Digital Footprints in Public Service: The Pros and Cons of Social Media Screening in Recruitment

Juliana Bolivar

Troy University

PA-6624: Public Human Resource Mgt

Dr. Dayna M. McDaniel

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According to a 2020 Harris Poll, 71% of U.S. hiring decision-makers agree that examining candidates' social media profiles is an effective method for screening applicants (Express Employment Professionals, 2020). The practice of conducting social media background checks on new job applicants has gained momentum in recent years, presenting both advantages and challenges for managers, particularly in the public sector. The expansion of the digital footprint presents a need for a balancing test between the valuable insight employers receive concerning the information obtained from the evaluation of a candidate's online presence and the preservation of individual privacy to ensure effective public sector job recruitment.

The emergence and subsequent ubiquity of social media have irrevocably transformed countless sectors, including the field of recruitment, especially in the public sector. Historically, hiring processes heavily leaned on resumes to evaluate a candidate's qualifications and experience. However, recent academic explorations suggest that social media can provide a much richer, multi-dimensional portrayal of a candidate, arguably offering insights that conventional hiring processes might miss.

According to a 2016 report by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 82% of public sector employers reported using social media to screen candidates, compared to 67% in the private sector. This disparity highlights the greater reliance on social media within public sector recruitment, likely due to the unique demands for transparency and accountability in public service roles (SHRM, 2016). Furthermore, a study by Zhang et al. (2020) found that public sector recruiters are more likely to use social media to verify professional qualifications

and assess candidates' alignment with organizational values, compared to their private sector counterparts who focus more on technical skills.

Smith (2020) meticulously explored the advantages of incorporating social media into recruitment strategies . Beyond the boundaries of a CV, he suggests that social media platforms provide recruiters with a more expansive understanding of a candidate's personality, shedding light on their interests, behavioral tendencies, and potential fit within an organization's culture. Such in-depth insights not only enhance the evaluation process but also facilitate more informed hiring decisions. Specifically, it emphasizes that attributes not immediately evident from a resume become discernible through a candidate's online activity (Smith, 2020).

Similarly, Johnson (2019) argues that the digital footprints candidates leave on social media can significantly augment a recruiter's comprehension of a candidate's core values and adaptability. This is because social media platforms provide a plethora of information that traditional recruitment processes might overlook. For instance, candidates' posts, interactions, and endorsements can reveal their personal interests, communication skills, and engagement in professional communities. These activities offer insights into a candidate's personality, work ethic, and alignment with organizational values—details that are often not captured in resumes or cover letters. By tapping into this resource, public organizations can fine-tune their hiring strategies, aligning candidates' skills more closely with the organization's needs (Johnson, 2019).

Verification of different associations and participation in professional activities named in their CV can be accomplished through online searches. For example, online searches can conveniently find papers published in online journals and volunteer work, which reduces the need to email each organization for confirmation. Analyzing candidates' public LinkedIn and Twitter activities can also help employers validate claims made on C.V.s. As Smith and

Gallicano (2015) point out, activity on social media platforms goes beyond just actions; it reflects a deep connection to the content . Actively sharing relevant research, joining professional discussions, or getting endorsements for skills like "Community Outreach" from peers and superiors provide deeper insights into a candidate's true dedication to their field (Smith & Gallicano,2019).

Although the veracity of the content presented on social media is constantly questioned, psychological research about the nature of social media profiles, particularly on platforms like Facebook, has suggested that public profiles are real extensions of the candidates' lives. Back et al. (2010) postulate that online platforms might serve as extensions of real-life social contexts. They suggest that users often represent their genuine selves on these platforms, given the combination of personal details, social interactions, and the public nature of such platforms. Their findings align with the notion that Facebook profiles, in most instances, reflect genuine personality traits rather than exaggerated or idealized versions. Therefore, this tool is often leveraged by recruiters utilizing social media as a vetting mechanism since such platforms represent an authentic snapshot of a candidate's character (Back et al., 2010).

Ethical and Legal Considerations

When reviewing social media for potential advantages, such as deeper insights into candidates' personalities, alignment with organizational culture, and validation of professional credentials, there are inherent ethical and legal complexities. Within the public sector, these search and review activities of multiple sites can manifest as potential biases by the reviewer. The validation of information challenges lies in obtaining the benefits of verifying job-related information while avoiding ethical and legal misconduct during the hiring process. Garcia and Thompson (2021) point out the susceptibility to biases that can emerge when an employer

unknowingly, or even unintentionally, considers a candidate's personal beliefs, affiliations, or lifestyle choices that are irrelevant to the job at hand. Such biases can skew the recruitment process, favoring or penalizing candidates based on their online persona rather than their qualifications. Moreover, there is the risk of potential discrimination, where decisions might be influenced by an individual's race, gender, religion, or other protected attributes discernible from their online profiles well before the interview stage of the job recruitment. Brown and Green's (2018) work emphasizes that these are not merely theoretical risks but tangible challenges with profound legal implications. While social media can be an advantageous tool in recruitment, it brings with it a mosaic of ethical and legal considerations that demand thoughtful attention and strategic navigation. The duty, then, is on employers to continually educate themselves and implement practices that are both legally compliant and ethically sound (Brown and Green, 2018).

Adding another layer to this complex subject, Brown (1996) states that this "omnipresent oversight" gives employers an almost unprecedented window into personal data, reaching the corners of an employee's life even outside their professional sphere. He feels that the ethical implications of this are profound. It raises questions about the boundaries of oversight: Brown asks at what point does this scrutiny infringe upon an individual's inherent dignity and autonomy? More than just legal compliance, Brown (1996) notes that the socio-psychological ramifications of such extensive surveillance impact human dignity when individuals feel watched online, affecting their self-concept and overall psychological well-being.

Striking the Balance: Effective Recruitment and Privacy

The digital age has revolutionized recruitment processes, making them more efficient yet complex. Elzweig & Peeples (2009) recognize that in the evolving landscape of recruitment,

social networking sites have emerged as powerful tools that grant employers a window into the lives of potential candidates while noting a pivotal concern: while these platforms can provide a wealth of information, they concurrently pose notable privacy challenges. Therefore, one of the cornerstone strategies they advocate for is transparency.

Their findings suggest that before embarking on the process of scrutinizing a candidate's public social media profile, employers ought to inform the candidate of such intentions explicitly. This method is not merely about adhering to ethical standards; it is about establishing trust right at the outset. By being forthright about the intention to peruse their public profiles, employers not only respect the candidate's right to be informed but also mitigate potential invasions of privacy (Elzweig & Peeples, 2009).

The digital age has revolutionized recruitment processes, making them more efficient yet complex. Elzweig & Peeples (2009) recognize that in the evolving landscape of recruitment, social networking sites have emerged as powerful tools that grant employers a window into the lives of potential candidates. For example, platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter allow recruiters to verify professional credentials, assess professional networks, and gain insights into candidates' industry engagement. However, while these platforms can provide a wealth of information, they concurrently pose notable privacy challenges. For instance, there have been cases where employers faced legal repercussions for delving too deeply into candidates' private social media activities without consent (Brown & Green, 2018). Therefore, one of the cornerstone strategies Elzweig & Peeples advocate for is transparency, ensuring that candidates are informed about the extent and purpose of social media screenings to maintain trust and legal compliance.

Davis and Martinez (2019) state that social media vetting should not eclipse traditional screening mechanisms. Instead, social media should be woven into the hiring tapestry as a

complementary source, enriching the overall evaluation without dominating it. Their findings caution against the pitfalls of unchecked access to personal information, which can unintentionally introduce biases into the recruitment process. By establishing explicit guidelines detailing the extent to which online content will shape hiring decisions, employers can ensure a balanced perspective, wherein personal beliefs or unrelated online activities do not unduly influence professional evaluations (Davis & Martinez, 2019).

Recognizing the dynamic nature of social media and the nuances inherent in its content, Davis and Martinez (2019) advocate for continuous training. This emphasis on regular upskilling ensures that those at the helm of decision-making are adept at discerning relevant information, reducing the likelihood of biases, and honing their ability to interpret online content astutely. In essence, by nurturing a well-trained team, agencies can harness the full potential of social media insights while sidestepping its potential pitfalls.

It becomes evident that the judicious use of social media in recruitment necessitates a structured framework. Elzweig and Peeples (2009) highlight the importance of clearly defined boundaries in the recruitment process. While social networking sites can offer a goldmine of information, not everything is up for grabs. For instance, while it may seem acceptable to review a candidate's public posts and professional interactions, delving into private realms without explicit permission breaches the implicit contract of trust between employers and potential candidates. Some might argue that publicly accessible information should be fully utilized, but Elzweig & Peeples contend that ethical use of this information is crucial to avoid legal repercussions and maintain the employer's reputation. Their research underscores that breaching this trust, especially by accessing private domains, can lead to significant legal and ethical consequences (Elzweig & Peeples, 2009).

The public sector recruiter needs to consider the concept of 'consent' when viewing some personal social media sites. Just because information is accessible does not necessarily grant employers the right to use it indiscriminately, particularly if the information is not job-related. This is where Elzweig & Peeples' emphasis on transparency between employers and candidates becomes pivotal (2009). Simply having access to public information does not imply consent to use that information in the hiring process. By notifying candidates about the intention to review their public profiles, employers can navigate the recruitment process with integrity, ensuring they respect candidates' rights while gleaning potentially valuable insights. Elzweig and Peeples (2009) argue that it is essential to discriminate between information that genuinely impacts a candidate's suitability for the job and irrelevant personal details. The use of social media in hiring decisions can be a double-edged sword; it offers valuable insights but also risks ethical and legal challenges if not handled with care.Vroman, Stultz, and Hart (2016) revealed that as of 2011, 91% of U.S. recruiters reported using social networking sites to screen applicants. Yet, despite its widespread use, there is a noticeable disconnect between what is seen online and its reported influence. The firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. ("Employers checking," 2014) found that while 60% of H.R. professionals viewed job applicants' social media profiles, only 6% admitted that what they saw significantly affected their hiring decisions. Nevertheless, 40% acknowledged that it had some impact. This gap between viewing and admitting influence underscores a hidden danger: Even if recruiters do not believe non-job-related details influence them, unconscious biases can still play a role.

The stakes are high; even if one applicant believes they were not hired because of personal details viewed on social media, the ensuing legal battle could cost companies immense amounts of money and damage their reputation. For instance, in 2010, a teacher in Georgia was

denied employment after school officials found a photo of her holding a drink on her Facebook profile. She sued the school district, claiming that the decision violated her right to privacy and free speech. Although the case was eventually settled out of court, it highlighted the potential legal and reputational risks associated with using social media in hiring decisions (Healy, 2011). Another example is the case of a New York woman who sued her prospective employer in 2013 after they rescinded a job offer upon discovering her pregnancy through social media. The employer faced significant legal costs and negative publicity, emphasizing the importance of handling social media information with caution and transparency (Smith, 2014). Therefore, while social media can provide insights into a candidate's potential fit, it's crucial for recruiters to tread carefully, ensuring they do not unknowingly venture into ethical and legal gray areas.

Establishing Practical Guidelines and Boundaries

Striking a balance between harnessing the potential of social media and ensuring candidates' privacy rights necessitates the establishment of practical guidelines and boundaries. For public sector entities, this becomes even more critical. Given the public sector's role in serving the community and upholding public trust, these organizations must exemplify best practices in respecting privacy while making informed hiring decisions. Williams and Lee (2023) recommend the principle of consistency. A set of guidelines and regulations will help guarantee that there is a level playing field and minimize the intrusion of biases when viewing the social media content of candidates' profiles. William and Lee (2023) contend that the consistency principle is not just about fair play but is rooted in the broader understanding of the implications of unchecked biases in recruitment processes. By subjecting candidates to inconsistent evaluation metrics, employers risk making skewed judgments that might overlook a candidate's actual potential or skills in favor of irrelevant social media content (Wiliam & Lee, 2023).

However, there is another layer to this conversation that transcends individual employer practices: the overarching legal and societal framework that dictates how background checks are performed. Traditionally, third-party agencies conducted background checks in accordance with the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA). Yet, as Handelman (2021) articulates in her research, with the advent and ubiquity of social media, this process has morphed into a more informal yet far-reaching method. Traditional protections that safeguarded applicants' privacy in regular background checks are proving inadequate in the realm of social media background checks. The transition from traditional background checks to social media screening emphasizes that the processes and tools to conduct background checks have evolved considerably. However, this shift in approach has illuminated gaps in the privacy protection of potential employees subjected to these new-age checks (Handelman, 2021).

In the realm of background checks, a distinction between traditional methodologies and social media screenings becomes pivotal. Handelman (2021) discussed the decision in NASA v. Nelson, which highlighted that the constitutional foundation supporting traditional background checks might not seamlessly extend to the practices of social media background checks. The main point of contention revolves around the pertinence of the information to the job in question. Traditional background checks, often grounded in clear-cut criteria related to the job, stand in stark contrast to the nebulous and expansive nature of information available on social media platforms (Handelman, 2021).

There are also laws that need to be recognized that may limit the evaluation and use of job candidates' social media information. Handelman (2021) states that the Fourth Amendment emphasizes the dynamics of privacy expectations in an era increasingly dominated by social media. As these digital platforms become an integral part of everyday life, it becomes imperative

to reconsider the boundaries of what qualifies as a 'reasonable expectation of privacy.' Contrary to some beliefs, not all digital footprints are considered public domain. Various judicial decisions have reflected a reluctance to treat all online postings as entities stripped of privacy, suggesting that the legal landscape is evolving in understanding digital privacy norms (Handelman, 2021).

Statutory solutions are also an avenue of control to create balance. Handelman (2021) points out that numerous states have taken proactive measures, introducing legislation to curtail employers' access to the personal social media accounts of applicants. This wave of legislation primarily targets practices like demanding login credentials from potential employees—a clear intrusion into personal privacy. Such initiatives underscore the pressing need for structured regulations safeguarding individual digital privacy during hiring processes (Handelman, 2021). Additionally, the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), a longstanding federal statute, could potentially serve as a tool for adaptation and reform. By updating the FCRA to address the modern challenges of social media background checks, a more comprehensive and relevant framework can be established. Such an initiative would fill the existing gaps, especially regarding employers bypassing third-party agencies to directly scrutinize potential hires on social media platforms (Handelman, 2021).

Technology represents a solution to this challenge of balancing candidates' social media information in the recruitment and selection process. Individuals are not merely passive participants; they can actively shape their digital presence. Handelman (2021) advocates for individuals to harness the innumerable security features embedded within social media platforms proactively. By leveraging these tools, users can exert granular control over their digital content, effectively determining its visibility and access.

Simultaneously, there is a pressing need to demarcate the boundaries between public domains and personal digital platforms. Just as behaviors and expectations differ between physical and digital realms, the principles governing privacy should also be distinct. It is essential to grasp those technological advancements while offering myriad benefits and also guiding in unique challenges—especially in terms of privacy. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics, as suggested by Handelman (2021), becomes essential in shaping future policies and practices.

Conclusion

The journey into utilizing social media background checks in public sector recruitment, as explored throughout this paper, has emphasized the undeniable transformative role these platforms play in modern hiring. Navigating this landscape mandates a delicate equilibrium where the promise of modern tools does not overshadow the foundational values. The overarching challenge is to seamlessly integrate the digital potential while steadfastly upholding the integrity and values intrinsic to the recruitment ethos of the public sector.

To proceed effectively, public sector agencies must develop clear policies and guidelines on the use of social media in the hiring process. These guidelines should specify what information can be considered and ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards. Transparency with candidates about the intention to review their social media profiles is crucial to maintaining trust and respecting their rights. This approach addresses the concern of implied consent raised by Elzweig & Peeples (2009), highlighting that accessible information does not automatically grant the right to use it indiscriminately.

Moreover, agencies should focus on job-related information when evaluating candidates' social media profiles. This means only considering public information that is directly relevant to the job requirements. Such a strategy helps mitigate biases and reduces the risk of legal issues.

For example, while assessing a candidate's professional network and endorsements on LinkedIn can provide valuable insights, delving into their private life on platforms like Facebook or Instagram without consent remains ethically questionable and legally precarious.

Regular training for H.R. professionals and recruiters is essential to navigate the ethical and legal implications of social media screening. Continuous upskilling ensures that those involved in hiring decisions are adept at interpreting online content accurately and fairly, reducing the likelihood of biases. This training should emphasize the importance of balancing digital insights with traditional recruitment methods to form a comprehensive evaluation of candidates.

However, significant gaps in research still exist, requiring a deeper look. Longitudinal studies on the outcomes of social media screening, particularly in the public sector, are necessary to understand its long-term effectiveness and impact on organizational performance. Additionally, research should explore how social media screening affects diversity and inclusion in the workplace, investigating whether certain groups are disproportionately impacted by these practices and identifying strategies to mitigate any negative effects.

Furthermore, the evolving legal landscape around social media screening necessitates ongoing research to develop best practices that balance legal compliance with ethical considerations. Understanding the implications of different privacy laws and how they affect social media screening practices globally will be crucial. Finally, technological solutions that aid in ethical social media screening, such as A.I. tools designed to identify job-relevant information while minimizing biases and protecting candidate privacy, should be investigated.

In conclusion, the future of social media background checks in public sector recruitment lies in finding the right balance between leveraging digital tools and upholding ethical and legal

standards. By developing robust policies, providing ongoing training, and focusing on job-relevant information, public sector agencies can ensure fair and effective hiring practices. Addressing the gaps in research will further enhance our understanding and guide the development of best practices in this rapidly evolving area.

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