

clean up your digital footprint: career prep advice from aelo swiss academy

A hiring decision rarely begins with a handshake. Long before the interview, someone types your name into a search bar and reads what appears. Surveys of employers across several countries have, for more than a decade, placed the share of recruiters who check a candidate's online presence somewhere between sixty and seventy percent, with figures varying by country, sector and year. The real number is probably higher, because many people who search a candidate never admit to it. Admissions officers behave in much the same way: long-running surveys of university admissions staff, including Kaplan's annual series in the United States, have repeatedly found that a majority regard an applicant's social media as fair game during review.

In Switzerland the pattern is often more personal than at large corporations. Internship and apprenticeship employers are frequently small firms, and the person doing the searching may be the owner rather than a talent acquisition team with a formal screening policy. At AELO Swiss Academy we treat digital footprint hygiene as a career skill in its own right, taught alongside interview practice and CV writing, because the two are now inseparable. A polished interview performance means little if the first ten search results tell a different story.

The good news is that footprint cleanup is neither mysterious nor particularly expensive. It costs an evening of focused work, a few hours of follow-up, and a modest maintenance habit thereafter. What it requires above all is judgement, because the goal is not erasure. The goal is a searchable record that matches the person you are becoming.

What your footprint actually consists of

Most students underestimate the breadth of their trail. It helps to separate the footprint into two layers.

The active layer is everything you deliberately created: posts, photos, comments, likes where they remain visible, forum contributions, blog comments, event RSVPs, marketplace listings, group memberships, review sites, and the accounts themselves, including the dormant ones you forgot you opened at fourteen. It also covers the usernames attached to all of this, which are often identical across platforms and therefore easy for a stranger to connect.

The passive layer belongs partly to other people. It includes photographs friends have tagged you in, posts that mention you, team rosters and sports results published by schools or clubs, local newspaper pages, and the archives of websites long since redesigned. A junior tennis result from 2016, complete with full name and club, can outrank your LinkedIn profile for years. Data brokers form a third element: companies that scrape public records and republish them in searchable dossiers, which then surface whenever someone searches a name.

Understanding this breadth matters because cleanup strategies differ sharply between layers. You control the active layer directly. The passive layer can only be influenced, through untagging, polite requests, and formal removal procedures, and part of it cannot be touched at all.

A first audit you can complete in an evening

Set aside two to three hours, open a spreadsheet, and create four columns: where the content sits, what it shows, who can see it, and the action you intend to take. Then work through the following sequence, which we give to every student in our career preparation coaching.

1. Search your full name in quotation marks, then repeat with your city, school and field of study added.
2. Search every username, nickname and email handle you have ever used, since these often surface accounts the name search misses.
3. Run an image search on your profile photographs, because reverse image results frequently reveal tagged photos on platforms you have abandoned.
4. Check the Wayback Machine for any personal website, blog or old profile page you maintained in the past.
5. Repeat the entire sequence in a private browsing window while logged out of every account, which approximates what a stranger actually sees.

Log everything, including results that seem harmless. Patterns only become visible in the spreadsheet. Students with international backgrounds should search variants of their names as well: different romanisations, shortened forms, and previous surnames. A name transliterated from Arabic, Chinese or Cyrillic script can produce several parallel trails, each needing its own pass.

Expect the first pass to take longer than later ones. A thorough first audit for a typical eighteen-year-old runs between two and five hours depending on how active an online life they have led. Subsequent quarterly reviews rarely take more than forty minutes.

Keep, prune, delete: judgement beats deletion

The instinctive response to an embarrassing discovery is wholesale deletion, and it is usually the wrong one. A profile stripped of all history reads as either intensely private or recently scrubbed, and interviewers notice both. We have watched applicants field uncomfortable questions precisely because their accounts contained nothing at all. Consider a pattern that recurs often enough to be structural rather than anecdotal: a final-year student applying for hospitality internships deletes every Instagram post from secondary school, and the interviewer, who searched beforehand, opens the conversation by asking what happened. The cleanup itself becomes the story.

The better framework is a three-way sort. Keep whatever genuinely reflects your interests and character, even if it is imperfect, because authentic material gives interviewers something to talk about and gives you credibility. A student whose feed shows cooking experiments, hiking photographs and model united nations debates is easier to engage with than a blank profile. Prune anything that is no longer accurate or flattering but is not damaging: outdated opinions, immature jokes, parties documented in unflattering detail. Delete the genuinely harmful: anything involving substances, aggression, confidential information, or content that would breach a future employer's code of conduct.



Where possible, archive rather than delete. Instagram's archive function hides posts reversibly, which protects you from regret six months later. TikTok and several other platforms allow you to download your data before closure, which preserves photographs that exist nowhere else. Dormant accounts on platforms you no longer use are better deactivated than left to gather security risks.

Two edge cases deserve particular care. First, never close an old email account before updating every service [Reddit](#) that uses it for recovery; students who do this lose access to accounts in cascading fashion, and recovering them afterwards is painful. Second, remember that deletion removes content from your view, not from the world. Messages remain in other people's inboxes, screenshots persist indefinitely, and group photographs cannot be withdrawn from someone else's camera roll.

Platform by platform, with the settings that matter

Facebook deserves the oldest, slowest treatment because it holds a decade of material for many students. Work through the Activity log year by year, reviewing posts, likes, comments and group memberships. Inspect the Off-Facebook activity setting to see which external apps and websites have been sharing your behaviour back to the platform. View your profile in a private window while logged out, since that is the closest reliable approximation to a stranger's view.

Instagram's "Your activity" section now allows bulk selection, so archiving or deleting in batches takes minutes rather than evenings. Review tagged photographs and use the hide option where removal is not possible. Treat highlights and biographical links with the same scrutiny as posts. And abandon the comfort of the private account as a safety guarantee: followers screenshot, and follower lists leak.

TikTok rewards one specific precaution. Download your data through the platform's export function before deleting anything, because the download includes drafts and videos that exist nowhere else. Then review visible likes and comment history, which are forgotten far more often than posts.

On X, formerly Twitter, search your own handle and skim the results. If you intend mass deletion, resist third-party bulk tools; granting an unvetted application full account access creates a security exposure larger than the reputational one. Deleting manually or using the official archive download is slower but safer.

LinkedIn is the one platform where the objective inverts: here you want to be found, and found correctly. Claim a custom URL, complete the headline, and check the public profile visibility settings so that you decide what a logged-out viewer sees. In Switzerland and the wider DACH region, XING still carries weight in parts of the German-speaking employment market, so a minimal, accurate presence there costs little and occasionally pays.

Finally, sweep the forgotten corners. Old forum accounts, Reddit histories under pseudonyms, public mailing list archives where your personal email sits in a signature, gaming profiles on Xbox or PlayStation networks, and Discord servers all surface in targeted searches. A single post to an open-source mailing list a decade ago can rank for years, and it is far easier to find in an audit than to remove afterwards.

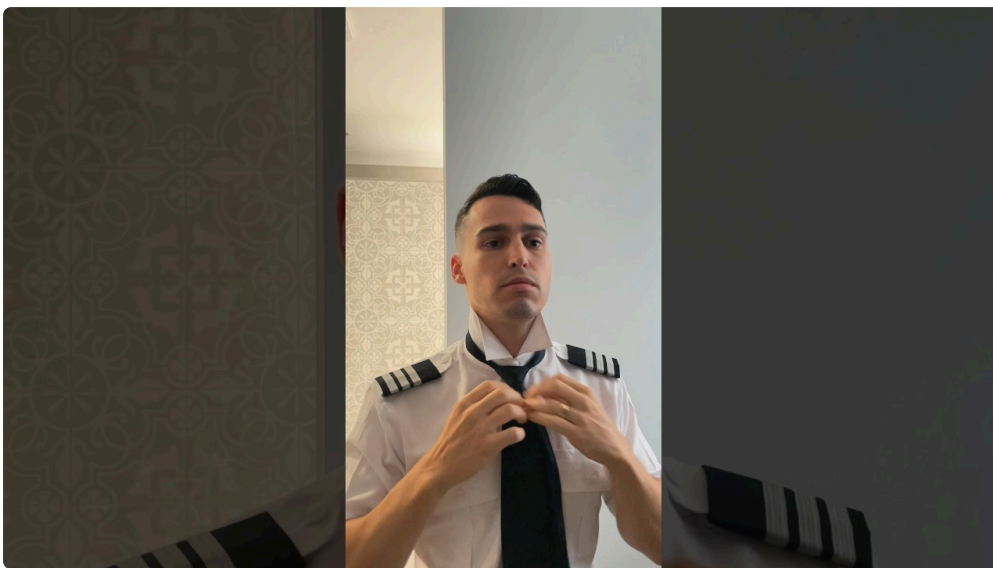
When you need something taken down

Some content warrants more than deletion from your side. Within the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation grants a right to erasure under Article 17, and controllers must generally respond within one month, extendable by two months for complex cases. Switzerland's revised Federal Act on Data Protection, in force since September 2023, provides comparable rights under Swiss law. In practice this means you can write to a platform or website operator, identify the content, and request removal on legal grounds. It costs nothing but a well-worded letter, and it works more often than students expect.

Search engines add a second lever. Following the 2014 ruling in the Google Spain case, Google operates a European privacy removal form through which individuals can ask for specific results to be delisted from name searches. Separately, Google's removal tools handle results whose underlying pages have already been changed or deleted but still appear in search. Note the distinction carefully: deindexing hides a page from search results, while the page itself remains online.

Data brokers respond to opt-out requests, though timelines range from a few days to several weeks, and the process must typically be repeated as brokers acquire data afresh. Within Europe, brokers are also bound by erasure rights, which strengthens your position.

Be realistic about limits. Erasure rights carry exceptions for public interest, journalism and legal obligations, so not every request succeeds. Others' photographs of you can be untagged but not deleted by you, though a polite direct request frequently resolves what formal channels cannot. The Wayback Machine honours removal requests, but the process is slow and outcomes are not guaranteed. And no procedure on earth reaches a screenshot that someone took in 2019.



Building the footprint that works for you

Cleanup is only half the assignment. The other half is ensuring that the top search results for your name are ones you chose. Fresh, authoritative pages tend to outrank stale ones over time, which means deliberate publishing gradually displaces whatever you would rather not lead with.

The anchor is a complete LinkedIn profile under a consistent version of your name, paired with a professional email address of the firstname.lastname form rather than a nickname you chose at thirteen. Above that, a simple one-page personal site or portfolio gives search engines something substantial and gives interviewers something current. Below that, contribute where your intended field actually lives: GitHub for developers, Behance for designers, published essays or conference participation for academic paths, short written commentary for business careers. In our coaching at AELO Swiss Academy we ask students to select two or three such venues and post there consistently, because depth in a few places beats fragments scattered across twenty.

Consistency in naming matters more than students expect. If your LinkedIn, portfolio site and email all use the same form of your name, searches consolidate around that identity and the material you control rises together.

A maintenance habit, not a crisis response

Footprint care fails when it is treated as a one-time emergency before an application deadline. It succeeds as a light, recurring discipline. Every quarter, run through a short review.

1. Re-run searches on your name and every active username, logged out.
2. Review privacy settings, since platform redesigns quietly reset them.
3. Archive or prune recent posts