

CASE: SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SELECTION TOOL AT DIVIDED SKY DESIGNS

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ABSTRACT

Social media sites such as Facebook are rapidly growing in popularity. Thus, it is no surprise that some companies have begun utilizing this media during the selection process by searching candidate profiles for information speaking to the candidate's qualifications, background, and interests. However, this practice is not without risk. The purpose of this case study is to get students thinking and talking about the practical, ethical, and legal implications of checking candidate profiles and the utility of social media sites in providing reliable and valid information regarding the candidate.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As the Human Resource Director for Divided Sky Designs (a leading national retail firm), you have developed a solid, standardized selection system intended for use in stores across the country in selecting their retail clerks. The current process consists of an application, a personality and ability test, and a structured interview with the store manager. You have ensured that these tools are both reliable and valid, and have gone to great lengths to train store managers in proper use of the selection system. Recently, it has come to your attention that several store managers also have begun looking at candidates' Facebook profiles before making a final hiring decision. You've begun investigating this practice and asking managers for their reasons for doing so. Several managers report that they use Facebook to supplement the existing methods and provide a bit of a background and character check. They look at posts and photos to see if the candidate would be a "good fit" with the company's culture and if he or she appears reliable and responsible. A few managers have reported that they decided to not hire candidates because they found photos showing the candidate looking drunk at parties or posting about drugs or alcohol. Another manager reported that she cut a candidate because of posts she read where the candidate spoke poorly of his current employer (also a retail firm). Yet another used Facebook to weed out candidates with poor communication skills. Most managers have told you that, in some cases, they have had several candidates who are more or less equally qualified to do the job, and have turned to information on Facebook to help them make their final decision. You've asked the managers what they do if the candidate has enabled privacy settings so it cannot be accessed. They've reported that in those cases, they simply do nothing. In other words, no hiring manager has ever asked to "friend" a candidate or for the candidate to provide his or her login information - that would be, in one manager's words "going a bit too far."

Because the use of social media is not currently part of your selection process, you need to make a decision as to whether or not you will allow your stores to continue in this process.

ASSIGNMENT DETAILS

There are three learning objectives associated with this case. The first objective is to discuss what factors can and should be considered by employers in making a selection decision. The second objective is to identify and explain legal and ethical considerations in using social media in the selection process. The third objective is to discuss whether social media sites have the potential to be a reliable and valid selection method.

You are to provide a recommendation as to whether or not your organization should research candidates' profiles on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. In your response, consider and discuss the legal, ethical, and practical considerations involved in using social media in the selection process by addressing the following questions:

1. What are the potential advantages of checking a candidate's social media profile?
2. What are the potential legal and ethical risks to a company that chooses to check candidates' social media profiles?
3. Can information gathered through a social media profile help a company make a well-informed employment decision? To what extent are the data reliable and valid for employment selection decisions?

ADDITIONAL CASE 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, 219–225.

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INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES

Organizations are increasingly relying on social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, in screening potential candidates. According to a 2009 survey by Career Builder.com, 45% of hiring companies reported that they use social networking sites in the selection process [1]. It is likely this percentage is even greater today.

Proponents of the practice contend that information posted on social networking sites can uncover damaging information such as reckless behavior, drug/alcohol abuse, or speaking poorly of past employers and even provide insight as to factors such as the candidate's attitude, self-presentation, potential organizational fit, writing ability, and personality. In fact, Kluemper, Rosen, and Mossholder [2] recently reported some evidence that Big Five personality traits can be reliably and accurately inferred through social networking sites. The potential for uncovering such valuable information, along

with the ease with which these sites can be accessed, certainly makes social networking sites an appealing supplemental tool to the selection process.

Nevertheless, there are several risks involved in using social networking sites in the selection process. Obviously, the potential is great to uncover legally protected characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, and sexual orientation. From an ethical standpoint, there is also the concern about the extent to which accessing applicants' social media presence, especially when done without the candidates' knowledge or consent constitutes an invasion of privacy.

A lack of standardization in how social networking sites are used by both candidates and hiring organizations can lead to inconsistent treatment of applicants. There is a great deal of variability not only in what candidates post to these websites, but in the amount of posted information that is made public. Additionally, employers must keep in mind that the information presented on a candidate's social networking page may be lacking in accuracy. For example, some of the information available about a candidate on these websites may come from secondary sources, such as Facebook "friends" or Twitter "followers." Similarly, many users of these websites self-select information shared in order to convey or preserve a desired self-image. It is also likely that the vast majority of organizations that use social media in selection likely do not have a standard rubric or guide to use as a screening tool, which again brings inconsistency to the process.

Perhaps most importantly, however, is the issue of the reliability and validity of social networking sites as a selection tool. Considerably more research is needed to investigate the content and criterion-related validity of social networking sites in the selection process [2] [3]. Further, from a practical standpoint, there is the question of the extent to which information on social networking sites is, in fact, relevant to a candidate's ability to perform a job. In the absence of solid data, companies may be better off relying on methods proven to be legally defensible, ethical, and psychometrically sound.

REFERENCES

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- [2] Kluemper, D. H., Rosen, P. A., & Mossholder, K. W. (2012). Social networking websites, personality ratings, and the organizational context: More than meets the eye? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42, 1143-1172.
- [3] 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, 219-225.