



## **Social Media and Selection: A Brief History and Practical Recommendations**

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## Table of Contents

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Authors .....	3
Abstract.....	4
Introduction .....	4
Background.....	4
Implications for Practice .....	6
Next Steps .....	8
References .....	11

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## **Abstract**

In the past 6 years, membership on social media sites has exploded. Over this same time period, organizations and their staffing/recruiting functions quickly embraced this new technology and found social media to be a great tool to source candidates for open positions and justify selection and hiring decisions. In this “Hot Topics” paper, a part of the SIO P White Paper Series, we explore this rapidly growing trend.

## **Introduction**

In 2010, there were only about 350,000 users on Facebook, 90,000 users on Twitter, and a paltry 50,000 members on LinkedIn (Browser Media, 2011). In the past 6 years, membership on these social media sites has exploded. Current statistics show there are over 1.7 billion Facebook users, 313 million active monthly Twitter users, and 450 million members on LinkedIn (Statistica, 2016). During this time, many other social media sites have come on the scene such as Glassdoor, Instagram, Snap Chat, Tumblr, WeChat, and WhatsApp. Needless to say, social media is here to stay. Over this same time period, organizations and their staffing/recruiting functions quickly embraced this new technology and found social media to be a great tool to source candidates for open positions and justify selection and hiring decisions. In this “Hot Topics” paper, a part of the SIO P White Paper Series, we explore this rapidly growing trend.

## **Background**

There are a few key points to make when it comes to discussing the use of social media to source candidates. First, things are changing to a candidate-driven market as the economy continues to recover and grow, making it more difficult for organizations to find qualified applicants. A recent survey of recruiters by MRI found that the most significant barrier to increasing headcount was a shortage of qualified applicants (King, 2015). Second, in order to compete for difficult to find qualified candidates, organizations have turned to social media. A recent Jobvite survey found that 92% of recruiters used social media to source their candidates (Jobvite Social Recruiting Survey, 2015). After employee referrals (78%), recruiters reported finding their best candidates through social and professional networks (56%). If organizations are not smart about the use of social media to source candidates, they will be bound to lose out on attracting the right candidates to fill positions.

Once candidates have been identified, social media profiles can be leveraged to screen out candidates. Career Builder conducted one of the first studies to look at the use of social media to screen candidates in 2009. In this study, they found that only 16% of the 2,600 hiring managers they surveyed were using social media profiles to screen out candidates. The growth of social media in the past seven years has made it more likely that candidates will have social media profiles and that recruiters and hiring managers will use that information to screen out candidates they feel are not qualified for given roles. For instance, in a 2015 Career Builder study, they found that about half of the 2,175 hiring managers surveyed used information they found on social media to screen out potential candidates. What is particularly troubling with this finding (and several others like it) is the rationale they shared to make those screening decisions. Of the group that used social media to screen candidates, 46% said they screened out candidates due to provocative or inappropriate

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photographs; 30% mentioned poor communication skills; and 14% mentioned the candidates' use of an emoticon. A more recent survey by The Society for Human Resource Management reported similar results: about 4 out of 10 employers are using social media to screen applicants with similar screening decisions (SHRM, 2016).

As one might expect with the explosion of social media, particularly for sourcing and screening candidates, researchers have started to look into the practical value of this new tool. Much of the initial research focused on which social media sites were producing the most application views, candidate applications, and ultimately new hires (Bullhorn, 2012). In this study, LinkedIn generated significantly more application views, candidate applications, and new hires than both Facebook and Twitter combined. Other researchers have started to look at the reliability and validity of social media profiles for use as a selection tool (Davison, Maraist, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012; Guilfoyle, Bergman, Hartwell, & Powers, 2016; Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholer, 2012; Sinar & Winter, 2012). Initial findings have shown that data from social media



sites is both reliable and has significant correlations with various ratings of job performance (i.e., Davison, Bing, Kluemper, & Roth, 2016; Kluemper, Rosen & Mossholder, 2012; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009; Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Sinar & Winter, 2012), but there have been mixed results regarding whether the use of social media provides predictive ability beyond more traditional screening tools (i.e., incremental validity) such as personality tests, situational judgment items, and biodata (Brown & Bergman, 2015; Rupayana, Puchalski, & Hedrick, 2015; Sinar & Winter, 2012; Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth, & Junco, in press). In other words, the extent to which social media is a reliable and accurate indicator of later success on the job remains unclear. The bottom line is there can be both value and risks for organizations using social media to source and screen candidates. The value or risks created by these practices will depend on how processes involving social media are applied and managed just like any other selection process.

## Implications for Practice

The use of social media to source and screen candidates is fairly new. Research on this topic is still in its early stages (Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge & Thatcher, 2016). Further, our legal system is in the process of playing catch-up evaluating the implications of these practices. This means that despite the potential benefits that social media may be able to provide, there are also legal ramifications that should be understood and accounted for when deciding if and how to use social media during the selection process. SHRM (2015) echoes this cautionary tale warning that using social media to screen candidates is still risky, citing the increased potential for discrimination, violation of consent and privacy, and legal as well as moral issues. Moreover, a few of the primary concerns with using social media in selection decisions are the increased potential of using information that is not job-related and using information inconsistently across applicants. The importance of these concerns is further realized when coupled with findings from a recent analysis of EEOC/OFCCP rulings, which found that the most common legal challenges to selection systems were se-



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lection instruments not being job-related, lack of documentation, and the use of an inconsistent process (Williams, Schaffer, & Ellis, 2013).

The use of social media throughout the selection process may also result in poor utility and create additional opportunities for discrimination (i.e., disparate treatment and disparate impact). Poor utility refers to the fact that unless the use of social media is a reliable and valid selection process, its use may not help improve the selection system and may result in additional risk for legal challenges. Whether social media screening increases the quality of a selection system will depend on whether the screening criteria are job-relevant and consistently applied. If these two criteria are met, then adding social media screening to the process may improve the selection process (e.g., make it more valid or even more efficient). However, if these criteria are not met, then adding social media screening may decrease the quality of the selection process and open the employer up to additional legal risks.

Disparate treatment means treating certain applicants differently, because they belong to a specific protected group (e.g., race, color, religion, national origin, sex, pregnancy, age 40 and over, disability) and is illegal. For example, a hiring manager's search of Facebook can easily reveal information about an applicant's protected class status. In turn, proving that such information was not used during the decision making process can be extremely difficult and creates additional legal risks for organizations (SHRM, 2015). Disparate impact, as it relates to the use of social media in the selection process, could result from using social media profiles as part of a selection process in such a way that appears neutral, but disproportionately results in the unintentional selection of only a specific group of protected class applicants. This could occur if a specific group of applicants that are part of a protected class are more likely to have or not have a social media profile or information on their social media profiles that would significantly increase their chances of being removed from the selection process. In both cases, organizations may open themselves up to legal scrutiny on the basis of selection practices that are potentially discriminating against certain individuals.

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In addition to increased risks of disparate treatment and disparate impact, there are also many additional laws that can come into play; and our legal system is regularly generating new case law that will continue to shape the way in which it is legal to use social media during the selection process. A few specific laws that may not immediately appear to be related, but that should be considered, include the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), Fair Credit Reporting Act, as well as various international data privacy laws.

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Although these last few paragraphs paint a gloomy picture for the use of social media during selection, the use of social media may also have a bright side. While it has been acknowledged that the use of social media sites may increase the risk of gathering information that is not job-related, sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook may still provide unique opportunities to assess information that is job-related. For instance, sites such as LinkedIn provide an opportunity to learn about an applicant's job-related skills and previous work experience, while other sites such as Facebook have the potential to provide information about an applicant's personality and potential fit for an organization. Research has shown that

job-relevant personality traits can be measured using social media and can be tied back to job performance for various types of work such as clerical, customer service, and sales jobs (Kluemper et al., 2012). Other research has offered similar insights and shown that social media can be used to measure information that differentiates between high and low academic performers (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009). It is important to acknowledge that this specific area of research is still in its infancy and more research is needed in the future.

## Next Steps

To justify integrating the use of social media profiles into employee selection processes, it is recommended that organizations leverage best practices for selection and follow recommendations based on legal precedents. One of the first considerations is to ensure that organizations have a clear set of criteria based on job analysis that define what it takes to be successful on the job. Once organizations have defined what it takes to be successful on the job, basic selection system design principles suggest that they should then select tools and design processes based on considerations such as reliability and validity, fairness to all candidates, candidate experience, process efficiency, and cost. These same criteria should be applied when organizations consider using social media in selection processes: when deciding whether or not to use information from social media, when



considering whether the portions of profiles being reviewed are job-related, or when considering whether the portions of profiles being reviewed are used in a consistent manner across candidates.

Organizations should also consider the potential reactions applicants may have about an organization viewing private forms of social media. LinkedIn is a professional form of social media and it may be safe to assume that applicants would understand if an organization reviews this type of profile as part of a selection process. The same may not be true of other forms of social media, which are typically considered to be more personal. Highly qualified applicants may find it inappropriate for organizations to view private forms of social media such as Facebook and as a result may choose to self-select out of a selection process. In turn, organizations should consider the potential impact of missing out on qualified applicants that may self-select out if organizations decide to incorporate social media profiles as part of their selection process.

To ensure successful implementation of social media, the following steps are encouraged:

- **Develop a social media policy for your organization** that details exactly how social media is allowed to be used during the selection process: be sure to work closely with your legal department to ensure that the policy reflects current local, state, and federal law, and even international law. Once the policy is developed, it is important to make sure that there are governance processes in place to implement and enforce the social media policy consistently across the organization.
- **Create and document a specific process that includes predefined criteria based on job analysis for collecting *only* job-related information from applicant social media profiles.** This process should be applicable to all potential applicants and should include a detailed process for removing an applicant from the selection process based on job-related criteria. Any time an applicant is removed from the selection process, a job-related reason also needs to be documented.

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- **Use a third party or employees that are not involved in the decision making process to provide standardized ratings based on applicant social media profiles.** Alternatively, it may be possible to obtain from a third party provider “big data” that includes job-relevant criteria from applicant social media profiles. This will help prevent decision makers from unintentionally learning of an applicant’s protected class status.
- **Provide all raters of social media profiles with standardized instructions and training on how to make ratings.** This will help ensure all social media profile ratings are collected consistently across applicants and that only job-related information is being collected from social media profiles.
- **Prior to collecting any ratings from social media profiles, ensure that applicants have been notified.** This notification process should be done in writing.



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