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## A Job Interview You Don't Have to Show Up For

**Microsoft, Verizon, Others Use Virtual Worlds to Recruit; Dressing Avatars for Success**

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It's now possible to meet with recruiters without actually showing up for a job interview.

Some employers are experimenting with Second Life, the online virtual community owned by San Francisco-based Linden Lab, to screen prospective hires. The program allows job seekers to create a computer-generated image to represent themselves -- known as an "avatar" -- and communicate with executives of prospective employers as though they were instant-messaging.



TMP Worldwide

A Microsoft recruiter in avatar form (left) interviews a job applicant on Second Life, an online virtual community.


A number of big companies put the new medium to a test last month, when recruitment-advertising firm TMP Worldwide Advertising & Communications LLC hosted a virtual job fair with employers such as **Hewlett-Packard Co.**, **Microsoft Corp.**, **Verizon Communications Inc.** and **Sodexo Alliance SA**, a food and facilities-management services company. TMP says it will host another virtual job fair in August.

The use of Second Life for recruiting marks yet another way that employers are incorporating popular Web sites into their talent searches. Employers have already set up pages for prospective hires on Facebook, the popular social-networking site, and have posted recruitment videos on **Google Inc.**'s YouTube, the video-sharing site. Some companies troll for prospective job candidates on **News Corp.**'s MySpace social-networking site.

But on Second Life, job seekers who are less tech-savvy are finding they can wind up shooting themselves in their virtual feet. When they start, some people have a hard time designing and controlling their avatars. Stephan Dowler, 37, a chef in Frederick, Md., went through an online training course offered by TMP before the recruitment event.

"I spent six hours working on the character and figuring out how to get around," says Mr. Dowler,

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who applied for a job as an executive chef at Sodexo.

He named his avatar Estephan Dollinger. "I gave him a big nose and brown eyes like me," he says. But he couldn't figure out how to dress the avatar in a suit for the interview, so Estephan showed up wearing jeans and a pullover.



Mr. Dowler didn't have any major technical problems, although during the job interview, he couldn't figure out how to manipulate the avatar to sit in the chair -- so he sat it on top instead. (Others at the event began floating

in the air while doing their interviews.) It sometimes became confusing when different Sodexo employees asked him questions at the same time, he says.

Mishaps aren't limited to job seekers; company executives aren't generally accustomed to interviewing in the virtual world either. At a Second Life recruiting event this spring hosted by Bain & Co., the global management consultancy, a partner's avatar slumped over by accident and looked as if it were asleep.

The phenomenon of recruitment on Second Life began with smaller, more-progressive companies that already used the site to market their products. These companies occasionally recruited Second Life users who visited their buildings. Now, other employers -- even in stodgier industries -- are inviting prospective hires who have never used Second Life to show up in the virtual world and meet with their avatar recruiters. At the recent Bain event, held in a virtual auditorium, the audience was made up of graduate business students who had received summer internship offers but had yet to accept them.

Connecting with job seekers on sites they use regularly is more effective than traditional recruitment methods, especially with younger job seekers, says Dave Lefkow, CEO of talentspark, an Issaquah, Wash., consulting firm that advises companies on the use of technology in recruitment.

Second Life, which is far less well-known than Facebook or MySpace, had 431,000 unique visitors in May, according to Web-tracking firm comScore Inc. But the employers who have used it for recruitment "have gotten significant benefit out of the buzz they've generated," Mr. Lefkow says, and were able to show job hunters they are innovative.

For some people, the process may be too innovative. To use Second Life, for example, you have to have a certain processor speed and graphics card to be able to download the software onto your computer. The software isn't compatible with satellite Internet, dial-up Internet and some wireless Internet services.

And of course, Second Life isn't as personal as a traditional interview. "The biggest difference is in the body language," says Waqar Ali, 33, who attended the Bain event. "When talking with someone in person, you are looking at someone in the eye, looking at how someone reacts to you."

Yet Mr. Ali was impressed that the firm was willing to try new recruiting methods. "I would expect

Bain to be much more conservative," says Mr. Ali, a dual degree student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He accepted an internship offer from Bain and is working in the firm's New York office this summer.

For employers, Second Life provides certain advantages. For one thing, it's cheaper than holding an actual job fair, where companies have to pay travel costs for recruiters. Hewlett-Packard, for example, says the cost of participating in the job fair -- which includes buying "land" in Second Life -- was less than the price of paying a third-party recruiter to hire one experienced candidate.

Another plus: Higher-ups in the company, who wouldn't normally attend a recruitment event, are able to make an appearance in avatar form. At the Bain event, for instance, Steve Ellis, the firm's world-wide managing director, logged into the event from New Delhi, where he was attending a management board meeting.

To be sure, Second Life has certain restrictions. At the Bain event, only 50 people could be present at one time. Invitations were restricted to students who had received internship offers in the New York and Chicago offices.

At the TMP fair, some job seekers who were scheduled for virtual interviews were confused about when they were supposed to attend, since they lived in different time zones. Many ended up missing their time slots. Out of the 749 job seekers who requested interviews at the TMP fair, 209 were scheduled and only 150 actually interviewed.


Employers say they don't view Second Life as a replacement for traditional recruitment methods but as an additional step that helps narrow the pool of candidates. "I do not envision the day that we would hire somebody virtually," says Betty Smith, manager of university recruiting for the Americas region at H-P. "This is really a supplement to our regular recruiting practices."

Recruitment managers see an upside to conducting interviews through instant-messaging in Second Life: Job seekers tend to be more relaxed and open, since they are interacting with interviewers in the same way that they would chat with friends online.

They also give better answers to questions. "I had time to think about it and type it without having uncomfortable 'ums,'" says Carlos Krefft, a software developer from Miami who interviewed with H-P at the TMP event.

Mishaps involving avatars are generally viewed as amusing. The blunders can even act as ice-breakers. Mr. Krefft, 30, who attended the event as a brunette female avatar named Dragon Ritt, tried to reach into his virtual inventory and hand an H-P employee his resume. Instead, he accidentally handed her a beer.

Luckily, he says, they laughed it off. H-P later offered to continue the interview process, but Mr. Krefft had decided to accept a position elsewhere.



In a recent Second Life job fair, applicants met with virtual concierges (right). The concierges took them to company hubs, such as Hewlett-Packard's (above), to meet with recruiters.

**Your Avatar Is Showing**

Here are some tips for job seekers who meet with recruiters in Second Life, an online world in which users create computer-generated images of themselves known as "avatars."

- Tailor your avatar to the position you're applying for. It's not necessary to dress up in a suit—but if you are interviewing with an employer that has a conservative workplace culture, you probably don't want to show up as a troll or a mermaid.
- You don't need to type as formally as you would in an email to an employer. But remember that traditional instant-messaging rules apply: Typing in all caps, for example, is the equivalent of shouting.
- Be sure to check with the employer inviting you to the event about the requirements needed to run Second Life on your computer. Try to play around with the program before your interview so that you can learn how to use your avatar.
- Don't keep multiple programs open when using Second Life. It could slow down your computer.

Source: WSJ research

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