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Article 44

Beyond the Suit and Résumé: Leveraging Social Media to Build an Online Reputation for 21st Century Professional Success

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Introduction

In the last decade, the expansion of Internet use with the related explosion of social media as an extension of one's personal image has had serious implications for employers and employees alike. Much of the current literature (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Bugeja, 2006; Kugler, 2008; Stengel, 2010) maintains that one of the challenges of this new social media extension to an employee's personal image, is the lack of ability to separate where their professional image ends and their personal image begins. The consensus from most of the research done in this area has concluded that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the two (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Finder, 2006; Jones & Behling, 2010).

Some of the research on social media and the Internet has focused on the use of both avenues to gain employment from an employee's perspective. More specifically, Dutta and Fraser (2009) and Elmore (2009) speak to the increased expansion in social capital or network structures that is afforded by the use of the Internet. Social capital/network structures can be defined as the individuals that you know and are connected to (A. Smith-Hunter, personal communication, 2011). Other research on the use of the Internet has stated that a modern corporation/business cannot realistically hope to recruit potential employees without using the Internet (as opposed to other recruiting tools, such as newspapers or more traditional medium) to aid their recruiting efforts (Lavezzi & Meccheri, 2011; Reiter, 2010; Stamper, 2010). The authors contend that failing to use the Internet to solicit interest and responses/applications for a job can be seen as a thwarting of effort and represents a severe limitation on the potential candidates that could have been contacted.

While the significance and use of the Internet are important human resource management topics, the previously outlined broad discussion is presented as a backdrop to the main points to be covered in the current paper. The major thrust of this paper is to assess the impact of a potential employee's social media image by employers on his/her hiring potential. The paper begins with a review of the current literature on the topic, ending with certain pertinent and related research study questions. This latter portion is preceded by a research design, a results section, and a conclusion section. Implications of the current findings, including the importance for future research, are also discussed.

Literature Review

Interacting on the Internet in any context brings with it some element of risk. This use becomes more challenging should software problems compromise the security of various websites, leading to possible hacking of information contained within these websites (Hasselback, 2009). These actions can lead to the maligning of users' personal pages and thus their online profile. In defense of employees' social network profiles, Jones and Behling (2010) employed a systematic look at social network sites, outlining the three potential legal issues employers may face if they use social networking sites in hiring decisions. First, the authors pointed out that an employer is not allowed to find out information on a social site that it would otherwise be prohibited from asking a candidate. Factors such as age, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation are barred from the employer's knowledge during the interview process. However, such information may be available on a candidate's social profile and should thus not be accessible to employers (Jones & Behling, 2010).

Second, the authors also state that many of the social networking sites' user agreements contain language, which prohibits information from the site from being used for commercial purposes (Jones & Behling, 2010). One could argue that an employer who uses an applicant's online profile to gather additional information is violating that site's user agreement clause (Jones & Behling, 2010). Third, the Internet, social media, and the laws covering this domain are still being explored and enacted, and as such, actions taken now by employers may be at risk later on in the process if invasion into a potential hire's privacy is later deemed illegal (Jones & Behling, 2010).

Nevertheless, most employers are indeed using the Internet today to view social profiles. Estimates put this figure at roughly 85% of employers viewing the online profiles of job candidates (Seale, 2009). Finder (2006) took an earlier look at the impact of one's online persona as an asset or liability to one's résumé. The author covered the essence of the social media profile of potential employees; assessing the impact such profiles can have on one's potential for hire in a company. At the time, the author found that the majority of company recruiters were not checking applicants' online profiles (Finder, 2006). The author thus concluded that while a potential issue, it was not yet significant enough to warrant an alarm, but that potential employees should be warned of the possible harm that could occur when employers see their online profile (Finder, 2006).

More recent studies have echoed these warnings (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Fuller & McGrath, 2009; Jones & Behling, 2010). The first paper looked at, among other things, students' awareness of their social profile and the potential harm their social profile could have on hiring decisions from an employer's perspective. The study concluded that the majority of students claimed not to currently have what they considered offensive material on their site but added that they had removed offensive materials, such as those showing them drinking, smoking pot, or engaging in derogatory remarks about others (Fuller & McGrath, 2009).

Another survey question from the same study indicated the students felt that employers did indeed have the right to view their online profile, with sophomores (70.4%) and juniors (81.1%) most likely to answer affirmatively followed by seniors (68.1%) and freshmen (58.4%). In addition, 80% of the graduate respondents felt that employers had the right to check their profile, while 56% of unemployed respondents, 76.2% of part-time employed respondents, and 70.7% of full-time employed respondents agreed employers and recruiters have the right to check an applicant's social networking profile before hiring the applicant (Fuller & McGrath, 2009).

Two studies that have a direct relation to the current paper looked intently at the influence of social networking websites on the evaluation of job candidates by potential employers. The first used undergraduate students to assume the role of a hiring manager and evaluate the online profiles of potential job candidates for various positions within an organization (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). The study concluded that negative information (e.g., drinking alcohol, using drugs) can significantly hurt a candidate including not being hired or receiving a lower starting salary (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). The aforementioned study used a simulated environment (Becker, 2001) which had students acting as potential employers, thus creating a limitation.

The second study was undertaken by Fuller and McGrath (2009). The authors looked at what employers were looking at on a social media page, as well as what candidates were revealing on these pages, and assessed whether pursuing such online investigations were beneficial to employers. The preliminary research results from the study showed that most social network sites revealed candidate's age, relationship status, sexual preference, and religion. Employers cannot legally ask job candidates to divulge such personal information during the interviewing process. The results further showed that alcohol use and or abuse was often rampant in individuals' profiles. Based on these findings, Fuller and McGrath (2009) recommended that hiring managers proceed with

caution when using social networking sites, since such use could violate equal employment opportunity laws.

Current Research

While social media can adversely affect our lives and online reputation, this emergent and pervasive technology offers a wealth of opportunities for job candidates who seek to develop professional online reputations. The ultimate goal of our study is to provide best practice and design recommendations to job candidates. The recommendations may be applied to any group who wishes to have a professional online reputation. We selected Facebook as the focus of our problem space because of its quick growth in popularity over the past few years and its corporate mission to make it as public as possible (Allen, 2010; Lodish, 2010).

Employers are interested in as much information as possible to prevent a bad hire. Our research clearly demonstrated that employers value openness and the ability to find holistic information about a job candidate. The job candidate in contrast wants to protect his/her privacy and create the most professional persona possible. Job candidates are often not aware that the information they post on the web might be used to form opinions about qualities such as work ethic, professionalism, and the image they might offer a company. Job candidates invest much time and energy to present themselves in the best light possible. Often they attempt to make their personal life private and invest their energy in other areas such as their résumé and interview skills and ignore their online reputation.

This study focuses on the results of an analysis of profiles using the social network Facebook and asks the question: How specifically does what is posted matter? Based on our research, we make recommendations for best practices.

This study focused on data collected from 172 employers who regularly hire college graduates. The average age of the employers who responded to this survey was 39 and their age ranged between 22 and 69. The average age of the job candidates they hire was 28 and the range was between 19 and 40; 74% of the respondents were female, the rest were male.

The employers offered insight into how they act on the social network information when making a final hiring decision. Of these employers, 76% responded that they do background checks on the candidates before making hiring decisions; 59% of these employers used the Internet to research a candidate before they made any hiring decision. Only 10% of these employers stated that their company has a policy on conducting an Internet background check. Most employers checked various Internet sources. The majority used Google followed by Facebook and then Linkedin.

Along with the survey questions, we presented profile pages of four possible candidates. One of these profiles was female and the rest were males. Kip represented our control variable and his profile-featured family oriented photos and comments with an overall professional look and no objectionable content. Rebecca represented a very party-oriented individual who displayed a provocative photo with another woman wrapped in a U.S. flag. Tim had an average profile but featured subtle photos of underage drinking. Justin demonstrated an extreme party-oriented profile with explicit photos of illegal drug use.

After looking at these profile pages, we asked employers if they would have hired each of the candidates for a possible job position. Only 3.8% of the employers stated they would not have hired our control, Kip. In contrast, the profiles with objectionable content yielded a rejection rate between 63% and 90%. The highest reasons for rejection included disrespectful comments, unprofessional demeanor, immaturity, and evidence of alcohol and illegal substance abuse. Additionally, employers stated they would not consider the candidates because of poor grammar usage and lack of any information about their educational background or work history.

We found statistically significant variables (the displayed information in the profile page) that influenced prospective employers positively in their hiring decisions. We found that two "strong point" variables influence hiring decisions with statistical significance (significant at 10% level of significance). They are: (1) Friends or family members or current/past colleagues who posted strong support on a candidate's profile page and (2) Strong work/education related evidence in their profile page.

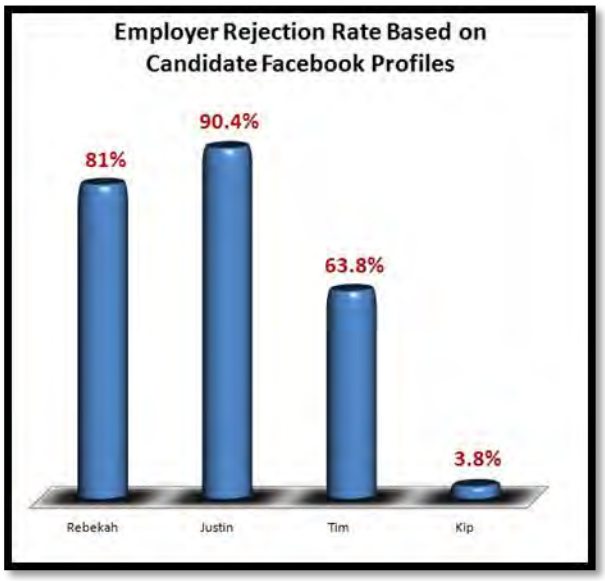

Figure 1

Discussion from a Student Perspective

From a student's perspective, privacy is a large concern; however, there is a difficult decision to make. If the profile is open to the public, there exists the risk that employers may discredit them based on information linked to their name. If they make their profile private, in accordance with our study, employers will think they have something to hide and may reject them based on that alone. Often students will make their profile open to public searches because they feel they have no information that will hurt them. Unfortunately, this is not always true. Some students keep their privacy settings open because they use Facebook simply to keep in touch with friends. They share information and stories, a few jokes here and there, but they wisely avoid posting pictures that will embarrass them and try their best to keep their online image positive. Our results

show that these students are even more at risk of rejection in the hiring process than the ones who have all the embarrassing pictures and keep their privacy settings locked.

College students are well versed in online jokes and humor and most employers are not familiar with traditional student aged humor. While students may think they are having innocent fun posting movie quotes or their favorite lines from the popular "Texts from Last Night" blog, they endanger their online image because employers who look at their profile do not understand the context behind these quotes and jokes and take them at face value. One example of this comes directly from a profile we used in our study. The student in the profile had a link to a news article from CNN about sports fans setting a taxicab on fire after their team won the championship game. The student posted a link to the article on his profile, commented in opposition of the action, showing his negative feelings towards the act. An employer who saw this on his profile commented that they would not hire him because he clearly admitted to a criminal act, setting a taxicab on fire. This is a perfect example of someone who has done absolutely nothing wrong, he simply wanted to share a news article with some friends, and some employers would have rejected him because they misinterpreted the post. He was implicated in a criminal act for posting a news story, from CNN. It only gets worse from there.

When students post inside jokes and humor from other less popular websites, they are even more at risk for misinterpretation. This is a very important point because the majority of these students would not think twice about posting anything like this because, to them, it is just good fun. To an employer who may misinterpret the page, however, it could be the difference between hiring the candidate and not hiring the candidate.

For students this can be a scary concept. They try their best to protect their online image without making themselves seem suspicious, but they also don't want to give up posting jokes and articles with their friends because that is the whole idea behind the social network. With the potential risk of posts being misinterpreted by a potential employer, students are forced to make a choice – either give up socializing on the Internet or make everything private. Obviously, they will not give up the former, so privacy concerns will only grow in the future. Which poses a new question – what is your best chance? Make your profile private and risk the interpretation of suspicion from employers? Or leave the profile public and risk the misinterpretation of your innocent content? This dilemma brings us to our next topic.

Discussion from a Career Center Perspective

With the current competition job candidates now face, it is vital that an individual portray his or her professional identity in the most respectable light possible. When employers receive a multitude of résumés for every open position, a job candidate does not want to give an employer a reason to take him/her out of contention.

Employers want to hire the best candidate for the position and many use online resources to gather information. Professional background checks on potential employees were conducted by 76% of the respondents in our study; 62% indicated they use social networking sites on the Internet to research potential candidates they consider for employment. Employers use the Internet to screen potential employees because it is cost effective and easily accessible. In essence, employers are making judgments regarding potential employees based on online information before they even meet them face to face.

As mentioned previously, posting certain personal information online can be detrimental to career aspirations. Information such as religion, race, nationality, age, and marital/family status are prohibited topics during the interviewing process. Job candidates put themselves at risk if they reveal such information online. Only 17% of the employers that responded to our survey indicated that their organizations had companywide policies in place that regard use of the Internet for background checks. An article on the National Association of Colleges and Employers website warns that employers could be charged with discrimination if the employer gained information about the candidate on a social networking site without the consent of the candidate (Downey, 2009).

The majority of employers surveyed screen candidates on the Internet after reading their application and résumé. The most common reasons employers decided against hiring candidates after viewing their online information are listed in figure 2. Employers were able to select as many reasons as applied.

Inappropriate comments and text	70%
Inappropriate photos and videos	81%
Criticizing employers, colleagues or clients	61%
Membership in certain groups	36%
Truthfulness behind posts	59%
Poor communication skills	42%

Figure 2

Additionally, 82% of employers indicated that the online list of the job candidate's friends would not influence their hiring decision. Employers did indicate that a candidate's friends may influence their hiring decision if the candidate knows someone who works or is connected to the company, the candidate's profile is not compatible with many of their friend's information, or the candidate's friends have painted a very different picture of the candidate on their profiles. Twenty-nine percent of employers have looked at the Internet profiles of a candidate's friends, relatives and colleagues. Of those employers, 61% looked at a candidate's relatives, 70% looked at colleagues and 96% looked at friends before they made a final hiring decision. However, the number of friends a candidate has does not influence the employers hiring decision.

Since employers use the Internet to make decisions on potential hires, it is crucial that job candidates portray themselves as professional, mature, and honest. Candidates should use social network sites to create their own personal brand and promote themselves to potential employers. Networking is the most effective job search method and networking online has become a necessity for job candidates, especially in the current economic climate.

Some proactive uses of social networking sites during a job search would be to contact potential employers through their page. This is an easy way to set up an informational interview to find out more about the company and expand the candidate's

network. If the company is using the site as a recruitment tool, the candidate may be able to apply for an open position through the company's social network page. It is important for the candidate to remain professional at all times during this process.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Job candidates should use all privacy settings offered on social networking sites to protect themselves from any misuse of personal information by potential employers. Candidates should always refrain from posting disparaging remarks about a current or past employer. This also pertains to an actual interview situation. It is also advisable to utilize professional networking sites such as Linkedin to conduct a job search and build the candidate's network.

While we very much recommend the use of Internet resources such as Facebook as a way to network, we encourage the maintenance of a high level of professionalism. Our survey results provide insights enabling us to formulate the best practices introduced in this paper. These results are important when considering how to leverage social media to develop a professional online reputation. Today's mainstream use of the Internet requires all job candidates to go beyond the suit and résumé.

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