

Using Social Media Content for Screening in Recruitment and Selection: Pros and Cons

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Abstract

The article considers the arguments that have been made in defence of social media screening as well as issues that arise and may effectively erode the reliability and utility of such data for employers. First, the authors consider existing legal frameworks and guidelines that exist in the UK and the USA, as well as the subsequent ethical concerns that arise when employers access and use social networking content for employment purposes. Second, several arguments in favour of the use of social networking content are made, each of which is considered from several angles, including concerns about impression management, bias and discrimination, data protection and security. Ultimately, the current state of knowledge does not provide a definite answer as to whether information from social networks is helpful in recruitment and selection.

Keywords:

applicant selection, employer screening, ethics, privacy, social media

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Introduction

The use of modern technologies and software has influenced the practices that emerge in employee recruitment and selection. Modern technology gives employers significant control over the information worked on and accessed by their employees. In addition, many employers have started to use modern technologies to access information about prospective employees on blogs and general web sites (Van Iddekinge et al., 2013). A particular concern arises in terms of a selection practice: when employers screen applicants by accessing any and all information available about these applicants online – specifically on social media. Many employers use social media themselves, for job applications and university admissions (George et al., 2014) as these digital platforms are ideal for information-sharing, creating user-specific content and facilitating the collaboration between people (Smith and Kidder, 2010). Social media platforms foster communication and facilitate a ‘network sociality made up of exchanges between social actors, institutions and social contexts’ (Trottier, 2012: 86). The social media context hence contributes to the reduction of information barriers (McFarland and Ryan, 2015) and boundaries between one’s private and public domains and networks (McDonald and Thompson, 2015). This is demonstrated, in particular, when employers gain access and use information about students on social media via their connections to alumni associations.

This trend appears to coincide with the increasing popularity of both personal (e.g., Facebook) and professional (e.g., LinkedIn) social networks (see Dery et al., 2014). Some of the largest social networks have members in the tens or even hundreds of million participants. Statistics suggest that an estimated 1.96 billion people actively use social media worldwide (Statistica, 2015). This includes Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn, as well as other important social networks and communication such as QQ, QZone, WhatsApp, WeChat, Google+, Skype, Instagram, Tumbler, Viber and Baidu Tieba (Duggan, 2015; Statistica, 2015).

It is, however, unclear to what extent the potential access to private information on those profiles should be considered in HR practice. Employer screening of public content has hitherto been less contentious, but little research has examined the validity of using private social network profiles in employment recruitment and selection (Van Iddekinge et al., 2013), although some studies have examined reactions and concerns about this practice (Haefner, 2009; Levin-Epstein, 2011).

While it is not unlawful to use search engines or social media in this way, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK advise caution in terms of how these searches are conducted (CIPD, 2013). Some employers may also request applicants to give access to personal social media profiles. It is in this instance that the interests of the applicants and prospective employers are likely to collide as the information shared on such private sites may be such that it cannot be disentangled from personal and other people's data. Not surprisingly, the practice of screening applicants' online profiles is highly controversial (see Chauhan et al., 2013). Regardless, chances are that online searches will remain an issue for the future, which means that the likelihood of online searches being conducted will only continue to increase (Thomas et al., 2014).

According to Westin (1967: 7), 'privacy is the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others.' The rise of social media in all domains of life has led to an increasing social convergence (Trottier, 2012). Information available on social networks about the contacts in private and work lives increasingly reduces the boundaries between these domains, making it more difficult for individuals to manage who they share information with as well as who gets access to their information. Access to online networks makes the different presentations of self more visible to others (see Ellerbrok, 2010): the self shared with family, friends and the self presented to the public domain. At the same time, many individuals do not

have full control over what their peers share, so our self-presentation online is also subject to an often misplaced sense of control (Trottier, 2012). The result are increasing concerns about who is receiving the information, especially in terms of information that is not relevant to employment (McDonald and Thompson, 2015).

Smith and Kidder (2010) provide a useful overview of how employers have used social networks in recruitment and explored some of the general issues surrounding the usefulness of information on such sites. The article builds on this work by expanding the discussion of pro and cons in practical terms and outlining more recent legal guidelines available to employers. In addition, arguments in defence of social media screening are considered as well as the issues that arise and may effectively erode the reliability and utility of such data for employers (particularly the request to access private rather than public information).

Ethical considerations

Pennington et al. (2007: 4) defined business ethics as ‘referring to the moral evaluation of the goals, policies, practices and decisions taken within business organisations as they impact on human well-being, fairness, justice, humanity and decency’. When recruitment processes move away from established and validated procedures to non-validated procedures (Pilbeam and Corbridge, 2010), such as the screening of social media content, managers are often confronted with a variety of issues. For example, it is unclear how this process meets existing corporate codes or standards of ethics. In addition, using such procedures requires appropriate ethics training to discuss managerial morality and the impact of managers’ values as these are now an integral concern in the recruitment processes (Stanwick and Stanwick, 2009), even more so than ever before. Of course, using measures that have not been validated is an issue for many

organisations that lack the expertise to validate their selection measures and the actual success of their candidates over time.

Unfortunately, applicants may not feel that they are in a position to refuse requests to share access details with an employer to their social media. In other words, applicants may feel forced to comply if they want to have the position they apply for. As a result, employers have a distinct advantage of wielding power over applicants (as well as employees; see Greenwood and de Cieri, 2007). This means that applicants do not have an actual choice if they want to gain a position. As a result, the information that is shared is not a true expression of consent or free choice on their part (Marx, 2003). This power, if used in employer screening, risks violating both the dignity and integrity of employees, as well as conferring feelings of distrust. Fear of potential privacy violations (Bansal et al., 2010) may scare individuals away from completing applications.

Legal frameworks, guidance and policies

Screening a job applicant's social network sites prior to an interview exposes interviewers to information that may be inappropriate to ask in assessment situations (Thomas et al., 2014) as they are unrelated to the job (Elzweig and Peeples, 2009). For example, information on social network sites may provide information about age, gender, race, disabilities, religious affiliation but also political views, marital status and children (Thomas et al., 2014). Many of these pieces of information provide answers to questions that employers are not allowed to use in regular assessment settings due to their potential to increase discrimination (see also USA guidelines in the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, 2013).

A number of additional legal frameworks and guidance exist in the USA and UK to guide employer decision-making during recruitment and selection. For example, several states in the

USA have implemented new statutes (e.g., Colorado, North Dakota, New York, Kansas, North Carolina and California) offering protection in terms of the extent to which employees are entitled to some privacy regarding their personal life activities while off-duty. The various statutes cover different aspects, such as legal recreational activities, political activity, sexual orientation and marital status (Chauhan et al., 2013; Elefant, 2011). Unfortunately, some organisations may not consider conduct outside working hours as irrelevant when they view behaviour that is incongruent or potentially detrimental to an organisation's image and representation (Chauhan et al., 2013). As a result, the practice of screening applicants' online profile and employees' social media content increasingly contributes to the blurring of lines between what is considered personal and work life (Thomas et al., 2014). However, some exceptions exist. For example, the state of California (CA Codes, 2013; Becht, 2013) implemented a new labour code in January 2013. According to Section 980, employers are not allowed to 'require or request an employee or applicant for [...] a user name or password for the purpose of accessing personal social media' (Section 980, b1). Exceptions apply in the case of malfeasance and when the employer owns the devices and access information is required to use these devices. Nevertheless, employers are not allowed to retaliate when employees do not comply with a request for accessing personal and professional social network information as employee consent is required and should always be voluntarily given.

In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has also provided guidelines on the extent to which they consider the screening of social networking information ethical (CIPD, 2013). The CIPD is a professional and independent body whose members are predominantly HR professionals and those involved in people development. According to the CIPD, screening general online activity is considered unethical, if not illegal. At the same time, the guidelines tend to focus on publicly available content, not on employers requesting access to private social networking profiles. Current practice in the USA and other European countries

tends to be more restrictive than in the UK, however, a move towards such restrictions is also expected in the UK in the near future (CIPD, 2013).

The use of social media information

Exchange theory applies not only to social actions (see Blau, 1964) but also information sharing and organisational behaviour. People share information about themselves in expectation that this will lead to some reward – such as a prospective appointment, in the case of selection and recruitment. At the same time, the power relations are such that the prospective applicant hands over information without being able to control who has access to this information once it has been handed over. What is more, the visibility of one's actions and interactions with others creates a modern technologically supported panopticon (see Foucault, 1979). In many organizations there is a disconnect between who collects and who evaluates the information (Feldman and March, 1981). Hence, social media users may not be sure who is observing them online and when. These practices may lead to a weaker sense of responsibility for how data is used, secured and shared – a trend that is compounded when managers do not take responsibility for handling areas of ethical risk (Sekerka, 2009). In addition, the individual applicant may not be aware of other applicants who also have concerns about the type of information being required: essentially preventing them to act together effectively to question and potentially change HR practices, particularly because they do not have organisational representatives to speak for them.

Several arguments have been put forward by managers to justify their use of social media information. These are outlined briefly and then discussed in terms of the issues that arise for each argument.

Fact-checking: More myth than fact! Some employers argue that information on social media enables them to check the veracity of information (Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Grasz, 2009). The expectation also suggests that social media profiles reveal hidden or undisclosed truths (Thomas et al., 2014). This assumes that individuals present their true self online, include pertinent details and do not list any misleading information (CIPD, 2013). There is evidence suggesting that this might be the case, as judged by close acquaintances of social media users (Gosling et al., 2008). At the same time, plenty of advice is available online on how to create a positive online image (Haefner, 2009; Levin-Epstein, 2011) or the issues that may arise in terms of the content on social networks while searching for new jobs (White, 2013). Nevertheless, many users use different platforms for different purposes.

In addition, not all individuals are similarly or frequently engaged online (Thomas et al., 2014). They may also differ in terms of how much information they put online (or is put up about themselves online) and how they decided to use their privacy settings (Brown and Vaughn, 2011). This means applicants' 'regular' behaviour may not be captured by such information despite arguments to the contrary (see Hall et al., 2014), requiring HR managers to assess whether their impressions based on online profile information match offline behaviours (Chiang and Suen, 2015) or reflect impression management efforts (Goffman, 1961).

Third, some individuals may provide a 'polished' profile to impress employers and conform to certain expectations (see also Kluemper and Rosen, 2009), reducing the reliability of impressions based on these less credible and self-generated cues (Walther and Parks, 2002). Goffman's (1959) concept of 'performing the self' is closely mirrored in the fluidity of online identities that individuals create for themselves (Pinch, 2010). Technology allows individuals to adhere to different norms and rules by creating multiple profiles for themselves. Role distance and audience effects can play an important role here (see also Goffman's 1961 concept

of situated activity system). In other words, individuals enact different roles online in expectation of an audience. These roles allow them to distance themselves purposefully and intentionally in order to appeal to a specific audience (e.g., by not revealing their minority status or sexual preferences) or closely ally themselves with social hierarchy and groups (e.g., by emphasizing certain group-specific aspects of their self, such as professional athlete). A relevant information age techno-fallacy is related to impression management: namely the assumption that the 'facts speak for themselves' (Marx, 2003). According to interactionist theory, interactions with different people shape how they relate and act for and towards others (Cooley, 1902). Given the use of social media screenings, users of social networks may feel greater pressure to conform and less autonomy than they once had. These presentations then lead to selective impression management that may erode the usefulness of information on such profiles (as all profiles appear to list the same merits). In conclusion, this supposed fact-checking may actually lead to inconsistent selection and use of very different profile information.

The HR manager without biases? Some managers also argue that information about the applicant's membership in a protected class (Brown and Vaughn, 2011) will not bias their assessments and lead to potential adverse impact (Chauhan et al., 2013; CIPD, 2013). This is reflected in surveys that report that about 20 percent of managers look at their candidates' online activity (CIPD, 2013; Grasz, 2009), with the numbers being much higher in certain organisations that require online checks (Preston, 2011). Nevertheless, it is somewhat questionable to what degree HR managers can effectively forget and disregard information about an applicant's ethnicity and race, gender, health, undisclosed disabilities, sexual orientation and other highly sensitive information often available on an applicant's social media profile.

Potential for age discrimination is another prominent concern (Van Iddekinge et al., 2013) as is discrimination due to visual characteristics of the individual (e.g., such as tattoos, see Timming, 2015). Moreover, it is considered unethical for a manager to seek information about an employee's life style choices when these have no impact on the employee's work (Ünal et al., 2012). However, when employers access such information on the social profile information of their applicants, this does not appear to be met with similar concern.

Social values may play a particularly important role when managers evaluate the content of social media. Even if unethical behaviour is unintentional, the risk is that under the illusion of objectivity, important decision makers involved in the recruitment process believe they are making decisions free of biases – not realising that unconscious beliefs, comparisons and stereotypes about what people post online can also shape their decisions (Stanwick and Stanwick, 2009).

Another concern is that employers may inadvertently discriminate against those without a social network profile (see also Thomas et al., 2014), especially since not all groups may be equally represented online (Klein and Pappas, 2010). In addition, some groups may be more willing to share information (Peluchette and Karl, 2008). Relatedly, some applicants may use social media that are regional or specifically designated for special purposes (e.g., support groups). This means these users utilize social media outside the mainstream. This leads to questionable reliability, poor comparability (due to unstandardized data across applicants; Brown and Vaughn, 2011) and thus dubious utility of social media content in the context of recruitment and selection (Thomas et al., 2014).

These considerations also fit in with a recent call for more critical Human Resource Management in academia as well as practice (see Bratton and Gold, 2015). HR practices take place in a larger social and organizational context that features potential sources of inequality and power differences. Paying attention to these may encourage a more critical appraisal of

HRM practices as a reflection of institutional power that may foster inequality (particularly when the investment in an application is not reciprocated, the applicant is dependent on the institutions and the exchange of information is one-sided in line with the differentiation perspective in social exchange theory by Blau, 1964).

Lower costs? One argument in favour of social media screening is that social network information, when public, allows employers screen applications more quickly while keeping costs down (e.g., because the screening involves a quick online search), an advantage particularly for small and medium-sized organisations. However, the evidence about cost savings is rather mixed (see McFarland and Ryan, 2015). The suggestion is that such practice will help avoid negligent hiring lawsuits (Chauhan et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2014), often by gathering more and more information about their current and prospective employees (Brown, 2000). For example, managers may not consider applicants who have posted provocative or inappropriate photographs, drug use or disparaging comments about others (Grasz, 2009). The issue is, however, that some content may have been posted and deleted years earlier (e.g., during adolescence), but still pop up in searches, leading to an inaccurate picture of the present applicant (see Thomas et al., 2014). In addition, it may be difficult to follow the line of postings on social media sites, thus attributing a given posting to a given individual may be difficult.

Furthermore, when recruitment involves employers accessing highly sensitive and personal information not publicly available, the issues are no longer time and capital costs. Instead, the employer risks not only violating the privacy of applicants, but also potential lawsuits due to invasion of privacy and the fact that this is not a validated recruitment and hiring practice. How then do HR managers link personal behaviour ‘off the clock’ to job performance (see Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Elzweig and Peeples, 2009)? Some evidence suggests that what managers pay attention to on social network profiles is unrelated to a candidate’s later job performance

(see Van Iddekinge et al., 2013). This is also a concern since some behaviour is driven by the situation rather than personality (Thomas et al., 2014). What is therefore their defence when they are sued due to adverse impact or discrimination?

Deducing personality: Relevance to the job? Another argument for screening social media is that some managers believe it allows them to draw inferences about an applicant's personality and character (Back et al., 2010; Brown and Vaughn, 2011; Chauhan et al., 2013; Clark and Roberts, 2010). One issue here is assumptions about causality, in that personality is supposed to drive the use of social media. There is certainly research in this area that has shown how different personality traits influence social media activity such as the frequency and content of images and status updates being posted (Sievers et al., 2015). Evidence from zero-acquaintance research (Beer and Watson, 2008; Hall et al., 2014) further suggests that people are relatively good judges of other people's personality. At the same time, most of the evidence focuses on specific traits, such as extraversion or openness to experience that can be assessed relatively easily by examining phrases and pictures. In addition, what is inferred about the personality of candidates based on their social media content may not reflect how the person will behave in employment settings.

Additional issues arise when HR managers try to infer personality based on certain post content (e.g., substance abuse or badmouthing online; Stoughton et al., 2013). Personality judgments are highly dependent on the extent to which observable cues are available (Beer and Watson, 2008), some of which may not be reliable (e.g., physical attractiveness as an indicator of personality). Furthermore, not all raters are equally accurate assessors as their own personality influences their judgment of others.

Some managers also believe that social media screening may give them a sense of how the applicant relates to others (Chou et al., 2013). However, people-oriented individuals are not

necessarily using social networks to a greater degree, nor do they have better relationships with their co-workers. So using such information may not add value. There is also evidence that differences exist in terms of offline and online friendships (Olson et al., 2012). Social media is also used to maintain offline relationships (Ellison et al., 2014). This suggests that the social media profile may not capture all dimensions of the applicant's social relations and interactions (e.g., number of friends, updates), which may then lead to inaccurate conclusions about the person's interpersonal skills.

Data protection and security? The concerns about data protection and access, as well as security are largely missing in the debate on employer screening of social media for employment purposes. For example, to what extent are the information obtained from social media profiles protected to the same degree as their standardized applicant data? How is access managed to ensure applicant privacy (Brown and Vaughn, 2011)? And, from the employer's perspective, have the risks and threats to the organisation been evaluated properly? Private information may also be exposed due to hackers accessing these social media networks (Park et al., 2014). Employer screening of specific sites listed by the applicants may also make industrial espionage easier by allowing some employers to learn more about another company via the applicants' connections to other employees and screening the updates not only of the applicants, but also their colleagues on the same social media network.

Conclusions

Historically, electronic surveillance is inherently associated with the management of risks and uncertainty (Lyon, 2001). The information obtained using public as well as private social media profiles provides those with the access with the power to exercise control over others. The

outcome of this approach is a potential and insidious power imbalance based on who has what information, setting the stage for potential exclusionary and even discriminatory practices in selection and recruitment as well as resistance by applicants and perceived coercion to comply.

It is clear then that the use of both personal (e.g., Facebook) and professional (e.g., LinkedIn) social media web sites is continuing to grow. Thus, it is not surprising that employers would want to tap this information as part of the employment recruitment, screening and selection process. However, as noted in this article, there are numerous ethical, legal and practical issues that need to be addressed before doing so. It is therefore our view that the use of social media in employer screening is not recommendable under any circumstances at this point in time (see also Clark and Roberts, 2010). Brown and Vaughn (2011: 221) summarised these concerns as follows: 'Without well-documented evidence for validity, the conclusions drawn by managers on the basis of profile searches may be tenuous at best and might furthermore result in undocumented discriminatory actions.' Thus, just as the practice of using un-proctored online employment tests have outpaced the research (Tippins, 2009, 2015), it is clear that so too has the use of social networking sites for employment recruitment, screening and selection. As a result, more research is needed to provide more definitive guidance on both the potential benefits and pitfalls of using personal and professional social media sites for employment purposes such as recruitment and selection (McFarland and Ryan, 2015).

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