Social network screening: Pitfalls, possibilities, and parallels in employment selection

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Overview

• Current state of SNW screening practices
• Risks with SNW screening:
  – Privacy, discrimination, negligent hiring, validity, reliability, generalizability, impression management, applicant reactions, & utility
• What social network screening can learn from established selection methods
• Potential screening approaches
• Best practices
• 45% of employers use social networking sites to research candidates

• 35% of employers rejected job applicants based on what was uncovered
  – Inappropriate photos/information
  – Content about drinking / drug use
  – Badmouthed previous employers
  – Poor communication skills
  – Discriminatory comments
  – Misrepresentation of qualifications
  – Shared confidential info about an employer
Reppler.com 2009 study - 300 individuals involved in hiring

- 91% use social networks to screen applicants
- 69% have rejected candidates
- 68% have hired a candidate
  - Positive impression of personality / fit
  - Profile supported professional qualifications
  - Profile showed candidate was creative
  - Showed solid communication skills
  - Showed candidate was well-rounded
2010 Microsoft Study - 2500 HR managers / customers

- Of U.S. (U.K. & Germany) HR professionals
  - 78% (in U.S.) reported reviewing online information when screening candidates
    - 47% in U.K., 23% in France, and 59% in Germany
    - 63% for social networking websites in the U.S.
  - 70% (in U.S.) had rejected candidates based on online information
  - 85% indicate positive online reputation influences hiring decisions
  - Company policies requiring online searches
    - 75% - U.S.
    - 48% - U.K.
    - 21% - Germany
SHRM 2011
Survey of 500 HR Professionals

• 44% of for-profit organizations use SNWs
• The most frequently used SNWs are:
  – 85% - LinkedIn
  – 78% - Facebook
  – 13% - MySpace
  – 11% - Twitter
• Those who have never or no longer use social networking websites do so because of:
  – 66% - Legal risk of discrimination
  – 48% - Lack of confidence in verification
  – 45% - Not relevant to work potential/performance
• Prevalence of SNW screening policies:
  – From 28% in 2008 to 44% in 2011
Issues related to social network website HR screening

- Privacy
- Discrimination
- Negligent hiring
- Validity
- Reliability
- Generalizability
- Impression management
- Applicant reactions
- Utility
Privacy

• Privacy issues and laws vary from country to country and (within the U.S.) from state to state
  – Enacted or proposed legislation in several U. S. States, Germany, etc.
  – Fair Credit Reporting Act
  – Stored Communication Act

• Accessing private information
  – Compelling applicants to provide passwords
  – “Over the shoulder” screening
  – “Friending” applicants
  – Access to “friends” private information

• FB user agreement
Adverse Treatment

- Adverse Treatment – Employment related discrimination based on race, gender, age, nation or origin, disability status, religion, sexual orientation, etc.
- Just about any questionable information that should be avoided in a job interview is likely available on social networking websites.
- It is likely that hiring managers (at least subconsciously) may allow this information to affect hiring decisions (adverse treatment).
  – Kluemper & Rosen (2009)
Adverse Impact

• Adverse Impact – A facially neutral HR practice/policy that disproportionately affects a legally protected group, irrespective of the intent of the practice.

• Adverse impact may occur for various reasons:
  – If strong social networking profiles can give an advantage over individuals with no profile to access, does this disadvantage older workers (who are less likely to have profiles) or minority groups (who may disproportionately have more limited access to computers due to socioeconomic differences)?

• Emerging studies are beginning to evaluate adverse treatment / impact, highlighting potential legal risk.
  – Roth et al. (2012)
Negligent Hiring

• Failure to conduct reasonable background checks incurs legal liability for employers.

• If an employer identifies, or should have identified, negative SNW information about a job applicant but still hires the individual, the employer could be sued for negligent hiring if the employee later harms a coworker or customer (Davison et al., 2012).

• This is likely more applicable for certain industries (Slovensky & Ross, 2012) such as those involving public safety (Levashina & Campion, 2009).
Validity

• Although several forms of validity are relevant to SNW screening, the most critical is criterion-related (predictive) validity
  – Statistical correlation between SNW test score and job performance
  – Can SNW screening (at least somewhat) accurately distinguish good from bad performers?
  – Establishes job relatedness criteria in cases of adverse impact

• Alarmingly little evidence exists for social network screening
Reliability

• Reliability (consistency) – The extent to which a measurement is free from random error
  – Reliability is necessary (but not sufficient) condition for validity

• Information across social networking websites is relatively inconsistent

• Can job relevant information can be reliably assessed via social networking profiles?
Potential for reliability and validity of SNW screening

• Kluemper & Rosen (2009)
  – 378 evaluator ratings (63 raters x 6 subject profiles)
• Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholder (2012)
  – Study 1: 274 Facebook user self and evaluator personality ratings
  – Study 2: 244 Facebook user evaluator personality ratings, self-ratings, and cognitive ability test scores

• Results
  – Each of the Facebook-rated Big Five traits was reliable
  – Each of the Facebook evaluated traits correlated with self-rated traits
  – Agreeableness and emotional stability predicted job performance (N = 56) above and beyond self-rated traits
  – Four of the Facebook-rated traits predicted academic performance (Conscientiousness, Emotional stability, Agreeableness, and Openness) above and beyond personality and cognitive ability
Generalizability

• A generalizable selection method applies not only to the conditions in which the method was originally developed, but applies across jobs, organizations, over time, for different types of applicants, etc.

• Different social networking websites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.) each differ in significant ways
  – For example, some social networking websites may provide more or different information than others (i.e., Facebook vs. Twitter)
  – Another example, applicant reactions may vary based on the social networking websites (i.e., Facebook vs. LinkedIn)

• Social network screening has not yet established generalizability evidence
Impression Management

• To what extent can, do, or will applicants “fake” social networking profiles?
  – Some SNW information can be manipulated while other information is difficult to fake
    • (Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholder, 2012)
• SNW users find impression management difficult when attempting to manage multiple audiences
  – LeBrecque et al. (2011).
• 30-35% of consumers (potential applicants) don’t take any steps to manage their online reputation.
  – Microsoft Survey (2010)
• This is likely to yield inconsistency (unreliability)
Applicant Reactions

• Many potential employees are (rightly) very concerned about their privacy rights
  – An applicant unwilling to give access does not necessarily have something to hide
  – May lead applicants to withdraw from consideration
• Emerging research
  – Siebert, Downes, & Chrostopher (2012)
  – Black, Johnson, Edward, & Stone (2012)
  – Sanchez, Roberts, Freeman, & Clayton (2012)
  – Initial research shows limited negative reactions to public access information but significant negative reactions private access
• Even if SNW screening is shown to be legal and valid negative applicant reactions may harm the utility of social network screening
Utility

• The usefulness of a selection method should weigh the benefits against the risks
  – E.g., validity and avoidance of negligent hiring
  – E.g., cost, privacy, discrimination, and applicant reactions
• Selection methods should cost significantly less than the benefits they provide
• The costs of a well-designed, legal, and valid social network screening approach are unknown, but are likely greater than casual perusal of profiles
Does all of this indicate that social network screening lacks the potential to be a valuable method of employment selection?

- No! It means that we have a lot to learn
- Until evidence mounts (one way or the other) there is substantial legal risk for employers in these uncharted waters

Historically, just about every method that is widely used today had opponents, legal issues, and methods that gained in rigor and value through refinement

- Established employment selection methods have each been assessed in hundreds if not thousands of studies
- Assessment of social network screening is just beginning
Can personal information be job relevant?

- Though applicants may not perceive certain SNW information to be job-relevant, many established selection methods tap exclusively into personal information.
  - Criminal records checks
  - Credit checks
  - Sex offender registry checks
- Other established methods tap into a mix of work and non-work information
  - Background checks
  - Biodata
  - Personal references
  - Personality tests
  - Interviews (i.e., school work, non-work leadership roles)
- A critical question is whether and for what jobs can criterion-related validity be established.
Cognitive ability tests

• Strong criterion-related validity (.30 to .50+)
  – Schmidt & Hunter (1998)
• Generalizability
  – Cognitive ability tests are valid across jobs
• Legal issues
  – Demonstrates adverse impact for particular minority groups
  – Methods have been developed to minimize adverse impact
  – Job relatedness / business necessity (validity)
• 2 initial key starting points for social network screening
  – Establish validity
  – Minimize adverse impact
Interviews

- Virtually all studies over the past 100 years have concluded that adding structure to the job interview improves reliability and validity while minimizing legal risk
  - Campion, Palmer, & Campion (1997)
- Unstructured interviews have limited validity
- It is likewise likely that unstructured SNW assessment is equally limited and legally hazardous
- How do we increase the structure of social network screening?
  - Job analysis
  - Consistency of information sought
  - Structured rating scales
  - Multiple evaluators
  - Same evaluators
  - Train evaluators
Self-reported personality

• Personality – That which permits a prediction of what a person will do in a given situation (Cattell, 1965)
• Personality traits have been shown across a wide range of studies to predict job performance (up to .30), but depends on the trait, the job, etc.
• Acquaintance ratings of Big Five personality traits are a stronger predictor of job performance than self-reported traits
  – Oh, Wang, & Mount (2011)
• Theoretical approach to SNW screening
  – Rating accuracy is enhanced when an array of observable cues is available to the observer (Funder, 1995)
  – Physical traces of activities conducted in the environment. An individual high on a particular trait will engage in more activities that are prototypical of that trait. Behaviors individuals engage in to reinforce their personal preferences or to display their identities to others (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002)
Screening approaches

- **Personality assessment**
  - Other-rated personality has been shown to predict job performance and can be evaluated via SNWs (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009; Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholder, 2012)

- **Biodata**
  - Past behaviors, opinions, values, beliefs, and attitudes predict future behavior
  - Suggested as an option for SNW screening (Davison et al., 2012; Slovensky & Ross, 2012)

- **KSAO’s: Knowledge, skills, abilities, and other job relevant characteristics**
  - Examples: fluency in a particular language, technical proficiencies, creative outlets, teamwork skills (Smith & Kidder, 2010), network ability, creativity (Davison et al., 2012), communication, interpersonal, leadership, persuasion, and negotiation skills (Roth et al., 2012).

- **Person-organization fit**
  - It is widely acknowledged that hiring managers may try to measure person-organization fit via SNW screening (Davison et al., 2012; Slovensky & Ross, 2012; Roth et al., 2012a).

- **Disqualifying information**
  - This approach taps into what is already known about background checks, i.e., credit checks, criminal history checks, employment checks, etc.
  - May screen for deviant behaviors such as drug use or discriminatory comments
Best Practices

Develop a social screening policy after evaluating pros/cons
  – Policy may discourage use
  – Policy may screen some SNWs but not others (i.e., LinkedIn vs. Facebook)
  – If the organization conducts SNW screening, incorporate the following:

1. Require informed consent
2. Discourage covert tactics
3. Verify the accuracy of information gained
4. Base SNW screening on job analysis
5. Develop a standardized instrument
6. Use multiple screeners
7. Use the same screeners
8. Outsource / insource
9. Conduct at the end of the hiring process
10. Train raters
11. Conduct a validation study
Questions?

• Thank you!

• Book Chapter:

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