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## The Debate About Using Social Media to Screen Job Applicants

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# **Appalachian Research in Business Symposium (ARBS) 2017 PROCEEDINGS 4th Annual Conference Volume II**

March 30-31, 2017



**Appalachian State University  
Boone, NC**



**Edited by:  
G. David Shows and Pia A. Albinsson  
Appalachian State University  
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It is our pleasure to present the *Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Appalachian Research in Business Symposium* from the 2017 conference held March 30-31 hosted by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. The Appalachian Research in Business Symposium provides a venue for presenting new research, discovering contemporary ideas, and building connections among scholars at Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and Western Carolina University.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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## Table of Contents

21ST CENTURY “PHARMA TALK”: TAKING SOCIAL MEDIA FROM TALK TO ACTION.....	8
Vorontsova, Nadja, Western Carolina University	
Rader, Scott, Western Carolina University	
A GUIDE TO ONLINE TOOLS FOR ENTREPRENEURS.....	15
Lahm, Jr., Robert J., Western Carolina University	
A HOLISTIC EDUCATION APPROACH FOR ASSESSING BUSINESS PROGRAMS.....	18
Carnes, Lana W., Eastern Kentucky University	
Awang, Faridah, Eastern Kentucky University	
Xiao, Qian, Eastern Kentucky University	
A SYSTEMATIC MAPPING STUDY OF BEEKEEPING .....	25
Conner, Joshua, Appalachian State University	
Hassler, Edgar, Appalachian State University	
Mandarino, Alexander, Appalachian State University	
ADD AND THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: IS ANYONE PAYING ATTENTION?.....	30
Koen, Clifford M., East Tennessee State University	
AN APPROACH TO COMPARING ATTORNEY DISCIPLINE ACROSS REGIONS: SIXTH AND NINTH CIRCUITS.....	35
Michael M. McKinney, East Tennessee State University	
Douglas P. Dotterweich, East Tennessee State University	
AN ECONOPHYSICS APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND THE NETWORK STRUCTURES AND STATISTICAL VALIDATION OF STOCK MARKETS.....	39
Tang, Yong, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China	
University of Fribourg	
Xiong, Jason (Jie), Appalachian State University	
Luo, Yong, Ningbo University of Technology	
Zhang, Yi-Cheng, University of Fribourg	
BUILDING SALES PEOPLE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL SALES MENTORSHIP PROGRAM.....	46
Karen Hood Hopkins, Eastern Kentucky University	
Christopher D. Hopkins, Clemson University	

## Table of Contents (Cont.)

COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT IN UNIVERSITY BUSINESS STUDENTS: A MULTIPERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS.....	52
Tanel, Karlee, Student, EKV Honors College Eastern Kentucky University	
Roberson, Michael, Eastern Kentucky University	
CONSTRUCTING FUTURE BUSINESS LEADERS: EVALUATING A MIXED METHODS APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN AN MBA CURRICULUM .....	59
Moore, Tom W., East Tennessee State University	
Gorman, C. Allen, East Tennessee State University	
DISPLAYING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: HOW ONLINE PLATFORMS AFFECT PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONS.....	67
Nile Latowsky, Appalachian State University	
Casher Belinda, Appalachian State University	
Nkem Obi-Melekwe, Appalachian State University	
Katherine Lesniak, Appalachian State University	
Shawn Bergman, Appalachian State University	
EVALUATION OF IT ETHICAL SCENARIOS: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS.....	76
King, Kristen L., Eastern Kentucky University	
Graham, Julia C., The University of Alabama in Huntsville	
EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF MINDFULNESS AND SELF-REGULATION ASSIGNMENTS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS.....	82
Roberson, Michael, Eastern Kentucky University	
FACTORS THAT DETERMINE THE DECISION TO MAJOR IN ACCOUNTING: REPORTING FROM A SURVEY OF ACCOUNTING GRADUATES.....	89
Sam K. Formby, Appalachian State University	
B. Dawn Medlin, Appalachian State University	
Sandra A. Vannoy, Appalachian State University	
IMPLICIT STARTUP SUBSIDIES .....	96
Robert Beach, East Tennessee State University	
IMPROVING STUDENT EFFORT ON A LEARNING OUTCOME ASSESSMENT: BENCHMARKS, OPTIONS, AND RESULTS.....	100
Roberson, Michael, Eastern Kentucky University	
Erekson, Thomas, Eastern Kentucky University	

## Table of Contents (Cont.)

LOOKING BACK – LOOKING FORWARD STOCK MARKET VALUATIONS AND COMPARISONS.....	106
Faidley, Joel K., East Tennessee State University	
MOBILE DISTRACTIONS: A RISKY DRIVING BEHAVIOR.....	114
Medlin, B. Dawn, Appalachian State University	
Choi, Hoon S., Appalachian State University	
Xiong, Jason (Jie), Appalachian State University	
Houlik, Zach, Appalachian State University	
NON-OWNERHIP: A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE OF CLOTHING LIBRARIES.....	119
Pia A. Albinsson, Appalachian State University	
B. Yasanthi Perera, Brock University	
ONLINE STUDENTS DEMOGRAPHICS AND MOTIVATIONS TO ENROLL IN CLASS.....	124
Billings, Viviane, Eastern Kentucky University	
Zhuang, Weiling, Eastern Kentucky University	
ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT NAVIGATION: BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COURSE.....	128
Polin, Beth, Eastern Kentucky University	
QR CODE UTILIZATION: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD.....	134
Medlin, B. Dawn, Appalachian State University	
Vannoy, A. Sandra, Appalachian State University	
THE DEBATE ABOUT USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SCREEN JOB APPLICANTS.....	140
Robles, Marcel M., Eastern Kentucky University	
THE EFFECT OF EVERGREEN LOSS ON PROPERTY VALUES IN WATAUGA COUNTY, NC .....	146
Benjamin J. Sullivan, Appalachian State University	
John C. Whitehead, Appalachian State University	
THE EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING ON PROJECT SUCCESS AS MODERATED BY VIRTUAL AND TRADITIONAL TEAM DYNAMICS.....	154
Creasy, Todd, Western Carolina University	
Carnes, Andrew M., Western Carolina University	
THE HIDDEN IMPACT OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS ON FIRM PERFORMANCE.....	164
Vannoy, Sandra A., Appalachian State University	



## Table of Contents (Cont.)

VALIDATING A FRAMEWORK FOR OBSERVATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF BEEHIVE HEALTH: TESTING THE BAYER MODEL.....	171
Volstad, Samuel, Appalachian State University	
Qiu, Xing, Appalachian State University	
Cazier, Joseph A., Appalachian State University	

# **THE DEBATE ABOUT USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SCREEN JOB APPLICANTS**

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## **Introduction**

A simple web search of a person's name on Social Media could point to multiple social media sites within minutes, and a variety of details can be found about someone, including photos and information about marital status, children, race, age, gender, religion, political affiliation, hobbies, and more (Davison, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012).

Many people may be posting personal information on social media sites with the intended audience of friends in mind, but often there is another audience that is not being considered, such as potential employers (Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade, 2013). As an inexpensive alternative to traditional background checks, many employers are turning to Social Media screening to evaluate job candidates. Employers often have access to personal information about the candidate that is not accessible during the interview process, and these Social Media screenings can reveal startling results about a candidate (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to explore how the use of Social Media screening by employers can impact people seeking employment and to examine the benefits and consequences of employers using such a practice.

## **Literature Overview**

Social Media screening is comparable to background checks in a new medium, except with more invasiveness because both job relevant and job irrelevant information can be gathered by the employer. Traditional background checks may investigate a person's criminal record, credit history, driving record, previous employment, and education; but much more can be learned through a Social Media inquiry. A quick review of a candidate's Facebook or Twitter site could reveal an applicant's number of children, marital status, religious affiliation, political views, and hobbies, among other personal information (Davison et al., 2012).

Several approaches to Social Media screening include (a) the people directly involved in the hiring decision investigate the candidate's online presence; (b) an employee with no part in the decision-

making process performs the Social Media screening on the job candidate; or (c) a consumer reporting agency, a third party, performs the Social Media screening and then reports to the employer (Reicher, 2013).

Social media allows employers access to information about a potential hire that they would not be allowed to gather during the job interview; and unlike criminal background checks, employers can research a job applicant's social media profile without making the applicant aware (Ebnet, 2012). Through an online search, it is possible for employers to discover information which is usually under the protection of federal employment discrimination laws, including a person's race, religious affiliation, gender, and national origin, which are covered under the Civil Rights Act of 1964; age, which is covered by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967; and disability status, which is covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This information may be gathered from a profile picture alone, which is usually available to the public on most social media sites and without the option to remove from public view. Additionally, a social media site profile picture gives employers the opportunity to make hiring decisions based on factors which are not protected by federal law, including sexual orientation, physical attractiveness, and smoking habits (Brown & Vaughn, 2011).

It is nearly impossible to confirm the validity of information found on social media sites, and the information discovered during Internet screening could possibly be misleading or inaccurate. For example, a social media site could be created as a personal attack or practical joke and, therefore, contain completely false information about someone (Weathington & Bechtel, 2012). The information on a job candidate's social media site is not necessarily more accurate than the information provided during an interview or on a résumé. A person may create a social media site with certain viewers in mind, and the site may not be a true reflection of the user's personality. For example, an individual may "fake good" on Facebook if the intended audience is family or potential employers or "fake bad" if the intention is to impress friends or potential mates (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). In addition, job applicants may be more likely to tailor online behavior to match the evaluation criteria of an employer if aware of the employer's practice of Internet screening (Bangerter, Roulin, & Konig, 2012).

Many job applicants use social media as an informal means of communication and may leave traces of unfiltered data, not intended for employers, on blogs, tweets and posts on Facebook. This social communication could offer employers a glimpse into the uncensored life of a potential hire and could be used in the evaluation process (Stoughton et al., 2013).

Online content created through social media is often permanent, which can make hiding an online history more difficult (Ebnet, 2012). People who send uncensored messages and photos over Twitter and Facebook are not likely to consider the long-term effects before making such decisions. The Internet and social media have made communication near-instantaneous, widespread, and indefinitely stored; and erasing online content is often limited if not impossible (Baumhart, 2015). Social media sites, such as LinkedIn, are designed as professional environments for people to network with colleagues and prospective employers and to share information about employment history and education. On the opposite side are social media sites like Facebook and Twitter which are designed as more casual environments for people to connect with friends and family and to

share information about one's social life. These types of personal sites are not designed with colleagues or prospective employers in mind (Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade, 2015).

## **Methodology**

A blend of primary and secondary research was used in this study. The secondary research included a review of scholarly literature that focused on social media and Internet screening and its impact on the hiring process. A review was also performed of the 2014 CareerBuilder survey that sampled more than 2,000 hiring managers who used social media sites to evaluate job candidates (Grasz, 2014).

The primary research focused on interviews with four hiring managers who were chosen for the study based on convenience and accessibility. The sampling size was delimited to four participants and may not be representative of larger groups. In addition, the research was limited by generational and gender differences which may have influenced the attitudes of participants and, therefore, influenced the results. Of the four hiring managers, three were male and one was female. The participants represented Generation X, Generation Y, and the Baby Boomers. Lastly, the data were self-reported.

## **Results and Implications**

In a recent survey by CareerBuilder, more than 2,000 hiring managers were asked to identify what they found during an Internet screening that led to the elimination of a job candidate from consideration of employment. The top reasons included postings of provocative or inappropriate photographs or information (46%), postings of drinking or drug use (41%), badmouthing previous employer or fellow employee (36%), displaying poor communication skills (32%), posting discriminatory comments (28%), and lying about qualifications (25%) (Grasz, 2014).

The primary research in this study focused on interviews with three hiring managers who frequently used social media as a screening tool and one manager who did not practice and did not have plans to practice Internet screening. The hiring managers gave the following reasons for practicing Internet screening: to save time and help reduce the number of candidates to interview, to find out if the job candidate is lying about résumé, to find out if the job candidate is badmouthing current employer, to get a real-life perspective of the job candidate, and to determine a job candidate's character.

According to the hiring managers, the following was found on social media sites of potential hires that led to the elimination of the candidate from consideration: poor communication skills, lack of professional networks, postings of scantily-dressed photos, disrespectful comments, badmouthing previous employer, and lack of real-world experience.

The CareerBuilder survey also identified what employers found during an Internet screening that led to them hiring a job candidate. The most common reasons were: appeared to be a good fit within the company culture (46%), background information supported professional qualifications for the job (45%), social media site conveyed a professional image (43%), well-rounded and

showed a wide range of interests (40%), great communication skills (40%), and creative (36%) (Grasz, 2014).

According to the hiring managers, the following was found on social media sites of potential hires that led to the candidate being hired: good communication skills, a professional profile, site consistent with résumé qualifications, proof of real-world experience, well-rounded, and creative.

The shared reasons for passing on a job applicant in the CareerBuilder survey and in the interviews with the hiring managers were: inappropriate photos, badmouthing, poor communication skills, and disrespectful comments. The CareerBuilder survey found that drinking/drug use was the second highest reason for employers to pass on an applicant; but in the interviews with hiring managers, drinking/drug use was not a reason at all. In the interviews with hiring managers, the lack of real-world experience was a reason for passing on an applicant that was not found as a top reason by the CareerBuilder survey.

The interviews with the hiring managers and the CareerBuilder survey also found similar reasons for hiring an applicant after an Internet screening, including the following: good fit with company culture, information supported qualifications on the résumé, professional site, well-rounded, creative, and good communication skills. The CareerBuilder survey found that being a good fit with the company culture the highest for managers to hire an applicant, but in the interviews with the hiring managers, fit was not a reason at all. The interviews with the hiring managers found that proof of real-world experience was a top reason for hiring a candidate, but was not a top reason found in the CareerBuilder survey.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The number of employers using social media sites to evaluate job candidates during the hiring process is growing quickly. While résumés and interview performance still remain the major determining factors in the hiring process, many employers are using Internet screening in addition to or as an alternative to background checks. Through Internet screening, employers often learn information about job candidates that they would not be able to learn during the job interview. Many people are unaware of the long-term effects that inappropriate material on social media sites can have on future job opportunities and of the importance of properly managing privacy control settings on social media sites. The line between public and private information in cyberspace is often blurred, and the issue of fairness with using Internet screening is a common debate. Employers could face potential consequences of using such a practice, including discrimination lawsuits, negative attitudes of the job candidates involved in the screening, and damages to an organization's reputation.

Based on the findings in this study, it is recommended that social media users practice self-censorship when posting content to personal sites like Facebook and Twitter. Social media users should be aware that personal sites may not be treated as a private environment by employers, and since employers are increasingly using Internet screening in the hiring process, any inappropriate content could lead to a job candidate's elimination of consideration. Ultimately, users should

understand the limitations to and the usefulness of using privacy control settings on social media sites.

It is recommended that employers consider the consequences of practicing Internet screening as an evaluation tool in the hiring process. An employer should understand that information on social media sites may be misleading or inaccurate and that Internet screening could potentially introduce bias into the hiring process. Finally, employers should be aware of federal laws that protect applicants from discrimination and of recent legal issues that question the lawfulness of Internet screening.

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