

Does profiling employees online overstep the boundaries?

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A new study has revealed that 27 per cent of employees have witnessed their employer using online information to 'profile' job applicants. Approximately 55 per cent of organisations now have a policy about profiling. Despite its increased practice, however, most employees are not comfortable with being profiled. Over 60 per cent believe they have a right to a private online identity that should not be accessed by employers. But only 40 per cent of those surveyed reported they manage their social media activities with their current employer in mind.

What is profiling?

Most of us have probably 'googled' someone to find information about them. Perhaps we searched for information on a potential flatmate, a new colleague, or even a new boss. With the aid of an internet search engine, we can easily learn important details about people before we meet them. What do they look like? What lifestyle choices have they made? What are their professional affiliations? And perhaps more controversially, do they seem like the 'right' kind of person to employ? This is known as profiling.

A growing trend among organisations, profiling is the collection of online information for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating current and future employees. However the practice of profiling is not without controversy, with recent commentaries questioning the legitimacy of the practice. In particular, although personal information is publicly available, some have objected to its use based on employees' rights to a private identity. In other words, there is some question as to whether profiling employees is a legitimate practice or whether it oversteps the boundaries of privacy.

To investigate this question from the perspective of employees, we conducted a survey study of 2000 employees across a range of occupational groups in Australia and the UK. We used this sample to determine the extent of profiling, the outcomes of profiling and the attitudes of employees towards profiling. We also looked at whether profiling depended on industry and profession and how often organisations defined the parameters of profiling in their policies.

The extent of profiling and attitudes about the practice

Across nearly all of our analyses, we obtained very similar results for employees from Australia and the UK. When industries were compared, public administration and defence organisations were more likely than other organisations to have a policy about profiling. This is probably because these organisations have a greater awareness of risk and are closer to public policy concerns. The spate of recent legal cases where employees have been disciplined or dismissed for what is considered inappropriate social media conduct also suggests employees' private lives are being increasingly scrutinised by employers.

Around 27 per cent of participants indicated they had witnessed or heard about an employer who had used online information to influence a hiring decision. When the outcome of the hiring decision was known, employees said that applicants were twice as likely to be unsuccessful than successful. When asked whether they had been profiled personally, most participants (more than 90 per cent) either did not know or said that they hadn't.

A small number of Australian and UK participants (3.3 per cent and 6.7 per cent respectively) reported they had been asked by a potential employer to provide them with their username or password to a social media site. This is a very contentious practice and one that is generally seen as stepping too far into the private lives of applicants. In some jurisdictions such as Washington, this practice has been banned.

Sixty per cent of participants agreed that employees have a right to a private online identity that should not be accessed by their employer. Generally, participants with higher levels of education working in large organisations felt most strongly about privacy. Somewhat paradoxically, 45 per cent of participants agreed that employers have a right to search for personal online information about current employees. Participants were most likely to hold this belief when they were male, working in managerial positions and highly educated.

Most employees (70 per cent) indicated they spent some time managing their online presence with their current and/or future employer/s in mind. Those most likely to manage their profiles were females, young (between 17-34 years of age), ongoing staff and staff in professional and managerial positions. It may be that these groups have greater awareness of what has been referred to as 'context collapse'. They may also be more familiar with the technologies themselves or perform job roles which are characterised by blurred employment and personal spheres.

A covert practice

Our research indicated that 27 per cent of employees had witnessed/heard about profiling and less than 10 per cent reported being profiled. However, other research indicates the practice is much more widespread, with estimates that around 80 per cent of hiring and recruiting specialists utilise profiling. This mismatch between practice and awareness suggests that profiling often occurs covertly.

Profiling is often used to screen unsuitable applicants. Slightly more than a quarter of those who use profiling indicate that they use online information to reject applicants. This is often on the basis of negative information, including inappropriate photographs, poor use of communication, drug use or associations with certain groups. If an applicant is refused a job on the grounds of what is referred to as a 'protected ground' such as sex, race, religion or sexual orientation, this amounts to discrimination. However, although employees and prospective employees are in theory protected by discrimination law, claims are very rare. This is because it is difficult for a prospective employee to make an effective claim if the profiling was covert.

Applicants are rarely told they are profiled and rarely informed about why they were screened. Our data demonstrated that participants were usually only aware they were profiled when they were successfully employed.

In addition to privacy concerns, a further question regarding the legitimacy of profiling relates to its validity and fairness as a selection tool. Online information may be incorrect, or it may be available for some job applicants but not others. In these circumstances, the selection process cannot be standardised across all people applying for the position.

Social media as reshaping the public/private boundary

The issue of social media conduct at work is increasingly contentious and contested. Profiling is one of the ways in which social media is blurring the boundaries between private and public life. Although online communications are in some ways similar to those occurring offline, exchanges on social media are preserved and can be shared, with or without the permission of the person who created them. This includes being shared with employers.

Overall, there is need for wider conversations about the relevance and reach of profiling. Transparency in when and how profiling is used by employers seems like a reasonable expectation. This is especially the case when we consider that policies about the social media conduct of employees, such as posting negative comments online, or private online activities during work time, are becoming increasingly prescriptive. The challenge is to balance employer requirements for selecting productive workers, with ensuring safe and private online spaces for employees.



- This post is based on the authors' paper [Profiling employees online: shifting public–private boundaries in organisational life](#), in *Human Resource Management Journal* (2016), DOI: 10.1111/1748-8583.12121
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