Social Networking Sites: Helping or Hindering the Chances of Getting a Job

Ashley Wright

Social Foundations of Mass Media Research Paper

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In today’s day and age, over half a billion Internet users have accounts on Social Networking sites (SNSs) (Sprague, 2011). Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are some of the most visited webpages for Human Resource personnel when looking for possible employees. Many individuals view SNSs as a positive way to get connected with friends and family, but also to network with individuals in their career circle. However, there are individuals who share things on their accounts that are deemed as inappropriate, and unfortunately, that information could hinder their chances of finding a job. So, when do SNSs stop helping individuals find jobs and start discouraging employers from hiring?

Some of the major ways SNSs can help users find a job are through networking, displaying experience, and being easily accessible to future employers in an organized fashion. However, being that profiles can be so readily attained, employers can also see information that an individual doesn’t necessarily want them to see. This is the biggest drawback to having an account on any SNS. This poses the question: should employers be allowed to ask potential employees to open their Facebook, Twitter, and other personal social networking accounts in the process of application, or does that go against a person’s constitutional rights and thwart the first amendment?

Since 2008, there has been a 45% increase in the use of searching applicants SNSs by Human Resource personnel and managers alike (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p. 219). According to Brown and Vaughn (2011), “Given the expanding percentage of employers using SNSs to gather data… it is reasonable to expect this practice to affect various human resource decisions, including hiring, training, promotion, and termination” (p. 219).

In 2011, Facebook introduced an updated profile theme called ‘timeline’. Timeline displays the users information chronologically. Socially, timeline is deemed acceptable; however, it can become a job applicant’s worst nightmare when searching for employment because employers can access past information much easier (Osman, Wardle, Caesar, 2012, p. e550). Since many employers are looking at applicants and current employees SNSs, individuals have to be aware of “the potential negative outcomes related to misuse” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p. 219).

For instance, according to Roberts and Roach (2009), a female applying for a hospital psychiatrist position was denied a job because the employer looked up the applicant on a SNS and found compromising pictures (p. 112). Similarly, upon application to Maryland’s Department of Corrections (DOC), individuals are asked to log onto their personal accounts on SNSs and let an interviewer see pictures, wall posts, and friends. In 2012, out of the 2,689 applicants at DOC, seven were not hired due to gang-related information that was found on their page during the interview (“Employers, Colleges,” 2012, p. 14). Likewise, there was an instance in 2007 when a law student’s application for a law firm was withdrawn because the firm saw via SNSs that the student was associated with a website that made disparaging remarks against female law students (Clark & Roberts, 2010, p. 509).

Applicants must be aware that at any time during the interviewing process, or once they receive the job, employers and HR managers can find inappropriate or compromising information off of SNSs that can result in not getting the job, or being terminated. Also, as in the case with the law student, an employer can find that an applicant is in association with someone or something negative and not ask them to return.

HR personnel also don’t necessarily need an applicant’s permission to view their social networking accounts. Many employers gain access by creating an account using their college or alumni e-mail address and becoming familiar with their alma mater’s network, therefore gaining access to current undergraduate students (Brandenburg, 2008). Brandenburg (2008) also states that some employers hire current students at any given university to look up applicant’s, and sometimes peer’s, social networking profiles.

Although applicants must be careful with the information they choose to share on the Internet, HR personnel also need to be careful with how they use that information in regards to rejection, termination, or disciplinary action. In regards to screening an applicant, Davison, Maraist, and Bing (2011) state, “Many employers assume that it is acceptable as long as specific laws (e.g., civil rights laws) are not violated” (p. 156).

Some hiring managers look at information or images in improper context, which results in “a hasty rejection decision” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p. 221). During a conference panel discussion, individuals were shown a picture of a women sleeping on a bathroom floor. Out of context, many of the panelists believed she consumed too much alcohol and passed out. If an employer were to dismiss her application due to that image, the employer could have legal action taken against them (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p.221). Peebles (2012) states, “…employers that do conduct pre employment Internet screening… expose themselves to additional liability if they discover and utilize certain online information” (p. 1400).

As it is stated in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), “A qualified person with a disability is one whom can perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodations” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p.221). Alcoholism is covered under both ADA and the ADA Amendment Act of 2008 (ADAAA). If the female in question was actually passed out on the bathroom floor due to drinking too much alcohol, and she suffered from alcohol dependency, an employer isn’t allowed to reject her application due to this discovery. The employer is only allowed to reject or terminate said female if and only if the “use of alcohol adversely affects job performance or conduct” (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p. 221). Therefore, employers have to be extremely careful when using information they find on SNSs against an applicant or employee when it comes to rejection or termination.

Although there are many SNSs that can hurt ones career, there are also a handful of professional SNSs that can help individuals find jobs. As Sullivan states in her article regarding LinkedIn (2011), “Lately I’ve been a walking commercial for LinkedIn—because if it weren’t for the professional social networking site, I might never have landed my current magazine job” (p. 40). Sullivan moved from Rhode Island to New York and wasn’t able to find a job through regular applications. She decided to create a professional profile on LinkedIn that showcased her educational background along with her work history and past “projects”. Through LinkedIn, she made connections with professionals who worked in journalism around New York. Sullivan sent an e-mail to one of her connections with her resume attached, and she got an immediate response requesting an interview for a position at the magazine. Sullivan (2011) states, “My boss said she was glad I’d contacted her because it saved her time trying to find candidates for the position” (p. 40).

LinkedIn is one of the many professional SNSs that HR personnel and employers use. It is used to research an applicant’s educational background, work history, and skills rather than to dig up dirt on an applicant. To land an interview and possible job through LinkedIn, Sullivan (2011) suggests adding a professional photo, updating education and work history, joining groups in a specific career field or area, and meeting professionals that an individual connects with (p. 40).

Other SNSs, like Facebook and Twitter, can be used in a similar and professional way as well. When it comes to keeping a social networking profile ‘clean,’ Roberts and Roach (2009) suggest the ‘grandma test,’ which is, “Avoid posting what one would not want one’s mother or grandmother to read or pictures one would not share with the world” (p. 113). Instead of posting compromising text or photos, focus on posting reputation enhancing content such as, “pictures of an awards banquet… a current resume… or positive social or family outings” (Roberts & Roach, 2009, p. 114).

Overall, due to the increase in viewing SNSs by HR personnel during the application process, it is important to market oneself in a favorable way online. Once something is posted on the Internet, it will never go away; therefore, users must be careful with the things they post on SNSs because future or current employers have the ability to find that content and use it against an applicant or employee. Likewise, it is important for HR personnel and managers to understand what they can and cannot do with the information they find about an applicant or employee on their social networking accounts.

SNSs can be an excellent tool for both individuals looking for jobs and for HR managers when trying to weed out applicants. In order to get ahead in a career, one must remember to watch what they say and post on the Internet. The things one shares via SNSs can either help one get ahead in life, or keep an individual stagnant. The decision is theirs.

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