

Cyberspace Is A Job Jungle



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by Jerry Useem (reprinted from the *Fortune* magazine)

The headhunter probably should have contacted Unmesh Laddha before plucking his resume off an Internet job board and sending it, without his knowledge, to an employer. Especially because that employer, Argus Technical Services, was where Laddha already worked.

Last November, Laddha's boss telephoned him in a huff, none too happy to have received the resume of his own employee. Initially dumbstruck, Laddha was at pains to explain that he'd posted it online seven months earlier, before taking the job at Argus, and had never even met the headhunter in question. His job was spared, but his resume, still lingering in cyberspace, has twice more landed on his boss' desk. "It's been very embarrassing," says the 28-year-old technical consultant. "Once I put my resume on the Internet, I couldn't do anything to control it."

Such is the mixed blessing of online job hunting. Sites like Monster.com, Headhunter.net, and HotJobs.com allow candidates to shop their resumes to hundreds of employers at once. But many resumes—purloined by unscrupulous headhunters, duplicated and re posted by roving "spiders," and even spotted online by Web-wise bosses—are getting more visibility than their authors intended. "I get a minimum of two messages a week from readers saying they've lost their job from posting on the Net," warns Pam Dixon, author of two books on Internet job searching. "It really is a very dangerous situation for the job seeker."

Hyperbole? It seems not. More than a dozen human resources managers contacted by Fortune reported stumbling across their employees' resumes on the Net. Mike Prelewicz, recruiting manager at the Milwaukee office of Consultis Inc., says it has happened to him six times, usually while he's sifting through candidates on Monster.com. "We call them on the carpet," says Prelewicz, describing his handling of the first offender: "I got him on the telephone and said, 'What's going on? Is there something you don't like about us?'"

That was a more tempered response, he admits, than his initial instinct: firing the guy. "The Net is so vast, people think you'll never bump into each other," says Prelewicz. "But it's more common than people realize."

Not all such encounters are accidental. Some corporations have begun to patrol cyberspace in search of wayward workers, giving rise to a shadowy new subspecies of HR professional: the "salvager."

As a senior human resources consultant at Seer Technologies, a computer-services firm in Cary, N.C., that has since been acquired, part of Lori Laubach's job was to log on to resume boards each day, type in the company name, and see if any of Seer's 700 employees popped up. If one did, Laubach would notify the employee's supervisor. They would discuss whether the employee should be persuaded to stay or encouraged to leave, then arrange a sit-down with the invariably stunned individual. "At least 20 or 30" people were caught in such a fashion, says Laubach, who left the company last fall. "Probably more... We relied very heavily on it."

It's called employee "salvaging," and to some, the practice smacks of guard towers and searchlights. "I would be repulsed if someone did it here," says Allen Wolf, manager of recruiting programs and services at Ford Motor. "We don't believe that's fair to the employee." Donald Harris, chairman of the Privacy Committee of the International Association for Human Resource Information Management, calls such monitoring Orwellian and speculates that "it could create an employee-relations disaster."

But at stake, Laubach insists, was a legitimate employer concern: protection of company secrets. Employees discovered with one foot out the electronic door, she says, needed to be reassigned off sensitive projects. Other companies seem to share her philosophy. A former HR manager at software behemoth Computer Associates, Bruce Sasson, says two of his colleagues spent "a good part of their day" scanning the Web for current employees. (Computer Associates says it has no such policy.) And Pam Dixon, the author, says she's confirmed at least seven instances of Fortune 1,000 companies assigning someone to the task full-time.

Read This Before You Put A Resume Online

Attuned to such dangers or not, an estimated one million people will transmit their resumes over the Net this year. And it can be a matchless generator of job leads. When Scott Savant, a PeopleSoft consultant, posted his credentials on three sites, he was deluged with as many as 75 recruiting calls per day. "There's a serious positive side to having it out there," says Craig Brown, who routinely uses the Net to land short-term gigs as an Oracle database administrator. "You can get that job of a lifetime."

But a number of factors conspire to wrest control from the job seeker. Among them: so-called spidering technologies. Dispatched at night by job boards looking to populate themselves with candidates, these programs creep robotically through other sites and return laden with resumes. Even private, password-secured services aren't immune to such pilfering: A couple of years ago ComputerJobs.com, a popular site for tech professionals, had several rivals sign up as "clients" and then illicitly download resumes for re posting.

The result? A CV posted on a handful of sites can quickly end up plastered across a dozen. And a runaway resume can be hard to stop. Many job boards don't even allow candidates the option of removing outdated versions.

In Craig Brown's case, a company he'd never heard of began using his resume to solicit business from a client. Shri Kakarla, a Brooklyn-based consultant, had an even worse problem: not only did he lose track of his resume's whereabouts, but someone improved it, adding work experience he didn't have. "I got a call saying, 'I heard you've worked at nuclear power plants,' " he recalls. "I was like, 'Where did you get that idea?' "

Then there are the thousands of small-time headhunters who, looking for a quick commission, harvest resumes from the Internet and shovel them to employers in bulk—without consulting the candidates. One former manager at Price Waterhouse Coopers says his resume was picked up in

such a sweep and sent to—you guessed it—Price Waterhouse. It was not, shall we say, a boon to his career. "[The headhunter] didn't even bother reading my resume," fumes the manager, who hired an attorney and considered legal action.

But what legal recourse is there against resume snatching? Not much, attorneys agree. "Once you've posted something publicly," summarizes Jamie L. Johnson, a partner at the law firm Brobeck Phleger & Harrison in Los Angeles, "forget it."

Sensitive to the mounting concerns, some job boards are turning privacy into a selling point. HotJobs.com, for instance, offers candidates the option of "blocking" their resume from the gaze of certain employers. And JobOptions.com has introduced a so-called "blind" approach whereby candidates post a truncated, nameless version of their resume and receive an e-mail if an employer's interest is piqued. "We're trying to provide an environment where professionals can have their credentials out there while keeping their careers intact," says JobOptions president Michael Forrest.

Pam Dixon is skeptical that such precautions can thwart a salvager. "It doesn't work," she says, noting that employers can skirt some blocking mechanisms simply by registering under a non corporate e-mail address.

So what's a responsible job seeker to do? For out-of-work or just-out-of-school candidates with little to lose, the air-drop method might still make sense. By all means, proceed directly to ResumeBlaster.com, which distributes resumes with all the discrimination of a fire hose, and blast away. But for those who'd prefer not to be fired for testing the waters, some protective steps seem essential.

As for Unmesh Laddha, he won't repost his resume online anytime soon. But then again, he doesn't need to. It's still out there—and will be for years to come.

Resume Privacy 101

Going online to job-hunt? We can't guarantee your privacy, but here are six steps that may safeguard your resume.

At a minimum, date your resume—just in case it lands on your boss' desk two years from now.

Include a legend that forbids unauthorized transmission by headhunters. It may not work, but no harm in trying.

Call a job site's administrators before posting to it. Key questions: Are resumes ever traded or sold to other databases? Is a firewall up to protect them from being cherry-picked by "spidering" programs? And who has access to the database? Just corporate recruiters? Headhunters too? Anybody at all?

Keep your resume off Usenet news groups, the most exposed posting spots.

If possible, cloak your identity with a "power resume"—one that lists your capabilities but not your name or employer—and with an anonymous e-mail account to receive inquiries.

Better yet, don't post a resume at all. Register with a "job agent" service (available on sites like NationJob.com and CareerBuilder.com) that brings notification of job openings to your desktop.

Her boss' spy, Laubach scanned the Net for employee resumes.