

## **Social Media and Selection: Ingenuity or Slippery Slope?**

Traditionally, applications capturing bio-data, personality or integrity measures, interviews and other assessment instruments have been utilized to select and hire new employees. Each of these types of assessment methodologies is backed by years of research documenting their soundness as reliable and valid predictors of future performance that minimize adverse impact. In contrast, many organizations are beginning to consider other forms of “data collection” through social media in an effort to gain a complete picture of the applicant pool from which they are choosing, despite being limited to no research support. Therefore, questions around the role that social media could or should play in selecting and/or monitoring employees must be asked. Further, these questions must be carefully researched before organizations blindly follow “current practice” in this area down what may be a very slippery slope. As Industrial and Organizational Psychologists, we are uniquely qualified to address the potential role for social media in selection decisions from a scientific, and yet practical, perspective. To read more about this topic, click on the link below:

### **What is Social Media?**

Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” This encompasses an enormous variety of online applications, such as social networking sites, blogs, social bookmarking, social news, video sharing, wikis, event sharing, art sharing, collaborative projects, music and audio sharing, and virtual worlds. This information is available online for anyone to access. Most importantly, for those who know how to filter this data, it means that one can quickly and easily gather background information on organizations and individuals.

The following discussion is not intended to offer resolution to the discussion of the role that social media could play in selection decisions. Rather, the intent is to offer a research framework from which to begin exploring potential hurdles and issues that must be navigated prior to implementing internet searches as a standard part of selection or monitoring processes.

### **PROBLEM – NO SUPPORT FOR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EMPLOYMENT DECISIONS**

Although 45% of employers are utilizing social media/networking information to make human resource decisions (Grasz, 2009), this practice has yet to be thoroughly evaluated. According to Brown & Vaughn (2011), “within the peer-reviewed literature, cursory empirical evidence exists indicating that others’ judgments of characteristics or attributes of an individual based on

information obtained from social networking sites (SNSs) may be accurate” (p. 219). Therefore, utilization of social media for purposes of selecting or rejecting applicants, without systematic consideration of potential implications of misuse of that information, would be unadvisable.

As Industrial and Organizational Psychologists, EASI•Consult’s Consultants are experts at evaluating all assessment tools and procedures utilized for a range of personnel decisions (e.g., selection, certification, credentialing, promotion, mastery and development). We base our evaluations on scientific data measuring criteria such as *reliability, validity, applicant reactions, and legal compliance* that enable organizations to demonstrate the value of various methods for making personnel decisions. We propose that the field of I/O needs to apply these same criteria to evaluate the usefulness of social media information as part of selection decision-making.

By examining issues such as *reliability, validity, and applicant reactions/public perception*, we will be able to make informed recommendations about whether or not social media information usage provides incremental value in addition to the current sources of information used to make selection decisions. As identified above, a contributing factor to this “problem” lies in the fact that solid empirical research on the use of social media/networking information for human resource decisions is limited. Therefore, the following will propose some research questions that must be empirically examined to begin bridging the gap in our knowledge in this area.

## POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Benefits:

Researchers (e.g., Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Davison, Maraist & Bing, 2011) acknowledge the following potential benefits of social media for employment-related personnel decisions.

- ◆ *May be a low cost way to double-check veracity of resume (education and work experience)*
- ◆ *May be a way to make inferences about applicant’s character or personality that might not be as easily or economically obtained through traditional means*
- ◆ *May be able to reveal untapped job-relevant (and job-irrelevant) applicant characteristics*
- ◆ *May be useful for identifying employees who are harming the company’s mission and reputation*

### Reliability:

Unfortunately, lack of standardization hampers reliability of predictor information (or repeatability/consistency of measures). The level of publicly available social media data obtainable by employers is highly unstandardized because the amount of information shared outside one’s network is customizable. This raises several research questions regarding the reliability of this approach. For example:

- ◆ *Are decision makers at risk of providing preferential consideration early in the decision making process based in part on applicants' personal preferences for privacy settings or general use of social media?*
- ◆ *Does perusing information about candidates lead to the fundamental attribution error, which occurs when information is construed to be representative of the person in question regardless of context? (Brown & Vaughn, 2011)*

### **Validity:**

One of the most problematic issues surrounding the use of social media information for personnel decisions lies in the limited evidence of validity to support the appropriateness and meaningfulness of the information gathered from social media (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Professional guidelines relating to employment decisions (e.g., EEOC's *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, SIOP's *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures*) emphasize the critical importance of validity evidence for all tools and methods. Therefore, this raises several questions regarding the validity of this approach. For example:

- ◆ *How do decision makers ensure that information gathered from social media sources is relevant to and predictive of future performance on the job?*
- ◆ *How do decision makers know what personal attributes can be measured by social media information?*
- ◆ *Does information gathered from social media sources serve as validation for information previously gathered from traditional sources (e.g., interviews, assessments, etc.), or is social media information later validated by traditional sources? Either way, how is information appropriately aggregated across sources?*
- ◆ *Is social media information valid for monitoring ongoing compliance behaviors (e.g., with relevant organizational policies and procedures)?*

### **Applicant Reactions:**

There are several considerations associated with applicant reactions to utilizing social media information for selection decisions. In the employment context, employers must determine if they are going to inform applicants about the use of public social media information for selection purposes. This decision is critical in that it could result in negative outcomes for employers. If an employer tells an applicant that their social networking information will be evaluated for selection decision purposes, that individual may alter their information to make it more socially desirable, thus causing the organization to lose access to potentially relevant information. On the other hand, if an individual is not told, they may perceive the action as unfair or an invasion of privacy, thereby opening up potential for future litigation. Research questions on this aspect might include the following:

- ◆ *In addition to legal considerations associated with gaining consent, how do applicants react to their information from social media sources being utilized for selection decisions and/or ongoing monitoring?*

Within industrial and organizational psychology, there is substantial research on applicant reactions to selection systems and tips for improving the “face validity” of tools used (e.g., Ryan & Ployhart, 2000). This information could no doubt be examined to glean best practices for utilizing social media information for selection decisions as well.

### **Legal Implications:**

Recruitment and selection practices, in both private and public sector organizations, are subject to EEO Law -- in particular, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Executive Order 11246. Both prohibit the same discriminatory acts; organizations are prohibited from discriminating based on sex, race, color, religion or national origin. Given these legal requirements, organizations must consider the following: Patterns of how different minority groups utilize social media may very well have a substantial impact on the recruitment and selection patterns of candidates. If so, employers who rely on social media may find themselves in direct conflict with EEO law. In addition, alcoholism is currently covered under the Americans with Disabilities Amendment Act (ADAAA); thus to make decisions about an individual based on social media information involving alcohol could result in a discriminatory lawsuit (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Finally, First Amendment (i.e., freedom of speech) laws may be violated if individuals are reprimanded or terminated for opinions expressed through social media sources. Thus, there are several questions regarding legal considerations associated with utilizing social media in employment decisions that those with legal expertise would need to consider. For example:

- ◆ *Social Media by definition involves reviewing user generated content. How do we ensure that using Social Media for employment decisions is not going to cause adverse impact to any particular minority?*
- ◆ *How do best practice companies develop written policies and procedures to guide fair and uniform procedures for the gathering and evaluation of data from social media sources?*
- ◆ *What do best practice companies do when they discover “off limits” information about a candidate such as a medical condition versus information that is not currently protected under federal law (e.g., sexual orientation, physical attractiveness, smoking habits, etc.)?*
- ◆ *How do decision makers ensure that constructs assessed by social media sources do not result in decisions that lead to adverse impact or disparate treatment (i.e., intentional discrimination)?*
- ◆ *What legal statutes dictate parameters around gaining applicant consent?*
- ◆ *What guidelines must be followed to maintain compliance around Privacy Acts?*

### **A Cautionary Note to Employers:**

Clearly, additional research is needed to better define what role (if any) social media can and should play in selection and monitoring decisions. In the meantime, researchers have identified the following “tips” for limiting legal pitfalls and improving applicant reactions when utilizing social media information for hiring decisions (Brown & Vaughn, 2011):

- ◆ *Search all applicants (not just case-by-case basis).*
- ◆ *Offer all persons utilizing social media information training on protected class information (and information NOT legally defensible for screening out applicants).*
- ◆ *Document information gathered and used in screening process (including reasons for follow-up or screen out decisions).*
- ◆ *Include rubrics developed by SMEs in each applicant’s personnel file (including printed screen-shots).*
- ◆ *Create written policy banning use of social media information for selection purposes until evidence of validity can be inferred from a careful analysis of the standardized use of such practices (e.g., correlate measures of job relevant traits with measures of job performance to determine their ability to predict future job success).*
- ◆ *Include multiple raters to increase inter-rater reliability when coding profile information.*

Because we acknowledge that scientific research in this area is limited, EASI Consult also recommends exploring parallel usages of social media information (e.g., data mining and e-recruiting) to gain further insight into the research questions posed above. These areas of research and practice would no doubt help to inform development of *Guidelines for Utilization of Social Media in Employment Decisions*, a document that does not yet exist but likely will be developed by some governing body in upcoming years.

For legal expertise in this area, or to learn more about how EASI Consult could help your organization empirically examine the role of social media in your employment decisions, please contact us at 1.800.922.EASI or go to <http://easiconsult.com/contact/>.

### **References**

- Brown, V. R. & Vaughn, E. D. (2011). The writing on the (Facebook) wall: The use of social networking sites in hiring decisions. *Journal of Business Psychology, 26* (2), 219-225.
- Davison, H. K., Maraist, C. & Bring, M.N. (2011). Friend or foe? The promise and pitfalls of using social networking sites for HR decisions. *Journal of Business Psychology, 26* (2), 153-159.
- Grasz, J. (2009). Forty-five percent of employers use social networking sites to research job candidates, CareerBuilder survey finds. *CareerBuilder Press Releases*.

*Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection. Fourth Edition, (2003). Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology.*

Ryan, A. & Ployhart, R. (2000). Applicants' Perceptions of Selection Procedures & Decisions: A critical Review and Agenda for the Future. *Journal of Management, 26* (3), 565-606.

Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection procedures. (1978). *Federal Register, 43, 38289-38309.*