The Password is: Secret

By Reg P. Wydeven
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I remember when I was assigned my first email account from UW Eau Claire during my senior year of college. At first, I never used it. I suppose it was like the first person to get a telephone in town – it was pretty cool, but didn't help when there was no one to call.

After some buddies got accounts from their various colleges, we were able to keep in touch. We then used accounts for study groups, communicating with professors and later, attaching assignments. Then everyone had email accounts and the phenomena blew up to what it is now.

When I got that account in 1995, I had to pick a "password" for the first time to access my account. I chose my favorite NBA player's name. I then used it for my UW account during law school, and then when I started needing passwords for websites like ebay and Amazon.

Today I need a password to access my email, online retailers, my fantasy football league, PayPal, my online banking and investments, and for just about every website I visit. Of course, today none of these sites allow me to use such a short password. Now a password has to consist of letters and numbers and I'm encouraged to use upper and lower case letters.

Because the requirements for passwords have slowly become more stringent over time, I basically have 43 different passwords. And if Wisconsin follows Maryland's lead, I thankfully won't have to remember them to share with an employer.

Many employers currently monitor social networking sites, such as Facebook, when evaluating job applicants or reviewing current employees. Some employers take it one step further, however, by requiring prospective or existing employees to share their passwords so the employer can inspect protected content on these social media sites.

The state of Maryland was the first to introduce a measure forbidding employers from demanding applicants or employees to share their log-in information for social media sites. The bill came about as a result of Robert Collins, a former corrections officer in Maryland, being asked to disclose his Facebook account information to be recertified for his job following a leave of absence. Collins complied, but claimed he felt embarrassed and violated as his interview perused his private messages, pictures and posts.

The American Civil Liberties Union championed Collins' cause, and the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services revised its policy so applicants are no longer asked for log-in or password information.

Proponents of the bill obviously claim the practice of asking for passwords violates expectations of privacy and intimidates job applicants and employees. Supporters also claim that employers could have liability exposure if they do discover criminal or harassing behavior on candidates' or workers' pages.

Opponents of the law claim that screening job applicants and employees is a necessary evil, especially in law enforcement. For example, a prison warden needs to know if his guards are involved in illegal activity or have gang affiliations. Facebook pages showing pictures of someone flashing gang signs are invaluable. The Maryland Chamber of Commerce is also fighting the bill, indicating it prevents employers from investigating harassment claims and other misconduct.

The measure breezed through the Maryland legislature, however, Democratic Gov. Martin O'Malley has not indicated whether he will sign the bill.

Even though it's 2012, I still don't have a Facebook page. I guess I'm old school: I find plenty of ways to embarrass myself without using the Internet.