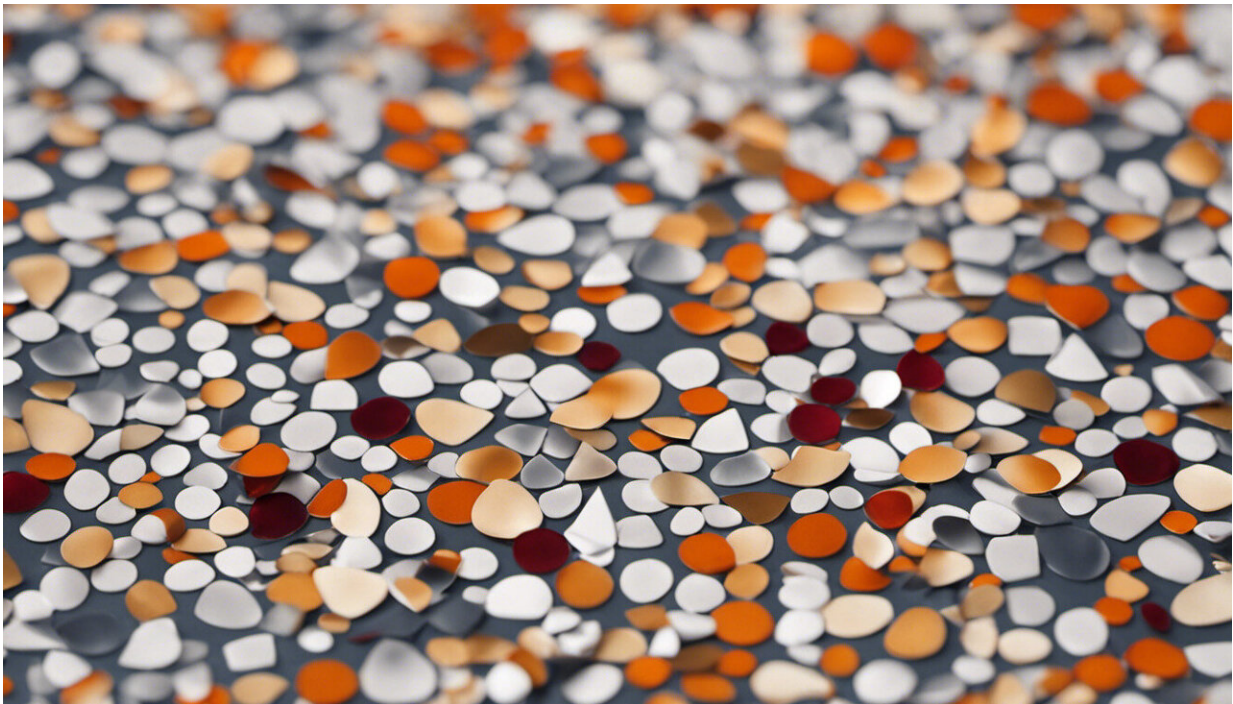# Your forgotten digital footprints could step on your job prospects: How to clean it up

April 6 2022, by Wendy Moncur

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Applying for a new (or first) job can be time consuming. The job application process, particularly for graduate schemes, involves multiple steps: tailoring your application, psychometric testing, interviews and participation in a day or more of assessments online or in person.

The process can also involve intrusive scrutiny of your digital footprints. Behind the scenes, up to 80% of employers and recruitment agencies use social media content as part of their assessment of candidate suitability. Being open online about health conditions, addiction issues or pregnancy can adversely affect an applicant's chances of success when applying for jobs, as can a profile which shows polarized views, non-mainstream lifestyle choices, or excessive partying.

Once in post, employees can face disciplinary action or dismissal for their conduct on social networking sites, even when posting outside of working hours. Unintentional leakage of sensitive information online—such as trade secrets, intellectual property and personal details of other employees—can be a security risk for organizations, and lead to loss of competitive advantage, reputation and client trust.

A vivid illustration of such security risks comes from footage posted by two Naval personnel on the Only Fans pornography-sharing website of their intimate activities at a secure UK nuclear submarine base, resulting in disciplinary action.

Our team has been examining how employees' digital footprints can harm them and their employers. Through extensive interviews with 26 people, we found that many struggle to recall and conceptualize the entirety of their digital footprints, or to imagine how others may string them together and draw unforeseen conclusions.

This matters for young adults entering the job market, who usually have extensive digital footprints across multiple platforms, and extending back many years. These footprints may reflect outdated versions of the person, and identities and opinions "tried on for size" as they mature and work out who they are.

Young people have told us of the peer pressure they face to comment on

hot topics, such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, without necessarily feeling that they want to express opinions publicly. Others have expressed regret at opinions gauchely expressed around politics, race and sexuality—opinions which seemed acceptable as a teenager yet don't read well to adult eyes. The persistence of this online content can affect young adults in ways unfamiliar to their parents, whose murky pasts are likely consigned to photo albums under the bed.

Digital decluttering

Coherently cleaning up one's digital footprints is a task that people tend to find overwhelming. They struggle to recall what they have posted across multiple channels across many years, and avoid decluttering—reassuring themselves that they are boring and not worthy of others' interest.

Some take broadbrush actions, such as deleting some or all of their social media accounts. Yet deletion is a luxury. Some of the young adults that we interviewed in our research felt compelled to be visible online via social media accounts while job-seeking—especially for white-collar jobs—so that potential employers could check them out.

Online visibility builds legitimacy. It presents an identity to the world—who we are, who we hang out with, our activities and opinions. Admittedly, that identity may be a sanitized version of the real person, carefully constructed with an online audience in mind, but so is a CV.

There can be ongoing tensions for job seekers between feeling they have to be visible online, and protecting their own safety. One of our interviewees, whose family had sought asylum in the UK, highlighted how asylum seekers could feel torn:

"I have met … people who were … running for their lives. Any

information that they put online digitally would be instantly sought out, so they stayed off any kind of digital, social media … But then they're also met with the contrast of needing to put something out in order to progress … to put yourself on show, or otherwise people don't think you're legitimate."

Similarly, survivors of domestic abuse may want to keep a low profile to avoid being found by their abusers.

Decluttering is a painful, yet necessary aspect of entering the world of work. Google yourself. Get a friend of a friend to look you up online and see what they find. If you can, remove the content that surfaces which shows you in a bad light. If you are featured in content posted by others, ask them to take it down. Untag yourself. If all else fails, detach yourself from online connections who have tagged you at your worst, so that the content is not associated with you.

If there's too much content that may harm your employment prospects, tighten your privacy settings so that potential employers can't see it. If membership of a specific social media site is linked to a past that you no longer align with—such as an OnlyFans account—untag yourself and delete your account for good measure.

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