


Saturday, March 17, 2007

Using online activity to assess prospective employees

A while back I was reading a blog post by Jim Plush titled "What separates a professional PHP web developer from a scripter?". In general it's a good list, and should provide good advice for many an aspiring developer. However one point in particular raised a red flag:


I should be able to find all sorts of good things on google that you're doing with php or web technologies, It generally is a red flag when I google you and nothing comes up(bonus points for having a project of your own or contributing to one).

The problem here isn't finding and assessing a developer's past work - any developer ought to have a few show pieces to show. It's the idea of googling for an individual as having a red or green flag effect.. I'll be cautious and note Jim used the word "generally" in there suggesting there are exceptions. Hopefully.


I'm a prime example, stick the following into Google: "Pádraic Brady". Now go google - you'll realise after a page or two that I seem to have only existed for scarcely a year, primarily on the PHP scene, and a little bit for much longer on some Linux and Irish websites (though my name is not quite as rare in Ireland so don't expect to know which is me ).


That's the length of time that's passed since I became more willing to use my real name on the internet, in a very limited way. Before that, I have used a collection of internet handles. In PHP, you'd see "Maugrim The Reaper" more often than not - assuming my blog title didn't give that away!

Going back a year, if during an interview a prospective employer decided to comment on my lack of online existence I'd have likely started getting worried. I've been on the internet since the mid 90's, since secondary school, and likely have posted a lot of stupid ignorant insanely offending messages. So do I a) tell the employer I operate under internet handle A and let them trace my existence for 10 years online, or b) refuse to hand the employer any personally identifiable details, or c) avoid the issue and hope I fall into some exceptional case reserved for privacy sensitive individuals not wishing to offend an employer by saying "no" straight out?

It raises a pretty intriguing question. How far should an employer value that online google check? Low or high? Personally, I'd lean towards low on the basis that if a prospective employee had a community involvement or a personal project they forgot to mention then they are either inexperienced in being interviewed (prod and prod again ,

or just don't have any. Checking online would be hit and miss. If I checked myself 12 months ago I'd be spitting red flags because I would have walked out of the interview rather than give up a list of my precious online anonymous aliases. Screw that.

Today I couldn't care less since my name has been barely used online for a year, and I'm almost certain in a non-offensive manner .

It's become a plus to associate my name with this blog and my own meagre contributions to the PHP community. I still however use multiple aliases which effectively isolate varying interests and online activities from each other - enough to defeat the tracking schemes of the average google-read-opine folk who aren't willing to dig around for a while. My "Maugrim" alias will net you little more than early PHP development on an online game ('00 to '03) and some references to the alias' source in a Yahoo Club (now Group) back in '99 where Maugrim The Reaper was a pissed off Irish druid in an RPG fiction writing club .

For those who've linked their entire identity, online actions, and blunders to a real name or singular alias however it's can be a pretty tough position.

The reason I raise this post is because I actually know people this impacts. I've seen 3 people over the last few years do their living best erasing themselves from forums, and opt-in services to get rid of their past. I know two of these were definitely having issues with employers. None actually noted an employer name, so it seemed to revolve around how easy it is not only for employers - but lest we forget, CLIENTS - to do an idle google for a name. Herein lies the danger of singular identities online - if you don't keep yourself ringfenced to an alias, or at the least wary about openly posting certain types of, eh, criticism under a real name then you can be fried. Hell, two years from now I might regret using my real name in this entry... That would (or will?) be a shin kicker.

Still doesn't answer how to respond to that employer question about your online contributions... I don't have one if an employer puts too much value on prying (sorry, checking) into a person's private activities online innocent though they may see it.

Posted by Pdraic Brady in Irishisms, PHP General, PHP Security at 07:16

Don't forget that employers are not stupid; If I google a potential candidate, and I encounter some childish things that he posted when he was 12, I know how to value that against stuff I found that he did afterwards.

It still is interesting as it may still tell a lot about someone's personality.

In any case google is a very good way to assess someone's community involvement, but it can never be the sole argument; among the people that work at lbuildings, there are many which you wouldn't find anywhere on google but they are very good software engineers (with computer science skills). They're knowledge comes from a solid educational background, and not from involvement in the php community, but still, had I not hired them because they have no online presence, we would have missed out on some brilliant minds. Anonymous on Mar 17 2007, 18:42

1. In some countries (USA) there are laws against various forms of discrimination. Because of this, googleing for random information on an applicant means that you will more than likely find out information which you are not legally allowed to ask during a job application (age, sexual/religious/political preference, etc). If you are going to google your applicant, I would suggest you do so AFTER your initial interview.

2. Trying to "erase" yourself from the internet is pointless. The best strategy is to be as open as possible about what you do, and when google picks up 39,000 results on your name, the stupid usenet postings that you made in 1995 get lost (yes, I have them too). Anonymous on Mar 17 2007, 19:50

Eh, who doesn't have posts that they regret when they are older and wiser? I suppose like you, I started using my real name since about two or three years ago, so my name does have a bigger impact. However, I do write some posts that I would rather not have judged against me as most are for purely entertainment and insanity value only.

I was about to post about torturing and murdering people with pros and cons of the two, but I'll rather not have that come back and bite me. I can imagine that now:

Personnel: "Soooo, you like torturing end users and 'idiots', huh?"

Me: "Err, um, that was taken out of context, it was supposed to be funny."

Personnel: "Well. It's not."

Me: "I understand that sir, but at the time it was hilarious. I do enjoy the parts about the chainsaws... sorry."

Personnel: "..."

Me: "Right. So should I leave now or do you want to boot me in the ass with your foot?"

Let alone all of the posts about ass raping and stabbing random people. Dear God! I'm screwed! Noooo!

Well, at least I can count on never working at a few awesome companies. Err, yeah, I'm that Jacob Santos who is a director of the films. There are enough development jobs out there that one should be able to slip by unnoticed. By the time they do find the dirt on you, you'll already have proven yourself to be of value.

What I'm more worried about is that I'll say something that would offend someone and they'll "whois" my domain and come kick my ass. I try to keep any defamatory comments to myself to protect myself from that. Which is why I tend to try to stay out of politics and religion. Anonymous on Mar 17 2007, 21:36

I was talking about this just the other day with a fellow TorCamper named Rohan Jayasekera.


He was telling me that he was one of 3 Rohan Jayasekeras of notoriety on the Internet, 2 of which living in Toronto! To make matters worse, the third is notable for saying some questionable things about human rights issues, which can be nothing but troubling when it comes to being "Google judged". Rohan, being one of the founders of Sympatico (the ubiquitous ADSL service in Canada) is still trying to push these undesirable Google results further down the list by blogging, etc.


He told me about a co-worker of his back in the day that had lost a large contract when his client Googled his name and found references to an "abusive husband" (a different person by the same name). This was enough for the client to pull the contract and go with another firm, despite the inaccuracy of the information. This man has since changed the spelling of his name (legally) to avoid this kind of thing in the future.

I guess the best defense having a unique name like ours is to simply flood the 'net with so many positive contributions that it drowns out the less desirable (and less relevant!) information. But I think you're already doing that PÃ¡draic/Maugrim!

Nice blog, btw! Anonymous on Mar 18 2007, 01:59

I would definitely rethink working for any company that would use Google as one of the methods for deciding to employ someone. Google can pull up a ton of information related to a name where it is either wrong or doesn't really pertain to the person searched.

Take me for instance. Search for my name on Google and see what comes up. Out of all of those 800+ returns which of them are about me. 


My alias is usually Panama Jack or AKA Panama Jack and I have used it for around 10 years. Out of those 2 million returns which ones are from or about me. 

Using Google to find out information about someone isn't very bright. You can tell it wasn't thought through very well. If they are that paranoid or desperate to find out information about an employee you would think they would PAY to have a background check performed. Instead they do a check on the cheap using Google.

That's kind of like asking a person with a severe case of alzheimer's what has been going on today. Anonymous on Mar 18 2007, 02:44

It is almost impossible to erase information about yourself even from forums. There are services like The Wayback Machine that archive millions of sites on a monthly basis. So you can still pull up posts from people even if they have deleted them from the site.

And then you have Googles caching of web pages as well. If you started a thread on a forum and then deleted it after Google went through. Google will still have the link to the thread. The link will not take you to the thread anymore but you can click on the CACHED link and Google will display the forum thread it stored when it found it last.

Like many have said once it is on the internet it is there forever. 

So trying to erase yourself or things you may have posted is a fruitless task. Anonymous on Mar 18 2007, 02:52