and others on best practices for maintaining self-presentation online, Hargittai said.

Study highlights:

- 34.5 percent of men and 25 percent of women never managed their privacy settings or the content of their social media profiles with respect to an employer audience.
- Whites were much more likely than other races to adjust social media profiles at least once in the past year in anticipation of employers searching for information about them.
- Hispanics were the least likely to keep an employment-related audience in mind in regards to the content of their online profiles.
- Women were more likely than men to manage their [privacy settings](#) for an employer-related audience and tended to do so more frequently.
- Those more knowledgeable about Internet privacy matters and privacy-related terms, such as "tagging," "limited profile" and "preference settings," were more likely to engage in managing the privacy of their social media profiles.

For the study, researchers analyzed responses from a paper-and-pencil survey given to a sample of 545 diverse young adults, ages 21 or 22. Five hundred and seven of those respondents reported using social network

sites. Distributed and collected by postal mail during the summer of 2012, the study was designed to assess the extent to which [young adults](#) monitor their self-presentation on social media networks and their privacy-related Internet skills and knowledge.

This is the same sample of young people that was surveyed in 2009 for a Northwestern study on college students and Internet skills. At that time they were all first-year students at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In 2012, some of them were still in college, about half had just graduated, and others had left college altogether. Ninety percent said they were either working or currently looking for a job.

The study also has important implications for social network site designers, as it highlights how lower-skilled Internet users fail to use privacy-related settings on a regular basis.

Eden Litt, a Ph.D. student in the Media, Technology, and Society program in the school of communication at Northwestern University is the co-author of this study.

Provided by Northwestern University

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