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The use of social media to make personnel decisions in education

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Abstract

Given the ubiquitous nature of social media, it is important for prospective and current teachers to be aware of the impact of a personal digital footprint upon their career. Teachers are held to a higher standard due to the public nature of their employment. Teachers represent the school district not only during the school day, but beyond the work day. The study surveyed school principals or hiring managers in Illinois, USA about the use of social media to screen or censure teachers. Approximately 2300 principals were contacted; however, only 80 responded to the survey. Of the responses, approximately 50 percent of the schools indicated a review of social media to make employment decisions. Facebook and Twitter are the two most popular social media platforms and the two that most potential employers search. Both platforms can offer a negative view of a potential candidate, as well as be used in grounds for discipline and/or termination of a teacher for inappropriate behaviors (e.g. unprofessional posts and inappropriate pictures). Further research is needed to determine the depth and breadth of social media screenings in regards to school personnel.

Introduction

Social media has been defined in multiple ways; however, most definitions include three key elements: 1) individuals construct a public, or semi-public, profile on a social media platform; 2) invite others to be a friend, follower, or connection; and 3) use the social media platform to communicate (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Chauhan, Buckley, & Harvey, 2013). Given the ubiquitous nature and worldwide use of social media, it is important for prospective and current teachers to be aware of the impact of a personal digital footprint upon their career. This study is an initial attempt to understand the extent social media is reviewed by school administrators as they make personnel decisions and serves as a pilot study for future research in the area. For business education teachers, the information presented in this study is important because courses or instructional modules about the impact of a digital footprint are typically taught by the business/computer teachers within the school districts. As the professional educator teaching digital media literacy, business education teachers hold the responsibility of not only presenting themselves in a professional manner, but also teaching their students the importance of a professional online presence.

Background

Search the Internet for the term “Teacher fired over Facebook” and dozens of hits return. A teacher from Cohasset, Massachusetts was asked to resign for posting comments calling students

“germbags” and parents “arrogant” (CBS News, 2010). In New Hampshire, a 35-year veteran teacher was fired for violating the school policy prohibiting friending students on Facebook (CBS Local Media, 2014). Simpson (2010), in an article for *Tomorrow’s Teachers*, wrote about multiple examples of teachers and aspiring teachers who have been fired, disciplined, or not hired based upon their social media profiles. Simpson explained teacher free speech rights are limited. The First Amendment only protects teacher speech if it is a matter of public concern, and probationary teachers may face disciplinary action if their speech is perceived as disturbing to the workplace.

A review of the relevant literature yielded mixed results. Little is available from academic sources concerning how social media is used in an academic human resources context; however, popular literature provides multiple examples of anecdotal data about the use of social media in personnel decisions. From the academic literature, the primary focus addresses the use of social media as a tool in candidate selection for businesses in increasing numbers; however, students may not be fully aware that recruiters view data from social media sites. Instead, many students appear to be confident in their ability to secure their accounts via the privacy settings located within the social media site (Madden, et al., 2013), thus hiding or limiting outsiders from viewing their profiles. The literature raises more questions than answers, including how social media is used for recruitment, marketing, and selection in the hiring process. Additional questions raised include the lack of human resources policies regarding social media scrutiny in the hiring decision, the need to investigate for generational cohort differences, legal considerations in using social media, privacy concerns, and the ROI analysis of using social media for recruitment. Little information is available in the literature about how hiring managers make decisions based upon applicant’s social media site.

Use of social media in human resources

In 2015, over one billion people were logged into Facebook at the same time (Facebook, 2015). The universal nature of social media creates a minefield for both employees and employers. Although engaging privacy settings gives the illusion of privacy in social media, unless the account is set to be unsearchable, it is possible for any interested person, organization, or future employer to find “a user’s networks, mutual friends, and profile picture” (Chauhan, Buckley, & Harvey, 2013, p. 126). Because of its widespread use, Chauhan, Buckley, and Harvey (2013) predict more human resource departments add a Facebook search to screen applicants. CareerBuilder.com (2015) surveyed potential employers in their annual social media recruitment survey to discover how the companies use social media in the hiring process. The results show a rising trend in researching job candidates’ online profiles, up from 39 percent in 2013 to 52 percent in 2015. Additionally, 35 percent of the employers indicated that the absence of social media is not only a red flag, but that they would be less inclined to interview someone who did not have an online presence. Almost half of the hiring managers found something in the online profile that caused them to not hire a candidate. The impact of social media postings has the potential to impact across the spectrum of the education profession. Schools may be searching for social media postings of potential teachers or current teachers to make personnel decisions. The news media has reported multiple cases where Facebook postings have resulted in disciplinary action for teachers and prospective teachers.

Implications for job seekers

For a potential teacher, knowing what employers seek in an online profile search can be useful. From the CareerBuilder.com survey (2015), employers provided a list of things that prevent a person from being offered a position in a business setting.

- Provocative or inappropriate photographs—46 percent
- Information about candidate drinking or using drugs—40 percent
- Candidate bad-mouthed previous company or fellow employee—34 percent
- Poor communication skills—30 percent
- Discriminatory comments related to race, religion, gender, etc.—29 percent

Employers also indicated the things that would encourage them to hire a candidate.

- Background information supported job qualifications—42 percent
- Personality came across as a good fit with company culture—38 percent
- Site conveyed a professional image—38 percent
- Great communication skills—37 percent
- Creativity—36 percent (¶ 3).

It is interesting to note that the behaviors listed as negative from the potential employers are the areas where teens are increasing their social media postings; however, younger teens are becoming more aware of the impact of their internet reputation and are taking steps to manage it by utilizing the privacy settings within the accounts and limiting contacts within the site (Madden, et al., 2013).

Currently, “there are no federal or state laws that specifically prevent employers from viewing and/or using information gathered from an unrestricted SNW [Social Network Website] profile to make hiring decisions with regard to unrestricted profiles” (Chauhan, Buckley, & Harvey, 2013, p. 130). Additionally, teachers are held to a higher standard due to the public nature of their employment. Teachers represent the school district not only during the school day, but beyond the work day. Simpson (2010) wrote, “in the seminal *Pickering v. Board of Education* [Pickering v. Board of Education, 391 U.S. 563, 1968] case, the Supreme Court held that it’s not a First Amendment violation to dismiss probationary teachers for what they say or write, if their speech involves merely personal things (*i.e.* doesn’t address broader social/political issues of the day), or if the speech might disturb the workplace” (¶ 2). Understanding that teachers are held to a higher standard, all current and future teachers should be cautious in the use of social media.

Implications for employers

By utilizing more online search engines in the candidate selection process, the legal implications of using social media are being questioned. Employers face a challenge when using social media networks to research candidates because the available information may not be consistent among the applicants. Through the use of these sites, the potential for individual bias in hiring decisions is high. Social media networks can provide access to identifying information about applicants such as race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, and disabilities, all of which are protected classifications under multiple federal laws (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). In Illinois, if a person has privacy settings enabled to protect the private information, the person has a common law right to privacy (Hidy & McDonald, 2013).

Additionally, it is illegal for an employer to request user names and passwords from job applicants (Strumwasser, 2014); however, as stated in the case of *Pickering v. Board of Education*:

By choosing to teach in the public schools, plaintiff undertook the obligation to refrain from conduct which in the absence of such position he would have an undoubted right to engage in. While tenure provisions of the School Code protect teachers in their positions from political or arbitrary interference, they are not intended to preclude dismissal where the conduct is detrimental to the efficient operation and administration of the schools of the district. (*Pickering v. Board of Education*, 1968)

The case has been used as grounds for teacher censure and or dismissal related to postings on social media (Simpson, 2010).

Another concern is the reliability of the data from social networking sites. Davison, Maraist, and Bing (2011) question the reliability and validity of using data from social networking sites to measure job-relevant characteristics; specifically, they ask if it is possible to measure personality traits from social postings? They also question if the information has been posted to generate a perceived image for the person. Is the person posting to impress friends or family? "For example, individuals may 'fake good' if they think their parents or employers will see the webpage, or even 'fake bad' if they think friends will view the webpage" (p. 156).

Concerning schools, the concept of *negligent hiring* requires consideration. Organizations that are involved in areas of public safety (e.g. education) should conduct criminal background checks as part of the screening process in order to find potential illegal behavior. As part of a criminal background check, an Internet search of the candidate is typically conducted. If a social media site does not have privacy settings enacted, it is probably permissible for the background check to access the site; however, U.S. law is developing in this area. In order to minimize the chance of a lawsuit about privacy invasion, school districts may want to include language in the background check consent to include social networking sites (Slovensky & Ross, 2012).

Internationally, employers need to be aware of individual laws within the various jurisdictions. For example, in the US, the candidate must provide written permission for a background check; whereas, in the UK, the candidate has the right to review the background check report for accuracy before it is provided to the employer. In France, terms of use prohibit employers from using the site to gather information for professional use or for recruiting purposes. Other countries, such as Germany and Switzerland only allow professional sites (e.g. LinkedIn) to be used in employment decisions and prohibit the use of Facebook to gather information (Russell & Stutz, 2014).

If using social media as part of the hiring process, employers need to be cautious in hiring decisions to document the reasons for not hiring a candidate, and those reasons should be consistent with the job requirements. The reason for additional caution in this area is that through a review of social media, protected information that cannot be used in the hiring process within the US becomes visible to employers, e.g. photos which can reveal a protected classification (race, disability), marital status, children, and potentially religious preferences. Formal written policies and training in how to utilize social media is important for all employers.

Purpose of the Study

Given the prevalence of social media in everyday lives and the use of social media by many businesses (CareerBuilder, LLC, 2015), the researchers were interested in how social media is used in the educational system. Multiple anecdotal and media sources are available (CBS Local Media, 2014; CBS News, 2010; Simpson, 2010); however, research in the area of using social media networks as part of human resources decisions is relatively new and limited, and the use of social media for personnel decisions research is almost non-existent (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). Additionally, a lack of scholarly research into the issue of social media use for personnel decisions within the educational system was discovered. This study seeks to begin the discussion by answering the following question. How are primary, secondary, and upper secondary schools using social media in the hiring and evaluation process?

Research Design and Methodology

Participants and procedure

Given the desire to compare social media use across various types and sizes of schools, a database was developed of principals' names and e-mails from a publicly available information sources. This contact information was gathered from all public schools in the State of Illinois, United States. Within Illinois, there are 866 districts (Illinois State Board of Education, 2013). After compilation of data was complete, the database consisted of 3,700 individual principals; however, two large districts indicated that they would not participate due to internal review board policies; approximately 8% didn't have email contacts listed, leaving 2,895 principals and corresponding emails. The researchers have learned that most of the larger school districts in Illinois have internal review boards that blocked the survey request; however, no list of schools with internal review processes is currently available to those wishing to conduct research in the public schools. As a result, the researchers determined to continue the study as a pilot study, from which future research could be designed and conducted within this area.

The survey (see Appendix) consisted of 46 questions, although not all respondents answered all 46 questions due to the use of skip-logic. The initial three questions asked the administrators to select all social media brands their school uses in the hiring process from an extensive list. Next, respondents were asked to rank the social media platforms their schools use for hiring the most. After these initial questions, the survey then asked detailed questions about six different social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest). The first question for each platform asked individuals if their institution used the specific platform. If yes, the survey automatically presented five specific questions on that particular platform. If the respondent selected that their institution did not use the platform, it skipped those five questions. Given this skip logic, the number of questions asked varied from respondent to respondent. The range was 21-46 questions answered.

The survey link was then e-mailed to the principal at each school. Over the course of two weeks, the survey link was e-mailed three times as a reminder to complete the survey. In total, the survey link was sent to 2,895 principals; email kickbacks for errors or spam filters (approximately 20 percent) immediately reduced this number to 2,316. Usable data was received from 78 respondents giving an

overall response rate of 3.34 percent. Due to the low response rate, investigators attempted to reach the respondents via another mechanism. The Principal's Association for the given state agreed to include the information regarding the survey, including the link in its weekly email to all members. This garnered an additional two respondents, giving a usable sample of 80 respondents with a response rate of 3.5 percent; however, 80 unique school districts responded to the survey for a 9.2 percent response rate of Illinois school districts.

Overall the sample consisted of 32 percent Elementary, 20 percent Middle School/Junior High, and 38 percent High School buildings. The majority (52 percent) of respondents had 26-50 teachers employed in the respective school. Sixteen percent had 1-25 teachers, while 14 percent had 41-75 teachers employed in the respective school. The remaining 17 percent had more than 100 teachers employed in their school.

Findings

Use of social media in hiring and evaluation

Principals for each school were asked to select which social media platforms the district and/or building has used in the hiring and evaluation process for its teachers. Results indicate 50 percent (n=40) of respondents use some type of social media for the hiring and evaluation process, while 50 percent reported never using social media for this purpose. In terms of specific platforms, 36 percent indicated they have used Facebook to screen, hire or evaluate candidates/teachers. Twitter was the second most used with 15 percent. While no one reported using Instagram or Pinterest for the hiring and evaluation process, LinkedIn (11 percent) and YouTube (6 percent) have been used. The following table presents an overview of key findings with details discussed thereafter.

Table 1
Summary of Results

	Facebook	Twitter	LinkedIn	YouTube
# of buildings using this social media platform in hiring and evaluation process	29 36%	12 15%	9 11%	5 6%
Recruiting	10 12%	0 0%	30 38%	0 0%
Screening	80 100%	80 100%	70 88%	80 100%
Selection	10 12%	15 18%	11 13%	20 25%
“Occasionally” this platform has had negative impact on hiring	61 76%	44 55%	35 44%	0 0%
“Frequently” this platform has had negative impact on hiring	3 4%	7 9%	0 0%	0 0%
Platform has been used for basis of disciplinary action and/or termination	23 29%	7 9%	0 0%	0 0%

Facebook

For those buildings using Facebook in their personnel decisions, all of them (100 percent) reported using it for screening purposes. A small number of those (12 percent) also use it for recruiting and selecting. When asked about the information gathered from Facebook on potential candidates, the majority agree that it: 1) presents a positive picture of the candidate (92 percent); 2) helps evaluate the personality of the candidate (88 percent); 3) helps evaluate the fit of the candidate with the school culture (92 percent); 4) helps evaluate the ethical standards of the candidate (96 percent); and 5) helps evaluate the professionalism of the candidate (100 percent). Despite these generally positive reports, 76 percent of respondents indicated that the information gathered has occasionally had a negative impact on the hiring decision.

When reviewing some of the qualitative feedback in regards to Facebook and the hiring process, professionalism (or lack of) in an applicant’s Facebook account was a key trigger in the hiring process. Examples of these comments include: *inappropriate pictures/comments in reference to school (6); comments on FB were inappropriate or unprofessional (14); images don’t portray a professional appearance (9); and inappropriate activities (5), photos or language used (6)*. In addition to Facebook impacting the screening process, 29 percent of respondents indicated that Facebook has also been used as the basis for disciplinary action or termination. Seven qualitative comments revealed that disciplinary action and dismissal has occurred for unprofessional behavior on Facebook.

Twitter

For those buildings using Twitter in their personnel decisions, all of them (100 percent) reported using it for screening purposes. Eighteen percent also reported using it for selection, while no one reported using Twitter as a recruitment tool. When asked about the information gathered from Twitter on potential candidates, the majority agree that it: 1) presents a positive picture of the candidate (91 percent); 2) helps evaluate the personality of the candidate (100 percent); 3) helps evaluate the fit of the candidate with the school culture (100 percent); 4) helps evaluate the ethical standards of the candidate (100 percent); and 5) helps evaluate the professionalism of the candidate (100 percent). Over half (63 percent) the schools who reported using Twitter reported that Twitter has had a negative impact on the hiring decision. Similar to Facebook, inappropriate language and negative tweets were reported in the qualitative comments as reasons for removing a candidate from consideration. Qualitative response examples include: *inappropriate language used (3) and unprofessional actions conducted (2)*. No qualitative response indicated that disciplinary action had been taken as a result of Twitter usage.

LinkedIn & YouTube

Similar to Facebook and Twitter, LinkedIn (88 percent) and YouTube (100 percent) are used primarily for screening purposes, with a small number using LinkedIn for recruiting (38 percent) and a small number (25 percent) using YouTube for selection. Responses for LinkedIn and YouTube also echo Facebook and Twitter in that it generally presents the candidate in a positive light. YouTube was reported as never having a negative impact on the hiring process, while a small number (44 percent) reported LinkedIn having an occasional negative impact. Qualitative responses about LinkedIn and YouTube were limited. The two comments made concerning LinkedIn referenced frequent job changes or lack of job experiences posted on the profile. No comments were made about the use of YouTube.

Qualitative comments

In addition to responding to specific questions on various social media platforms, principals were also asked to provide additional feedback relating to the building's use of social media and the hiring process. These comments supported what the data revealed – schools seem to be either for or against using social media in the hiring process.

A sample of the comments in support of using social media in the process included:

- Social media can instantly provide important information about a candidate that a resume cannot (3)
- We use Facebook, YouTube, and any social media available to us to prescreen potential candidates (6)

On the other extreme, some schools prefer to avoid social media, sample comments included:

- We do not design a systematic means of screening candidates through social media nor do we have a defined policy on the use of social media to evaluate candidates (3)
- We do not currently use social media in the hiring process at the building level (4)
- We are very cautious to use much social media (3)

Discussion

Although the low response rate does not allow for generalization beyond the sample, it is interesting to note that the number of school districts reporting the use of social media in the application process of 50 percent, mirrors what was found by CareerBuilder (2015) in that 52 percent of businesses are using social media. The reasons for hiring or not hiring a candidate was also consistent between the reporting school districts and the CareerBuilder survey. With approximately 50 percent of the school districts using social media in the initial screen process, pre-service and current teachers need to be aware of the dangers of a negative digital footprint. Facebook and Twitter are the two most popular social media platforms and the two that most potential employers search. Both platforms can offer a negative view of a potential candidate, as well as be used in grounds for discipline and/or termination of a teacher for inappropriate behaviors (*e.g.* unprofessional posts and inappropriate pictures). Based upon the limited response, the information found in this study is being offered as a first step that future research can use as a pilot study upon which to build additional studies.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study is the small number of principals responding to the survey which could lead to a response bias that impacts the ability to generalize the data in any way. An additional response bias could be present in that it is conceivable people who do not use social media may be less likely to participate in a survey about the topic, leading to the possibility of overestimating the phenomenon describe. The researchers made multiple attempts to obtain the information, including multiple reminders and the use of the professional association for principals. Additionally, the researchers discovered that multiple school districts had an internal review process prohibiting research studies from outside the school district. The researchers did not have access to a list of school districts with a private review process. An additional study to determine which of the 866 school districts within the State of Illinois utilize an internal review procedure would be helpful to all researchers wishing to conduct studies within the public schools.

Based upon the findings in this study, further research is needed to determine the depth and breadth of social media screenings in regard to school personnel. Examples of future studies include:

- A qualitative study of school leaders to determine social media policies of the school district
- A review of case law pertaining to the use of social media in school personnel decision-making
- Continued research into how each specific social media platform is used in personnel decision-making procedures
- A study on the perceptions of business teacher candidates on the use of social media in the personnel decision-making process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media is pervasive in today's society. Data seems to indicate that the digital footprint of teacher candidates is evaluated for personnel purposes, just as social media is part of business personnel decisions. Learning if or how social media profiles are included in the hiring process should inform teacher candidates how best to prepare for a career in public schools. Teacher education programs should not only teach about managing online reputations; they should also prepare teacher candidates to create lessons on building a positive digital footprint for their future students. As this study indicates, school districts are using social media sites as part of the hiring process, and the districts are finding negative information about candidates, primarily on Facebook and Twitter profiles. Since teachers are held to a higher standard and probationary teachers can be dismissed without regard to Freedom of Speech rights, it is important for teachers and teacher candidates to be aware of the impact of a digital footprint on their career. For business teachers, a unit about the use of social media in hiring decisions would be helpful as these teachers prepare their students to be future employees.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

Editor’s Note: The survey asked the same questions for each of the social media platforms. Only the questions for the first platform were included in the appendix.

Q1. The following is a list of social media brands. Please read the entire list and select ALL social media brands that the district and/or building use in the hiring and evaluation process for its teacher. (Select all that apply.)

- Facebook
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- Pinterest
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Other - Please specify below _____

Q2. Please rank the following social media platforms according to the ones your building uses the most. Drag social media platforms that your building uses to Group 1 and then RANK in order of most used. A ranking of 1 means your building uses that social media platform the MOST. If you do NOT use a specified platform, then do to Group 1.

Please rank the items you have placed in this box. Thank you.	
	_____ Facebook
	_____ Instagram
	_____ LinkedIn
	_____ Pinterest
	_____ Twitter
	_____ YouTube

Q3. Please answer the following questions in regards to how YOUR BUILDING uses the specific social media site to screen, hire, and evaluate teachers in your building.

Does your building use Facebook to screen, hire, and evaluate teachers in your building?

- Yes
- No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to Q9.

Q4. How does your building use Facebook through the hiring process? (Select all that apply)

- Recruiting
- Screening
- Selection
- Other - Please specify below _____

Q5. Please answer the following questions according to the information the building gathers from on potential candidates. In general, the information gathered:

	Strongly Agree	Generally Agree	Moderately Agree	Moderately Disagree	Generally Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Enough Information to Evaluate
presents a positive picture of the candidate.	<input type="radio"/>						
helps evaluate the personality of the candidate.	<input type="radio"/>						
helps evaluate the fit of the candidate with the school culture.	<input type="radio"/>						
helps evaluate the ethical standards of the candidate.	<input type="radio"/>						
helps evaluate the professionalism of the candidate.	<input type="radio"/>						

Q6. How often has the information gathered from Facebook on a candidate negatively impacted a hiring decision?

- Not At All
- Occasionally
- Frequently

If Not At All Is Selected, Then Skip To Q8.

Q7. Please provide examples of when Facebook has negatively impacted a hiring decision.

Q8. Has Facebook ever been the basis for disciplinary action and/or termination?

- No
- Yes - please elaborate below _____

Q39. Do you restrict how your teachers use social media?

- Yes. Please briefly explain how this is done. _____
- No

Q40. Please answer the following questions in regards to your building (Select All that Apply)

- Elementary
- Middle School / Junior High
- High School

Q41. How many teachers are employed in your building?

- 1-25
- 26-50
- 51-75
- 76-100
- 101-125
- 126-150
- 150+

Q42. Please share any additional comments relating to your building's use of social media and teachers.