

Chapter XI

Facebook Follies: Who Suffers the Most?

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relative impact of “inappropriate” postings on job candidates’ Facebook profiles on hiring decisions. Such postings included negative work-related attitudes, the use of profanity, and comments regarding alcohol abuse, use of drugs and sexual activities. Respondents indicated that all five types of information were relevant to such decisions and that they would be unlikely to pursue candidates who posted such information. However, such information was viewed as being more relevant for female candidates than male candidates. In addition, respondents were more likely to pursue male candidates than female candidates who posted such information. Thus, females were found to suffer the most. Although negative work-related attitudes and drug use were considered more relevant to hiring decisions than the other types of information, respondents were least likely to pursue candidates whose Facebook profiles contained comments regarding negative work-related attitudes and alcohol use. Implications and suggestions for future research are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that communications on the Internet are less inhibited than public communica-

tions, that is, individuals will say or do things on the Internet that they would not ordinarily do in real life (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Kayany, 1998; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005). Countless

examples of these uninhibited communications can be found on Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites (Levy, 2007). For example, a recent study of 200 Facebook profiles found that 42% had comments regarding alcohol, 53% had photos involving alcohol use, 20% had comments regarding sexual activities, 25% had semi-nude or sexually provocative photos, and 50% included the use of profanity (Peluchette & Karl, 2007). These authors also examined wall comments, or “public” messages that individuals post on each others’ profiles and found that about 50% involved issues of partying, 40% involved negative comments about other people, 25% involved derogatory comments about employers, 18% sexual activities, and 10% negative racial comments.

It has been suggested that these Facebook follies, or this reckless tendency to post anything and everything on one’s profile, is in part due to students’ perceptions that the likelihood of anyone other than other students or recent alumni seeing their posting is remote (Lupsa, 2006). Yet, recent evidence suggests that employers are looking. According to Taylor (2006), using Internet search engines such as Google, blogs (Web logs), and social networking Web sites (Facebook, MySpace) has become commonplace for screening potential job candidates. In support, a 2006 ExecuNet survey of 100 executive recruiters found that 77% use search engines as part of their recruitment process and that 35% have eliminated job candidates based on information they have found on the Internet (Jones, 2006). That is up from 26% reported in the 2005 survey (Forster, 2006). A study conducted at the University of Dayton revealed that 40% of employers would consider applicants’ Facebook profiles as part of their hiring decision (Lupsa, 2006). Finally, a study by CareerBuilder.com revealed that 26% of the 1,150 hiring managers they surveyed said they used Internet search engines in their candidate screening process and 12% said they used social networking sites. Of those hiring managers that used social networking sites, 63%

said they did not hire the person based on what they found (Sullivan, 2006).

So, what kind of information are these hiring managers using to screen applicants? According to the aforementioned study by CareerBuilder.com (Sullivan, 2004), 19% said they eliminated candidates from further consideration because they had bad-mouthed their previous company or a fellow employee, 19% were eliminated because they had posted information about drinking or using drugs, and 11% were eliminated because they posted provocative or inappropriate photographs. The purpose of this study was to examine the relative impact of these Facebook follies on hiring decisions for male and female candidates. More specifically, we examine the following five types of information: (1) negative work-related attitudes, (2) comments regarding alcohol abuse, (3) comments regarding use of drugs, (4) comments regarding sexual activities, and (5) use of profanity.

Negative Work-related Attitudes

Based on the notion that it is much easier to train people to learn new skills than it is to change their inherent attitudes, many companies have adopted the “hire for attitude, train for skill” philosophy (O’Connor, 2000; Greengard & Byham, 2003). Perhaps the most well known example of this is Southwest Airlines who looks for people who can embrace change, keep promises, follow through, and bring a sense of humor and fun to their work (O’Connor, 2000). Empirical research also suggests that hiring managers consider attitude to be an important attribute in new recruits. For example, the results of a 1994 survey revealed that employers valued attitude more highly than ability when hiring an administrative employee (Flynn, 1994). Another survey of hiring managers conducted by the *New York Times* Job Market found that 85% considered personality to have great importance in hiring decisions (Milne, 2002). Other factors considered important were:

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