

# Screening job applicants on social media may hurt the firm

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In today's high-tech society, the challenge is no longer how to find information on job applicants, but rather to determine which information is key to one's recruitment and selection plans. The proliferation of social networks has created means for self-expression, often in many different ways that reflect people's personal and professional selves. However, we ask this: Is social media content helpful or harmful in recruitment or selection? We explore some of the issues below.

It is very tempting to search for an applicant's name using one of the many internet search engines. But what happens when you find a picture of your applicant on a social media site, enjoying an evening out, holding an alcoholic beverage and looking worse for wear? Unfortunately, by searching information in this fashion, it is very likely that you have undermined your own selection process: Your applicant's background (e.g., ethnicity, age, and gender) is now known to you. More importantly, within split seconds you have also formed an (potentially inaccurate) impression of how sociable this person might be. If you have specific expectations about how your employees conduct themselves in private as well as public, you may have already made up your mind about whether or not you would like to employ this candidate. This is just one example that demonstrates how it is hard to claim that online information does not bias or invalidate selection.

So what does this mean for good recruitment and selection practice?

## **Consider the legal aspects when screening online content**

From a legal perspective you as an employer risk to undermine your own selection and recruitment process when you consider additional practices that have not been validated, result in data that may not be comparable, and risks violating the privacy rights of the applicants. A number of frameworks and guidance exist in the US and UK to guide decision-making during recruitment and selection. The general trend and adoption of guidelines suggest that employers are on very thin ice if they wish to use social media information for recruitment and talent acquisition purposes. Not only do professional associations such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) consider such practice unethical, in the US such practice might result in court cases due to potential discrimination and the use of non-standardised and insufficiently validated selection practices. In other words, the potential risks to employers (e.g., in terms of legal vulnerability and reputation harm) are much higher than many may be aware.

## **Consider the ethical dimension**

Some organisations try to get a sense of applicants' networking and presentation skills by asking them to provide access to their social media platforms. However, this carries several risks. First, the applicant will have limited control over everything that is accessed and produced by their contacts. Second, the applicant is unlikely to refuse such a request – remember, they want the job and may thus feel forced to comply with your request. And third, you now have access to third party information via the applicant's network. Do you need to know what an applicant's family and friends chat about online? Evidence suggests that such practices actually reduce interest of applicants – including those who might be good candidates but might also value their privacy (which they may feel is not valued by the organisation).

## **Do not be swayed by simplistic premises**

Some managers have argued that screening social media content can be used to check facts and that it reduces costs. Yes, but at what price? Staff profiles may do a far better job, as do employer references, in checking facts in a more systematic fashion. In addition, you risk recruiting on the basis of impression management skills, but are these the key skills you need? What if the applicants use social media outside the main stream – or no social media? How

do you evaluate this? Furthermore, what will you as an employer do with this data and how long will you store it, hopefully securely? Also, let's remember that information can go both ways: The applicants may now also have access to your connections and contacts, including their job competitors and internal staff. Thus, the perceived cost reduction will never make up for the costs of a court case, breached data security, reduced validity, or the damage done to one's reputation and image.

### **Conclusions: Balancing the pros and cons**

We believe that the use of social media content in recruitment and selection raises too many concerns about impression management, bias and discrimination, data protection and security for organisations. Thus, why compromise your recruitment and selection process by including results which may be subject to chance. Right now, the arguments against this practice far outweigh any perceived benefits that some managers feel justify this approach.



#### *Notes:*

- *This article is based on the authors' paper [Using social media content for screening in recruitment and selection: pros and cons](#). *Work, Employment & Society*, 30(3), 535-546. doi: 10.1177/0950017015613746*
- *This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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