



*ExecuNet Career Guide:*

# Dealing With Your Digital Dirt

*Search*

## Dealing With Your Digital Dirt

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### **Published By**

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### **About ExecuNet**

Founded in 1988, ExecuNet is the leader in providing job search and career management services to the \$100,000+ executive and senior-level manager. It is the first source executive and corporate recruiters use to find top executive talent. For the latest in job market intelligence, or to learn more about ExecuNet's services, visit us on the Web at [www.execunet.com](http://www.execunet.com).



## Virtual Perpetuity



Most people want to leave some sort of legacy — a great novel or work of art, a thriving business, a family name. The Internet gives us that power to leave something behind — although the content may be something we would rather have forgotten.

Online, content never really dies. This fact is demonstrated anytime you've replied to a job posting on one of those aggregator sites and found that the company has already filled the position. The job posting site still lists the position in its index, but the employer has already removed the listing from its own site.

Anything that is connected to your name online can be viewed as a reflection of your character and integrity, and during these times of corporate officer scrutiny, positive personal branding can move you into the top candidate slot.

Never have I been more aware of my online presence than March 2005, when I started my blog — a full 10 years after ExecuNet moved its business to the Internet. "Dave Opton" has always been associated with the mission of ExecuNet — to connect senior executives to each other and exclusive career opportunities — but on my blog, "Dave Opton" is a guy who has spent more than four decades learning about life and talking about it.

I invite you to share your thoughts and comments at *Six-Figure Learnings*:  
<http://www.execunet.com/davesblog>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave" in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

**Dave Opton**  
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## Digital Dossiers

A photo opportunity with an indicted congressman. A posting on a conspiracy theory newsgroup. A blog that details personal habits or professional grievances.

What do these items have in common? Google, and other web search engines, will find these moments in misjudgment, along with other "digital dirt" you may have lurking. As the cost of attracting, on-boarding and retaining senior-level talent inches upward, recruiters and hiring managers are using these Internet search tools to screen candidates very carefully.

"Dossiers of 'digital dirt' are being assembled at an alarming rate with horrible potential consequences," says Jack Vonder Heide, CEO of Technology Briefing Centers, Inc., of Oak Brook, IL.

In fact, an overwhelming majority of executive recruiters say they do online searches as part of their background checking, and more than one-quarter have eliminated candidates because of something questionable they uncovered.

<b>Recruiters' Use of Search Engines</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Do you use search engines to uncover information about candidates?	74.7%	25.3%
Have you ever eliminated a candidate because of information you found on the Internet?	26.4%	73.6%

*Source: ExecuNet, Feb. 2005*

Furthermore, nearly one-half of the more than 2,200 respondents to an October 2004 Harris Interactive/Dogpile survey indicated that they used search engines to research the background of a job candidate.

Recruiters are finding value in "Googling" candidates, because the information gleaned from the search helps to produce a more detailed profile of an individual. Also, if an executive search has been narrowed down to two excellent candidates, the deciding factor may come from additional information that is discovered during an online search.

For example, websites that list you as a mentor or volunteer coordinator indicate a spirit of community involvement and leadership qualities that are not evident in a review of professional experience and academic credentials.

Also, mid-career executives can dispel misconceptions about age when online searches reveal their names and finishing times for recent marathons, or other high-energy activities.

"The advantage of the Internet is that recruiters and employers get a more complete picture of candidates," says David Perry, managing director of Perry-Martel International, in Canada. "The disadvantage of the Internet is that recruiters and employers get a more complete picture of candidates."

Unfortunately, senior-level executives who have moved up through the ranks over the last decade of commercial Internet usage may have unknowingly posted something online that can haunt them, or, even worse, someone else may have made private information public.

An informal gathering of friends plus a digital camera can equal disaster for an executive in transition, and Vonder Heide illustrates an example that may subconsciously damage an executive job search. "Digital photos of last year's neighborhood party are discovered," describes Vonder Heide. "There is the applicant, passed out in a lawn chair at three in the afternoon, beer bottle in hand."

While not necessarily an indication of serious alcoholism, the photo may subconsciously cloud the image a hiring manager may have of the candidate.

### **Disqualifying Factors**

The information that recruiters, hiring managers and potential employers uncover when they Google candidates may have an impact whether a job offer is made, or, in some circumstances, revoked. Among the reasons ExecuNet recruiter members cited for eliminating candidates based on online information:

- Misstated academic qualifications
- Failure to acknowledge publicly-known information about an ethics investigation
- Weird personal habits
- Falsifying company or title information
- Suspended license
- Legal proceedings against a former employer

One recruiter said that he can learn about candidates' interactive skills via online postings. "Sometimes reading a potential candidate's post on either technical newsgroups or bulletin boards reveals the candidate to have lackluster or worse communication skills, a very bad attitude or weak technical skills."

Another recruiter warned against taking online information too seriously, since validity can be questionable. "We found a candidate's personal website that contained highly objectionable content, but we would not rule out the candidate on that basis alone as information on the Internet can be falsified."

"Verification/authentication is touchy," says Vonder Heide. "Approaching a candidate with dirt opens the door to discrimination suits. The hiring manager is safer using the 'other candidates more closely met the requirements of the position' line."

Search consultant Tom Meade says that he hasn't found anything too "juicy," but he thoroughly examines candidates' search results. "I just Google the person by name, which may bring up newspaper articles about the individual, or I use the Internet to scour the filings of previous employers to find references to termination or company performance issues that might bear upon the person's candidacy."

"I think what people haven't yet recognized is that nowadays they are the product and they have to manage their own brand and manage their own PR," says Perry. "There have been instances where I found unusual things about a candidate and said, 'What were you thinking?'"

Perry recalls a rabidly anti-George Bush candidate who posted some messages on a website that was later found by the potential employer. "Those postings cost him a \$108,000 a year job, but of course, you can't tell the candidate these things."

Linda Dominguez, principal of California-based Executive Coaching and Resource Network, says that job searching may be tough for executives with skeletons in the worldwide web of closets. "If the candidate simply posted, say, vastly liberal political opinions on a website or blog, and the ultra conservative hiring manager finds them, the candidate may not get invited to the interview," warns Dominguez. "The more serious the connection to questionable activities, the greater the chance the potential employer won't bother with you — it's still a buyer's market out there."

### **What Does the Internet Say About You?**

An August 2004 Harris Interactive/Microsoft poll revealed that 43 percent of men and 35 percent of women used search engines to find information about themselves. If you are about to embark on a job search, it would be worthwhile to take a look at what the rest of the Internet population can learn about you.

"Candidates should thoroughly research their own backgrounds before the job seeking process. This will help them understand potential landmines," warns Vonder Heide.

"Job-seekers should get in the habit of periodically Googling themselves to find out what really is being said about them out there in cyberspace. Bottom line: thanks to the Internet, the proverbial office water cooler has become an ocean capable of wiping out careers with a single tidal wave," notes Business and Career Coach Meg Montford of Abilities Enhanced in Kansas City, MO.

#### **How Recruiters Check Out Candidates**

"We had a client about two years ago who was hiring a CEO," says an executive recruiter and ExecuNet RecruitSmart member. "We did our search, identified our primary candidates, performed initial interviews, and began our verification process. The process generally consists of reference checks, education verification, and verification of claims of performance by an individual.

In this case the candidate had told us several things that we wanted to check out.

The easiest was to use a search engine to verify the articles he claimed to have authored. Lo and behold, we could not find them anywhere. The deeper we looked the more concerned we became.

Since not all articles find their way to our fingertips, we started to search the credentials a bit closer. Needless to say he was not who he said he was, nor had he done some of what he claimed. We were unable to match employment time frames or match him to specific issues.

We challenged the candidate on our findings and magically he removed himself from our process claiming no further interest. We moved along and ultimately recruited the right individual who remains our loyal client today."

Don't limit your self-investigation to one search engine, as each one indexes the Internet differently. Dogpile ([www.dogpile.com](http://www.dogpile.com)) is a meta-search engine, which brings you the top combined results from Google, Yahoo! and AskJeeves.

Also, check the "images," "news" and "newsgroup" directories that are available on individual search engines as well.

### Digital Dirt Diversions

If your "narcisurfing" (conducting web searches for your name) yields results that you may want others to ignore, there are ways to divert attention to more positive items.

- Create a blog and gain control over the results that emerge when someone searches on your name. Each blog entry is "signed" by the name of the author, and since search engines rank results by recency and frequency, the blog will land at the top of the search pages.
- Build a simple website that displays your résumé, articles, press mentions, awards. Not only will the site serve as an electronic portfolio of your experience and success, it will get noticed by Googling recruiters.

"Blogging is the best way possible to be found," says Perry. "Your blog is another business tool, and it should be used to find a job." Before you start posting entries, Perry says to define the message and what you want the reader to learn from your writing. "You have to be consistent once you make the decision on how you want to appear. Rants won't get you a job. The tone of the blog has to match your objectives, and the objective has to be continuous employment for the next 10 to 15 years."

Amass your own dossier of positive information through some new search engines that have narrow capability, called "vertical" search. These types of search engines aggregate information across the Internet, making it easier to create a more complete picture of an individual.

- Preople ([www.preople.com/](http://www.preople.com/)) calls itself, "the ultimate ego booster," supplying Internet rankings for each name that is entered. Preople boasts a personal profile feature, whereby users can build their own information page.
- Ziggs ([www.ziggs.com](http://www.ziggs.com)) is still in beta, but it professes to index nearly 2.7 million people profiles, across more than 78,000 companies. The site allows users to create their own online profiles.
- ZoomInfo ([www.zoominfo.com](http://www.zoominfo.com)) is search technology that scrapes information from the Internet and compiles the results into a concise summary of any individual with a web presence. The site allows individuals to create their own web summaries, presenting the information that you want others to see. ZoomInfo also powers the people search function on Business.com.

While these may all be good tools, they have not gained widespread popularity yet with the recruiting community, and therefore can't make an immediate impact on your job search.

In an extreme case, former Enron CEO Kenneth Lay counteracts the negativity among the more than 300,000 Google results to the term "Enron scandal" with a creative solution: he bought a paid link to the term. When one searches Google for Enron's troubles, a paid link to "Enron Information" appears on the right hand side. The link drives traffic to [www.kenlayinfo.com](http://www.kenlayinfo.com), Lay's own site which presents the ousted executive's side of the story through articles and information.

## Web “Cleansing”

There are some methods for eradicating information that appears during cursory searches, but archiving technology makes it nearly impossible to have the data removed forever — the “Wayback Machine” at [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) maintains online data from 10 billion web pages from as far back as 1996.

“They [candidates] may get lucky and find a hiring manager who is not as sophisticated as he or she should be,” says Vonder Heide. Or, some recruiters may not want to find something that will exclude their candidate or have the employer question the candidate’s character.

“The situation is compounded by the reality that it is nearly impossible to erase one’s ‘digital tracks’ and stop the damage,” Vonder Heide continues.

### After-Hiring Crisis

It might be a good idea to cleanse your Internet image — even after you’ve landed your dream job, as this story illustrates. Identifying details have been changed.

Anne Sparrow was going through the arduous process of applying to law schools across the country when she accepted an interim job with a legal publisher. She neglected to tell her new employer of her plans since she was still almost a year away from admission, and there was no guarantee she would even be accepted.

Anne detailed her law school journey on the personal blog that she maintained over a three-year period, along with stories of personal exploits, explicit humor, political commentary, and other details that are often undisclosed to employers.

Six months into her new job, Anne’s manager found her blog through a link on Anne’s instant messenger profile. Anne was confronted about her career plans by senior management almost immediately.

“I was mortified when I saw my website on my manager’s computer screen, and in an instant, I mentally prepared myself to hear that I was fired,” says Sparrow. “Not only were they learning that I would be eventually leaving the job to go to law school, they now knew a lot of personal information about me — things that aren’t ever mentioned in a professional work environment.”

Luckily, Sparrow’s company was supportive and the culture was casual enough that the irreverent tone was not mentioned. They allowed her to stay on until she left for law school, but they asked that she give notice as soon as she accepted an offer.

Other bloggers have not fared as well: employees from Google, Starbucks, Delta Airlines, Friendster, Harvard University, the Houston Chronicle and the Federal Government have all been fired because of information they wrote on their personal blogs. In fact, the term “dooced” was coined to refer to someone getting fired because of their personal blog. The definition comes from the URL of a blogger’s website after she was terminated by her employer for her writings.

If you find a site that contains truthful, yet embarrassing, information about you, you must first ask the webmaster and/or site owner to remove it. Removal is at the webmaster's discretion, and Google provides instructions ([www.google.com/remove.html](http://www.google.com/remove.html)) on how site owners can eliminate content from the search engine's index.

In an article about how sophisticated hackers are using Google to uncover sensitive information, Google spokesman Steve Langdon said, "Google removes content from search results under very limited circumstances," citing pages that contain child pornography, credit card numbers and other personal information, or copyrighted material that is used without permission.

The bottom line: Unless the online data is illegal or webmasters are fully cooperative, executives who find embarrassing associations in search results are often resigned to accept their existence.

### **How to Address Questionable Information**

"In a couple of cases, if I hadn't prefaced what I found about the candidate, he wouldn't have gotten the job," says Perry, referring to explainable information he discovered when Googling executive candidates.

"There are several ways to handle addressing 'digital dirt' on a candidate, depending upon the situation and what you've found out," says Karen Armon, CEO and founder of Alliance Resources, LLC in Littleton, CO.

"Introduce how easy it is to get information on the Internet about anyone, show the candidate what you found about him or her, and ask for an explanation." However, Armon says that an explanation isn't necessary unless the information is truly a deal-breaker.

"Tell the candidate that, 'I generally search the Internet for publicity about a candidate, especially when conducting an executive search, because I hope to find out if the candidate is media savvy. I've turned up some information about you and wondered if you could tell me something about it.'"

"My tip for people who know that their dubious activities will be discovered is to address it up front," says Dominguez. "If the activities in question are controversial, but not immoral or illegal, follow your instincts, and remember your legal rights (you don't have to, for example, apologize for a political opinion that differs from the manager). If the activities in question are illegal or demonstrate an inferior character, you'll probably not get many interview requests, but you should get some help to upgrade your integrity."

Just as candidates must anticipate all types of interview questions, Dominguez recommends preparing responses that allow candidates to maintain control. "You can Google just about anyone and find information — and for the executive whose background includes a hasty departure from a previous employer, he/she must be prepared to deal with it."

The key, says Dominguez, is to move the discussion forward, just as one of her clients did when questioned about leaving a former job. In this particular case, "Mark" was dismissed from his CFO position because he uncovered illegal accounting practices within his firm.

"When interviewing for his next position, Mark said, 'My last company and I found we had some critical cultural and management style differences. There is a certain type of leadership style that works well with my own, and I'm looking for a much better match this time around — which is why I'm speaking with you. I'm hoping we can discuss management and leadership styles, culture, how decisions are made.'"

### Keeping the Cyberslate Clean

"I'd advise executives, whether in search or not, to avoid posting negative comments about almost anything, but especially in reference to work-related situations. This means postings on Internet bulletin boards, chat rooms, personal blogs, or anywhere that can be accessed by the digital public. Also, they should beware of 'news' that comes out in press releases generated by their organizations, as well as any written reports authored by any media," says Montford.

ExecuNet founder and CEO Dave Opton proposes a simple litmus test: "Before doing anything that could become public, ask yourself two questions: Would you want your mother to find out, and would you want to see it on the front page of the Wall Street Journal?"

#### Expert Resources

- Jack Vonder Heide, Technology Briefing Centers, Inc. ([www.tbchq.com](http://www.tbchq.com))
- David Perry, Perry-Martel International ([www.perrymartel.com](http://www.perrymartel.com))
- Linda Dominguez, Executive Coaching and Resource Network ([www.executive-coaching.com](http://www.executive-coaching.com))
- Meg Montford, Abilities Enhanced ([www.abilitiesenhanced.com](http://www.abilitiesenhanced.com))
- Karen Armon, Alliance Resources, LLC ([www.allianceresources.net](http://www.allianceresources.net))

## Get the Facts: Choosing and Using a Search Engine for Internet Research

When you use the Internet to research companies, industries or people, it is important to realize that no single search engine has the whole Web cataloged. By restricting your search to one search engine you risk missing vital information.

How can you make sure this doesn't happen? Read on to learn about three types of search engines — the meta search engine, the search engine and the directory — and how you can use them to get the most from your searches on the Web.

**The meta search engine:** A meta search engine will search the other search engines' listings to arrive at its search results. This means that a meta search tool is the only device that really comes close to looking at the entire Internet. Try MetaCrawler, [www.metacrawler.com](http://www.metacrawler.com), one of the largest meta search engines, or Dogpile, [www.dogpile.com](http://www.dogpile.com).

**Search engines:** Search engines display the sites in order according to how often a site contains the keywords you specify. Google, [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), is one of the major search engines. Also try Ask Jeeves: [www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com).

**Directories:** This type of search site relies on human editors, rather than technology to find information. Yahoo! ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) was one of the best known, but they switched to their own search technology in late 2002. Yahoo! still maintains a directory at [dir.yahoo.com](http://dir.yahoo.com) but LookSmart, [www.looksmart.com](http://www.looksmart.com), and its partner, Zeal, [www.zeal.com](http://www.zeal.com), are largely monitored by human editors.

For more information on search engines, visit [www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com).

**Quick Tip:** News Search Engines. If something has been written in the media on the company you are researching, use a news search engine to find additional information. Try Google News ([news.google.com](http://news.google.com)), Yahoo! News ([news.yahoo.com](http://news.yahoo.com)), or Northern Light's paid service ([www.northernlight.com/nse.html](http://www.northernlight.com/nse.html)).

If you are looking for a new search engine to try, a list of the more useful ones includes:

- AllTheWeb.com: [www.alltheweb.com](http://www.alltheweb.com)
- Alta Vista: [www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com)
- AOL Search: [search.aol.com](http://search.aol.com)
- Excite: [www.excite.com](http://www.excite.com)
- Go.com: [go.com](http://go.com)
- HotBot: [www.hotbot.com](http://www.hotbot.com)
- Look Smart: [search.looksmart.com](http://search.looksmart.com)
- Lycos: [www.lycos.com](http://www.lycos.com)
- MSN: [www.msn.com](http://www.msn.com)