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Avoiding the Pitfalls of Online Networking

Online networking sites have become increasingly popular with career-oriented legal administrators. Connecting with others through sites such as LinkedIn and industry association forums is an easy way to expand your professional circle, identify job opportunities and share information with colleagues. In addition, more social-oriented sites such as Facebook and MySpace enable users to share a variety of personal and professional information with acquaintances.

But while online networking can certainly be effective, there are potential pitfalls to consider when using the technology to foster business and social connections. These tips can help legal administrators keep their professional reputations intact as they navigate the world of digital interaction:

Observe tech etiquette. Although you can often learn a number of details about a person through online sites, be careful not to come across as overly familiar when reaching out electronically to a new contact. You still need to address the person by name, introduce yourself and explain how you found him or her, and your reason for wanting to connect. For example, you might reference a shared connection, such as a mutual friend or previous employer, when approaching someone for the first time. Keep your communication concise but polite and be upfront about your career-related motives. For instance, you may be considering a job opportunity at a firm where the individual once worked and want to see if he or she can provide some insights into the corporate culture.

Choose your friends wisely. Be selective about whom you invite to join your virtual network. By the same token, don't accept every invitation you receive to link to others on online sites, especially if you have only the most tenuous connection to the person. You could find yourself a victim of guilt by association if you're tied to others who have a poor reputation in the legal field.

As a general rule, it's wise to limit your network to individuals who know you well enough to vouch for your abilities and professional reputation if they were to be contacted by a potential employer or someone else who had an interest in your background.

Limit online networking from the office. Online networking may be useful for career purposes, but be careful of when and where you do it. Even if you're primarily using professionally oriented sites, resist the temptation to continually nurture your network when you're at work. Keep in mind that your firm has the right to monitor the sites you visit and the e-mails you send when using its equipment. Some companies even block certain sites, such as Facebook, to prevent employees from accessing them during work hours. Although many people now think of services such as Facebook as a normal part of

their everyday lives, most legal professionals would have a hard time justifying the need to update their Facebook status during the workday.

Be attentive to your digital trail. As more people, including hiring managers, turn to the Internet to find information about prospective hires or others in their professional circle, it becomes increasingly important to have a positive online presence. Career-savvy professionals should always think twice before posting any information online that is linked to their name. This includes profiles on networking sites and comments left on online bulletin boards or blogs. Also, legal documents or newspaper items that mention you by name will often show up in online searches.

If you use online networking sites, be sure to familiarize yourself with the privacy settings and use them to maximum advantage to prevent your personal and professional worlds from unintentionally intersecting. If you discover negative information about yourself online – whether it be an ill-advised comment you once posted on an online bulletin board or an unprofessional picture of you that a friend uploaded to a social networking site, take steps to have the unfavorable information removed. And remember that once you've left a trail in the digital world, it can be difficult to erase.

Without a doubt, online networking sites have permanently changed the way professionals interact with one another, mostly for the better. But the ease of making online connections can present problems for even the most adept networker. Understanding the risks and rewards of maintaining a virtual network is essential for anyone who aims to successfully traverse this ever-evolving electronic environment.