Montana City Asks Job Seekers For Social Network Info

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Editor's Note: Where is the line drawn between your public persona and your private one online? Is there a line? Should there be?

(newsfactor.com [1]) - One city in Montana wants more than a job applicant's telephone number and address. Along with their job experience, city officials in Bozeman, Montana, are asking job seekers to provide passwords to social-network Web sites and other online groups to which they belong.

Job applicants are being asked to sign a waiver that allows the city to not only check prior work experience, education and credit history, but also to check their social networks, blogs, and Internet chat rooms or forums.

"Please list any and all current personal or business Web sites, Web pages or memberships on any Internet-based chat rooms, social clubs or forums, to include, but not limited to: Facebook, Google, Yahoo, YouTube.com, MySpace, etc.," the application states, according to KBZK, the Montana news station that received a tip from a job applicant.

Responsibility To Protect

Bozeman's city attorney, Greg Sullivan, is defending the practice, saying the government has a responsibility to protect the public, and therefore asking for the information is necessary.

"So we have positions ranging from fire and police, which require people of high integrity for those positions all the way

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down to the lifeguards and the folks that work in city hall here," Sullivan told KBZK. "So we do those types of investigations to make sure the people that we hire have the highest moral character and are a good fit for the city."

Bozeman began requiring the information approximately three to four years ago, when social-networking Web sites became mainstream and popular for people to use, according to Sullivan.

Aside from job seekers having their own privacy threatened, applicants are worried that government officials will also have access to their friends' and family's information, because social-networking sites such as Facebook include a user's list of friends and information about those friends.

To deal with that concern, Sullivan was asked about creating a separate Bozeman Facebook page so that applicants can add the city as a friend, and therefore allow the city to view the applicant's profile. Officials may explore the option, Sullivan said.

A job applicant's information is not looked at early in the hiring process, according to Sullivan. Those who become finalists for a position and are made a provisional offer are the only applicants whose social-network accounts are checked.

Right to Privacy

The request for passwords and log-in information has stirred up a great deal of privacy concerns -- so much so that the American Civil Liberties Union has spoken out against the request from officials.

Montana's own constitution states that the right of individual privacy is essential to the well-being of a free society and shall not be infringed without the showing

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of a compelling state interest.

Sullivan agreed that the right to privacy applies to every single person in regard to state action in Montana, adding that the city takes upholding those rights "incredibly seriously."

"What we are doing is essentially balancing individuals' right to privacy with the need of the city to ensure we have the best employees."

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