Online Reputation in a Connected World

Abstract

This research examines the expanding role of online reputation in both professional and personal lives. It studies how recruiters and HR professionals use online reputational information in their candidate review processes, and how consumers feel about this use of their information. It investigates the steps consumers take to monitor and protect their online reputation.

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Overview

An online reputation is the publicly held social evaluation of a person based on his or her behavior, what he or she posts, and what others (such as individuals, groups, and Web services) share about the person on the Internet.

The Internet constitutes a worldwide database, where information is archived and not easily deleted. People, companies, and governments are increasingly using technologies such as social networking and video sharing, blogs, and search engines to create and share content with others around the world.

Whether it is for a job application, friendship, dating, or other purposes, when people want to learn about someone, they turn to this ever-growing pool of information. Online reputation, therefore, plays an important role in personal and professional life and has become a significant factor in making hiring decisions.

This report summarizes online reputation research commissioned by Microsoft. It was conducted by Cross-Tab between December 10 and 23, 2009, in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Approximately 275 recruiters, human resources (HR) professionals, and hiring managers, and about 330 consumers interviewed in each country.

This study explores the attitudes of consumers, HR professionals, and recruiters on the subject of online reputation. In particular, it examines the impact of online reputation on hiring and how people manage their online reputation.

Highlights of the study's findings include:

- The recruiters and HR professionals surveyed are not only checking online sources to learn about potential candidates, but they also report that their companies have made online screening a formal requirement of the hiring process.

- Of U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed, 70% say they have rejected candidates based on information they found online. Though not as frequently, respondents from the U.K. and Germany report the same trend.

- Recruiters and HR professionals surveyed report being very or somewhat concerned about the authenticity of the content they find.

- In all countries, recruiters and HR professionals say they believe the use of online reputational information will significantly increase over the next five years.

- Positive online reputations matter. Among U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed, 85% say that positive online reputation influences their hiring decisions at

least to some extent. Nearly half say that a strong online reputation influences their decisions to a great extent.

- Consumers surveyed have mixed opinions about the appropriateness of recruiters and HR professionals examining some types of online content. Most find it reasonable that recruiters and HR professionals check information on professional sites. There is greater concern, however, about recruiter scrutiny of photos, videos, and other personal content including blogs, personal social network pages, organizations they are affiliated with, financial information, and the like.

- Consumers surveyed use a variety of methods to monitor and manage the information posted about them online. Most notably, they use multiple personas, search for information about themselves, adjust privacy settings, and refrain from posting content that they believe could damage their reputation.

- Though most consumers surveyed do manage their reputation at least to some extent, there are a significant percentage of respondents (between 30% and 35% depending on nationality) who don't feel their online reputation affects either their personal or professional life. Consequently, they are not taking steps to manage their reputations.

The impact of online reputation on hiring

As job seekers struggle to find work today, understanding how information posted online can affect their chances for employment is even more critical than in strong economic times.

The impact of online reputation on hiring varies by country

Fewer than 15% of consumers surveyed believe that information found online would have an impact on their getting a job. Those consumers surveyed in the United States and U.K. significantly underestimate the level of data mining that recruiters and HR professionals conduct and the impact it can have on hiring. The assumptions of consumers surveyed in France or Germany more closely matched what recruiters and HR professionals reported. (See Figure 1 below.)

**Figure 1. Recruiters and HR professionals who have rejected candidates based on data found online vs.
consumers who think online data affected their job search**
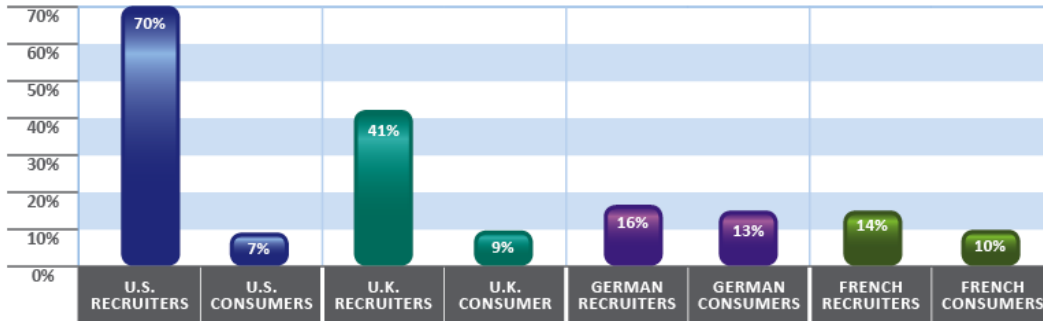
In the United States and U.K., recruiters and HR professionals surveyed are likely to research candidate behavior online and report markedly high rates of candidate rejections based on their findings. Comparatively, only 7% of U.S. consumers surveyed believe information about them online affected their job search. In the U.K., only 9% of consumers surveyed believe online information had any impact on their job search, while 41% of responding recruiters and HR professionals have rejected candidates based on information they found online.

In Germany, 13% of consumers surveyed believe information found online about them could influence a hiring decision. Their perceptions closely parallel the 16% of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed who report having rejected candidates based on information they found online. Similarly, 10% of French consumers surveyed believe

information about them online could affect their hiring while 14% of recruiters and HR professionals report they have rejected a candidate based on that information.

Companies require recruiters and HR professionals to check online reputational data about candidates

Of the U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed, 75% report that their companies have formal policies in place that require hiring personnel to research applicants online. Recruiters and HR professionals in the U.K. report that slightly fewer than half of the companies surveyed (48%) have implemented such policies, and only 21% in Germany and France have done so.

In the United States, the U.K., and France, there is a close correlation between the percentage of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed who review online reputational information of potential candidates all or most of the time and the percentage of companies that require it. In Germany, however, recruiters and HR professionals surveyed are exceedingly thorough in their research. They are nearly three times more likely to look for online reputational information than corporate policies dictate. (See Figure 2 below.)

Figure 2. Percent of companies with policies that require review of reputational data vs. percent of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed who seek it
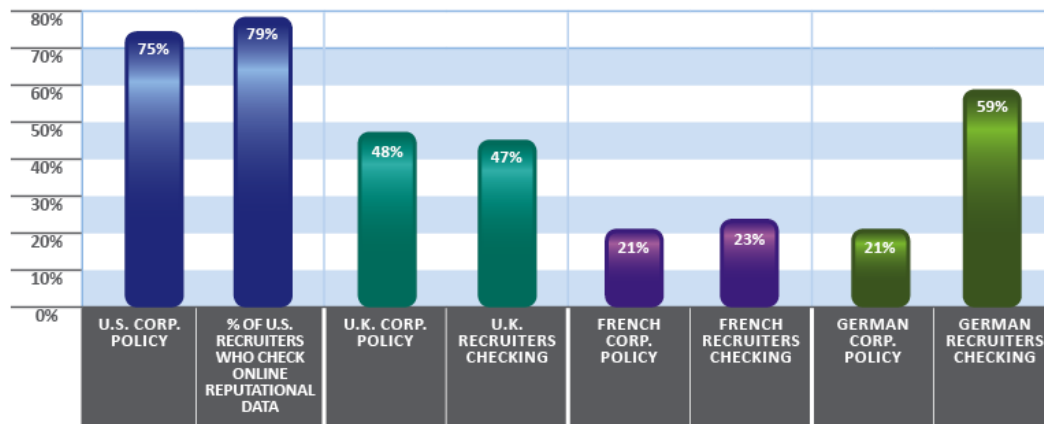
The gender of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed also plays a role in whether they seek online reputational information. Results vary by nationality. (See Figure 3 on the next page.) Job applicants who work with male recruiters should take particular note that men are more likely to look online for reputational information when compared to women.

Figure 3. Recruiters and HR professionals by gender who review online reputational information
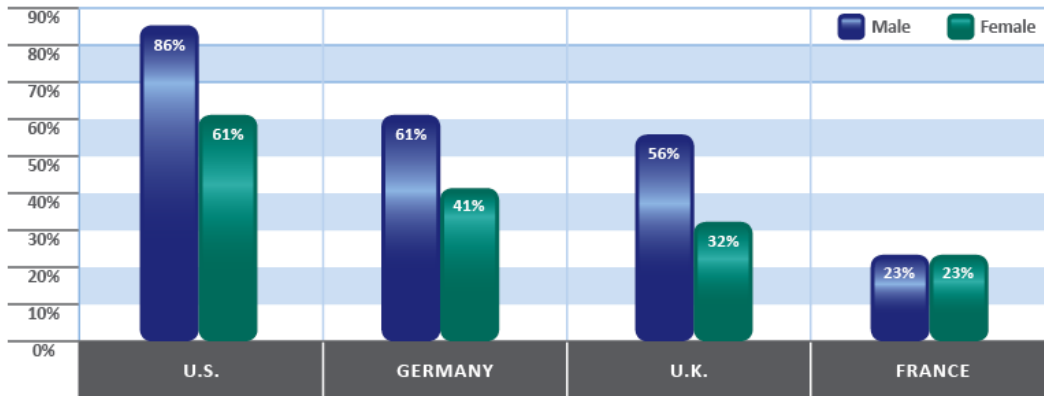
Recruiters and HR professionals typically conduct deeper searches than most consumers are aware of, and think they are justified in doing so

In the United States, 89% of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed find it appropriate to consider professional online data when assessing a candidate; 84% of them think it is proper to consider personal data posted online.

But there are noteworthy differences between the types of sites that consumers surveyed think are appropriate for recruiters and HR professionals to examine and the types chosen to investigate. U.S. survey results highlight the tension between consumers' sense of privacy and online searches by recruiters and HR professionals.

Only 15% of U.S. consumers surveyed think it is very appropriate that employers review candidates' photo and video sharing sites, while 25% think it is somewhat appropriate, and 44% think it is somewhat or very inappropriate. (And 16% did not know.) Yet, 59% percent of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed check these sites.

U.S. consumer opinion on reviews of social networking sites are evenly split with 43% of those surveyed thinking it very to somewhat appropriate, and an equal number finding it very to somewhat inappropriate. (14 percent did not know.)

Respondent age plays a big role in shaping opinions on the appropriateness of reputational research. Among those surveyed who are 18 to 24 years of age, the percentage of those who think it is inappropriate for recruiters and HR professionals to check these sites jumps to 56% of those surveyed. Yet 63% of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed review these sites.

Consumer are most accepting of reviews of their professional and business sites, with 64% of U.S. respondents saying that it is very to somewhat appropriate for recruiters and HR professionals to look at these sites. Interestingly, only 57% of U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed actually do so.

Areas of online information that stir the most controversy among respondents in the United States when reviewed by recruiters and HR professionals for reputational information include online gaming (only 23% of users find this very to somewhat appropriate), virtual worlds (only 25% of users find this very to somewhat appropriate), and classifieds and auction sites like Amazon, eBay, Craigslist, etc. (only 28% of users find this very to somewhat appropriate).

Yet on average one in four U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed reviewed these sites for applicant information. (See the table below for details.) In fact, online searches by recruiters and HR professionals are so prevalent in the United States that only 2% of those surveyed did not research any of the types of sites listed in the table below.

Percent of recruiters and HR professionals who use these types of sites when researching applicants	
Search engines	78%
Social networking sites	63%
Photo and video sharing sites	59%
Professional and business networking sites	57%
Personal Web sites	48%
Blogs	46%
News sharing sites (e.g. Twitter)	41%
Online forums and communities	34%
Virtual world sites	32%
Web sites that aggregate personal information	32%
Online gaming sites	27%
Professional background checking services	27%
Classifieds and auction sites	25%
None of these	2%

What information causes HR professionals to reject candidates

Because the private actions of employees can now embarrass companies in ways that make headlines and spread around the online world in minutes, hiring processes have changed to include vetting all behavior, not just how someone performs on the job.

Concerns about lifestyle, inappropriate comments, and unsuitable photos and videos (shown in the table below) top the list of reasons that those surveyed give for rejecting a candidate. But they also rejected applicants because of inappropriate comments by friends, family, and colleagues, or based on membership in certain groups.

Types of Online Reputational Information That Influenced Decisions to Reject a Candidate				
	U.S.	**U.K.**	**Germany**	**France**
Concerns about the candidate's lifestyle	58%	45%	42%	32%
Inappropriate comments and text written by the candidate	56%	57%	78%	58%
Unsuitable photos , videos, and information	55%	51%	44%	42%
Inappropriate comments or text written by friends and relatives	43%	35%	14%	11%
Comments criticizing previous employers, co-workers, or clients	40%	40%	28%	37%
Inappropriate comments or text written by colleagues or work acquaintances	40%	37%	17%	21%
Membership in certain groups and networks	35%	33%	36%	37%
Discovered that information the candidate shared was false	30%	36%	42%	47%
Poor communication skills displayed online	27%	41%	17%	42%
Concern about the candidate's financial background	16%	18%	11%	0%

Not all online content is true, but candidates may be rejected nonetheless

Nearly 90% of U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed say they are somewhat to very concerned that the online reputational information they discover may be

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inaccurate. An equal number claim they take steps to corroborate its authenticity. (The research did not investigate what steps they take to validate the authenticity of the information they find.) In France, 47% of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed are concerned with information accuracy, and even more (50%) say they take steps to verify it.

Recruiters and HR professionals surveyed in the U.K. and Germany are not as likely to check information accuracy. In the U.K., 80% of these professionals said they are concerned with the veracity of the data, yet only 68% say they take steps to check it. And though 79% of recruiters and HR professionals in Germany express concern, only 39% say they attempt to verify the data.

Recruiters and HR professionals say they tell candidates if online content factored into their rejection
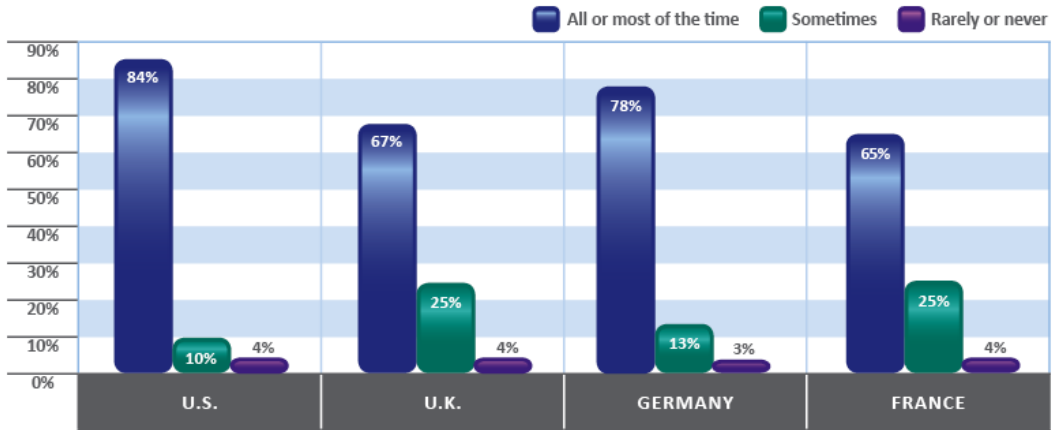
When recruiters and HR professionals were asked whether they informed candidates that online information factored into their decision to reject a candidate, answers split along country lines. In the United States, 86% surveyed said they informed the candidate of the reason for rejection. This corresponded to 66% in the U.K., 63% in France, and a mere 36% of recruiters and HR professionals in Germany. Further research needs to be conducted to learn what, if any, impact getting this feedback had on the actions candidates take, or whether it motivated them to take steps to modify their online content or reputational information.

Good online reputations matter to recruiters and HR professionals

The good news for applicants is that creating a strong, positive personal brand online can have a positive impact on their applications. In the United States, 86% of human resources professionals surveyed stated that a positive online reputation influences the candidate's application to some extent; almost half stated that it does so to a great extent. At least two thirds of those surveyed in the U.K. and Germany stated that it influenced an application to some extent. Only 5% of French recruiters and HR professionals surveyed indicated that a positive online reputation affects a candidate's application to a great extent. (This result from France is so anomalous that it requires further research for clarification.)

Over the next five years, recruiters and HR professionals surveyed expect that the use of online reputational data will dramatically increase. (See Figure 4 on the next page.)

FIGURE 4. Recruiters and HR professionals who believe the use of online reputational data will increase in 5 years


The increasing use of online reputational information by recruiters and HR professionals surveyed is one of the clearest findings from this research. Though the rate of projected increase varies by country, the data tells an unambiguous story.

Of concern are the lengths to which recruiters and HR professionals surveyed go in search of information as well as the types of information they are seeking. They are for the most part, comfortable searching for information that would be unethical or even illegal to ask a candidate to provide.

Challenges and strategies for managing online reputation

About half of the consumers surveyed in the United States, U.K., and Germany report being somewhat to very concerned about how their online reputation affects their personal or professional life. (See Figure 5 below.)

FIGURE 5. Consumers who are somewhat to very concerned about how their online reputation will affect their life
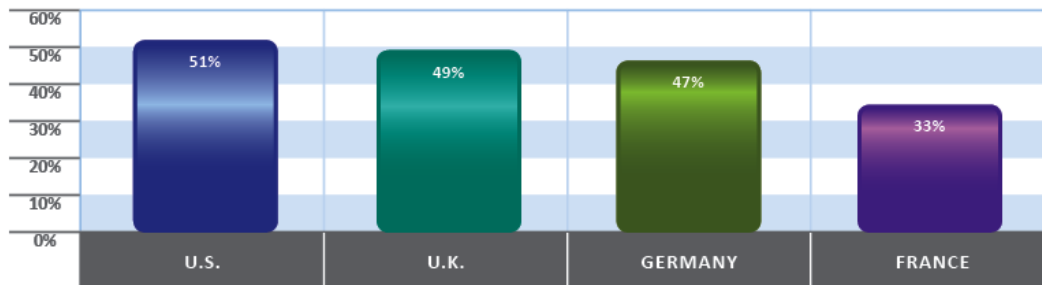

France is the outlier. French respondents reported being less concerned than other groups, and study findings suggest two key reasons for this. First, the data suggests that the French do not rely as heavily on online information to make either social or professional judgments about others. Second, data shows that the French are considerably more proactive in monitoring and managing their reputations and have, therefore, less to be concerned about.

A notable minority (20% to 30%) surveyed in each country say they are not at all concerned about how their online reputation affects their personal or professional life.

Consumers take steps to separate personal and professional identities online

This study found that about eight in 10 respondents report they take at least some steps to keep their professional and personal profiles separate. (See Figure 6 on the next page.) The most common methods respondents employ are creating multiple profiles, keeping profiles anonymous, restricting access to personal sites, and refraining from publicly sharing which sites they use.

FIGURE 6. Consumers surveyed who take steps to separate personal and professional online profiles
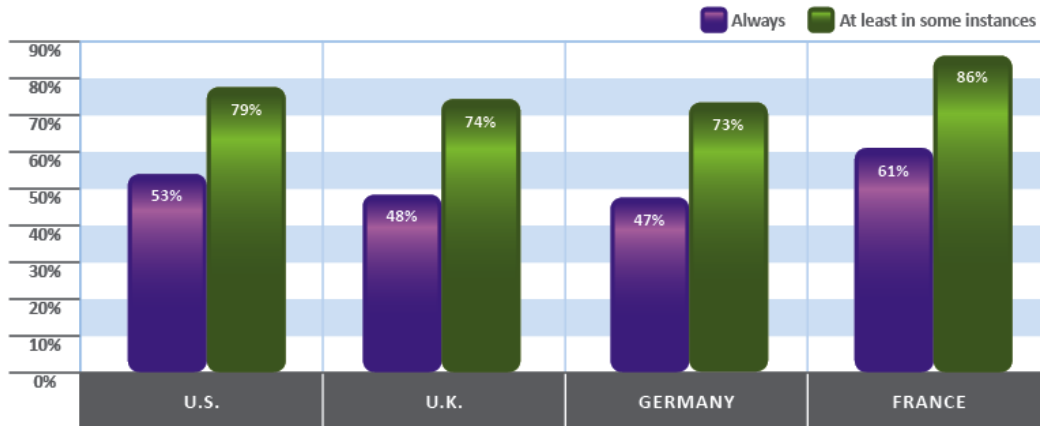
There are clear national preferences for how to maintain separate identities. (See Figure 7 below.) For example, respondents in the United States and U.K. were considerably more likely to restrict access to their personal Web sites, while German respondents favor using multiple profiles. The French were equally likely to use multiple profiles and restrict access.

FIGURE 7. Strategies consumers surveyed use to separate personal and professional online reputations
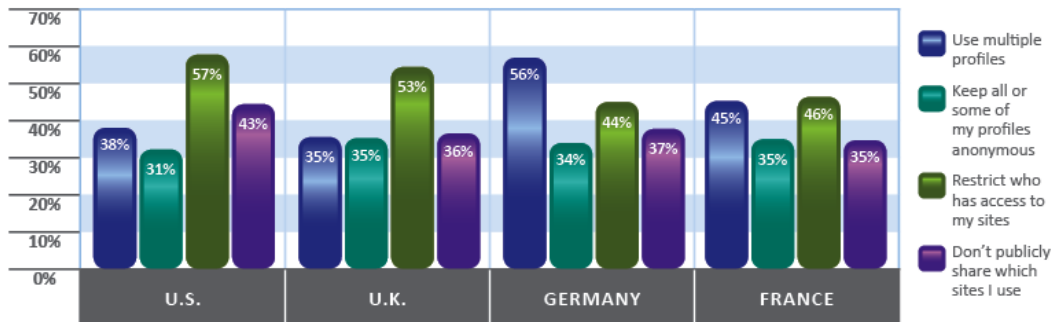

How consumers protect their online reputations

In addition to maintaining separate online identities, the majority of respondents (particularly those under 40) have taken measures in the last six months to protect their reputation.

Except among French respondents, there are, however, significant minorities that do nothing to monitor their reputation. (See Figure 8 below.) Respondents in the U.K. were

the least likely to have taken steps in the last six months to monitor or manage their online reputation, followed by those in the United States and Germany.

FIGURE 8. Consumers surveyed who have taken no steps at all in the last six months to manage their online reputation
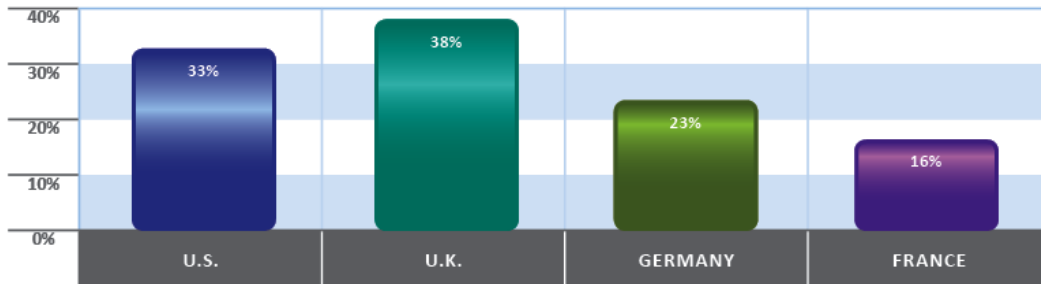
There is a direct correlation between the percentage of respondents who are concerned about their online reputation and the percentage of those who actively monitor or manage it. (See Figure 9 below.) Those most diligently monitoring and protecting their reputation report being the least concerned.

FIGURE 9. Consumers surveyed who took steps to manage their reputation were much less concerned about it
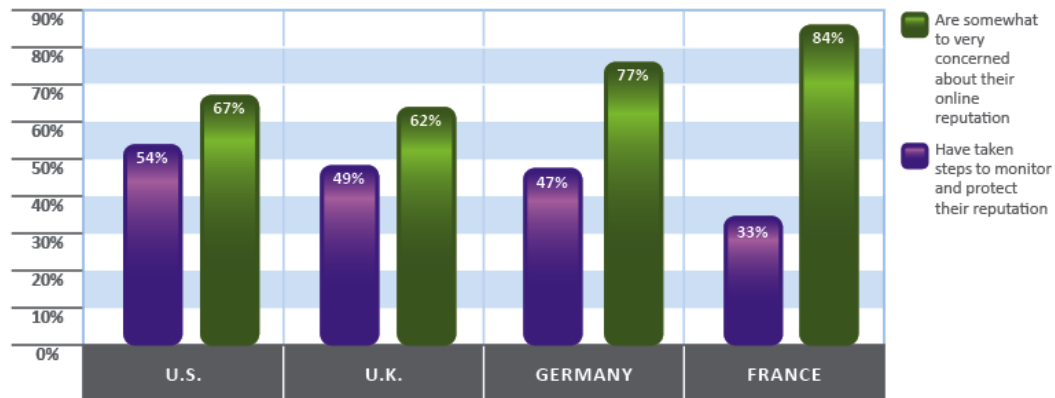
In the study, consumers were asked to identify the strategies they used to manage their online reputation within the last six months. These included searching online for information that has been posted about them; using alerts to notify them of mention of their name or information; employing an online reputation management company; checking a credit report; checking to see what other people say about them online; establishing privacy settings on social networking sites; choosing not to post specific content anywhere online; and contacting a Web site administrator to remove unflattering or untrue content.

The most common method that respondents employed to manage their online reputation in the last six months was searching for information posted about them. (See Figure 10 below.)

FIGURE 10. Consumers surveyed who used a search engine to find information posted about them
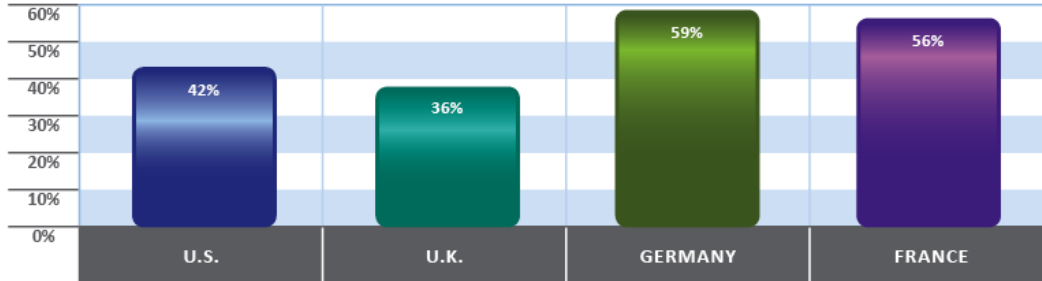

The second most common method used by those surveyed was setting privacy controls on social networks, blogs, and Web sites to limit access to content. Another method used in the past six months almost equally among those surveyed was not posting specific content online. Respondents from the U.K. were least likely to take this step. (See Figure 11 below.)

FIGURE 11. Respondents by country who chose not to post specific content
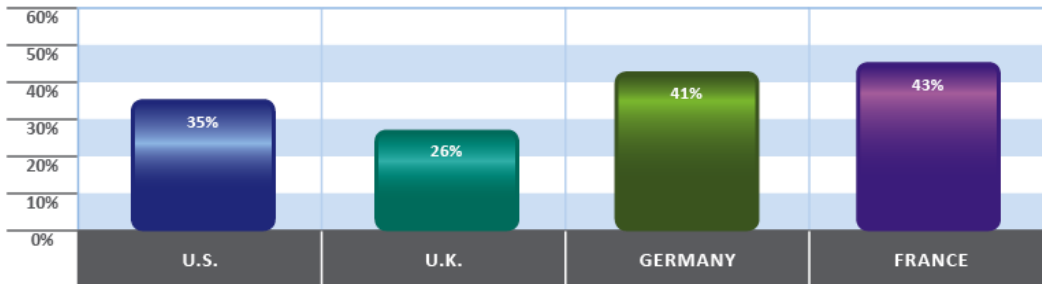
Those ages 18 to 24 surveyed were more likely to refrain from posting content than any other age group. (See Figure 12 on the next page.) Again respondents in the U.K. were the least likely among their peers to show this type of restraint.

FIGURE 12. Consumers ages 18–24 who chose not to post specific content in the past 6 months
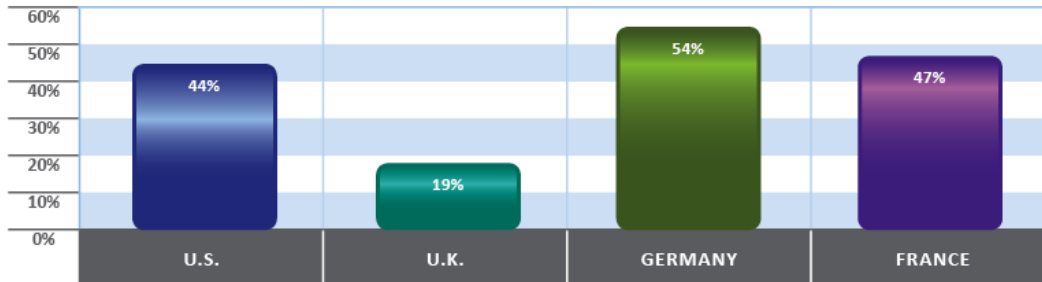
It is instructive to note which protective strategies respondents surveyed were <u>not</u> using:

- Only 20% of respondents in the United States, 10% in the U.K., and 5% of respondents in Germany checked their credit reports in the last six months.

- Just 16% of Germans used an alert service in the last six months that would notify them when new information about them is posted on the Internet. Even fewer U.S. respondents (13%) and those in the U.K. and France (8%) used this service.

- Fewer than 5% of respondents in any country used an online reputation management service or contacted a Web site administrator to request that untrue or unflattering content be removed.

Most respondents (almost 80%) have not checked to see what others have posted about them. This lack of review poses particular concerns because a significant percentage of respondents say they never consider the impact that the information they post may have on other's reputations. To be specific, one third of U.K. respondents rarely if ever consider the impact, and neither do a quarter of respondents from the United States and Germany.

The French appear to be far more considerate of the privacy and reputations of others with 84% of respondents saying they consider the impact of information on others before they post it.

Consumers are concerned that content shared on mobile devices may impact their online reputations

When asked specifically about the use of mobile phones to share information online, age played a significant role in the responses, but with surprising results. The youngest

age group did not dominate in mobile content sharing which includes text, video, and photos.

France was the only country to match our assumption that the use of mobile devices for posting content online would decrease with age. In the United States, 50% of respondents ages 41 to 50 were most likely to report that they post or edit content online using a mobile device, followed by those ages 25 to 30. (See Figure 13 below.)

FIGURE 13. Consumers by age who use a mobile device to edit or post content
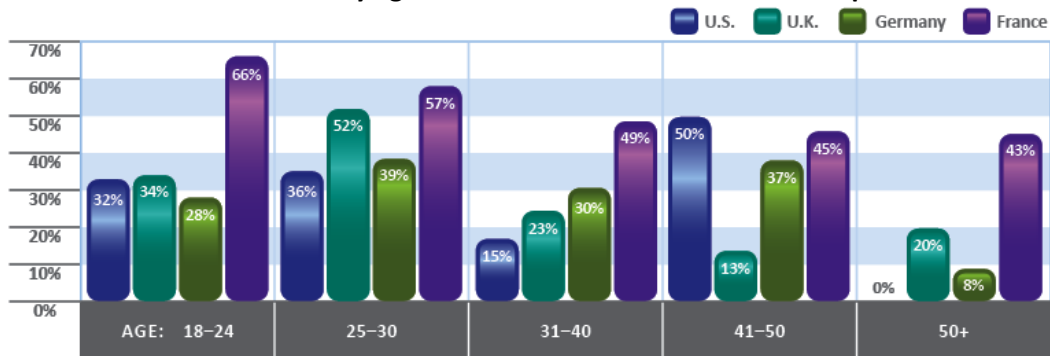
In Germany, respondents ages 25 to 30 had the highest reported usage, closely followed by those ages 41 to 50. U.K. respondents ages 25 to 30 reported the highest use, while respondents ages 41 to 50 showed the sharpest drop in use of any country. Cross indexing these results with other research on the use of mobile devices by age is needed to better understand the data.

Because significant amounts of online material are generated on mobile devices, about a third of consumers surveyed expressed anxiety about the potential for damage. Germans expressed the greatest concern overall at 46%, followed by the British (34%), the French (31%), and Americans at 30%. It is unclear why 31% of French respondents expressed concern about data posted using mobile phones, when only 5% expressed concern about the impact of online content on their reputations overall. There was surprisingly little difference in the level of concern expressed about mobile content by gender or age.

Keeping reputation in mind at all times is a challenge

The survey showed that regardless of age, gender, or nationality, it is difficult for consumers to keep their reputation in mind at all times when interacting on line. This was particularly evident in answers about posting content (including text, video or photos) in the last six months. Though nearly 70% of respondents from each country reported they had not posted anything they came to regret, fewer than half of

respondents said they always considered their online reputation when posting Web content. Women, however, were more likely than men to consistently consider their reputations. (See Figure 14 below.)

FIGURE 14. Consumers surveyed who always consider their online reputation when editing or posting content
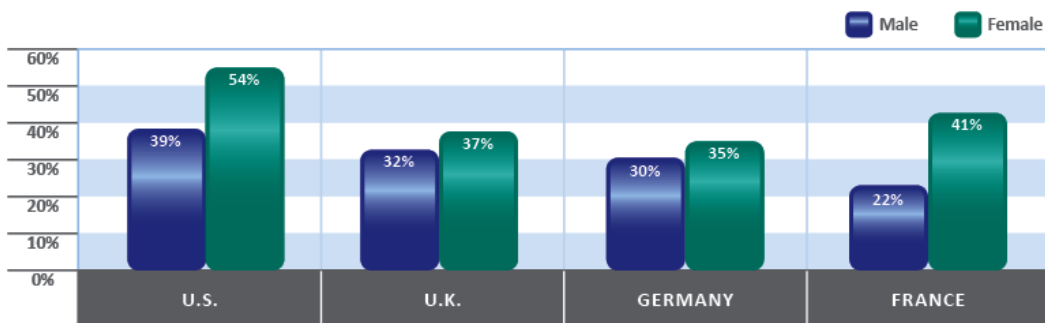
## Respondents are unclear about who controls their online reputation

The United States was the only country where respondents think they have a great deal of control over their online reputation. Respondents in the European countries were more likely to report that they have at least <u>some</u> control over their online reputation. (See Figure 15 below.)

FIGURE 15. Belief in control over online reputation by country
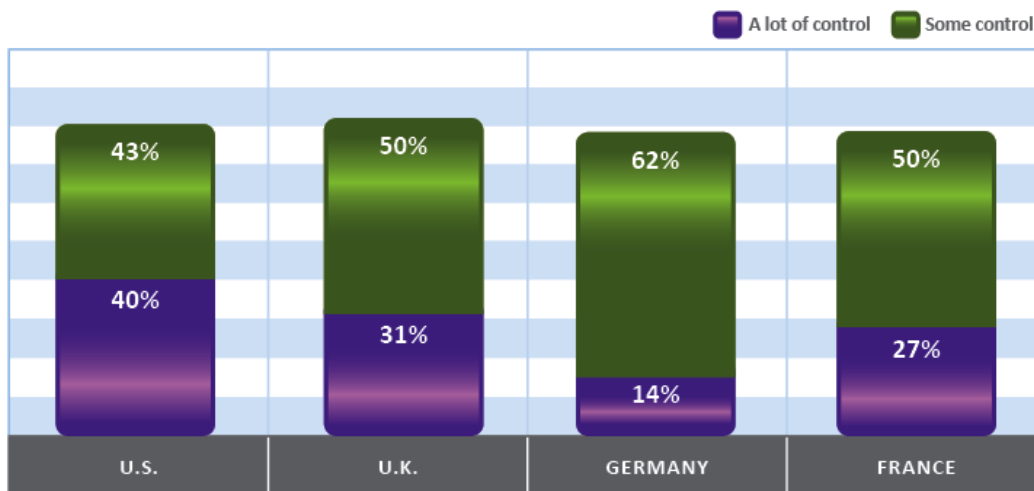
Consumers participating in this study were asked who they believe is responsible for their online reputation: Are individuals solely responsible or is the burden shared by the Web sites and services they use? (See Figure 16 below.)

FIGURE 16. Where consumers think the responsibility for their online reputation lies
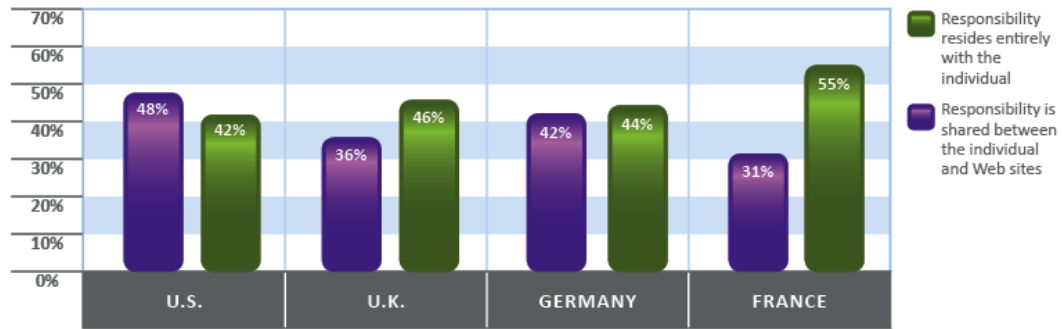
The United States was the only country surveyed where a slight majority of respondents of all ages think that the responsibility for protecting their reputation is entirely their own. European respondents placed a heavier burden on Web sites and services, except for the youngest age group. Respondents ages 18 to 24 in all countries are somewhat more likely to think they have full responsibility for protecting their online reputation.

When researchers asked recruiters and HR professionals the same question, the study revealed a sharply contrasting view. Of U.S. professionals surveyed, 62% believe reputation is entirely the responsibility of the user, while only 31% believe it is shared with Web sites. In European countries, the opinion was reversed with about half of recruiters and HR professionals believing that responsibility for reputation is shared with the Web sites and about 30% who believed it was the individual's responsibility. (The rest indicated they don't know.)

Conclusions

Though the survey found significant differences between countries in the extent to which recruiters use online data in hiring practices, the overall trends were constant.

The study found that online reputation information is increasingly becoming a factor in recruiters' decision process for accepting or rejecting applicants. Based on reports of recruiters and HR professionals surveyed, the United States appears to have the greatest number of companies with corporate policies requiring online reputational checks. However, recruiters surveyed in all four countries anticipate that the use of online reputational data to screen candidates will increase dramatically over the next five years.

Of particular concern is the depth and breadth of information that recruiters are seeking about candidates. Traditionally, recruiters have had clear restrictions on the types of information they can ask candidates. This included restrictions on asking about their families, their affiliation to religious, political or other groups, their financial situation, medical condition, and so on.

Now, recruiters can easily and anonymously collect information that they would not be permitted to ask in an interview, and the survey found that recruiters are doing just that. Specific research into the legality of collecting information about candidate's online reputations is needed to get a clearer understanding of this area.

Study results also indicate that, with the exception of the French, consumers surveyed generally underestimate the impact of their online reputation on their professional and personal life and the extent to which recruiters looked at candidate's online reputations.

The survey also found mixed opinions among consumers surveyed about the appropriateness of recruiters examining information on personal sites. This includes viewing photos and videos there, reading personal content on blogs and personal social network pages, investigating the organizations they are affiliated with, and looking at their financial information.

While most consumer respondents are managing their online reputation to some extent, between 30% and 35% (depending on nationality) indicated that they believe online reputations don't impact their personal or professional lives.

For those who believe their online reputation matters, there are widely divergent views on how much control they think they have over their reputation, what methods are effective in managing it, and how to apply those measures consistently.

This research provides a solid foundation for understanding the expanding role of online reputation. It highlights areas of ethical and legal concern that need public discourse. It identifies new areas of conversation and negotiation for friends and family members so that as they use online tools, they do so in a way that respects the privacy and online reputation of others. And the research provides valuable insight into developing effective educational messaging and advice for consumers about how to protect and manage their online reputation.

Methodology

In advance of Data Privacy Day, Microsoft asked Cross-Tab to conduct research among the general public and the HR community to ascertain their perceptions towards online reputation and how it is impacting both people's personal and professional lives.

Consumers

- Cross-Tab conducted interviews in four countries: the United States, the U.K., France, and Germany. Interviews were conducted online using panels provided by Borderless Access between December 10, 2009 and December 23, 2009.

Country	N=
United States	335
U.K.	333
Germany	334
France	343

- To be considered for the study, respondents needed to spend at least four hours online per week.

- Quotas were imposed on age, with half of the respondents aged 30 or under.

HR professionals, hiring managers, and recruiters

- Cross-Tab conducted interviews with HR professionals, hiring managers, and recruiters in four countries: the United States, the U.K., France, and Germany.

Country	N=
United States	275
U.K.	276
Germany	279
France	276

- Interviews were conducted online using panels provided by Borderless Access between December 10, 2009 and December 23, 2009.

- To be considered for the study, respondents needed to be at least 25 years of age.

About Cross-Tab Marketing Services

Cross-Tab Marketing Services is a market research outsourcing leader, providing a full range of market research and data analytics solutions to global clients. From managing end-to-end research operations, to market research process outsourcing, secondary

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