

Impact of Traditional and Internet/Social Media Screening Mechanisms on Employers' Perceptions of Job Applicants

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Abstract

This study examined employers' perspectives of applicants' employability via traditional methods (resume, job interviews, etc.) and nontraditional methods (internet/social media). Drawing from qualitative interviews with employers, results showed that older employers only checked candidates once online, whereas younger employers checked candidates multiple times. Respondents cited the internet/social media as an inexpensive way to conduct a cursory background check on job applicants. But they mostly used the internet/social media to weed out applicants, not to be

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more inclusive with applicant pools. Implications for employers and job applicants are discussed.

A wealth of research exists on traditional methods that employers use to obtain employees; these methods include examining the content of applicants' resumes and/or job application, performance on job interviews, recommendation letters, and if the applicant is a referral (Brown, Setren, & Topa, 2012; Dreher & Ryan, 2004; Kim et al., 2014; Parks-Yancy, 2010; Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2015; Roulin, Bangerter & Levashina, 2014). Of the traditional screening methods, being a referral and performing well on job interviews has a significant positive impact on receiving a job offer (Hebberd, 2015; Roulin et. al, 2014).

Employers are increasingly turning to nontraditional methods, such as the internet/social media to screen applicants (Weathington & Bechtel, 2012). In 2010, Careerbuilder.com found that 49% of companies in 2009 were using social media sites to help screen candidates (Grasz, 2009). People express themselves via the internet/social media and employers seek to learn more about applicants in that way (Jobvite, 2014). They post verbiage and images about themselves on social media sites, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and many others. Indeed, some workers have been offered jobs and higher salaries over other similarly qualified candidates on the basis of having traditional family-oriented posts, videos, and photos online, in addition to the quality of their resume and job interview. Applicants' online activities can increase their appeal to employers, beyond just the traditional measures of an applicant's suitability for a job (i.e.

referrals, resumes, applications, interviews, recommendations, etc.) and can tip the employability scale in their favor (Harrison & Budworth, 2015). Despite this relatively recent finding, the impact that the internet/social media has on employers' evaluation of applicants is still unclear.

This study investigates how employers utilize traditional screening methods and internet/social media to determine job applicants' employability. It is not clear, for example, which screening methods (traditional methods and internet/social media) are most important to employers, in terms of likelihood of offering the job to a candidate? That is, of referrals, resume, job application, interview, employment recommendation letters and applicants' social media, which methods are most likely to cause an employer to extend or decline a job offer and in what order? Why? Which methods cause a candidate to be immediately excluded from consideration for the job and which may help a candidate overcome an, otherwise, poor showing on another screening mechanism? For example, if an applicant has a great resume, but does not interview well, does that eliminate the candidate or can she or he still advance in the screening process? Which of those screening methods gives employers the best return on their screening investment and which gives the least?

This investigation utilizes employer perspectives of how the screening mechanisms affect applicants' likelihood of being hired and explains how employers perceive the return on their screening efforts. This study also provides insight into ways that firms reduce the costs associated with searching and screening for the right applicant. By understanding how employers screen applicants, the study results contributes to increasing the fit between or-

ganizations and employees.

Literature Review

Job Applicant Qualifications — Traditional Methods

There is extensive data regarding what employers want in applicants. For example, many employers for professional jobs want employees who are team players, customer-service oriented, are good communicators, can motivate and lead others, and want to achieve organizational objectives (Hollon, 2012). Job applicants promote their attributes to prospective employers through traditional and nontraditional methods. The traditional methods include their resume, their job application (sometimes used instead of a resume, depending on the employer), referrals (i.e. the applicant was referred to the job by an entity associated with the employer), job interviews, and recommendations (people who are willing to vouch for the candidate, but are not necessarily associated with nor known to the employer). Each method affects employers' perception of job applicants' fit for the job.

Resume. The resume generally states applicants' job or career objectives, education, highlights specific technical and language skills (e.g. knowledgeable of Oracle and fluent in Spanish), and work experience. It is a building block to demonstrating the applicants' qualifications. The applicant lists all of the characteristics that highlight their qualifications to the potential employer. Resumes are generally the first traditional method by which job applicants communicate employability to employers. It has varying success in getting candidates noticed by employers, often on the basis of the organization of the resume content, the page length (longer is generally not better), if it contains

language contained in the job description itself (if there is a job description offered by the company) (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2015), and the content of their work experience (Dreher & Ryan, 2004). A resume is an employer's glimpse into the applicant's attributes and, ideally, will spur the employer to want to learn more about the person.

Job Application. The resume stems from the applicant to the employer. However, a job application stems from the employer to the applicant and usually collects both legally important and factual information about the applicant. This can include dates of work history and schooling, degrees awarded, criminal history information, if the applicant can legally work in the employer's country, and so forth (Healthfield, 2015). It is often the basis for applicants' criminal background check, if the employer conducts such checks.

Many employers now require applicants to complete the job application online. This method allows for human resource information systems (HRIS) to easily scan and sort the applications on the basis of the employers' desired selection criteria. Job applications can highlight an applicant's attributes as being qualified for the job by demonstrating that their application content is consistent with information provided in the resume. Actually, employers also use it as an initial weed-out mechanism. That is, even if one has the requisite job attributes, completing the job application incorrectly can automatically halt the candidate from going further in the screening process. Applicants who are very internet-savvy are more likely to complete the application correctly and to be satisfied with the online application process than those who are not very internet-savvy (Sylva & Mol, 2009).

Referrals. Referrals are applicants who are recommended by others who have a positive view of that person (Van Hove & Lievens, 2009). Referrals are generally embedded in people's social contacts and people use referrals when looking for employment (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001). Prospective employees are aware that referrals represent a validation of their talents and suitability to employers and that employers often view referrals more favorably than candidates with similar skills, but are not a referral (Brown et al., 2014; Parks-Yancy, 2010).

It enhances applicants' candidacy to be referred to a job, as opposed to applying blindly. Referrals who get hired start their job much quicker than non-referrals, they tend to be more satisfied with their job, and stay longer at the firm, as well (Brown, Setren, & Topa, 2012). Presumably, they have a better understanding of the work by virtue of having an "inside track" from the referrer (Hebberd, 2015). Referrals are not only more likely to be hired, but they receive a higher initial salary offer than non-referrals, too (Brown et al., 2014; Lin, 2001).

Many companies have formalized referral programs. Current employees can refer candidates and receive a reward, often financial incentives (Brown et al., 2014). Employee referrals have a 7% applicant to hire rate, but this accounts for almost 40% of all new hires (Hebberd, 2015). In addition, referrals are a way for employers to informally evaluate candidates, under the assumption that an employee would only refer someone whom he/she perceives as being a good fit for the organization (Dustmann, Glitz, & Schönberg, 2010). Therefore, referrals are an inexpensive screening tool for employers. In one study, almost 67% of employers and recruiters found the referral-based

recruiting processes to be a shorter and more cost-effective means to find good, reliable talent (Hebberd, 2015).

Job Interviews. There is extensive research on interviewing, particularly in the management and personnel psychology disciplines (e.g. Higgins & Judge, 2004; Marr & Cable; 2014; Muir, 2005; Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez & Harms, 2013; Roulin et al., 2014; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Researchers have found that applicants' impression management tactics, self-promotion tactics, and ingratiation techniques during a job interview can impress the interviewer so much that he/she focuses less on the candidates' actual qualifications for the job. Instead, the interviewer is "wowed" by the applicant's presentation of themselves during the interview. This benefits the interviewee, in terms of likelihood of getting the job, but can hurt the organization because the candidate may not actually be a fit for the job nor the firm. This hurts the company's bottom line; the company's screening process yielded a poor return on their screening investment (i.e. hiring an employee who does not fit the job). For example, Marr and Cable (2014) examined if applicants' ability to sell themselves (i.e. selling orientation) during the interview affected the accuracy of interviewers' judgments about the applicants' fit for the job. Candidates who had a strong selling orientation were more likely to be deemed a fit for the job than those who did not have a selling orientation. However, the study also found that interviewers' judgments were inaccurate, such that the candidates who were actually the best fit for job, in terms of performance, were those who did not have a strong selling orientation. In this regard, the candidates who were favored by the interviewers probably also utilized impression management techniques. They probably

conveyed the image and qualities that seemed desirable to the interviewee, irrespective of if they actually possessed those attributes.

Other studies have also found that applicants who promote or “sell” their qualifications, compliment the interviewer and agree with interviewer’s statements tend to be evaluated more favorably to interviewers than those who do not (Roulin et al., 2014). A study of college student job applicants found that those who engaged in ingratiation tactics and, to a lesser degree, self-promotion tactics received better evaluations than those who did not (Higgins & Judge, 2004). Ingratiation involves acting in a way that conforms to the desires of others. For example, an ingratiating job applicant may agree with opinions expressed an interviewer, which causes the interviewer to believe that the interviewee is “similar to themselves” in terms of attitudes and beliefs. In turn, the interviewer is more likely to assess the candidate favorably. Self-promotion involves asserting one’s attributes and seeming fit for the job to the interviewer. This tactic can help applicants with similar academic training and work credentials to distinguish themselves from competing applicants (Muir, 2005). In Higgins and Judge’s (2004) study, ingratiation, particularly, trumped objective evaluations of the candidates, such as their work experience and grade point average.

Despite their limitations in determining person-job fit, interviews are one of the most popular screening methods (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994). Given interviewers’ tendencies to err on the side of the interviewees’ ingratiation and self-promotion tactics, in terms of evaluating candidates, it actually behooves candidates to

use those tactics during a job interview. These tactics can help candidates get the job, even if objective skills are not very good.

Recommendations. Most employers require applicants list the names and contact information of people who can vouch for their character and would recommend them for the job. This information is often captured in the job application. As noted in the preceding discussion about referrals, it benefits candidates if they can list recommenders who are also known to the employer in a positive way. However, even if candidates do not know anyone affiliated with the prospective employer, it behooves them to name recommenders who will speak favorably about the candidate. This is another way in which the applicant's attributes are communicated to employers.

However, employers do not put much stock into what the recommenders say, even if it is favorable. If the recommender is unknown to the employer, then they don't necessarily have any experience with the recommender's credibility and, therefore, their recommendation of a candidate will not necessarily help the candidate get the job (Kim et al., 2014).

The two most important components of credibility are trustworthiness and expertise. If a potential employer does not perceive the recommender to have either of these characteristics, their recommendation will be of little help in the applicant getting the job (Kim et al., 2014). After all, recommenders may not be entirely truthful when a prospective employer asks about an applicant. Their reasons for hedging the truth can include wanting to help a friend get a job or, even, a desire to get rid of a bad employee (if the recommender works where the candidate is currently

employed and is seeking to leave).

Job Applicant Qualifications — Nontraditional Method: Internet/Social Media

The internet and social media have become some of the most utilized tools in the screening process and procuring employment talent. With more than one billion people on Facebook worldwide, the opportunities for job placement and referrals are endless (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2015). Social media have become the venue in which people self-promote and engage in status-building activities (Tham & Ahmed, 2011). More than 15% of current employees get their first job utilizing social media and over 92% of employers use or are planning to use social media for recruiting (Jobvite, 2014). The internet also allows applicants to apply for hundreds of jobs, domestically and globally, at one time. Gone are the old days of not knowing about employment opportunities in one state because applicants do not live in that state.

Employers are increasingly using the internet/social media as they realize its cost-savings benefits relative to searching for and screening candidates (Messiah, 2012). Some employers have reduced their recruitment and screening costs by 50% by using the internet/social media. Also, 65% of employers evaluate the character and the integrity of potential employees based on their social media pages (Messiah, 2012). They want to know if those people represent themselves professionally, thus representing the company in the same fashion.

Job applicants use social media to manage and increase their online presence to gain the positive attention of employers. They follow company postings on Facebook,

tweets on Twitter and updates on LinkedIn, for example. Many organizations have social media sites they mine for potential job applicants. These employers notice who is looking at and commenting on their social media pages, blogs, etc. If the person piques the employer's interest, the employer may try to learn about him or her via social media sites, such as LinkedIn or Facebook. While people may think employers only go to LinkedIn for hiring, in actuality, they go to almost all the social media sites when screening for prospective employees (Brooks, 2016).

There are downsides to applicants with employers being on social media. Behaviors that cause employers to not hire otherwise qualified candidates include: inappropriate or provocative photographs, information about drinking, bad-mouthing their previous company or fellow employee; discriminatory comments about race, gender, religion, and evidence of criminal behavior (Davidson, 2014). The internet/social media serves as part of employers' background check process for applicants.

Employers also find positive information about applicants on social media. Evidence of applicants' community service activities or participation in a popular social cause are just some examples of how social media can be positive. Unfortunately, less than one-third of employers on social media find content that makes them more likely to hire a candidate (Perkins, 2015).

Employers must weigh the legality of how they use social media applicant information to make hiring decisions. For example, can an organization reject applicants because their Facebook page says they are an atheist and that does not align with the company's corporate culture? Black and Johnson (2012) proposed that employers who

screen applicants via the internet/social media are potentially exposing themselves to unlawful discriminatory behaviors. That is, they may exclude (or include) candidates on the basis of online images, videos and posts that demonstrate the applicants to be members of protected classes, such as women, racial minorities, and disabled individuals. Or, employers could eliminate applicants on the basis of engaging in lawful activities, such as political protest. People's physical attributes and activities outside of work are not always evident from traditional screening mechanisms, but they are often easily discernible from posts, photos and videos on the internet. Employers may enact their personal (and, sometimes, illegal) biases by removing objectively qualified candidates from employment consideration on the basis applicants' online information.

According to Saylin and Horrocks (2013), employers can be held legally accountable for their hiring decisions if it is suspected that they used personal information that is considered protected by law (race, sex, religion, disability, etc.) to pass on an applicant. Thus, some employers say they do not use social media for screening, they only use it for prospecting (i.e. finding potential candidates that fit the job description) for talent. They want to limit potential employment discrimination lawsuits.

Screening Methods: A Black Box

The process by which employers use both traditional and internet/social media mechanisms to screen employees remains in question. It is not evident which screening methods are mostly likely and least likely to cause an employer to extend a job offer, nor is it clear as to which methods determine the immediate exclusion of a

candidate from the job and which methods help a candidate overcome an, otherwise, poor showing on another screening mechanism. Other questions include: when is the internet/social media utilized (if at all) in the screening process? Are a candidate's social media behaviors screened only once or is it on-going up to the point of hire? Finally, which traditional and internet/social media screening methods gives employers the best return on their screening investment and which gives the least? Why?

Data and Methods

Study Participants

Seventeen in-depth interviews with managers and executives from various companies located around the U.S. were conducted. All of the interviewees had decision-making authority in the hiring process at their organizations. Their job titles included President, Human Resources Manager, Director, Regional Manager, Vice President, and Sales Manager, etc. The average age was 44 and the study participants ranged in age from 32-60. The participants were 51% male. The respondents worked in industries, such as insurance, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, transportation, financial services, beauty, and energy. Their organizations ranged in size from 15 employees (one respondent) to three hundred or more employees (the remaining 16 respondents). All of the interviewees had at least 10 direct reports. With the exception of two respondents who worked for their firms less than two years, the participants worked for their organizations five or more years and had been in supervisory roles for at least five years. Therefore, the interviewees were experienced in evaluating applicants and making hiring decisions.

The sample was obtained utilizing the snowball sampling method. Researchers interview one subject who, then, provides additional contacts to obtain sensitive data that subjects, otherwise, would probably not share (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). In this study, an initial research subject provided access to the remaining research subjects. This investigation concerns the screening process utilized by employers, which involves sharing information that could expose them to legal or personal liability. Many employers would not be willing to participate in this kind of inquiry for those reasons. Therefore, the snowball sampling procedure was appropriate for this study.

Interview Methods

The authors employed qualitative interviewing to obtain in-depth employer perspectives regarding traditional applicant screening methods versus internet/social media. Qualitative methods are appropriate for obtaining and analyzing detailed information from respondents (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). Table 1 lists the questionnaire, which queried employers' usage of applicant screening mechanisms and their opinions regarding usefulness. The respondents received a verbal and written explanation of the study, which was to investigate employer screening mechanisms. They were informed that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed and that their real names or other identifying information would not be used in any publications resulting from the interviews. The subjects were not offered specific participation incentives, but were willing to participate on the basis of having been referred to the authors by other subjects. The interviews were conducted in-person, when possible, and

over the telephone. Each interview was approximately 45 minute to one hour.

Variations in the respondents' statements regarding their use of the screening mechanisms and their opinions of the mechanisms' usefulness to their hiring process were examined. These patterns were identified by way of entering the interview transcripts into Atlas Ti, a qualitative analysis program, and coding the interview responses based on definitions of key variables that were defined before data analysis. These variables were defined before analyzing the interview transcripts to ensure that the phenomena revealed in the data were appropriately identified and to ensure consistency in the coding. The key variables were resume, referrals, interviews, applications, recommendations, internet/social media and return on investment (ROI).

The authors conducted all of the interviews. However, a research assistant helped with coding the interviews in Atlas Ti. The responses were coded based on the predefined variables and then variations in the respondents' perspectives were identified. The research assistant also randomly analyzed different portions of the transcripts on her own to determine if their coding and conclusions were similar to the author's, which they were. Any disagreements were reconciled through an iterative process, ultimately resulting in an 82% percent of agreement.

Results

Internet/Social Media is Cheap

The interviewees utilized the traditional methods and the internet/social media to determine employees' attributes. The traditional methods incurred financial costs,

Table 1

Interview Questions

1. What methods of screening do you utilize for hiring of applicants? Resumes, job application, referrals, interviews, recommendation letters, internet/social media?
2. Are the other screening methods more or less useful than social media (social media presence/information from different social sites) for screening applicants? Please explain.
3. Which methods do you use more often? Which do you find more reliable/accurate? Why?
4. How do you define ROI for your screening (actual hiring, longevity of hire, income received from hire)? Please provide examples.
5. Which do you feel you receive a better return on investment (ROI) for your screening efforts? Why?
6. If you had to decide which screening method you rely on primarily, which would it be? Why?
7. What are your thoughts on the effectiveness of internet/social media in regards to your screening/hiring process?
8. How does your ROI from internet/social media compare to the other screening methods' ROI?
9. Has internet/social media helped significantly in your applicant screening process? If so, how? If not, why not?

such as paying recruiters to source resumes, time spent reviewing job applications, and time and money spent conducting interviews and formal background checks. However, the internet/social media was a low-cost and quick way to evaluate candidates.

“Once I get a resume that seems interesting, I immediately check out [the candidate] online. The internet lets me see if there are any red flags that appear right away and it costs me nothing to do a

Google search. It's a great low cost way to weed out people." —**Training Director, oil industry**

"We've been using the internet [to screen people] for about four years. People don't realize just how much time it takes from getting a resume to actually hiring someone. It's LONG, like a couple months or even longer. So, Googling [applicants] helps me avoid some hassles later on. Hassles are things like we were about to extend an offer to a guy, thought he'd be a great fit. His resume was great, interviewed great, clean background check. Well, we find out that he had posted on [a dating site] that he hated numbers and math....and we're hiring him to be an accountant! Some may think that that was none of our business, but sorry, his online persona did not fit with what he said in his interviews. We spend too much money to hire people who seem one way in person but another way online. Social media gives context to a candidate that you don't get from a resume"—**Finance Manager, financial industry**

"Using the internet to screen potential applicants after receiving their resume is important. It has helped me reduce the risk of hiring the wrong person. Your social media footprint validates who you are and what you tell people. If I read a resume and it doesn't align with their social media brand, I automatically get pushed away [from that applicant]." —**Regional Sales Manager, medical devices industry**

Age Matters

Though everyone utilized traditional and internet/social media screening methods, the sequence in which the respondents' used them was differed by age. That is, people who were over 46 tended to only screen candidates via

the internet once and it was usually after a first or second interview. They tended to not think of the internet as a major way to screen applicants and several acknowledged that their age and limited experiences with the internet/ social media were contributing factors.

“I will look at someone’s LinkedIn page and don’t care if they know I’m looking, because I’m trying to hire you, but that is my preference and will be after several rounds of interviews before you get to me. We don’t use social media for screening as company. It is just better to get a resume/references and start from there. Everything on social media can’t be trusted.” —**Sales Director, medical devices industry**

“I’ll look up people on LinkedIn, Facebook, or Google, but it’s usually just for junior staff, not senior staff. I usually do it after I’ve done a phone call [with the candidate]. I don’t why I don’t look up senior staff [on the internet], I guess it’s kind of an ageism. I’m old school and have to catch up with the digital world. They’re older so they won’t be on [social media] much. Like I’m thinking they don’t have much of a digital footprint, anyway since [people in her profession] usually don’t like being on the web because they don’t want clients knowing personal things about them.”—**Director, mental health industry**

“Social media is a good thing because you can get a lot of good information about the person without ever having to do interview. We probably don’t use it much [for hiring purposes] because of our age and we just don’t think of it first. For us, [proprietary screening technology] works. It comes in handy. We’ve hired people who didn’t do well on it and the bad behavior pops up later on. It’s pretty accurate.” —**Manager, spa industry**

However, the younger respondents tended to screen candidates online as soon as they received the resume or job application and the person seems qualified. Monitoring people online was a normal part of their day-to-day life and the recruitment/selection process was no exception. Three respondents also Googled candidates more than once during the screening process.

“Once [qualified applicant] has applied [for the job], I Google them right away. I want to see if their social media fits who their resume says they are. I also look at how their LinkedIn compares to, say, their Instagram. If it’s wildly different in a bad way, that’s a problem.” —**Sales Manager, pharmaceutical industry**

“I always look them up at least one more time before we make an offer and even afterwards. It’s hard to rescind an offer once it’s made, but we did it once. [The applicant] posted some inappropriate comments about our company. He talked about how hot the women were and we felt he was a potential sexual harassment lawsuit waiting to happen. We talked to legal and found a way to take our offer back.” —**Sales Manager, pharmaceutical industry**

“I won’t even offer them an interview if they don’t have some type of social media presence... LinkedIn specifically. If you have a blocked profile, you are put at the bottom of the pile for interviews, because what are you hiding? Only a fool would not use social media for screening. That is a free way of assessing that person and who they really are.” —**Agent, insurance industry**

“Using social media or the internet to screen applicants has increased with us. By the time they have actually been invited to the interview, they have

been researched online, as well as, their social media pages have been viewed. We need to know are you relevant and current.” —**Recruiter, oil & gas industry**

Good Referrals Trump All

All of the employers received the best return on their screening investment from referrals. This was followed by interviews, then the resume or job application, and then internet/social media, though a couple of respondents felt the resume/job application provided more value than the interview. References were required by all of the employers and candidate could be excluded if they received a poor reference or the reference had a bad reputation to the employer. But, references did not contribute to the decision to hire a candidate at all, unless the reference was known in a positive way to the employer.

“We go by referrals, first, not blind applications. So, basically, you need to be a referral [to get hired]. At the level for which I hired [management], I can’t afford too many mistakes. I’ve never had a referral not work out. We define return on investment by if they stay five or more years at the job or exceed productivity. Like we had a guy who wrote a lot of [financial] articles, way more than was required....I like interviews in person, but we also do them by Skype. I can tell a lot by how person walks in the room, shakes my hand. With Skype, it shows how prepared they are, like one guy had a bunch of financial books in the background and I could see them on camera. In Skype interviews, the interviewee sets the scene, in face-to-face interviews, [the employer] sets the scene.” —**Vice President, health care industry**

“[Referrals] are the most reliable. Now, I did have situation one time where a [person] I hired was rec-

commended by a good client. I invested in equipment and training for [her work] and she was fired after four months! But, still referrals provide the best return....Longevity is a good measure, if they stay at least two years....But, if the referral has a bad interview and just an okay resume, then I'm not hiring them because that's a double whammy.”
—**President, fitness industry**

“A resume tells you about their technical competence. It says if you can do the job. But it says nothing about your behavioral competency. I can verify a resume with a background check. People have been disqualified by the background check, too. I had a guy who said he had a [college] degree and he didn't.....I get the best return from referrals. Return on investment is their productivity, if they develop and deliver courses and reduce the amount of decentralized training because we are becoming more centralized. Also, if they stay about 2-5 years. Interviewing is second to referrals because, particularly with my job, my employees have lots of unsupervised time. I need to know how you show up. The job application gives the legal information that's pretty easily verifiable.....Anyone can make themselves look good on social media. [It's] most effective for non-managerial ranks. But for management jobs, behavioral competency is big, so we hired head hunters to look at them.”—**Training Director, oil industry**

“Recommendations are required, but don't really matter. Anyone can get someone to say something good about them. The absence of recommendations is more glaring than having them. But, if we don't like the person who is recommending someone or they have a bad reputation, it hurts the candidate. A lot.”—**Manager, insurance industry**

“Referrals are hard to come by, but they [give the

best return]. Recommendations don't have an impact if I'm not familiar with the recommender." — **Director, mental health industry**

"Referrals are the most reliable. They are more reliable than any other source out there. They allow me the chance to get a better picture of the employee. I just don't rely on social media or the internet." — **Recruiter, oil & gas industry**

"Absolutely, we use referrals. You can't get an interview without a strong one. Actually we require at least two from non-family people. They must be from someone you worked with recently and in the past. If you can't get these two things, then that probably means you were not really good at your job and most people didn't like you." — **Director, health & beauty industry**

Referrals Get Second Chances, Non-Referrals Don't

If the referral had a questionable social media presence or did not perform well during the first interview, he or she could still be considered for the job. Non-referrals were generally not offered such considerations; they were excluded on the basis of their internet presence, a mediocre resume or a poor interview. Only one respondent was willing to give candidates a face-to-face interview after a poor phone interview, but that was only if their resume and cover letter were stellar and they didn't exhibit any unprofessional online behaviors. According to the respondents in this study, a tarnished employment reputation can still warrant hiring consideration if the candidate is recommended by a known and trusted source.

"A [referral] had some things on Instagram, pictures of her holding alcohol, looking drunk. But since I knew [the referrer], I contacted him about it.

He assured me that was from years ago and that he would tell her to get rid of it [on the internet]. We measure performance by sales numbers and she ended up being a good hire. But, if I hadn't known [the referrer], she would've been cut [from consideration for the job]." —**Regional Manager, pharmaceutical industry**

"If I Google [a referral] and the internet paints a different picture than what they said at the interview, I'll ask [the applicant] about it. If they're not a referral and their internet is different than the interview then I won't hire them. " —**President, fitness industry**

"Referrals are the best. They're likely to do the best work and be collegial. But, I also like cover letters because it shows how people express themselves. It shows their clinical experience and if they will be an asset. If a referral's cover letter is not great or if I Google them and something comes up from years ago, I'll call probably still call them for them to explain...I'm less likely to do that if it's not [a referral]." —**Director, mental health industry**

"If I felt good about [an applicant], looked them up online, saw something crazy, then I'll ask [the referrer] about it before making a decision." —**Manager, insurance industry**

Not having an internet presence at all can also hurt being hired, especially if the candidate is not a referral.

One interviewee described his beliefs:

"Referrals are given the benefit of the doubt, they get a chance explain a situation. Not [non-referrals]. If I can't find a referral on the internet at all, I may still hire them. If they had a good interview and I felt they'd be an asset. I'm not hiring a [non-referral] who I can't find on the internet.

That's like hiring a ghost." —**HR Manager, transportation industry**

Internet/Social Media Screening Weeds In, but Mostly Weeds Out

Though the internet helped with hiring job candidates, respondents mostly used it to weed out applicants. The internet essentially served as a type of background check. Employers were generally looking for online images, posts and behaviors that were consistent with the referrer's opinion of the candidate (if the candidate was a referral) and consistent with the resume and/or application, and interview (if the candidate made it that far in the screening process). Lack of consistency between traditional screening mechanism content and internet/social media content was a basis for excluding applicants.

"I told my brother's friend to give me his resume, but his email address was [a sexual email moniker]. I told him to change it because anyone looking him up on the internet would see it and he'd have nothing. The internet is the greatest source of self-elimination for a job candidate." —**Human Resources Manager, beauty industry**

"Social media is effective if it's used right. I don't accept random Facebook or LinkedIn connections unless we are connected to mutual friends because that could be a potential [applicant] that I need to get rid of later on. Social media can actually boost someone's resume, but whether it's good or bad, [social media] needs to be consistent with the interview content and the job you're pursuing at the time. I had guy who was might've been a good salesman, but his LinkedIn profile was all about real estate and that's not what we do. He didn't get an interview." —**Regional Manager, pharmaceutical industry**

“When I was hiring for a certain position, I remember this one person that stood out, and not for the right reasons. Of course they had amazing referrals from people I know, as well as, great interviewing skills, but when I took a moment to look at their social media presence, it was bad. I didn’t hire that particular person because I tell all my employees that they are a direct reflection of me. If I want people to think of me as a swinger or weed head, I can do that on my own.” —**Sales Director, medical devices industry**

“Not having a social media presence makes me question your integrity. What are you hiding? If you are looking a job, you should at least have a LinkedIn account. If you don’t, then I will ask a lot more questions than I normally would, and always check their references and their references’ social media. I just don’t feel good about people without a social media presence.” —**Agent, insurance industry**

Though most of the respondents described the internet as showing applicants’ tarnished employment reputations, two described how the internet improved the applicants’ suitability for the job. In one case, an online search led to the applicant being offered more money than he or she, otherwise, would have been offered.

“We were going to make an offer [to an applicant]. But I saw online that he had published a lot of articles about the job. This were not on his resume. People were more excited about him. We increased the amount we were going to offer him by about \$10,000.” —**Finance Director, financial services industry**

“I think social media reinforces thoughts that people have anyway after an interview, for good or bad. Rarely does it change an opinion. I’ve looked up [an applicant] on Facebook and what I found just reinforced what I already thought about them....I hired her.” —**Manager, insurance industry**

“Social media gets to the real person. In essence, you get to sample their brand before having to commit to it. At the end of the day, isn’t this what marketing is all about? Branding yourself and learning to leverage this into new business and profits.” —**Agent, insurance industry**

“While doing a little background research on a potential employee, I found she had some very strong stances on certain political topics. I was leery of hiring her at this point. Once I meet her for her last interview, I asked her if she had anything she wanted to share. She proceeded to tell me all about her political ties and why she stood so firmly on those beliefs. It had a lot to do with a family situation and she had garnered a following to support this cause through her use of social media. She did this because before no one wanted to support this cause, but now that she was able to create her brand image of the cause, she had thousands of followers. I hired her, because in sales, if you can’t sell something to someone you know, you can’t sell. She sold her cause to thousands of strangers. She was going to be successful at this job.” —**Sales Director, technology industry**

Internet/Social Media Screening Helps Employers to Enact Personal (and Illegal) Biases

The internet/social media enabled the employers to discover information that is not usually on a resume or legally permissible to ask during interviews. Some respon-

dents openly admitted to using the internet to enact their personal hiring preferences, even preferences that are not legal reasons for excluding applicants from being hired.

“I prefer married people, people with kids. They’re more stable, more likely to stay at the job. I can easily find that out by Google....all else being equal, I’ll hire married people over single people.”—

Training Director, oil & gas industry

“I hired this one young man. He had very strong political opinions about everything, but the only way I knew this is because I searched through his social media sites. I can’t say I agreed with all of the, but I allowed him to be who he was. I might not do that with [another candidate with similar views].” —**Coach, sports industry**

Two respondents expressed concerns about personal hiring biases and legal liability with using the internet to screen candidates. They were cautious about online searches of job applicants and interacting with them via social media for those reasons.

“We look to see who has been looking at our [LinkedIn page] and we gain talent from there. But we have to be careful because you can contact someone who works for a vendor and then we get into a non-compete legal situation....I try not to just Google everyone because when you do that, you’re just looking for dirt, not really trying to get the best hire.” —**Director, transportation industry**

“We are keenly aware of the legal restraints that can come with using social media in the screening process. We have constant trainings on the how’s and how not to of using the web to screen candidates. It is very important that it is not ever perceived as not hiring a candidate solely because we

didn't like what they were wearing in a photo. Whatever reason we use, we have to document it and these documents are periodically audited for legal reasons. This is the system we use to ensure compliance to all laws surrounding hiring decisions." —**Director, technology industry**

Discussion

This study examined the process by which employers utilize traditional and nontraditional screening mechanisms to determine job applicants' employability and hire talent. The employers in this study utilized all of the traditional and nontraditional selection methods that were the focus of this investigation. They discussed the time commitment and financial costs of sourcing and evaluating prospective employees. For these reasons, they acknowledged the internet/social media as an inexpensive way to conduct a cursory background check on job applicants. However, the employers mostly used the internet/social media to weed out applicants, not to be more inclusive with their applicant pool.

The timing of when employers Googled applicants depended largely upon the age of the employer. Older employers usually only screened the applicants once and it was generally after a job interview. Younger employers tended to Google applicants when they received a resume that seemed interesting or if and when the candidate was referred to them (which sometimes preceded receiving the applicants' resume). They also screened applicants via the internet/social media several times during the hiring process, including after the candidate received a job offer. Their reasoning appeared to be familiarity with using the internet/social media to find out about people. The older

employers were not as accustomed to looking online for information about people as part of their everyday life, unlike the younger employers.

The interviewees in this study also wanted to determine if the applicant's attributes that they displayed in the resume, job application, job interview and recommendation letters was similar online. The respondents did not necessarily deem the internet/social media as a reliable way to learn any substantially new information about an applicants, instead, it determined consistency in an applicant's qualifications. Lack of consistency between an applicant's qualifications in the traditional screening mechanisms and internet/social media was reason to not hire a candidate. The employers viewed them as questionable applicants. An exception was if the prospective applicant was a referral.

The employers stated that they received the best return on screening investment from referrals. Referrals stayed at the job longer and performed better than non-referrals. The next most useful screening tool was interviews, followed by the resume or job application, and then the internet/social media. Recommendations did not help candidates get the job at all, unless the interviewer already knew the recommender and had a favorable view of him/her. Referrals were preferred over non-referrals by all of the interviewers and, importantly, were more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt, even if they performed poorly during the interview and/or had a questionable internet/social media presence. In these cases, the employers would ask the referrer about the discrepancy and, if the explanation was satisfactory, the referral could still get the job. No such consideration was given to non-

referrals, who were automatically excluded from getting the job for similar transgressions.

Finally, several employers admitted to using internet/social media information about an applicant to enact their personal hiring biases, even biases that are not legal reasons to include or exclude prospective hires. They freely acknowledged that the internet/social media afforded them the ability to find out information that is not usually on a resume nor is legally permissible to ask during a job interview. They admitted to using that information to make hiring decisions. Only two employers explicitly disavowed engaging in such behaviors. They stated that such actions were not only illegal, but also against their professional morality.

Implications and Future Research

In this study, traditional screening mechanisms provided a greater return on employers' selection process than nontraditional mechanisms. However, the internet/social media is actively utilized by employers, mostly to confirm what they already think about applicants and/or to weed them out. This benefits applicants whose internet/social media reputation already favorably fits the employers' view of them via traditional selection mechanisms. However, it hurts applicants whose internet/social media presence may contain false information that does not fit the employers' view of them via traditional screening mechanisms, particularly if the applicant is not a referral. According to the interviewees in this study, only referrals are given the benefit of the doubt should their internet/social media presence seem questionable. However, sometimes people's internet/social media may contain informa-

tion that they did not post and is also not true. Non-referrals don't get the chance to address that issue with prospective employers because they are automatically excluded from further consideration for the job. Again, this hurts the non-referrals employment prospects and puts them at a career disadvantage relative to referrals. This finding also suggests that all job applicants should regularly monitor their internet/social media presence to know what information is online about them.

As noted in other studies, some employers screen prospective employees via the internet/social media to find out information that are not legally permissible reasons to include or exclude candidates from a job. This is a downside of internet/social media screening, as it enables employers to enact their personal and, sometimes, illegal biases for and against job applicants. This behavior by employers also hinders people from obtaining jobs for which they are objectively qualified and can limit the quality of companies' pool of potential new hires. It is self-defeating for employers to engage in these behaviors if they truly seek to hire the best talent for their company. A way to limit this behavior is for companies to be transparent in all aspects of their hiring process, including all internet searches about job candidates. It is well-documented that referrals are more likely to be hired than candidates with similar skills, but are not a referral (Brown et al., 2014; Parks-Yancy, 2010). However, this study goes further by demonstrating that referrals are also given the benefit of the doubt, even when the quality of their employability is in question. If a referrer vouches for the candidate, he/she can still be hired, even if the employer discovers a negative attribute about the applicant during the screening process.

Non-referrals don't get that consideration. Thus, referrals actually get the opportunity to improve their employability by way of getting the job, despite a questionable past, whereas non-referrals do not. This increases the employability of referrals and provides them with a career advantage over non-referrals. It is understandable that employers want employees with whom they have similar contacts that can vouch for their character/work ethic. However, this preference facilitates a cumulative career disadvantage for applicants who don't have contacts to connect them to employers. They are likely to have more difficulty getting a job and advancing upward than job applicants whose contacts are connected to people with hiring authority (Parks-Yancy, 2010). Future study could examine how referrals from social media relationships or via social media outlets impact the hiring process.

This study provided a valuable contribution to the literature regarding employer selection practices. However, it has limitations. Namely, the sample was small and not randomly obtained, therefore the results are not generalizable to the larger U.S. population. A future study would include a larger sample size that would allow a broader view of the various types of hiring organizations, as well as, other levels of individuals that participate in the hiring process. Additional studies could investigate how companies are increasingly including more guidelines about the appropriate manner to utilize the internet/social media in the hiring process (i.e. what can be included/excluded; what is considered quality hiring information; what should not be used to protect the company from lawsuits, etc.). Another future study could include the perspective of employees' and their view on the various hiring

practices of various employers. It would serve employees to understand what information sources are being utilized the most to bring the highest return in their career search.

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