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HBR CASE STUDY AND COMMENTARY

Should Fred hire
Mimi despite her
online history?

Four commentators offer
expert advice.

We Googled You

by Diane Coutu

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Hathaway Jones's CEO has found a promising candidate to open the company's flagship store in Shanghai. Should a revelation on the Internet disqualify her now?

HBR CASE STUDY

We Googled You

by Diane Coutu

The wind was howling and relentless as Fred Westen opened the door and called upstairs to tell his wife that he was home. While he waited for her to come down, he poured himself a shot of whiskey, tilting the decanter with his left hand. In his right he grasped the morning's *Wall Street Journal*. The CEO of the luxury apparel retailer Hathaway Jones wanted to hear his wife's reaction to a story.

Martha Westen walked almost languorously down the stairs. She went to the kitchen, poured herself a cup of tea, strolled into the living room, and nestled in her favorite chair by the fire. Fred handed her the paper and directed her attention to the front page. There she found an article about how an insurer had rejected a woman's claim for disability because of chronic back pain, based on information the company had obtained from her psychologist's notes.

Martha shook her head. "It gets worse every day," she shuddered as she envisioned a future in

which everyone's medical records were posted online. "Even our thoughts aren't private anymore." At 58, Martha didn't pretend to be an expert on shared online content or anything else to do with the Internet. All her information was limited to what she read in the popular press.

Which was just enough to keep her up at night.

"It's what I keep on telling you, Fred. There are no secrets now, and we're just going to have to learn how to live with that."

Martha fell silent, staring moodily at the flickering fire. Fred was almost relieved when the telephone rang. He jumped up to grab the receiver.

At the other end of the line was John Brewster, Fred's old roommate at Andover and now a stringer for a number of U.S. newspapers in Shanghai. Although the two had not stayed close after prep school, they still exchanged Christmas letters and called each other occasionally. The men spent a few minutes catching

HBR's cases, which are fictional, present common managerial dilemmas and offer concrete solutions from experts.

up and then John eased the conversation around to his daughter, Mimi.

Now in San Francisco, Mimi had heard that Fred planned to expand the Philadelphia-based Hathaway Jones into China, and she wanted to be part of the move. Fred hadn't seen her since she was a teenager, but he remembered her as poised and precocious in the way that expatriate kids often are. John asked Fred if he would meet with her. "She's a terrific gal," his old friend promised, "a real mover and shaker."

"I look forward to seeing her again," Fred said honestly. "Just have her contact my assistant."

The Candidate

A month later, on the other side of the country, Mimi Brewster was admiring herself in the bedroom mirror. As she stared at her reflection, a trace of a smile brightened her face. It wasn't a smile that Mimi would let everyone see, but it communicated the satisfaction she felt with her life. With her bobbed black hair and Manolo Blahnik shoes, Mimi felt that she was right on track. Not quite 30, she was already the kind of person who made people sit up and take notice.

"You look terrific; he'll be as wild about you as I am," Mimi's boyfriend, Chandler, said as he rolled over in bed, unable to hide his continuing infatuation with Mimi. "He'd be nuts not to hire you."

Mimi agreed with Chandler. She had grown up in China, and she spoke both Mandarin and a local dialect. Although she had been an average student, her profile had won her admission to some top colleges, including two Ivy League schools. She eventually plumped for Berkeley, where her father had gone. There she'd majored in modern Chinese history and graduated cum laude.

She had parlayed her college experience into numerous job offers, finally accepting a position at a management consultancy, where she got the broad business exposure she wanted. Her career in motion, she applied to an MBA program two years later, choosing Stanford over Harvard because she felt that it was closer to the buzz. She was recruited after graduation by the West Coast regional office of Eleanor Gaston, the largest clothing, shoes, and accessories company in the United States. There, for the past four years, she'd shown a sharp eye

for the capricious fashion tastes of the young, newly rich people in search of something to do with their dot-com money. Now, with two successful brand relaunches behind her, she was looking for some general management experience, preferably in a fast-growing market like China.

Mimi walked over to the bed, sat down, and kissed Chandler playfully on the lips. "Don't waste the day chatting with your Facebook friends," she told him. "You've got to take Patapouf to the vet." Mimi's Siamese cat was famously ill-tempered, but he had attitude, and Mimi warmed to that. She picked up Patapouf and gave him a hug.

Abruptly, she stood, straightened her Hathaway Jones interview suit, and said good-bye. All business now, she grabbed her bag, her BlackBerry, and her keys and ran out to catch the flight to Philadelphia.

Bullish on a China Shop

Fred left the house at 5:30 AM every day for his office at 1 Constitution Road. He had a lot of work to do, and there was not a moment to waste. Despite sales of \$5 billion in 2006, Hathaway Jones had fallen on hard times. Four years ago, the privately owned U.S. retail chain had recruited Fred because of his imposing credentials and a lifetime's experience of working with luxury brands and had charged him with waking up the company's sleepy, conservative stores.

It hadn't been easy. Though aggressive outsourcing to suppliers in Mexico for some of the chain's lower-tier brands had helped bring the company's margins closer to industry standards, that was just a start. An avid consumer of his firm's marketing research, Fred knew that the company's image was getting old fast. Younger people across the United States, where Hathaway Jones had 144 shops and outlets, wanted more affordable clothing, with more flair. The trend was starting to show up in declining numbers for the company's high-priced—some said stodgy—designer clothes. Plans for radically revamping the company's image and product line were in the offing.

Fred's biggest bet, however, was to elbow in on China's luxury goods market, which was growing by 70% a year. He had earmarked millions of dollars to open new stores in three of the largest cities, including Beijing and Guangzhou, with the flagship in Shanghai,

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China's wealthiest and most cosmopolitan city. With the plans in place, Fred was focused on selecting a winning team. "I wonder what Mimi's like now?" he asked himself, eyeing her CV. "Maybe there's a way I can fit her in. Doing a friend a favor and banking on a rising star—who knows? This could be a twofer."

The First Impression

Mimi was Fred's last appointment of the day. "C'mon in!" he boomed, embracing her and inviting her to take a seat on the couch. Mimi looked around the corner suite and glanced at a lithograph of Hathaway Jones's first store, a draper's shop in Philadelphia. "You're the spitting image of your mother," Fred said, settling into his soft leather chair. "Tell me how she's doing."

Mimi relayed how after almost 30 years of painting portraits, her mother had taken up fashion photography to capitalize on China's unprecedented interest in image and celebrity. "It's amazing how much appetite the new middle class has for fashion," Mimi commented. "Right," Fred said, adding that Chuppies—China's yuppies—couldn't seem to get their hands on luxury goods quickly enough. "Absolutely!" she said, a little too abruptly. "Everybody knows that."

Mimi fished around for insights that would make a smart impression on Fred. She knew that on the face of it, China seemed to be all about money. "But if you talk to senior executives in the big cities," she reported intelligently, "Confucianism comes up in every conversation." She said that the Chinese wanted to balance the intense materialism of the past two decades with some kind of spirituality and that Fred had better be prepared to deal with it.

Mimi looked him squarely in the eye. Clearly, she wasn't expecting a handout. She wanted to be part of Hathaway Jones's plans to expand into China because she felt she deserved to be part of those plans. Indeed, she hoped to lead the team opening the flagship store on Nanjing Road—Shanghai's version of Fifth Avenue. "A store is more than just the look and feel of a brand," she said knowingly. "It's a woman's fashion fantasy. I can help you create a fantasy to die for." Mimi talked about using ancient Chinese archetypes to bring the company's brand alive, and Fred was intrigued by the pitch. "I'll open the door for you and arrange some

interviews," he said noncommittally, "but after that, you're on your own."

Mimi winked. "Thanks, boss," she said, turning on her heel, confident that she was going to be a player at Hathaway Jones.

Page Nine News

Virginia Flanders, the vice president of human resources, was a lifer at Hathaway Jones, and as a member of the old guard, she had not been invited into Fred's inner circle. Indeed, the two of them had been at loggerheads about the way Fred brought together his top team. He ignored internal talent and downplayed the value of HR, relying overmuch, Virginia thought, on his sixth sense about who were the right people to bring on board. It was typical of the man, she reflected, that Fred spoke glowingly about Mimi after just one interview.

As she put together a file on Mimi for the staff, Virginia had to concede that the candidate's letters of recommendation were impressive. Employers described her as aggressively creative, original, opinionated, and a risk taker—perhaps a bit brash for Hathaway Jones, Virginia thought. She rounded out the file by running a routine Google search on Mimi. The first hits turned up a restaurant owner who shared Mimi's name. Virginia narrowed the search by adding a few parameters—Berkeley, Stanford, and Mimi's employer.

It was Virginia's practice to scan the first 11 pages of Google results, and on page nine she glimpsed something that might cause concern. A story in the November 1999 issue of the *Alternative Review* identified Mimi, fresh out of Berkeley, as the leader of a non-violent but vocal protest group that had helped mobilize campaigns against the World Trade Organization.

"That's odd," Virginia mused, deciding to key in "human rights" and "free trade" along with Mimi's name. She didn't expect to find much, but the search engine came up with several hits. It was soon clear that Mimi's involvement had been more than just a student's expression of defiance. One newspaper story featured a photo of Mimi sitting outside China's San Francisco consulate protesting China's treatment of a dissident journalist.

Virginia had just clicked on another entry when a pop-up notified her of an e-mail from Fred, canceling their meeting for later that day. Groaning inwardly, Virginia typed a short mes-

*"It gets worse every day.
Even our thoughts aren't
private anymore."*

sage and hit the reply button. She was going to have to talk with Fred about this straightaway.

Ex Post Facebook

Fred was in the boardroom wrapping up a meeting with the senior executive team; Virginia waited a few moments, then walked in. He knew her well enough to see that whatever she had to say to him wasn't going to make him happy. "What's the problem, Virginia?" he asked as he snapped his binder shut.

"I'm afraid we have something of a situation on our hands," she began, priding herself on her ability to remain objective. "I've been Googling Mimi Brewster, and I think there's something we might need to worry about." Virginia showed Fred printouts of the half-dozen or so articles she had found. Choosing her words carefully, she pointed out that Mimi could be the kind of person who could get the company into trouble in China.

"For heaven's sake," Fred said, betraying his irritation. "Google anyone hard enough, and you'll find some dirt." Privately, however, Fred was relieved that Virginia hadn't turned up anything more recent than eight years ago—and even more relieved that it wasn't a picture of Mimi half naked on MySpace, which could really embarrass Hathaway Jones.

Fred's mind moved back in time, remembering the 1960s. "Let's face it," he thought a little defensively, he'd "not inhaled" just like the rest of his friends. Suddenly he felt a touch of paranoia—or was it realism? He couldn't tell.

"Let's get Mimi back in here to tell her side of the story," he said, looking up at Virginia. He knew enough about the Internet to understand that anyone could put information out there.

Virginia blinked anxiously and suggested that Fred might first want to get some feedback from the company lawyers. She explained that they were studying the legal and privacy implications of Internet searching practices in an attempt to define an appropriate position for the company. "It's a bit risky letting her know that we're considering not hiring her because we Googled her," Virginia pointed out. "It might be safer just to back away before we get too involved."

"Maybe," Fred conceded, acknowledging that he might need to rethink Mimi's candidacy. "But people with her credentials and ref-

erences don't walk in the door of a company like ours every day. If she's swept up by the competition, there'll be hell to pay."

The Decision Point

"Watch out!" Martha shouted as Fred ignored a yield sign and veered toward an oncoming car.

Martha and Fred were heading out for dinner in the city, but Fred's mind was a million miles away. "What's the matter?" she asked, trying not to sound intrusive. "Is it something we can discuss?"

Fred put on his blinker to signal that he was turning left. He told Martha what HR had turned up about Mimi. "What am I supposed to do?" he brooded. "With everyone's sins out there on the Internet, fewer and fewer young people seem to be coming to us without any baggage." He turned on the car's defroster and loosened his tie. "Everyone is going to have to be a little more forgiving," he said.

Martha was quiet for a few minutes as she tried to process the news. She didn't think anyone was going to just forgive and forget. "Internet postings are like tattoos," she said, ending the short silence. "They never go away. Sooner or later someone else will dig up this information, and if the wrong people get hold of it, your China plans will be derailed."

Fred quickly glanced at her in surprise. He'd expected Martha to insist that he hire Mimi despite the discoveries.

Martha grew impatient with Fred's naïveté. The genie was out of the bottle now. He needed to put business considerations ahead of any hesitation he felt about using information that turned up on the Internet.

Fred looked away from Martha and turned the windshield wipers on high. Snow was falling fast and hard, and Fred felt strangely alone. "I don't know," he thought, flipping the argument back and forth. "The problem is that I have a responsibility to Hathaway Jones to hire the best people I can find. And how am I going to do that if I can only consider the ones who have always played it safe?"

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See [Case Commentary](#)

"People with her credentials and references don't walk in the door of a company like ours every day. If she's swept up by the competition, there'll be hell to pay."

Case Commentary

by John G. Palfrey, Jr.

Should Fred hire Mimi despite her online history?

Fred Westen should certainly follow his instinct and hire Mimi Brewster if everything else checks out. He should talk to her and tell her exactly what has come up. He has little to lose. There's no legal reason to fear searching the Internet for information about your job applicants—an issue arises only if you unlawfully discriminate against someone because of what you find. And if CEOs are looking only for people who are total saints, and who never did anything that made it onto the Web, then maybe they're hiring only uninteresting people at the end of the day. A strategy of that sort could backfire terribly: If you have nobody with chutzpah in your group, you will find yourself hurting for leaders.

There may also be another side to the story discovered by the human resources department. Digital information is extremely malleable. Anyone with a tiny bit of expertise can easily falsify it—for example, by anonymously lying about someone in a chat room and starting a rumor that catches fire and becomes a “truth.” Fallacious remarks travel very, very quickly online—perhaps even faster than true information—and it is hard to track them down and expunge them. So if something that may or may not be true about a candidate is raised, it is essential to bring that person in to clarify the situation. You might also want to ask them to provide more references for you to check. Because online information is so easily falsified—and, plainly, so easily shared—this second level of interviewing has become increasingly important.

Presumably, Mimi didn't call up newspapers and ask them to write articles about her. But in the culture of “digital natives,” there's often an intention to be public. People raised in the modern computing environment share information much more promiscuously than previous generations have. They have a certain devil-may-care attitude toward things that other people would probably consider highly private—compromising photos, embarrassing

conversations, and other activities that they otherwise wouldn't want their mothers to know—and they don't think twice about revealing them online. That's not going to change unless there's a radical course correction in social norms.

Given the trend, hiring standards will have to change, or you just won't be able to hire great people. That's hard for the current crop of CEOs and HR executives to understand. Most senior executives are “digital immigrants” who have not immersed themselves in the electronic culture. Baby boomers, and sometimes younger executives, are trying to work through their ambivalence toward the current generation of 20-somethings, who increasingly put negative information about themselves online. The primary difficulty for digital immigrants is that they're fighting against their own instinct, which is to pull the trigger on the digital natives. The generation gap will continue to widen until the digital natives become CEOs and HR executives themselves.

I don't have a crystal ball, so I can't tell whether the current revolution is going to turn out to be permanent or not. My guess is that we're headed for a really big backlash at some point—there are going to be train wrecks as people who post too much personal information online begin to realize the consequences. When they have to explain to their kids why naked pictures of themselves at age 25 are on the Internet, some digital natives will have real regrets. That said, I don't think those conversations will necessarily differ much from the ones that people who grew up in the 1960s had to have with their kids about drugs and free love.

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The primary difficulty for digital immigrants is that they're fighting against their own instinct, which is to pull the trigger on the digital natives.

Case Commentary

by Jeffrey A. Joerres

Should Fred hire Mimi despite her online history?

The evolution of online media and social networking is changing the employment landscape in many subtle but fundamental ways, which most employers and candidates are only beginning to understand fully and manage effectively. One of these shifts is the practice of informally conducting at least partial online background checks of individuals prior to interviewing them.

Traditionally, a background check was not done until after an applicant had gone through a gauntlet of interviews and been selected as a finalist. And it wasn't long ago that someone with an imperfect past could move far away from his troubled history and start fresh in a new location. Today, qualified candidates can be Googled out of contention for a job before they even get a foot in the door for an interview, and it's difficult for them to leave their baggage behind even when crossing national borders, because the online community knows no boundaries.

In this case, Fred and his HR manager have taken some initial steps in the hiring process and uncovered some red flags that would cause me to sideline Mimi as a candidate for the Shanghai position. Beyond the disconcerting online revelation, former employers describe her as opinionated and brash, and in the interview with Fred, it seemed quite inappropriate for her to wink at him and call him "boss" on the way out of his office. If the job for which Mimi was interviewing were in a Western country, these concerns might not be as big a deal, but China is a unique place.

Although Mimi has some strong qualifications, her background in China is not enough to make her a good manager there. Hathaway Jones is opening its first store in Shanghai, and the firm needs a manager who can build a constructive relationship with the local government. Hiring someone without the right skills and attitudes to do so could hinder the company's ability to succeed in this market. And, of course, the fact that Chinese people are very

Web oriented and know how to Google probably wouldn't help her situation.

Frankly, because retail and service businesses are so local in nature, I would hesitate to put an expatriate in the Shanghai position. Chinese employees expect their leaders to be modest and humble and see them as highly respected authority figures with parentlike attributes. A Western-style leader who doesn't understand this will face high turnover rates and low productivity levels. For all her language skills, Mimi does not strike me as a credible parent substitute for a Chinese workforce.

This case illustrates how important it is for potential employees—particularly young people who spend a great deal of time engaging in all sorts of Web 2.0 activities—to protect their reputations and think twice about the online personae they are presenting to the world. Information posted today will still be available years from now and could come back to haunt them. Many new high school and college graduates don't truly understand this until they are sitting in a job interview and the HR manager opens a file that includes not only their résumé but also their latest blog entries and party photos. Online content is public information, and it is fair game for employers to ask about it.

We always recommend that candidates search the Internet to find anything about themselves that might come up in an interview, so that they can prepare to respond effectively. They should consider how they might use the Web to demonstrate attributes that would make a positive impression on potential employers. Better to fill the Internet with content that portrays you as an accomplished and capable individual who would be an asset to a new employer than to share the details from your latest weekend adventures.

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Today, qualified candidates can be Googled out of contention for a job before they even get a foot in the door for an interview.

Case Commentary

by danah m. boyd

Should Fred hire Mimi despite her online history?

If Hathaway Jones doesn't want to hire people like Mimi, it'll miss out on the best minds of my generation.

I just celebrated my ten-year blogging anniversary. I started blogging when I was 19, and before that, I regularly posted to public mailing lists, message boards, and Usenet. I grew up with this technology, and I'm part of the generation that should be embarrassed by what we posted. But I'm not—those posts are part of my past, part of who I am. I look back at the 15-year-old me, and I think, "My, you were foolish." Many of today's teens will also look back at the immaturity of their teen years and giggle uncomfortably. Over time, foolish digital pasts will simply become part of the cultural fabric.

Young people today are doing what young people have always done: trying to figure out who they are. By putting themselves in public for others to examine, teens are working through how others' impressions of them align with their self-perceptions. They adjust their behavior and attitudes based on the reactions they get from those they respect. Today's public impression management is taking place online.

Once again, adults are upset by how the younger generation is engaging with new cultural artifacts; this time, it's the Internet. As with all moral panics around teenagers, concern about who might harm the innocent children is coupled with a fear of those children's devilish activities. To complicate matters, many contemporary teens are heavily regulated and restricted while facing excessive pressures to succeed. The conflicting messages adults convey can be emotionally damaging.

What is seen as teens' problematic behavior can also be traced back to the narratives that mainstream media sell to teens—including the celebrity status given to Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan. Thanks to a number of complex social factors, narcissism is on the rise. Narcissists seek fame. Reality TV shows tell teens that full exposure is a path to success, so how can we be surprised that attention-seeking teens reveal all? Not all teens want this kind of attention, but cultural norms

have shifted, and the Web has become both a place for friends and a space to seek attention.

So, what does all this imply for the company in this case? Many young people have a questionable online presence. If Hathaway Jones doesn't want to hire these people, it'll miss out on the best minds of my generation. Bright people push the edge, but what constitutes the edge is time dependent. It's no longer about miniskirts or rock and roll; it's about having a complex digital presence.

Naturally, there'll always be a handful of young people who manage to go through adolescence and early adulthood without any blemishes on their record. Employers need people who play by the rules, but they also need "creatives." Mimi is a creative, and for the job Fred is trying to fill, a traditionalist just won't do. Fred should listen to his own instincts and hire Mimi. I'd advise him to open a conversation with her immediately so that they can strategize together about how to handle potential challenges posed by employees' online practices.

I think Fred will learn a lot from that experience. My generation isn't as afraid of public opinion as his was. We face it head-on and know how to manage it. We digitally document every love story and teen drama imaginable and then go on to put out content that creates a really nuanced public persona. If you read just one entry, you're bound to get a distorted view. That's why I would also advise Mimi to begin creating her own Google trails. She should express her current thoughts on China, reflecting on how she has fine-tuned her perspective over the years. Part of living in a networked society is learning how to accessorize our digital bodies, just as we learn to put on the appropriate clothes to go to the office.

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Case Commentary

by Michael Fertik

Should Fred hire Mimi despite her online history?

As Fred has told his VP of human resources, if you Google anyone hard enough you'll find some dirt. This is the new reality. Companies don't want to go on record about Googling candidates, but everybody's doing it. Your CV is no longer what you send to your employer—it's the first ten things that show up on Google. I'm 28, and I'm part of a generation that doesn't even go on a second date without Googling the other person.

In light of the widespread use of Internet searching practices, Hathaway Jones will have trouble hiring Mimi. The job is high-profile enough, and the online content about her is sensitive enough for Chinese decision makers, that there is absolutely no question the information will be discovered and noted—even if it appears only on page nine of Google's results. Then people will write more about it on the Internet, and the community will take heed. Given the climate of the times, Mimi presents a risk to Hathaway Jones.

In this case, Mimi didn't publish the content herself, and she is powerless to pull it from the Web. These are newspaper articles. Even our company, which was set up to search for and destroy unwanted online information, wouldn't try to remove newspaper stories. That would be bad constitutional practice, and what's more, in almost every case, we would fail. The Internet loves newspapers; it can take a very long time to move an item from page one on Google to page two.

Mimi should have disclosed the newspaper articles to Fred when they first met. She's smart enough to know that her opinions about China and globalization could affect the company's performance there. By taking this information to Fred before HR did, she would have been able to exert some control over how the story played out.

Mimi doesn't have to wear the postings like an albatross around her neck for the rest of her life, though. There are several things she can—

and should—do if she's serious about a business career in China. For example, she could consider publishing stories about globalization on a home page that she creates, or joining an online discussion forum about China and the World Trade Organization. In these public forums, Mimi can explain that she had many political and social interests when she was younger. If her opinion has matured, she can repudiate her earlier view by explaining on the Internet that she believes the world is more complex than she understood it to be when she was 21.

The lesson to be learned from her experiences—and it is a lesson for CEOs as well as for job candidates—is that you need to know what is being said about you online. A person's reputation has always been shaped not only by what she makes known about herself but also by what other people say about her. Now, however, what other people say reaches a far wider audience than ever before. Ten years ago, if someone spread a rumor that you had herpes, it probably wouldn't get too far. Today, all it takes is one enemy to put something anonymously on the Internet, and everyone will see it, whether it is true or false. Don't tell me that it wouldn't have an enormous impact on your emotional and professional well-being. Some people shrug their shoulders and say that our notions of privacy are evolving. They are. But even today, I believe people have some right to privacy. It's *the* big Internet issue, which is why I'm in the business I'm in.

Michael Fertik (michael@reputationdefender.com) is the founder and CEO of ReputationDefender, a company headquartered in Menlo Park, California, that finds and removes unwelcome online content.

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