SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELECTION

HOW ONLINE INFORMATION HELPS—AND HURTS—YOUR HIRING PROCESS

So let’s say you have an open position . . . perhaps a sales job in an important new market for your business. You’ve got a full funnel of applicants who’ve put their names in, and all look very promising. You’ve got limited slots for interviews. How do you make a choice between them?

If you’re like a lot of hiring managers, one of the things that might factor in to your decisions around whom to interview and hire is what you find out about a candidate on social media. Savvy job seekers are creating professional LinkedIn profiles—and cleaning up personal Facebook ones—with potential employers in mind, and they are a wealth of information. So you turn to the internet, and here’s the information you uncover about your potential candidates:

> James has changed jobs every 18 months, and progressively climbed the ladder with each new position. He has almost a dozen glowing recommendations from current and former colleagues, and experience in a range of industries and companies. His Facebook profile shows him in a group of people, beer tipped toward the camera in salute.

> Julie looks a lot like the sales people you currently employ. She has lots of connections and a long track record of industry experience—including with your key competitors. But you can tell that she’s basically working within her strong existing network of contacts, and not adding many new contacts to her list.

> Justin’s profile is not as active as James’ or Julie’s, but his experience addresses many of your company’s pain points—including impressive statistics around building new business. In addition to his work experience, his profile reveals a strong interest in community service with a focus on underserved youth.

Obviously you’ll consider more than the limited information presented here. But, in this paper we’ll discuss how this kind of information can inform big and small decisions in meaningful ways—from how to source candidates, to screening them, to influencing them to have a positive impression of the job you’re seeking to fill. We’ll start with a background on how social media is being used, talk about how we think it’s most effective, and address legal implications. We’ll share some research we’ve done to see whether you can actually discern anything of value about someone’s personal attributes and performance from an online profile. And at the end, we’ll look at these three fictional applicants with a social media lens on—and see if there is a best man or woman for the job.
THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The use of online profiles is exploding. “It’s awesome, the impact we’ve been able to have on people’s lives,” says Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s creator and CEO.1 Two people sign up for LinkedIn every second, and hundreds of thousands of job applications have been submitted directly through LinkedIn’s application system.2 The growth of the top three social media sites alone is staggering.

Glassdoor and CareerBliss: Just as recruiters screen out candidates for what they find online, job seekers use sites like these—which are packed with reviews, rants, and even salary data—to vet their own job prospects. Sites like these can have a huge impact on your employment brand which is a critical concern in the war for talent.

BranchOut and BeKnown: Both of these are add-ons for Facebook that enable business networking. The user can control how much of a personal profile can be seen by professional contacts.

Klout and Peer Index scores: these add-ons to existing social media profiles measure an individual or company profile’s social networking activity, and assign a rating as to how influential they are online.

SOCIAL MEDIA 4.0—USE CASES FOR RECRUITERS

Social networking is already heavily used by HR, specifically on the recruiting side. Figure 2 shows its frequency as a tool to source candidates:

And above and beyond the big players, there are many smaller ones. A few of them to keep on your radar include:

Google+: This site offers individual and group profile pages, and operates as a competitor to industry juggernaut Facebook. Google+ builds profiles that link with other commonly-used Google tools such as Gmail, Picasa for photo sharing, YouTube for video sharing, instant messaging, search, and other offerings.
It’s also already in use for screening candidates. In fact, as Figure 3 shows, social media has grown exponentially as a way recruiters screen out applicants over just the past two years:

![FIGURE 3: USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SCREENING JOB SEEKERS](image)

**SHARP SOCIAL SOURCING AND SCREENING STRATEGIES**

Recruiters are getting creative when it comes to social media. It’s a way to both find candidates, and vet them for jobs. Some of the new and creative ways we’ve seen it being used include:

➢ **Utilize search capabilities built in to Facebook and LinkedIn.** One analyst predicts that the ability for hiring managers to source their own candidates through social media could be the death of the recruiting agency. But, when the middle man is removed, costs go down too. One can actually argue that sourcing candidates this way is neither new nor creative—it’s becoming the norm to find the best talent. And that includes passive candidates who aren’t actively searching. We saw one recruiter do this by seeding a job description with her own LinkedIn profile information. She then used a feature on LinkedIn that shows who looked at your profile (and if you pay for premium access, you get more details about who is looking), and she followed up with candidates who had promising profiles to fill the job. In a Bersin & Associates report, Red Hat (a software company) revealed the cost savings it achieved by sourcing candidates largely through LinkedIn’s premium services rather than agencies. They’ve reduced agency fees by 80 percent, and the total cost of recruiting by 20 percent overall. At the same time, they increased hiring by 20 percent, and reduced the time it takes to source candidates. “Frankly, [LinkedIn] instantly gave us a database that far exceeded any of the vendors we were using,” says a senior talent acquisition director. “It was just incumbent on us to get the maximum benefit.”

➢ **Foster connections.** At global hotelier Hyatt, hiring managers noted that candidates who connected through the company’s social networks tended to be more engaged and interested than those sourced through job boards. Hyatt creates networks specifically for job seekers, including a website and blog geared for college recruiting, and Facebook and Twitter accounts just for job seekers. These outlets help Hyatt promote their employment brand to an already-engaged talent pool. In just a six-month period, 4,000 applicants were sourced using these methods.

➢ **Get mobile.** Our smartphones and tablets keep us connected—and give us a chance to connect with candidates in new ways. Intel has a smart example of how a mobile recruiting strategy puts them ahead of the pack. The company used to receive 20,000 paper résumés a year, which took time to scan and sort. To streamline this process, recruiters hit job fairs with tablets equipped to capture key
candidate information and recruiters’ notes, and then integrate with their applicant tracking system. “The app allows Intel to reduce our candidate response time by 25 times, and save over 500 hours per year in manual processing,” says Intel’s Allen Stephens.  

> Use Twitter to connect with passive candidates. In the article we cite above, Allen Stephens includes his Twitter handle as a hyperlink in the article. That’s a smart way to connect with candidates. In a May 2012 post on the weblog Fistful of Talent, recruiter Meredith Soleau details how Twitter became her favorite recruiting tool. She provides an insightful example: IT people tend to follow Wired Magazine, so she searches their follower list to find potential candidates for her open positions. By understanding trends related to the professionals she’s sourcing, Soleau is able to use social media to uncover people—and as the one of the few doing it, she has their full attention.

---

**SCREENING SOCIALLY:**
**WHAT LINKEDIN PROFILES CAN TELL YOU ABOUT YOUR NEXT HIRE.**

An intrepid group of psychologists recently examined Facebook profiles and found they had some links to work-related attributes such as openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. But with a small sample and not much other data out there, we set out to conduct our own research on what social media can tell you about someone—their work styles and preferences and, even more importantly, where they’re likely to excel (and struggle) on the job.

And our research has a distinct advantage. As a result of large assessment projects, we have a robust database that details the proficiencies of groups of employees, and that pairs this with extensive information about their personal attributes. It’s thorough, relevant, and consistent—a Holy Grail of data just waiting to be mined for insights. What would happen if we scientifically compared the data we’d gathered with information available in online profiles, particularly from a career-oriented social media site like LinkedIn? Would we see any trends? What can (and can’t) we learn about a person’s real-world behaviors and performance from his or her online identity?

To answer these questions, we took a sample of more than 700 recent sets of assessment results and performance evaluations for employees spanning several companies and a range of professional jobs, including sales representatives, engineers, clinical researchers, and project managers. Our data included extensive information about their personal attributes and their proficiency in active learning, decision making, and customer focus, among other key work competencies. Next, we looked online to see if the subject had a public profile with LinkedIn. We then mapped all of the profile details into a common structure so we could compare and analyze it (importantly, we also excluded information like photos that could be a source of bias). Finally, we matched this cleaned and categorized LinkedIn profile to assessment results and on-the-job effectiveness. To our knowledge, this type of research has never before been done. Here’s just some of what we found:

First, looking at personal attributes, what can we learn about someone’s real-life work style from their online profile? What stood out most were the profile’s links with assertiveness and achievement orientation—that is, how vigorously someone will express an opinion, and how much he or she continually...
seeks out challenging goals. Both of these were statistically related to several parts of the profile—those with higher assertiveness and achievement orientation were more likely to have a LinkedIn profile at all and had more connections when connections were categorized rather than used as a raw count—those with higher achievement orientation also were members of more LinkedIn groups and had held more positions per year in the workforce. Two other personal attributes, self-confidence and innovativeness, also had notable links to the online profile—those who were more confident and expressed a strong desire to innovate had more connections and in the case of innovativeness, were more likely to use the skills and experiences section of their profile.

Second, we looked at the profile’s link to job performance—after all, scanning an online profile during the hiring process is pointless and risky if it’s unknown how the information translates to actual on-the-job behaviors. We all know of cases where a new hire with a stellar resume flopped soon after starting—how well does information drawn from a LinkedIn profile connect to actual job effectiveness? Interestingly, when properly structured and interpreted, the profile did provide several key insights about job performance. Overall, stronger performers were more likely to have more LinkedIn connections, to have more upward progressions when moving from job to job, and to be members of more LinkedIn groups. These same trends held up across many of the performance facets—customer focus, active learning, decision making, and communication. We did also find one part of the profile negatively linked to performance—the longer a person’s employment gaps (length of time between jobs), the less likely they were to be top performers.

It’s very important to note that these findings, while based on a large sample and statistically significant, do not reflect universal patterns occurring for every job and every profile. Nor is our research a substitute for your own justification of the job-relevance of an online profile in your organization. However, it does suggest that there may be some promise for online profile information in predicting job effectiveness—keeping in mind several critical caveats.

Before you make LinkedIn a part of your selection process, we do have several key warnings. Consider other ways to gather objective, structured information to predict job performance. In our research, although we did find several links between the online profile and performance, these links paled in comparison to those found with a selection test the individuals also completed. Also, all is not equal when it comes to online profiles. For example, African-Americans are less likely to have a profile than Caucasian individuals. For certain jobs, such as hourly employees, such individuals are also less likely to have a profile than those in sales and other professional roles—in our sample, the rate was at most about 50/50 for such jobs. So using online profiles as an information source for all of a company’s jobs would likely not be possible. Women and those over 40 are also less likely to have a large number of connections even when they do have a profile. Though we do see some trends between certain parts of an online profile and better job performance (critical for demonstrating job-relevance of any selection tool), not everything in the profile can be linked to performance. For example, we saw no connection between someone’s number of skills or experiences and performance. And drawing on information from an online profile—particularly in haphazard or subjective ways—could contribute to adverse impact within your selection process. Refer to page 6 for more information on the legality of using social media when hiring.
BRAND YOURSELF AS AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

One of the reasons Amazon.com stands out as a retailer is because its site is rich with reviews of products from the people who bought them. Five-starred products will sell—bad ratings or even no ratings will have negative impact. Increasingly, your company is also a product subject to ratings online. Sites such as Glassdoor.com and Vault.com are sounding boards for employees and recruits to dish about your culture, your benefits, even your pay scales.

This can be scary, but it’s also an opportunity for companies that are “good products.” Here are just a few of the lessons to be learned from retail ratings for HR recruiters:

Ratings are believable. People trust online ratings, and positive ones for your company curry favor with candidates.

Feedback is valuable. Hidden in every negative review is an insight into how you can improve. This is a strong indicator that you may want to look at your selection process through the lens of an applicant. Showing you’ve acted on this feedback also leaves a positive impression.

Retailers encourage reviews. Amazon has a program where top reviewers are provided with new products—for free, from the companies who make them—prior to their release. The companies can’t control the content of the reviews, but having that content there helps them make sales from day one, rather than waiting for the reviews to trickle in. Employers can also encourage reviews from candidates or even employees. But, never try to control the content—that will take away credibility.

LEGAL CONCERNS

The legal implications of these tools are significant. We think there are five unique areas of consideration:

> **Potential for adverse impact.** Different protected groups such as those over the age of 40 or members of minority groups may use and access social media less than others. This could create an issue for those groups if they are not given the chance to be considered for a job because they do not have a social media profile if preferences are given to applicants with the largest number of recommendations, friends, contacts, etc.

> **Lack of validity.** Our most valid tools provide evidence that they work to answer specific job-related questions about job candidates. Yet when it comes to social profiles, the information presented may be very questionable when it comes to job-relatedness. The research we summarize above is a key first step in establishing if online profile data have any bearing on job effectiveness. Yet each organization would need to have its own plan for showing this before widespread use to inform selection decisions. Without a structured approach to review social profile data, organizations open themselves up to an unreliable process that further reduces the validity of social profiles for predicting performance on the job.

> **Insufficient record-keeping (for decisions).** What information from a social profile was used, how, and why? These questions are often hard to answer, and will make it difficult to defend your process if faced with a legal challenge.
> **Disparate treatment.** This occurs when members of a protected class are intentionally treated differently than others. This could happen when information found on social media sites is evaluated in a different way for different applicants.

> **Access to irrelevant information.** You can’t un-ring the bell, so they say. And social profiles often contain sensitive information around race, gender, age, orientation, and disabilities. This can lead to treating applicants of one demographic group different than others, or even the perception (if not the reality) that a decision was made based on marital status, religious affiliation, political affiliation, sexual orientation, or another protected class. Connections between social media information and on-the-job effectiveness are also largely unknown or worse, based on stereotypes and unfounded assumptions, so a first step is sorting out what’s relevant and what’s not.

Additionally, information related to social life is most often not relevant to ability to perform a job. Certain types of information can make a negative (sloppy party photos) or positive (helping rescue homeless pets—or another cause close to a hiring manager’s heart) impressions—but have little to nothing to do with one’s skills and competencies. Even for career-oriented sites like LinkedIn, we found that some details in the profile were much more closely linked to performance than others.

**SOCIAL SMARTS: HOW SHOULD YOU USE WHAT YOU FIND ONLINE**

At DDI, we recommend that every hire is made and every hiring tool is built on the same foundation, which we call a Success Profile.

The Success Profile is the result of a detailed job analysis, so each profile is unique to a role. It spells out the key competencies, motivations, knowledge, and experience relevant to successful job performance. With this “answer key” in hand, it’s possible to evaluate a candidate pool to find those who best match the profile. And that’s where tools—like social networking—come in.

Obviously some insights into experience and skills will be apparent from a LinkedIn or similar type of professional profile. These sites connect you with a pool of people who have a desired specific skill, but may not be
actively job searching. Some recruiters are using this to their advantage, and putting their names on their job postings. A passive job seeker then searches them on LinkedIn. The recruiter can see who has opened his or her profile, and gets a lead and some initial information on a passive candidate.

There are other in-depth ways social media offers valuable insights. For creative professionals, their work is often online—either as a blog, a YouTube channel, a Flickr account, or other site. These content collections give employers a way to look at a specific skill.

A note of caution though: in all the instances above, there are already tools that will gather this information—and do it in a way that's validated, documented, and proven. When considering the use of social media, it should be determined that all data reviewed is job related and the criteria used to evaluate the data are consistently applied every person. If there is any question about the ability to do this, our opinion is that the use of social media should be limited or avoided altogether.

**“LIKE”-LIST: A SOCIAL MEDIA CHECKLIST**

If use of social media is a train that’s left the station in your organization (and that’s true for many of us!), then consider the following actions to make sure you don’t end up with a social media train wreck:

- Create a detailed social media policy for employees. If screening job applicants through social media will be permitted, then the employer’s policy should clearly identify what information or sites will be reviewed, how the information or sites will be evaluated, why these sites are chosen, and what records will be maintained (i.e., screenshots, access dates, etc.). The policy should cover both potential and current employees. It may make more business sense to only visit professional/career orientated sites like LinkedIn as opposed to a more traditional social networking site like Facebook unless you use a service like BranchOut to focus on job-related content.
- Apply all social media policies consistently and fairly for all individuals associated with employment at your organization. A policy for how to account for different levels of detail in candidates’ profiles would be an appropriate consideration, for example.
- Put procedures in place to ensure that decision makers are screening individuals’ social media sites for information that is job related and a function of business necessity. To establish job-relatedness, consider the following questions: Are these basic job requirements? Related to job necessity? Does a job analysis support using information? How will you defend if challenged? Is there potential that a protected group could be negatively impacted?
- Ensure you have social media expertise in the organization (defined competencies; professionals that possess those competencies and/or options to close the gap.
- Keep accurate records of the information that was used to screen individuals in your searches.
- Maintain current and objective job descriptions that highlight the employer’s expectation of the employee.
- Be aware of state and federal laws governing the information organizations can access and evaluate about individuals when making employment decisions. Employers may use third-party service providers to review social media and
social networking profiles to screen job applicants. If so, it is important to understand that they may have obligations under the Fair Credit Reporting Act.

> Above all else, it is critical that employers are able to articulate a legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason for any employment decision and retain appropriate documentation to support that decision. This is true for any medium.

APPLYING SOCIAL MEDIA SAVVY TO SELECTION . . . AND CHOOSING JAMES, JULIE OR JUSTIN?

Based on what we’ve covered here, do you think it’s now possible to improve your ability to choose one of the three candidates we mentioned at the beginning of this paper?

The answer is yes . . . and also, it depends. Each of those candidates may be good choices for a specific organization and sales job that fits with their experience, motivations, and personal attributes (the Success Profile). James may be a good fit with an entrepreneurial start-up, Julie may thrive in a traditional sales role, but may falter if asked to become a “hunter.” And Justin likely would be drawn to an organization with a greater purpose.

Again, social media is not a substitute for quality selection tools such as assessments and interviews. But, it’s one more tool that can help you make the right match.

END NOTES:

1 http://omgeureka.blogspot.com/2011/03/faces-behind-facebook-interviews-and.html
2 press.linkedin.com/about
3 [Using social networks: how global recruiting tools attract top talent, bersin research bulletin 2011]
4 [Bersin, social media for recruiting case study april 2010]
6 http://fistfuloftalent.com/2012/05/twitter-finding-your-talent-your-peers.html