

Rethink using social media to learn about job candidates

by Christina Fong

An HR professional would never ask a job candidate to reveal his or her religion, political leanings or sexual preference, knowing it is illegal to probe for that information or take it into consideration when hiring. But if you are checking out job applicants by looking at their blogs and social media sites, you are likely to learn those personal details.

Once you know someone is a Muslim or Christian, or gay or straight, can you stop your own biases from influencing whether you offer that applicant a job?

The EEOC has cautioned of the risks associated with searching online for applicants' protected characteristics. Some states have even drafted bills limiting employers' ability to access candidates' online information.

In fact, only a minority of surveyed employers admit to actually researching candidates online. Still, some do.

Social media affects decisions

In an experiment I conducted with my Carnegie Mellon University colleague Alessandro Acquisti, we learned that in some cases, what employers learned from their social media searches did, indeed, influence some decisions not to hire.

The most significant finding: Muslim candidates in politically conservative areas—defined as states or counties where Mitt Romney was favored during the 2012 presidential election—got fewer callbacks from employers than non-Muslim job-seekers with equal credentials.

9 important conclusions

Some of our research findings might help you decide whether social media should be a factor in your hiring:

1. Social media searches can produce useful, relevant information about a person's suitability for a job. For example, you could learn more about a candidate's skills, interests, strengths and attitudes about work.
2. If a hiring manager has a bias against a certain kind of person—whether it is religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation—learning that an applicant has unwanted characteristics will very likely come into play in the hiring decision.
3. Economists believe that considering a protected characteristic when hiring can affect the bottom line. If you discriminate against someone based on your own tastes, you could miss a strong candidate who might have helped your company.
4. Learning that a candidate has a protected characteristic could, in some cases, put pressure on you to hire that person even though he or she would not otherwise be your first choice. Once you know someone is gay, for instance, you might fear that not hiring the applicant would appear to be discriminatory.

5. Information that is not job-relevant may interfere with a choice based solely on the applicant's qualifications and perceived benefit to the company. Thus, it may be better not to get that information in the first place.
6. If you search social media for information about a job candidate, you may find nothing at all. One manager might consider that a negative; perhaps the applicant is not tech-savvy. Another might respect the job-seeker's discretion and privacy awareness. Whichever way the manager leans, that search has affected the hiring decision.
7. Creating a policy that forbids or allows social media research during the hiring process will let hiring managers know whether they are even allowed to surf the Internet for information about job applicants. Before you write the policy, weigh the benefits of using social media against the drawbacks.
8. It is a good idea to run the policy by your organization's legal team before allowing or forbidding managers to conduct social media searches on candidates.
9. If the decision whether to allow social media searches seems complicated for your firm, consider skipping them. If you want to learn more about your job applicants, do it the traditional way: by asking them and calling their references.

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