In our most recent publication, our 2015 Company and Talent Report, we explore the various ways that today's talent searches for employment—and, as you may guess, one of the most widely used resources is the Internet. In fact, nearly 40% of all of our job applicants nationwide say they find us online, whether that be through organic search, a social media site, an online job board, or a paid advertisement. To further narrow it down, according to Jobvite's 2014 “Job Seeker Nation” report, social job seekers—those who actively use social media to search for a job—indicate that Facebook is the most fruitful resource (76% found their current job on Facebook) and Twitter is the most popular place they look for employment help and advice.

In addition to providing rich recruiting opportunities for employers, the Internet presents innumerable venues for job seekers and employees alike to discuss employment details, share experiences, and air grievances. Because of these things, and the fact that our business hinges on the ability to attract and retain talent on a national scale, we're paying a lot of attention to our online reputation. And if you're as passionate as we are about attracting the best talent in the market—you'll do the same.

YOUR REPUTATION PRECEDES YOU

Peer reviews are both a powerful motivator and de-motivator for job seekers. Not long ago, word of mouth reviews were limited by the speed in which one person could talk to another person or group of people. Good or bad, a company's reputation in one town would rarely spill over to other locations. However, with the advent of social media, it's rare—and nearly impossible—to contain experiences to one location.

THE SOCIAL WORKPLACE

Employee camaraderie extends outside the walls of your buildings, and so do discussions about employment with you. Undoubtedly, your employees are talking; and, because these discussions often happen online, they're subject to public viewing (and sharing, and re-tweeting, and blogging) which ultimately impacts your reputation and ability to attract new talent or retain current talent.

It's important employers protect their legal rights and interests through use of a social media policy, because a well-crafted and communicated policy will work to protect your company by setting clear expectations related to online behaviors, while also respecting the rights of your employees. There are, however, legal limits to how much online behavior you are able to control through your policy.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has decided several recent cases in favor of employees with respect to electronic and on-line discussions and comments by employees pertaining to wages and working conditions, reasoning that the discussions, comments or similar electronic communications are protected under the National Labor Relations Act under which employees have the protected federal right to engage in concerted activity with regards to wages and working conditions, whether or not those employees are represented by a union. Elwood Staffing's General Counsel, Lia Elliott, emphasizes the importance of understanding and staying up to date with applicable laws, guidance being issued by the NLRB and decisions issued by the NLRB:

“Taking adverse action against an employee related to electronic communications on company email systems, social media sites, or similar electronic avenues can be higher risk in our current environment given that the majority of the NLRB leans – sometimes rather counter-intuitively – more in favor of the employee. Many, if not most, electronic and on-line employee communications are protected. In fact, on March 19, 2015, the NLRB General Counsel published guidance on Employer Handbooks with particular emphasis on social media and email polices. Now more than ever it is critical that employers have their employee handbooks reviewed by experienced labor and employment law counsel who understands the National Labor Relations Act and the current stance of the National Labor Relations Board.”
Even companies with an air-tight social media policy are not immune to lapses in employee judgment. Whether intentional or not, an employee's online activity could publicly expose details of employment situations at your worksite, which, if negative, may deter potential candidates from applying. For this reason, we suggest implementing internal employee surveys that allow you to gauge workforce sentiment and give employees an opportunity to provide feedback—in the hopes they will air grievances privately and not online. You can read more about one survey method we suggest and employ—the employee Net Promoter Score℠—in our 2015 Company and Talent Report.

RECENT CHANGES IMPACT PUBLIC CONSUMPTION

Though there are numerous social media sites job seekers use to evaluate you, one may begin to affect you more than any other due to an impending partnership. Google and Twitter have once again struck a deal to allow Google to display tweets in real-time—to the tune of about 9,000 tweets per second[^1]. This means Google will display information as soon as it is posted; no delays, no overlooked posts, no need for the Google user to be a member of Twitter or to even go to the site to search. When and where Google will display tweets is still unclear, but experts expect it to be on the first page and near or in the same section as organic search results. Given that more job seekers say they trust Twitter more than any other social site for help and advice, this match-up will impact you.

So, what does this mean for you as an employer?

Two things.

First, this means you’ll be competing with more information that Google—the world's most trusted and widely used search engine—is disseminating. No one puts as much thought into your reputation as you do, and you will be competing for trust against information others posted impulsively in 140 characters or less. This means that people, even those who may simply set out to search for your phone number, will be faced with a real-time stream of information about you. This stream can be especially poignant if you are the subject of negative discussions.

Second, this means you need a response plan. Because public tweets containing your company's name will be visible to anyone who “Googles” you or a similar search term, you need to know what people are saying about you. And you need to be prepared to respond quickly—to the good, to the bad, and to the ugly.

STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Providing superior customer service and following a strategic response plan has always been the driver of our corporate customer service strategy, and that extends to social media.

For years, we have had a policy to publicly address complaints on social media. Instead of deleting negative comments, we provide relatively immediate responses online and steer the rest of the conversation offline. This both protects the upset party—who often needs to share personal information in order for us to correct a problem—and our company, because we are able to stop additional negative actions, resolve issues, and restore goodwill quickly. It shows others that we care about our customers' experiences and take the time to solve problems and, more importantly, it gives happy employees the opportunity to come to our defense—one of the best scenarios possible. In the beginning, this was a small initiative, but, as we grew, we hired a dedicated associate engagement manager to monitor our social media sites, respond to public and private grievances, and connect people with the correct internal resources.

Like ours, your response plan should include a continued analysis of customer feedback. This feedback is valuable as it can offer insight into the minds of your customers and expose areas for potential improvement. For example, comments collected online from job applicants helped us identify internal customer service and response time
issues and served as the impetus for the formation of a formal corporate-wide customer service tracking initiative, the Purple Index. Each week, we survey a random population of new applicants—by phone or email survey—and track their responses. Our branches are then assigned a Purple Index score based on the responses and, when necessary, assigned action items to improve customer service or response rates.

WE GET IT. WE’VE BEEN THERE.

We know firsthand managing your online presence and reputation can be a full-time job. Some companies have the luxury of an entire department dedicated to managing social media, but, the reality is, most simply don't have the resources. Whether you have a social media department of 10 or you manage it by yourself, it's worth whatever time and attention your company can muster. So, plan and prepare, consider strategies like those that have worked for us, and do your best to make social media work to your advantage. After all, your reputation depends on it.