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Your Online Life Could Leave You Stuck Forever

Tips to Ensure Your Online Life doesn't keep you from Earning the Living you Need

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Article appeared in Polare magazine: April 2010 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Work is a central part of life. It provides us with an identity, a sense of worth, and the ability to participate in the world. Work also provides a much-needed income and, I don't know if you are aware of this, transition is frighteningly expensive with little support from the public sector.

The more times you appear online and the more active you are online, the greater risk you face of being electronically outed

In this article I aim to provide some insight into the subtle mechanics of transgender discrimination, how physical and social transition have to be combined with careful management of your online persona, and some tips on how to reduce your difficulties and maximise the odds of finding or maintaining

a successful career as a transgendered person.

Introduction

Being transgendered is challenging enough but in our increasingly connected world many transgenders engage in behaviour which will ultimately limit their future success in relationships, social connections and career. Being transgendered without an income, a defined place in society and needing to rely on social welfare or resort to illegal activities is incredibly disempowering and should be avoided if possible.

If you are (or think you may ultimately be) in the process of transitioning I hope to provide some insight on how to manage your online presence (and history) in a positive way, and hopefully prevent you being blindsided at a later date.

Why am I qualified to write on this? I transitioned six years ago and have been involved in the Web and online world since the early 1990. I can speak from both experience and observation. I do have to be discreet in writing this because, for the most part, I have achieved an acceptable degree of "stealth" in my professional life, and wish to preserve this hard-won anonymity. I am, however, heavily involved in the digital media, social networking, and employment screening industries and believe I have helpful insights into these areas.

In spite of my knowledge I made a lot of mistakes going through my second puberty, some of which have caused me enormous harm, harm I would like to prevent for others in future, especially as "online" becomes almost as important as "real life".

The "safety" of the online world

The Internet and the rise of online social networks offers a two-edged sword. Online provides a "safe" way to interact with the world while transition proceeds and one's sense of self reforms and consolidates, but it can also leave tracks and history that could trip you up once transition is complete and you are trying to build a new life in your affirmed gender. It is important to remember that little is ever truly "deleted" from the Internet and youthful exuberance (regardless of your calendar years) can create unwelcome challenges.

While society has come a long way in becoming more tolerant and understanding, many early-stage transitioners suffer appalling rejection, leaving them isolated and vulnerable. I know this was my situation and I wish someone with more experience had taken me aside and advised me. Instead, despite my education and experience, I made a series of mistakes while reaching out from which I still fear repercussions as I forge a new life.

In the early days of transition many people report a sense of euphoria, where the incredibly tough decision to move forward has been made and the oppressions of a lifetime of denial are lifted. In spite of this euphoria there is also (usually) a high degree of loneliness which results from negative reactions from family, friends, colleagues etc. Loneliness and fear are powerful feelings. When faced with these feelings, which provoke a visceral and primitive response, there are two reactions commonly expressed.

- Withdrawal and isolation (Flight) - I can't handle this right now so I will retreat and live an isolated life; or
- Participation and insinuation (Fight) - I am free at last so let's grab the flight of life with both hands and see where we land.

It isn't unusual for people to go through various phases in how they deal with the world, and there can be wild oscillations until an acceptable level of equilibrium with life is achieved. The Flight response is borne of fear and, while it can be incredibly lonely, it is actually quite safe from a public perspective. The Fight response, driven by euphoria, is energising and liberating - with great potential for good but carries the danger that in the euphoric response caution will be thrown to the wind and you will create online footprints that are fossilised on the Internet, footprints that could be discovered at a later date and used against you.

Who do you want to be?

There is a psychological term known as "Cognitive Dissonance" which is defined as:

the feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time.

Dissonance increases with:

- the importance of the subject to us;
- how strongly the dissonant thoughts conflict; and
- our inability to rationalise and explain away conflict.

Gender and gender roles are extremely important to most people, after all, what is the first question asked when a baby is born?

Our journey is one of affirming our identity, who we know we really are, despite evidence of external biology and the weight of expectations. Transition is the physical and social process of completing the journey from biological imperative to a psychological imperative. Who we are in our heads is more important than who we have always been assumed to be. Completing transition, with its schedule of chemical, surgical and social adaptations, is a process of resolving internal cognitive dissonance and making best efforts to reduce the feelings of cognitive dissonance in those with whom we interact.

As society and technology develop, our online personalities will be almost as important as how we present physically. With Australia becoming increasingly a knowledge and service-based economy it is vitally important, in order to maintain your ability to remain a valid and contributing member of society, that you ensure you have not manufactured unbeatable dissonances in your online persona.

Google yourself?

Have you ever typed your name into Google? Try it some time ... you might be surprised at what appears.

Google is a very powerful company, with technology that has indexed a significant percentage of all the pages that are available on the "open web". Google has an indexing tool (or "bot" or "spider") that looks for information, hyperlinks and websites and creates an index to the data it finds. When you do a Google search you don't search the Internet directly, you search the index that Google has built. This index is immensely powerful but it can also be a trap and expose online footprints you would prefer to have remained hidden.

Google also maintains search rankings that give greater weight to pages that have a lot of external pages referring to them in the form of hyperlinks and U.R.L. links. In other words, the busier you are online, the more times your information appears, the more indexed hits you will have on Google and the higher you will appear on search rankings.

Online social profile sites, pre-Facebook

If you look at a site such as "Urnotalone" (an example only of a contact site for transgenders, there are many others) a lot of that site has been indexed by Google. You may have joined the site before transition, using your female name (assuming you are M.T.F.). If you then transition and the online pseudonym you adopted becomes your everyday name you will have left a footprint that will probably have been indexed and archived by Google. In the early days of transition you may have been a lot more open about your status and perhaps been exploring your identity in what you thought of as a safe forum, making comments or creating a profile that you might later consider less than professional.

You are now through transition and looking for work. You see a job that really appeals and send in your application. During the application review stage someone Googles your name (trust me, this is happening a lot now) only for them to stumble on your Urnotalone profile on what is clearly a transgender-related site. Google has "outed" you! This means your application may now be assessed on terms other than your skills and experience, potentially denying you a job you would excel at. Discrimination is harder to maintain on a formal basis (such as at an interview) especially in the light of anti-discrimination laws, but if you are rejected at the short-listing stage (where it is only your resume that is being assessed) you will be ignorant of the reason for rejection and will simply receive a polite "thanks but no thanks" email.

There are a multitude of sites that are indexed. They can include chat forums, newsgroups, social media sites and a range of sites that you would automatically assume might remain "private". The more times you appear online and the more active you are online, the greater risk you face of being electronically outed, to the detriment of your working life and possibly other important social/professional connections.

Ad-serving technology and the Semantic Web

Currently there are moves to create the next evolution of online search through the creation of the Semantic Web. This next step in

online searching will create indexes that don't just rank by volume and relevance of search terms but will also use sophisticated inferential search techniques that rank by meaning and context. This will make targeted searching much more comprehensive and will make it harder to hide anything online.

The Internet runs on advertising revenue and advertising only works effectively if marketing messages are delivered efficiently to the identified target market. This means that the sophistication of the tools being employed to develop browser profiles (that's a picture of you as a consumer of online resources) is continually evolving. In spite of having the best possible anti-virus, anti-phishing, anti-spyware software on your computer, every time you visit a site something, somewhere, is making a note of your I.P. address, what site you came from, how long you spent on the site, and what site you went to after your visit. Without all the security tools in place your online life is open to examination at the most complex levels. With this information you can appreciate how important it is to be careful when you are online.

Facebook and modern social media sites

With the rise and rise of social media sites you run a much greater risk of exposure and what I term "discrimination by mental association", in spite of your best efforts to disappear into the woodwork. Without wanting to get all metaphysical, there is a truth to the homeopathic maxim of "like attracts like" and people make assumptions about you not only by how you present yourself, but also by the company you keep. This means that you can unintentionally expose yourself because people make assumptions about the volume and nature of the people you have chosen to associate with online.

If you have a Facebook page you probably have it in your own name (I am assuming you have completed transition). Facebook's terms of use have specific rules concerning spoofing identity, or the use of pseudonyms, which means that you will most likely have your Facebook identity helping you march up the Google page rankings. With Facebook you may be extremely discreet about the information you post, and you may well have tweaked the privacy settings to their most secure settings. You may have been discreet but are all your friends as careful as you are?

If you have ever looked closely at the ads that appear on Facebook you may have noticed that they appear to be quite relevant to you. There is no magic at play here, the ad-serving technology at work on Facebook (for example) targets the ads you see based on the information on your profile, and on the information contained in the profiles of those you have chosen as friends.

There is a highly sophisticated mesh of contextual assumptions being woven and any of these could stimulate enough doubt (or bigotry) in the mind of an interested searcher for them to eliminate you from consideration, or make things difficult for you, purely on the basis of this "discrimination by mental association."

I had the experience that I had a number of friends who listed themselves as lesbians, or had links to lesbian groups, and suddenly I started seeing a lot of ads asking if I wanted to meet up with "hot lesbians in Sydney". This wasn't because my personal preferences were set for this but the ad-serving mesh determined that in the context of my network of contacts this type of ad might be appropriate to my personal situation. In this case it was simply software making an assumption but suppose I was in the job market and a bigoted employer Googled me, found my Facebook page and made an assumption based on the company I keep online?

Linked-in and professional networking sites

Linked-in (other similar sites such as Plaxo, Link-me and even online job boards such as Seek, MyCareer, Career One) can be very powerful resources and provide profitable access to a range of professional networks. Speaking specifically of Linked-in for one, I have found it almost impossible to have the old profiles deleted.

This is usually because Linked-in requires you to use the email address you nominated when you created the profile as your username. If you have changed employers, but used your work email to create the account, or even if you remain at your current employer post-transition but your email address has changed, you have effectively fossilised your old profile online forever. Linked-in is highly automated and even contacting their administrators (if you can handle the thought of potentially outing yourself to some faceless call centre operator) will most likely fail to result in a successful purge.

Creating your Linked-in profile may create complications for you as your career history now provides future employers with a way to identify and contact potential referees that you have not formally submitted. This sort of practice is not entirely ethical but it does occur and some companies even employ overseas agents to conduct deep background checks to bypass local legislation. Old referees may not know you by your present name and you run the risk of either exposing your history or being seen to have lied on your resume if your former employers do not know you in your revised persona.

Summary and five tips for online safety

I realise this may all sound massively paranoid. I make no apology for this. Online it is always wise to assume that people are watching. The technology (and money) involved in ensuring ads are delivered in a cost-effective manner will mean that a level of paranoia is absolutely essential in keeping aspects of your life confidential. Google, Facebook and the Internet in general may be "free" but it far from being safe or private.

I could speak about specific sites or search engines but this article would become a book and would probably send you to sleep. What I will do is make suggestions that you can use to assist you in maintaining your safety online.

1. If you are indulging yourself online (fantasy, role-play or fetish) make sure you do so under a suitably anonymous pseudonym.
2. Never provide information online unless you are able to satisfy yourself that the recipient's privacy policy

and online security policy are adequate to protect your information.

3. Make best efforts to limit any online situations where your former identity and current identity are co-located (this increases the likelihood of semantic exposure).
4. I would encourage you to maintain two social media profiles, one under your real name and one using a pseudonym. If you have friends who wish to connect to you online, make sure that any who could provide enough information to "out" you in context are only accepted as friends with your pseudonym. While this may seem cold, or paranoid, true friends will understand.
5. Protect your online profile by making sure you check your presence on Google regularly. This way you won't be blindsided and may have the opportunity to apply to have the compromising information changed. This will not, however, remove archived or cached searches, so prevention is better than cure.

If you truly care about your online reputation I would encourage you to be paranoid, make extensive use of unlinked pseudonyms and always be very careful. It is not just those who are transgendered. There are actually companies being established that employ "online reputation managers". These are specialists who can manage the hygiene and profile of your online footsteps. This sort of business is only created when there is a need. As the world becomes smaller and more interconnected these businesses are likely to boom.

Farewell Paige, You Will Be Missed

Paige Breen, the author of the preceding article, was larger than life, literally and in every other good way. Standing well over six feet tall, she radiated self-confidence. She was a woman of varied life experiences; businesswoman, rally driver and unarmed combat instructor, to name only three.

Although some of her family refused to accept her, she was much liked and admired by work colleagues and by friends, both within and outside the trans-community.

I counted Paige as a close friend although we met only occasionally, due partly to her business commitments and partly to the fact that I live 50km outside Sydney. But we found time to meet from time to time for a meal or a relaxed day together. The last time I saw her we had lunched in Glebe on the day of the Gay and Lesbian Fair in Victoria Park. Over lunch she regaled me with her latest triumphs and disasters, explaining how she lost half a million dollars in the World financial downturn, only to make it up, and more, in the latter half of 2009. Then she drove me to Central Station in her brand new Mini convertible.

There are many Paige stories and I would welcome some for the next issue of *Polare*. I remember her telling me how one night she was attacked by two men in the street. "I did the girlie thing and panicked," she said, laughing. "Then something went "click" in my head and I reverted to my former self as a military unarmed combat instructor." Both attackers finished up in the gutter, one with a broken arm.

She had called off lunch at my home a few weeks ago and I was trying to contact her to reschedule the visit. I sent emails. I left voice mail. Then I heard from one of her business colleagues that Paige had passed on from an overdose of sleeping pills on the night of Sunday 4th April. Sleep well, Paige, you will be missed.



Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.