

Manager's Journal: Watch Out, or You Might Get 'Salvaged'

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By Richard Miniter

You post a resume online and wait for the offers to come in. Then you get an e-mail -- from the boss. Seems a sharp-eyed guy in personnel saw your resume on getajob.com. If you're lucky and the company has decided that you're worth "salvaging," you'll get a raise and a warning. If not, you'll be shown the door.

As the booming high-tech economy has created the tightest labor market in recent history, the Web has also made it easier for employees to leave. Almost five million people post their resumes online every month, according to the Media Metrix research firm. In response, personnel managers are fighting a secretive rearguard action to scan online job boards and hold losses to a minimum.

Usually based in the human resources department, "salvagers" monitor online job-listing sites, which range from general ones like monster.com to such specialty sites as layover.com for truckers and Taxsearchinc.com for tax preparers. Understandably, few companies will publicly discuss their salvaging operations, which can range from a full-time staff of salvagers to "find and tell" policies that require any employee who finds a colleague's resume online to inform a supervisor immediately.

For some small firms, salvaging is a matter of life and death. Four years ago Cary, N.C.-based Seer Technologies, a 700-employee software company, was in trouble. Key engineers were exiting, and Lori Laubach, a senior human-resources executive, had to stem the brain drain. She became a salvager, catching an average of 30 people a month. She would ask low-level employees directly why they were unhappy; she persuaded nearly one in four to stay. When a senior manager strayed, Ms. Laubach would confer with his supervisor and develop a detailed strategy before confronting the wayward executive. "Retention is the name of the game," says Ms. Laubach, whose efforts helped save the company, now known as Level 8 Systems.

Salvaging led to a cat-and-mouse game between job-search sites and employers. A quality-control officer at a midsize telecom company posted his resume in the "confidential" section of a highly specialized job site, which withheld his name and his employer's and blocked anyone logging in from his employer's domain name from seeing his resume. The employee got several offers -- including one from his employer. The personnel officer who smoked him out used a free Yahoo! account to avoid the job site's filters; the employee later received an e-mail asking if he ever worked with . . . himself. "If you're a technical like me, anyone can read your resume and figure out who you are," he says. After a few sleepless nights, he came clean. The company gave him a small raise and warned that he would lose certain assignments if his resume was found again within a year.

Sometimes salvagers will turn up resumes of current employees who aren't looking for work. That's because some aggressive recruiters use "spiders," special programs that wander the Web, plucking resumes from one job site and posting it on another, without telling the resume owner. Resumes can also move when a job site is bought or sold or when it forms an alliance with another site. Pam Dixon, author of "Job Searching Online for Dummies," posted several sample resumes on the Web. "My resumes got circulated to foreign countries, including Taiwan and Canada, and to databases I had never heard of and recruiters I didn't know."

While the jobless might welcome such exposure, old resumes can come back to haunt current employees. "About two-thirds of the employee resumes that I found online were old, inactive or being misused by headhunters," says Ms. Laubach. An engineer at a global electronics manufacturer almost lost his job when a salvager found a resume he had posted more than two years earlier. What saved him? He had moved, and the address on the old resume was outdated.

The online job-hunt market is shifting to favor sites like CareerBuilder.com, which quickly became the second-largest online job finder by building its business around anonymity. "We are obsessed with protecting the privacy our users," says CEO Robert McGovern. His site e-mails job openings rather than posting resumes, and offers free anonymous e-mail to evade employers' surveillance efforts. And in case your employer monitors your Web use, the company recommends you log on from home.

Some people lose their jobs through salvaging and never know it. Ms. Dixon says several human-resource managers have told her they have added employees to the layoff list after their resumes were found online. "These people still think they were laid off at random," says Ms. Dixon, who adds that she finds salvaging "disgusting and repellent."

Charles Sykes, author of "The End of Privacy," disagrees. Mr. Sykes criticizes managers who listen to employee voice mails, read their e-mail or use hidden cameras. In contrast, he argues, "posting a resume is not a private communication. You're broadcasting your availability for a job."

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