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# Personal Social Networking: Affects on Companies Hiring Decisions

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**PERSONAL SOCIAL NETWORKING: AFFECTS ON COMPANIES HIRING DECISIONS**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the effects personal social networking sites had on candidate's opportunities for obtaining employment and how and to what extent hiring managers used this information in the hiring process. Hiring managers across four industries: Retail, Banking, Healthcare and Hospitality were surveyed to learn how they are using social media sites to "screen" potential mid-level (and above) managers for their organizations. Additionally, the researchers wanted to determine what social media content was most influential in developing negative perception of the candidate. The results of the study showed contrasting results to prior studies which typically included samples of professional recruiters. The study found moderate social media usage to screen candidates, and little success finding candidates through such medias, however four basic areas were of significance to hiring managers and if found on social media could significantly jeopardize candidate's potential in obtaining the job. These areas included: poor communication skills, substance abuse content, bad mouthing former company/boss/colleagues, posting provocative / inappropriate photos.

**Key words:** social networking, employment, hiring managers, social media content

As with many inventions, one typically leads to many others creating an even greater effect on a society. Over the last 20 years the Internet has been such an invention which revolutionized how we obtain, share, and exchange information. The Internet has affected many facets of our daily routine from how we shop, obtain our news, and communicate to name a few. The ability to share information with a larger audience can have both potentially positive and negative results.

Social media can offer many examples of that. While many would agree that being able to share pictures, thoughts and important life events with family members or friends may be enjoyable and have a positive impact on social interaction, overall privacy of an individual may suffer as a result, leading to potentially negative consequences.

## **Research Questions**

When private information found on social media sites becomes accessible by a potential employer for instance, what effect (if any) does it have on a candidate's ability to obtain employment? There is some evidence to suggest that some employers today are regularly and consistently using such sites to learn more about the candidate... or check up on existing employees. Is this trend moving upward or downward and what can be expected in the future? What are the hiring managers that use social media finding on potential and current employees; and what social media content specifically is the most influential in developing negative perception of the candidate? What effect does it have it on a candidate's ability to get hired?

Conversely are there areas which candidates may want to highlight or expose to the hiring managers which could help them land the job they seek? These questions, which are part of our research, are important to those on social media sites who may be unaware of hiring manager's

practices. There are also questions of legality of such practices and whether the government should intervene to help protect private information. Could information found on social media sites also effect level of employment discrimination? How can a candidate protect oneself from these potential negative consequences?

Much has been written on social media topics including employment implications however the precise answers continue to be elusive as the phenomenon is still unfolding.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Social media usage trends and posting of personal information**

There are several social media websites such as Twitter and LinkedIn, but none are as popular as Facebook. According to Burbary (2011) as of March 2011 there were approximately 630 million registered users' worldwide, sharing more than 30 billion pieces of content, generating 770 billion page views per month. In the U.S. most users are students and young adults. Nearly 80 million users are almost evenly split between two age groups 18-25 and 26-34 representing approximately 55% of all U.S. users. Each one of them on the average has 130 friends each leaving permanent record of interactions with their friends and acquaintances.

These numbers are staggering and so is the pace in which pictures, music, "likes" (Internet way of approval of an idea or content) and other content is added. Many profiles will include clues about a member ranging from choice of music, political affiliation, religious affiliation, sexual orientations as well as permanent record of opinions on just about anything.

## **Employers and Recruiting Companies Hiring Process Trends**

Along with the increased usage of social media, and companies' presence on sites such as Facebook, employers today have an opportunity to use these sites to recruit talented candidates. With access to social sites, the recruiter can measure a person's creativity, job-related interests, and learn about their job experiences. In fact, according to Joos (2008) professor in Nova Southeastern University, who also is a highly respected business and social media consultant, many companies increasingly are using "advanced Internet technologies to find potential employees" and spent a lot of effort on messages geared towards perspective talent. These companies are interested in attracting passive, yet very talented and successful job seekers for their organizations (Joos, 2008). The increased interest should continue as social media recruiters experience higher rates of success hiring from social media sites.

Jobvite (2011) a company who sells proprietary recruiting technologies, after conducting their annual social recruiting survey with over 800 responders (mainly human resources and recruiting professionals) found the greatest evidence that the social recruiting phenomenon is on the rise as well as confirming that the upward trend will continue. The increased interest in social media recruiting maybe explained through success many responders have claimed. According to the survey 58% have successfully hired through social networks. It is important to mention that LinkedIn may be the driving force in success as the popularity was reported to have increased from 78% to 87%. To clarify even further, 94.5 % of responders said that they hired from LinkedIn (Jobvite, 2011).

Since LinkedIn attracts more professionally mature individuals, it may not contain similar content one can find on Facebook, but the question remains, do the 45 % of responders who in

their research claim to always search social media sites look on Facebook? Is the individuals profile on LinkedIn supported by what they have on Facebook? Although no other research to date has identified such a high positive result when it comes to employers using social media recruiting – the growing trend seems obvious.

Further evidence of the growing trend was found by Cook (2012), after surveying top twenty-five advertising and public relations firms. It was found that 72% were using social networking sites to recruit a prospect and as many as 64% were planning on increasing their current usage in search of a future prospect. Again, the higher usage rate may be due to increased confidence around ability to find strong candidates. As many as 73% of responders agreed or strongly agreed that social networking websites were an excellent sources of meaningful information on potential candidates. LinkedIn again was named as playing a stronger role in recruiting for 73% of the responders (Cook, 2012)

While the above research may sound exciting for those seeking jobs, getting noticed may not be beneficial if the content seen for the recruiter is “negative” and lacks professionalism. Cain, Scott and Smith (2010) mention E- Professionalism as being a relatively new slogan but there is already some evidence that use of information from Facebook or other social media is more prevalent among employers and it is hypothesized that it will even become more widely used in the future. Massive amounts of personal information is available to the public and potential information found can impact how viewers may judge individual character, attitude, and professionalism in general (Cain et al., 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the dilemma lies in what the potential recruiter may find on social sites, as there is a chance the information found can also be hurtful to the prospective candidate. The

recruiter may learn candidate's personal opinions or private thoughts on religion, politics, and other areas. Through pictures and comments the recruiter can also learn candidate's interaction in social situations. All information which could potentially be viewed by the recruiter could create a negative impression or worse an opportunity to discriminate (illegal) against the potential candidate. As the potential job responsibilities increase (for example CEO, CFO) what is found on social websites about the candidate may become even more relevant for the employer as well as the candidate.

In a recent study, researchers were curious if the residence program directors were using Facebook to screen potential candidates, and if so what information was most useful in the hiring process (Cain et al., 2010). According to their survey results, 20% reviewed the profile of a perspective candidate and slightly more than half of them developed a negative perception of the candidate, in many instances costing the candidate a job opportunity. In terms of accountability, nearly 90% of the responders stated that residency (pharmacy) candidates should be accountable for unprofessional behavior discovered through social media. What the researchers have also learned is that even though the social websites were not as widely used to research a potential candidate as they hypothesized, if the hiring managers did – they would be very critical of anything deemed unprofessional or considered to be questionable behavior. The possible reason for the limited use of social networks was the generational gap in social media usage. This trend however could soon change as the older age group in the study was also the fastest growing on Facebook (Facebook, 2009). This could potentially mean that the most conservative hiring managers could soon be using content found on a social site and whether to extend the offer or not.



Sluder and Andrews (2010) in their study of “The effect of Facebook on Hiring teachers” also found the majority of the older generation are not using (in 2008) social media as frequently as the younger counterparts, however if they were in the future to use the social media to screen candidates, they may be very discriminating on what they may find. Still, 33% of users reported to have checked applicants’ social networking site for more information during a hiring process. The other interesting part of this study was to examine what aspects (if any) of information found would have such a negative impact that otherwise viable candidates would be eliminated from the pool of candidates. Eighty seven percent of responders agreed on four areas including: pictures of alcohol consumptions, pictures of nudity, the usage of obscene language, and sexual in nature postings.

## **MEMBER/CANDIDATE PERCEPTIONS**

What is the candidates’/members’ expectation and understanding of privacy while on social media sites? What are the attitudes of candidate and perceptions of what employers do?

Why are employers looking at these sites is what Kennedy and Macko (2009) tried to understand and their survey showed employers had surprisingly simple answers. Employers stated that evaluating a job applicant’s personal information found online is simply performing their “due diligence” to hire the best candidate for the position and most did not see anything wrong viewing candidate’s profiles who willingly placed private and personal information on public social networking sites, and *should* expect employers to access such information. As ethical

questions remain, potential candidate information may be misinterpreted while students themselves, as discussed by the authors, are not that concerned (Kennedy & Macko, 2009).

Shafie, Mansor, Osman, Nayan, and Maesin (2011) in their quest to understand what students were mostly concerned with when it comes to their privacy sampled 164 students between ages 18-25. Their research showed that students top privacy concerns were around content that deals with personal relationships (73%), financial information (65%) as well as gossip and lifestyle content (60%) and generally less about content that may affect their work/professional life or sharing content dealing with politics or religion (Shafie et al., 2011). This further confirms evidence that the students are not aware and are not concerned with what potential employers may find on their website. Educators, parents, and life coaches should be alarmed about this trend in attitude.

Clearly younger people may have a greater chance of negative consequences and that is what Brandtzæg, Luders, and Skjetne (2010) found in their study, stating sociability as the greatest challenge to privacy. What they found was that young people have many more friends on social media websites and they hypothesized that this maybe because of conformity and common practice among young people of seeking out and adding more “friends”. When they realize the effect it seems it’s too late to turn back. The study highlighted an individual which had 585 Facebook friends and questioned the level of privacy an individual may enjoy with a circle that large (Brandtzæg et al., 2010). Another question may also be asked around how one manages comments and contents posted on original members’ space with a circle of 585 “friends”. It is almost certain that with a group that large negative content can be expected.

Peluchette and Karl (2008) in their study of 433 undergraduate students of which nearly 80% were using some type of social media site were in fact concerned about their current content in their profile. 20% of students stated that they would not want prospective or current employers to see their content. They were also concerned with party photos or comments left by friends. 56% of students were concerned about pictures of alcohol consumption and rightfully so – there are studies including the present one, indicating that it may have significant effects on how prospective employers view candidates.

Peluchette and Karl (2008) also found compelling evidence that males may be at a higher risk of developing negative perception of a profile onlooker. Males were significantly more likely to upload self-promoting and sexual in nature pictures as well as comments. They were also less concerned with effect of such content. More studies maybe needed to understand male risk versus female risk.

Besides diminished reputation, there may be real costs associated with having inappropriate content on social media sites as explained by Bohnert and Ross (2010) through their research-experiment. The researchers put together an interesting experiment which was to measure perception of employers and measure the likely response based on viewings of several different profiles. The participants (would be recruiters) were given a cover letter, a resume, and a paper representation of a created profiles, each with a different theme. Simulated profile including family-oriented, professional-oriented and in contrast one that contained alcohol oriented contents. The simulated profile was to be the only difference in candidate otherwise similar in qualifications and in terms of experience. The results of candidate showing alcohol oriented contents could be summarized as:

- The candidate would least likely to be offered the job
- If they were offered the job – the offer would be approximately \$2400 dollars less than of those with family or professionally oriented profiles
- This was true regardless of whether the profile contained the candidate drinking alcohol themselves or content showing friends engaging in such an activity

Using several networking sites and student responses (ages 18-29), Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, and Budden (2010) through their research again confirmed what other studies have found:

privacy expectations of students do not match the reality, companies are looking at the profiles and making decision based on content, and surprisingly most students are not concerned.

Specifically, their study found that 45% of companies are relying on social media as a human resource tool and are strongly basing their decisions on the content of these sites. Additionally student's perceptions of the privacy of these social media sites are in fact not as private and secure as thought to be. Out of the 289 respondents, slightly over half were not mindful that employers or recruiters could view their social networking profile even if the individual account was set to private. Additionally during their study, Vicknair et al. (2010) discovered that recruiting companies felt they had the right to view potential candidate's social networking sites in order to make their candidate selection.

How biased could the companies be? Should they have access in the first place? Is there an opportunity for discrimination are all valid questions worth additional research.

## **Method**

### **Research design, methodology, and instrument**

While much of the mentioned studies so far were mainly samples of professional recruiters whose entire job is finding talent for their companies, the researchers were interested in the trends of regular managers in four very different industries whose jobs may partially be hiring candidates for their companies. These were considered individuals whose job allowed them to replace or fill a few jobs a year.

The main purpose of this study was to determine if and how companies are using social networking sites to screen potential candidates. What would their perceptions be based on information found online, and how would the information found on these websites influence their decision to hire. A survey questionnaire with three distinctive parts was developed in order to collect qualitative data such as gender, age, and industry. The second part concentrated on measuring social media usage and respondents preferences, and the third part was developed to measure the effect information found on the websites would have on a potential candidate getting hired. Using SurveyBuilder.com as the driving tool to collect data, an 18 question survey was prepared in which several scales were used including an interval 4 and 5 point Likert scale and an ordinal based questionnaire which allowed responders to rank importance of issues, as well as multiple choice options.

### **Sample**

The exploratory data set consisted of survey responses from 33 individuals (N=33) from four industries: finance and banking 9%, retail/wholesale 19%, hospitality 38%, and healthcare 9%. Over 5,000 employees were found for 34% of the surveyed companies, 31% employed

between 1-100 and 19% of the responses were collected from companies with 101-1000 employees.

### **Timeframe, data collection and analysis**

With the consent of all selected companies, samples of human resources, recruiting and other hiring managers were collected across four industries: Retail/Wholesale, Financial/Banking, Healthcare and Hospitality, Food & Beverage Services. The selected managers were sent an email which contained a survey hyperlink asking for their participation and opinion on the topic. Participation was strictly voluntary and their responses were both anonymous and confidential.

### **Data Analysis**

An 18 question survey was designed through an on-line survey tool targeting human resources and recruiting managers on the use social networking sites and its effect on an individual's opportunity for employment. Over two weeks, 33 surveys were completed (N=33) consisting of 38% Human Resource Managers, 13% Recruiting/Staffing Managers, 25% Executives and 19% Hiring Managers. Out of the 33 surveys completed, 50% were male and 50% were female with 72% of the population ranging between the ages of 30-49 years of age, 19% between the ages of 50-64 and a mere 9% between the ages of 18-29. The data collected allowed the researchers to measure the use of social networking sites amongst hiring and recruiting managers and how candidate's personal information can potentially affect their opportunity for employment.

Following are the findings of the data research in comparison to a recent survey conducted by Jobvite.

Table 1

*Comparison between responses from Jobvite (2011) Report and JWU Students' sample*

Survey Questions	Responses Jobvite (2011)– Social recruiting surveys N = 800**	Responses JWU Student Sample N = 30*
Do you or company use social networking sites to screen potential candidates?	80% = Yes 10% = No	39% = Yes 46% = No
Which social networking sites do you currently use to screen potential candidates?	Facebook = 55% Twitter = 46% LinkedIn = 86 %	Facebook = 26% Twitter = 6% LinkedIn = 41%
Have you rejected hiring a candidate because of what you found on their social media site?	69% = Yes 26% = No	13% = Yes 81% = No
Have you successfully hired a candidate through social networking site?	63% = Yes 36% = No	25% - Yes 75% = No
How do you use on line profiles of candidates?	Always search = 45% Occasionally = 29% Do not review = 13% Review if provided = 12%	Always search = 6% Occasionally = 41% Do not review = 29 % Review if provided = 24%
<b>JWU students' survey results to question: Which behavior would you consider when dismissing a potential candidate?</b>		
Poor Communication Skills	Extremely important = 61%	
Substance abuse content	Extremely important = 70%	
Bad Mouting former company/boss/colleagues	Extremely important = 56%	
Posting Provocative / inappropriate photos	Extremely important = 41%	

*Note.* \*33 Individuals from Healthcare, Retail, Finance and Other provided response to JWU Research Students survey using SurveyBuilder.com

\*\*Jobvite (2011) social recruiting survey – 800 person sample

The above data comparison provides a scope on the potential power social networking sites may have on decision making from human resources and hiring managers. When comparing the student's survey against the Jobvite data research, the number of respondents in the student's survey was substantially less. The number of respondents to the Jobvite survey was approximately 96% greater than the number of responses collected by the student's. Due to the substantial difference in sampling size, the outcome of this survey is significantly different.

Other potential reasons as to why the survey results were not similar include:

- Jobvite's targeted the survey to human resources and recruiting professionals whose primary job is to hire and recruit for their company.
- Jobvite's is a company that sells recruiting technology solutions. It may have been in their best interest to show higher impact of social networking sites to encourage purchases of their product.

The above being said, Jobvite's targeted a population of human resource and recruiting managers across the United States where the JWU students focused on four industries. Although N=800 may seem like a large number, it is not large enough compared to the number of individuals in hiring roles in the United States. A more detailed study with a larger population should be conducted to gauge the true impact of social networking on candidate's opportunity for employment.

### **Respondents Using Social Networking Sites**

Individual companies from four different industries were asked if they used social networking sites to screen potential candidates. 39% of respondents confirmed using social networking sites



to screen potential candidates for their companies while, 46% acknowledged not using social networking sites to solicit nor recruit potential candidates. A mere 5% of the population disclosed planning to begin using social networking sites to screen candidates this year while 10% admitted not knowing whether their company will start using social networking sites to recruit potential candidates.

### **Which Social Networking Sites are most commonly used by Hiring Managers?**

When human resource and recruiting managers were asked to disclose which social networking sites were most often used to screen and recruit potential candidates, 41% admitted to using LinkedIn™ as a reliable recruiting tool, while 26% of the respondents used Facebook as the current networking site. Other sites that appeared on the survey with minimal responses included: Twitter, Google Plus+, MySpace and Youtube. 25% of the respondents were successful in hiring a candidate through social networking sites, specifically through LinkedIn™ whereas 75% of the respondents were not successful. One respondent listed Craigslist as a site successful in recruiting candidates which was curious. Craigslist is not known as a vehicle to recruit candidates.

### **Quality of candidate's comparison Social Networking Sites vs. Other Resources**

On a scale from 1 – 5 where 1 rated the quality of a candidate as very poor a 5 rated the quality of a candidate as excellent, 56% of the respondents felt that social networks were fair when rating the quality of candidates compared to 59% who felt internal transfers were good or better.

### **How Are Social Networking Sites Being Used by Recruiting Managers?**

Results of this question varied greatly; 41% of the respondents admitted to occasionally searching social network sites for candidates, 24% reviewed the information only if a candidate provided, 6% of the respondents always searched, while 29% of the respondents did not review at all. A question was addressed regarding how companies rely on social networking sites to find candidates; 28% agreed to rely on it sometimes, 20% occasionally depended on it, while 25% never relied on social networking sites to recruit candidates. Some of the responses captured on open ended questions helped further interpret the results.

- Some felt social networking sites were easier than third party companies.
- Some companies strictly used social networking sites to recruit management positions.
- Some respondents found social networking sites useful in finding quality like-minded candidates.

### **Influential Content Found on Social Networking Sites**

When addressing the content of social networking profiles and what hiring managers found most influential, 30% of respondents felt that both awards and community service involvement were very influential when reviewing a candidate's social networking profile, 27% of the respondents didn't find their network of friends influential when being considered for a job.

With all of the personal content being shared online by social networking sites and their users, one question addressed if any of the hiring managers had ever turned down a potential candidate for information viewed on their social networking site, 83% responded to have never turned down a potential candidate for information viewed on their social networking sites, 11% responded to have turned down a candidate for information viewed on their social networking sites. When asked to elaborate on this question, comments like inappropriate remarks about a

current or former employer were revealed as well as remarks about drinking, drug use and inappropriate photographs.

### **Social Network Site's Behaviors When Dismissing a Potential Candidate**

Are individuals aware how damaging social networking sites can be if not properly managed?

Hiring managers were asked, which behaviors they would consider most when dismissing a potential candidate 70% of respondents felt that substance abuse content in a candidate's social network profile is extremely important when dismissing a potential candidate. 61% felt poor communication skills was very important while 56% felt it was extremely important to dismiss a candidate when the individual is bad mouthing a company, boss, customer or colleague 41% of the respondents felt posting provocative or inappropriate photographs was a deal breaker for hiring an individual.

### **Privacy and Social Networking Access**

With the current buzz on hiring managers requesting individual's social networking passwords to review its content, curiosity raised the question of privacy. The data received found that 76% of respondents did not find having access to a candidate's personal networking password important when considering an individual for their company. Meanwhile 11% of respondents found having access was slightly important. When asked to expand on this question, many of the respondents didn't want the password nor need it. Others felt this was an invasion of privacy and logging into someone's personal account was inappropriate.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

Social media usage and activities continues to carve into our culture and there is no indication of it slowing down. In fact, more people become part of the phenomena including the aging population. It is no longer the “young” thing but a way many communicate, share experiences, interests, or display their attitudes and feelings. This is the new norm and as our analysis indicates the trend will likely continues to grow. Hiring managers will likely catch up to professional recruiter’s in terms of social media usage to hire for their needs. It is also very possible that as generation Y continues to take on roles with increased responsibilities, social media along with its content will have a great effect on all of the stakeholders.

As the evolution of social networking sites gains momentum and the generation of students who are commonly on social networking sites move on to executive roles, more and more candidates will be screened and recruited through such sites. There is definitely a trend on the power social networking sites may and will have on human resource and recruiting managers alike.

### **Employees**

Because of the open forum social websites offer, current and future employees must be aware of what they post and how it can potentially affect them.

For example, many individuals feel posting photographs of their social life will attract more friends into their network, but they are not weighing the consequences and impacts it may have on their professional life. From our own and other cited findings the employers are not just looking what they can “*dig up*” on an employee or potential candidate but also to seek talent to enhance their biggest asset – the human asset for their organizations. Employees must exercise caution when posting personal information and photographs on these websites and conform to the emerging standards of e-professionalism. It’s not just about missing out on getting *that* job,

avoiding damaging one's reputation, getting embarrassed, or worse fired; lack of E-professionalism can also mean missing out on the next promotion, or getting noticed outside of the company. Many progressive companies today are searching for talented but not actively seeking candidates.

### **Organizations**

In absence of laws, organizations must proactively seek solution to help hiring managers navigate through the changing environments of social media usage. According to our survey 43% of managers today are using social media website to screen the candidates, yet many companies do not yet have solid guidelines for their managers to go by. Not having such as guidelines may expose the company to potential liabilities. One of our responders has summarized the overall feeling out there shared by many Human Resources managers "*...there is much litigation today where people are suing because they are being disciplined, terminated or turned down for jobs because of what someone at the Company may have seen online...there are not enough laws out there dealing with (sic) social networking and how it may negatively affect a job / job offer. The rules are changing as these decisions are coming down. It's changing faster than we can keep up.*" (K. Connolly, personal communication, April 20, 2012).

### **Organizations**

### **Legislation**

The laws may need to be better defined as well. There is a lot of room for discrimination. The candidate's social websites can easily reveal their political affiliation, sexual orientation, their marital status; age and other legally protected questions recruiters can get answers to without asking a single question. Does the right to know of the employer outweigh the right of privacy

an employee or candidate should expect? The employment law and policy makers should take on the challenge and help identify the balance.

### **Study limitations and future research**

Obviously in order for this exploratory research to gain statistical significance a larger sample will need to be surveyed. Additionally, extra effort may be needed to obtain insight from the finance and banking industry. In spite of our efforts the response rate was only 9% so the opinion of our overall study may not be representative of this group. We suspect these industries in particular may be more conservative which could mean that information found on candidates maybe more detrimental to their chances for obtaining future job.

Also more studies may be needed to better understand the potential for discrimination. This is a topic of significance that should be explored.

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