

Hey Employers—My Facebook Password Is None of Your Business

Tony Bradley, *PCWorld*, March 24, 2012

- 1 Some employers are demanding that individuals surrender their Facebook credentials as a condition of being hired. The practice is simply ludicrous, so don't be one of those employers.
- 2 Facebook itself has harshly condemned requiring access to users' private Facebook accounts. The Facebook Statement of Rights and Responsibilities specifically forbids doing so: "You will not share your password, (or in the case of developers, your secret key), let anyone else access your account, or do anything else that might jeopardize the security of your account."
- 3 I can't imagine what employers hope to accomplish, but your Facebook password is none of their business. One of my *PCWorld* peers believes in the "if you don't have anything to hide, you have nothing to fear" approach championed by Google's Eric Schmidt. That's crap. I'm not doing anything illicit or illegal in my home either, but there's no way in hell I would give an employer a key to my house to prove it. It's none of your business.
- 4 What would you hope to gain? Is the goal to dig into the employee's personal life to identify behaviors that might reflect poorly on the company? Is it to monitor personal social media accounts to guard against leaking confidential data? No matter what the "reason," demanding a Facebook password as a hiring requirement is insane.
- 5 Why would you ask an employee for the password to their personal Facebook account? It's not any different than requiring an employee to surrender a key to his home or car, or tapping his personal phone line. You could do unannounced inspections where you just walk in to the employee's house on the weekend to see what's going on, and search around a bit to see if he's hiding anything.
- 6 Whether the goal is to ensure that your employees handle themselves with integrity and don't partake in activities that would reflect poorly on the company, or to ensure that the employee is not stealing or leaking sensitive information, a key to the house would be just as legitimate of a request as the Facebook password. The Facebook password is a huge invasion of privacy, and one that probably comes with some legal liability for your company.
- 7 Users are routinely told not to share their passwords. Ever. With anyone. It is a mantra that is brainwashed into people's heads to help them avoid malware and phishing scams. Even within companies, employees should never share their personal passwords even with the IT department or Help Desk.
- 8 If you expect employees to have the integrity and discipline not to share their personal password to the company network, you shouldn't force them to go against the practice of never sharing passwords by requiring the Facebook password. Sharing the Facebook password is a "gateway drug" that puts the security of your whole network at risk. Once you've established that it's a standard practice for your company, your employees are more likely to fall for subsequent password requests.
- 9 [While we're on the subject,] why Facebook? Or--more specifically--why only Facebook? People have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Path, and others. They can

call, chat, or video conference with Skype, or share location information on Foursquare. They can post pictures of confidential product plans on Pinterest.

- 10 If the goal is to monitor behavior to see who the employee is hanging out with, and what sorts of activities he engages in on his personal time, Facebook is just one of many, many potential outlets for that information. If an employee willingly surrenders his Facebook password to you, he could simply create an alternate Facebook profile where he shares the real dirt, or let the Facebook account stagnate while he resorts to other social media networks to share his personal life with those he actually wants to see it.
- 11 If the goal is to ensure that company data or sensitive information is not being leaked through social media, Facebook is just one vector. Granted, Facebook is the most popular and well-known, and it may be a good place to see if users are accidentally sharing information they shouldn't be. But, if an employee is intentionally trying to extract data from the company, there are plenty of other options you won't have access to with a Facebook password.
- 12 The practice is at least unethical, if not illegal. There is simply no valid reason for an employee to give you his or her Facebook credentials--or any other password for that matter.

A Private, None-of-Anyone's-Business Note to My Millions of Readers

Martha Bazeran, *New Media Herald*, April 13, 2012

- 1 Imagine you've applied for a job with high pay, exciting work, and solid benefits. The job description is a perfect fit for you, and you're excited when you score an interview. Later, the interview goes pretty well—until they pull out a laptop and ask for the username and password to your Facebook account.
- 2 Do you give it to them?
- 3 My friend Carla says she ended an interview when asked for such information, walking away from the job. I admire her courage. Carla says the question invades privacy and is highly unethical: "There is no sound reason to ask for my password. Do they want to edit my photo? If they just want to see what I'm up to, they could simply ask me to friend them. Of course, that's also an unnecessary invasion of privacy. I wouldn't do that either."
- 4 Carla is right, of course, that employers don't really need our password. *They* shouldn't be able to edit our pages. But the whole "password request" scandal is more rumor than fact: Shannon McFarland from *Business Weekly* makes it clear password requests are only common among public agencies like corrections departments, but most other employers just ask for candidates to friend them. Offended applicants and columnists talk about password requests because those are easier to attack, but I suspect they're mostly creeped out about what the boss will see, not edit.
- 5 In truth, it makes me uncomfortable, too—but it doesn't bother me as much as the constant assumption that we have a privacy right on Facebook. The plain fact is that Facebook isn't remotely private to begin with. It doesn't matter what your settings are. It's a social networking site. Online. What you post can be shared with others, liked by millions. Quoted. There's a reason companies have *their own Facebook* pages: It's a promotion platform.
- 6 Indeed, Facebook is one of the best tools ever created by the human race for allowing anyone to *submit* a bit of information to the entire world at lightning speeds. If you want privacy, send a letter—in an envelope.
- 7 Whatever civil liberties activists might say, Facebook isn't the same as a house. The password to the one isn't like the key to the other, unless you have Webcammed your entire house and put it on a free channel for global consumption. And if you have, reasonable employers might be curious about that, too.
- 8 Why? Consider the case of Charlotte Berry, an exemplary British teacher with a legion of faithful students—and a Twitter account: @talktoteens. In October 2011, a reporter dug up some tweets Berry had sent adult friends, containing profanity and sexual banter, and wrote an article about it, quoting risqué posts without context, as though they had been sent to the world at large. Although it was an irresponsible hit piece, it was picked up by three daily papers. The public, shocked that a teacher would say such things (outside of class), pressured the district and school to *fire her*. To its credit, the school resisted, but it did spend time and money on an investigation.

- 9 Berry's story shows that even if the employer is on your side and cares about your privacy, and even if you're clearly in the right and what you're saying is nobody's business, the *entire organization may* at some point have to stop everything it's supposed to be doing to respond to public pressure to fire you if you post stupid stuff in public view. Anyone who says the Twitter posts were private is wrong. Yes, they were *addressed to* a specific person, but they weren't private. If they had been, the reporter wouldn't have been able to look them up on a newsroom computer.
- 10 And that point brings us to an important difference between Facebook and other social networking tools, like Twitter: access. You can check anyone's Twitter account whenever you want. You can Google someone to find out what else they're up to on most other popular sites. But if someone is posting silly stuff on a restricted Facebook profile, you aren't going to get even a whiff of that *bad* habit until something he posts goes viral.
- 11 Fine, you say, but how bad can those postings be, really? Imagine you have just learned through the news that your child's teacher is a child molester, and that his Facebook account showed years of posts about his love of child porn. Worse, you think maybe your child may have been a victim. *Are you sure you wouldn't sue the district? After* all, that information was knowable. Why didn't the district know it? The reason you'd sue is the reason an employer asks.
- 12 Facebook isn't like a house. It's not like Twitter. It's a publisher. And, though it might surprise people under 40, government agencies and employers have long *exerted* control over what employees are permitted to write for publication. Defense-related jobs in particular have had tight controls. The old publication process was lengthy and involved enough it was easy to control. Now posts can be written on impulse, ungoverned by personal judgment or editorial control, and distributed worldwide in seconds. Is it surprising employers have tried to adapt?