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A blog can be an interview tool

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am on the search team for an executive position, and we are working on our short list. One of the candidates looks good on paper and did fine in the first round of interviews, but when I Googled him, I found his personal blog.

Although there was nothing about work on it, I now wonder about his discretion and whether we should do a second interview.

-- Fort Knox

Dear Fort,

"Dear Diary" used to mean scribbling unedited ramblings in a leatherette book with a little gold lock, or, if you were really serious, in a numbered, spiral-bound notebook. Grammar, spelling and taste didn't count because the writing wasn't for public consumption.

Now, 25.3 million personal journals are on-line as blogs, according to technorati.com, a site that tracks the blogosphere. And they are sprouting at a rate of 70,000 new blogs a day. With that many diarists on-line, blogs are as ubiquitous a source of information for potential employers as reference letters, and just as fraught. After all, who really cares about an applicant's colonoscopy or his yearnings for an out-of-town paramour?

And is the person who's writing who you think he is? It's no wonder you're suspicious.

Also, though blogs are ostensibly about communicating, for many, grammar, spelling and taste still don't enter the picture: It's more egosphere than blogosphere.

Still, some blogs are superb testaments to sharp thinking and clear writing, and provide yet another lens through which to view your applicant.

Unless he humiliates himself, his current employer or colleagues on the site, print out the latest posts for his dossier and share the URL with the rest of the team. If the consensus is that he hasn't shot himself in the foot -- yet -- by all means bring him in for a second round.

That's when you should ask about the blog. You'll want to know why he maintains the site and what he considers appropriate content. If he's surprised you've seen it or doesn't think the information is as public as CNN, you have your answer. He's too naïve for the position. Next!

But a blog should not be an automatic disqualifier. A few enterprising bloggers have turned their sites into magnets for eyeballs, daily posting fresh ideas that generate an eager following. Matt Drudge's on-line postings for his Drudge Report (<http://www.drudgereport.com>) -- first written on a PC from his Hollywood apartment -- are credited for having broken the Monica Lewinsky scandal to the public. Twelve years after he started publishing his idiosyncratic reports on-line, they've been syndicated by Wired News, carried by AOL and are vindicated regularly by mainstream journalists.

Mr. Drudge reported 3.6 billion visits to his site in 2005 and more than \$1-million in income from banner ads. A bit pricey, but if I were Paul Martin, I'd snag this guy for my communications team.

Ditto for Andrew Sullivan, the columnist for Time magazine and the Sunday Times of London, who also writes a weblog he calls the Daily Dish (<http://www.andrewsullivan.com>). Mr. Sullivan couldn't have predicted the intellectual property firestorm ignited by music downloads when he wrote in 2002 that "Blogger [weblog publishing software] could be to words what Napster was to music -- except this time it'll really work." But he was on the right track. One year later, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 127 million Americans were getting their information on-line, and Mr. Sullivan was crouched at the starting gate when it happened.

It's not just journalists who are getting into the act. Sun Microsoft's president Jonathan Schwartz (<http://www.blogs.sun.com/jonathan>) asserts that leaders who want their business strategy and corporate values to be taken seriously should be recording their triumphs and even their failures on weblogs (he records his own goofs at www.blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan?entry=dear_John). Ignoring this medium is like sticking to snail mail, he wrote, turning your back on a way to foster employee loyalty and recruit talent. In short, it's snubbing the outside world.

I read Mr. Schwartz's blog and there's nothing on it about his sex drive, yesterday's colonoscopy or who takes out the garbage. Unlike other blogs I've seen, it's neither psychotherapy transcript nor gossip rag, and there's not a single spelling mistake. It's totally professional and if that's true of your candidate, I say bring him back.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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