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Technology is completely ingrained in our daily lives. As a result, we are faced with new ethical considerations in personal, educational and workplace settings. These changes present challenges that can have long term effects beyond an overshare in a social media posting or a lapse in judgment in a workplace setting. In this issue, we focus on the students, the digital natives that have grown up with technology and social media and the responsibilities associated with keeping a well-manicured digital footprint.



Deanna House, Ph.D.

## The Ethical and Vulnerable Sides of Social Networks and Background Checks

By Albert M. Verile, CFE, Founder, Sharpline Investigations, LLC



Albert M. Verile

In January 2009, I had just graduated from college and wanted to find a career in criminal justice, so I applied to federal agencies like the DEA, as well as local law enforcement in Hillsborough County. As part of the application process for a position with the sheriff's office, I sat down in a modern office across from a calm, stern man who explained he was my background investigator. He laid an image on the table, printed on a piece of paper.

I glanced at the image and realized it contained not only a familiar post, but a picture of a young male who looked very much like me. The investigator asked, "Is this you?" I looked at it more closely and realized that this printout had come from my Facebook page. I was very into fitness, and it contained a less-than-polite quote from Arnold Schwarzenegger that made an unfortunate comparison between weightlifting and sex. I was both surprised and awed that

a potential employer had taken the time to investigate my social media. I explained that the quote had come from a famous actor, not me, and he explained that this was not appropriate behavior for his agency. I successfully moved through the process and became a sworn sheriff's deputy where I served honorably. I also realized just how significant posting on social media had become—and potentially how dangerous.

Today's social networking sites have morphed into a communication platform well beyond what most of us originally expected. They help us connect with long-lost relatives, maintain relationships, and get instantaneous updates on some of the most important events in history. Social media has become the most used vessel for voicing feelings and opinions about life, jobs, people, politics, religion and anything else imaginable. But this frequency of use has blurred the lines between what's business and what's personal and has created the false sense that anything posted online does not have the potential to be used against you in the future. That's wrong. It can.

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## The Ethical and Vulnerable Sides of Social Networks and Background Checks

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In my current work as a private investigator for the legal profession, I know social media can be a great investigative tool. If my firm spends enough time on your social media profiles and those that you associate with, we can find all the pieces, put them together, and create a full picture of you, your family, your friends, your interests, your work—practically your entire life.

Like any kind of power, though, that amount of personal information can be used for good, and it can be used to break the law. Looking at social media helps employers to limit risks and learn things that conventional background screening methods wouldn't reveal; thus, one hopes,

increasing the likelihood that better candidates get the job. Companies must follow the strict laws and guidelines set forth in the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), which regulates what can and cannot be used during a background check or a background investigation. Using a third-party vendor for background checks and investigations often makes sense, because the firm you hire should be skilled at abiding by the FCRA. They ought to know, for instance, how to respect an applicant's privacy; they can't "add" an applicant as a friend to bypass their social media privacy settings and conduct an investigation; they can only use publicly accessible information. I had made that embarrassing post on my Facebook page back in 2009 public, so it was fair, ethical and legal to use.

But there's a place beyond the law that is still concerning. Given that social media reveals so

much about age, ethnicity, political beliefs and religion, an unscrupulous employer could use that information unlawfully to discriminate. Imagine, for instance, if the investigator back in 2009 hated Arnold Schwarzenegger, or some other private detail I'd accidentally revealed, and so he hadn't hired me. I never would have known why, but my life and my career might have been much different.

That's why today, when it comes to background checks for hiring, employers ought to go beyond the law and into the realm of ethics. Because social media is so vast and powerful, it allows employers to access information that could lead to many forms of discrimination. We all need to be like my investigator back when I started out: firm, understanding, and ethical.

## Education—The Doorway to Ethical Awareness

*By Kirk Hazlett, Part-Time Professor, Communications*



**Kirk Hazlett**

It's appropriate that this issue of the Center for Ethics' newsletter is of, by and for students. As I learned seemingly centuries ago, success begins with a solid educational foundation including a genuine understanding of how "doing the right thing"

can truly make all the difference. As ethics officer for the Tampa Bay Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America, I have made it my mission to ensure that our members—business leaders at all levels—are aware of the importance of ethical business conduct not only to their own continuing success but also to the continuing success of our society. It's all inextricably linked.

I was delighted to participate recently in an ethics program sponsored on campus by the Center for Ethics in cooperation with PRSA Tampa Bay. The guest speaker was Kimberley Sullivan, Interim Manager of Employee Relations for the City of Tampa for the City of Tampa and the city's long-

serving ethics officer, who shared her experience and lessons learned. For me, her most memorable take-away was an emphasis on the importance of education in fostering and maintaining ethical awareness and conduct among the city's thousands of employees. Regular training programs ensure that all employees, from newly-hired clerk to senior department director, are regularly reminded of their responsibilities as representatives of this sprawling organization known as the "City of Tampa."

This forward-thinking mindset is mirrored in the academic curricula offered by (thankfully) more and more colleges and universities nationwide. From business management to communication to health sciences and beyond, students are introduced to ethical thought and behavior as a core value in their chosen discipline. And, in my own humble opinion, the future for our nation and our society is bright.

As public relations icon Edward L. Bernays said so clearly in his excellent *"Your Future in Public*



*Relations"* (Richards Rosen Press; 1961): "Anyone with ingrained good sense does not need a specific code of ethics tailored to his profession to tell him how to behave. He will no more pin a \$50 bill to a story handed to an editor than he will hand a \$10 bribe to a traffic cop in an attempt to escape punishment for a violation of the speed laws."

But it starts with education...the doorway to ethical awareness.

## PRSA Talks Ethics

By Deanna House, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Cybersecurity, Associate Director, Center for Ethics



Deanna House

The Center for Ethics and the Tampa Bay Chapter, Public Relations Society of America, co-hosted a breakfast event on September 18, 2019, in honor of PRSA's "Ethics Month." An attentive audience of UT students, faculty,

and PRSA members welcomed Kimberley Sullivan, Interim Manager of Employee Relations for the City of Tampa, who shared her experience as the Ethics Officer tasked with developing and launching this first-of-its-kind initiative for the City. She discussed the history of the now robust ethics program in place for the city and the key pieces of program implementation including 1) training, 2) an ethics hotline and 3) an ethics commission consisting of five members from the community in various advisory roles. In closing, Sullivan emphasized the importance of training and education as key factors in the success of the city's program.

## JOIN THE BOARD

We are looking for two student members to serve on the Board of Directors! Students should be sophomore or junior status and interested in contributing their perspectives related to ethics and promoting the mission of the center.

For more information, please email the director, Robert Marley, at [rmarley@ut.edu](mailto:rmarley@ut.edu).

## UT Students Navigating the Ethical Grey Area

By Jordan Hurwitz, MBA '22, Staff Assistant I, Sykes College of Business



Jordan Hurwitz

Ethics surrounds all of us, especially college students, in our everyday lives whether we notice it or not. It is important that students recognize and understand the importance of ethics because situations challenging one's



ethical values will frequently be encountered—both on and off campus. Thinking through how to handle an ethical situation ahead of time is a necessity for being prepared with the best possible outcome. Accordingly, the Center for Ethics Fall Hot Seat featured four student panelists leading a discussion of ethics (and the ethical dilemmas faced in their lives) offering their personal perspectives.

The four panelists, Jasmine Rodriguez '21, Christopher Toma '21, Cambria Barkett '21, and Micah Summers '20, discussed a broad range of topics, answered audience questions and comments, and finished with an interactive discussion of the ethical impact social media is having on young adults' behaviors and attitudes. The audience was quite engaged, offering thoughts and comments throughout the night, which made for an exciting event.



## Center for Ethics Mission Statement

The mission of the Center for Ethics is to provide educational and professional resources to promote ethical systems and individual responsibility in the academic and greater business community through close interaction with the University.

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