# Prospective Employers are Watching You: Social Networking and Your Next Job

Travis J. Schneider & Justin R. Feeney

**Western University**

## ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter increasingly influence how we choose to interact with others. Organizations have chosen to be a part of this interaction, often by using SNSs as part of their selection systems. Although only limited research has investigated the validity of such usage, employers continue to believe that SNSs can be used to draw important inferences about an applicant's character. Unfortunately, some employers have breached applicants' privacy by requesting their username and password for their SNS account(s) in an effort to attain SNS information. The current article discusses the potential advantages and disadvantages of using SNS information for selection, and offers practical suggestions on what prospective job applicants should do with their SNS account(s) when they enter the job market.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les sites de réseautage sociaux (SRS) comme Facebook et Twitter ont de plus en plus d'influence sur la manière dont nous choisissons d'interagir avec les autres. Les organisations ont choisi de faire partie de cette interaction, souvent en utilisant les SRS dans le cadre de leurs systèmes de sélection des candidats. Même s'il n'y a eu que peu de recherche sur la validité de cette utilisation, les employeurs continuent de croire que les SRS peuvent être utilisés pour dégager des inférences importantes au sujet du caractère d'un candidat. Malheureusement, certains employeurs ont violé la vie privée des candidats en demandant leur nom d'utilisateur et leur mot de passe pour leurs comptes de SRS dans un effort pour obtenir de l'information du SRS. L'article actuel décrit les avantages et les désavantages possibles d'utiliser les renseignements dans les SRS pour la sélection des candidats et offre des suggestions pratiques sur ce que les candidats à un poste devraient faire avec leurs comptes de SRS lorsqu'ils arrivent sur le marché du travail.

Since the advent of the first social networking site (SNS; e.g., Facebook and Twitter) in the early 2000's, social media has had a major influence on how we choose to interact with others. However, individual users are not the only ones making use of SNSs. Organizations have also been taking advantage of SNSs as cost-effective human resource tools. For instance, the Employers Resource Council (ERC) surveyed organizations in Northeast Ohio to see how SNSs were being used (ERC Survey Briefing, 2009). Forty-nine percent of organizations used SNSs for networking and relationship building, 35% for branding/marketing, 35% for external communication, 31% for reaching new customers, 27% for recruiting, 22% for sales, etc. These percentages indicate that organizations have been interested in making use of SNSs for multiple purposes. However, the authors did not specifically mention one important purpose of SNSs that has recently gained popularity: personnel selection (Grasz, 2009). The purpose of the current article is to discuss the potential advantages and disadvantages of using SNS information for selection, and to offer practical suggestions on what prospective job applicants should do with their SNS account(s) when they enter the job market.

The use of SNSs for selection may lead to major benefits, which may explain their popularization as a selection tool. For example, their use incurs relatively little cost, and they offer an abundance of unique information about job candidates. This allows even small organizations the opportunity to attempt to verify information contained in résumés, reference letters, interviews, and other selection information sources typically drawn from applicants. Previously, advanced background checks were unavailable to small organizations due to their substantial costs. Now, those making hiring decisions may have access to "detailed information that would allow them to draw conclusions or make inferences about the applicant's character or personality that might not be as easily or economically obtained through traditional

means" (Brown & Vaughn, 2011, p. 220). For example, interviews are expensive to conduct. Instead of (or in addition to) asking applicants about their hobbies and interests in an interview, an employer can easily find their hobbies and interests listed on their SNS profile pages. Also, because there is a near-unlimited amount of space to describe this information on SNSs, more of this information may be available than in résumés or curricula vitae, which are often limited by space restrictions.

From an organizational standpoint, the use of SNSs for personnel selection is not without its drawbacks. There has been an increasing concern that some of the information (e.g., protected group status, political affiliations) used from SNSs may not be work-related (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Grasz, 2009; SHRM, 2011). This raises two concerns. The first is that making hiring decisions using non-work-related information may violate laws or regulations that protect applicants from discrimination. For example, SNSs may reveal protected applicant characteristics (e.g., age, race, sex, marital status, religious affiliation), which could warrant a Canadian Human Rights Commission complaint if this information were collected (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2007). Recently, human resource professionals reported an increase in their legal concerns about discovering information about protected applicant characteristics from SNSs (SHRM, 2011).

The second issue is that the validity of using SNSs for hiring decisions is unknown, as there has been little research on the topic. If SNS information proves to be unable to predict job performance, then organizations using SNSs for selection might make poor hiring decisions. Ultimately, organizations may find it difficult to defend their hiring decisions in legal cases whereby qualified applicants are denied using an unproven measure (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009; Kluemper, Rosen, & Mossholder, 2012), especially when this issue is compounded by access to protected information such as race or age. As a result, the percentage of organizations using SNS information for selection has recently dropped despite the increasing popularity of these sites (SHRM, 2011).

Another validity concern is the potential for people to distort their information on SNSs. Researchers are already showing that people use SNSs to convey desired impressions to others (Cunningham, 2013), and this would likely only be enhanced when applicants become more aware that employers might view their SNS activities. As the use of SNSs becomes more

widespread in the hiring process, job seekers are likely to become more aware of their SNS activities, removing negative information and placing an extra emphasis on positive traits. In this regard, we can learn from faking in personality assessment, where research reveals applicants consistently receive more favourable personality scores than do job incumbents or the general population (Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006). Moreover, applicant faking has been shown to impact hiring decisions (Christiansen, Goffin, Johnston, & Rothstein, 1994) and decrease the ability of personality measures to predict job performance (Peterson, Griffith, & Converse, 2009; Peterson, Griffith, Isaacson, O'Connell, & Mangos, 2011). More problematic is that research shows that faking increases dramatically once used in the workplace, as job incumbents coach new entrants on how to beat the system (Landers, Sackett, & Tuzinski, 2011), and it seems probable that this would apply to SNSs. Subsequently, even if SNSs were to have some initial prediction of job performance, this may decrease fairly quickly once companies begin using it.

Regardless, some organizations employ aggressive methods to collect SNS information for selection. For instance, a new controversial trend has been documented in the popular press, whereby potential employers request the SNS login information of applicants (McFarland, 2012; McGuigge, 2012). Asking for a job candidate's login information is more prevalent among public agencies, (e.g., law enforcement, 911 dispatchers, security; McFarland, 2012). However, other organizations also ask for login information, ask the candidate to add a human resource manager to their account, or ask the candidate to log into their SNS account during an interview (McFarland, 2012). Whereas the request of SNS login information is typically a violation of the SNSs' terms of service (O'Dell, 2012) and has been condemned as a privacy violation by law professionals (McGuigge, 2012), there are currently no laws in place in Canada or the U.S. to deal with such a situation (although there is some new legislation in progress in the U.S.; McFarland, 2012). As a result, applicants are left in an awkward position when SNS login information is requested. Even knowing that these requests are a privacy breach, what would you do if an organization requested access to your SNS pages, or even worse yet, your login information? Would you grant access so that you appear to be a "team player," or would you walk away? The answers to these questions all re-

**TABLE 1**

**Suggestions for Modifying your Social Networking Site(s)**

| WHAT TO DO | WHAT TO AVOID |
| --- | --- |
| Try to demonstrate that you have a good knowledge of the SNS features available. This will show employers that you have a good grasp of technology. | Remove inappropriate comments or photos posted by others. |
| Be aware of the number of status changes you make. Some jobs (e.g., marketing) might encourage frequent SNS use, and a higher number might be seen as a positive. | Try to reduce the frequency with which you post while at work or during business hours. Even if your organization is okay with you posting, it may be perceived negatively by prospective employers as a sign of poor work ethic. |
| With your posts and photo uploads, try to show your personality and interests. For example, if you're family-oriented, demonstrate this with photos of your family. This will make it easier for employers to judge your fit with their organizations. | Avoid posting any radical political positions. In general, it may be best to avoid showing any strong or extreme political or religious affiliations, even if there is nothing objectively wrong about holding these positions. |
| Use content on your SNS profile to show your interests in books, TV shows, movies, music, and hobbies. Employers can also use this information to judge your fit with their organizations. | Avoid frequently complaining in status updates and absolutely avoid criticism of employers, co-workers, or clients. Also, avoid venting about work-related frustrations. You will appear negative and potentially neurotic to prospective employers. |
| Try to demonstrate positive communication skills by making sure your posts are comprehensible and by showing that you have a versatile vocabulary. | Avoid poor grammar and spelling. This demonstrates weak communication skills. |
| Create congruence between your SNS and your résumé (e.g., education, achievements, experience). | Do not mention looking for other employment if currently employed. |
| If applicable (e.g., LinkedIn), try to have other people post good references about your previous job performance. This may be applicable to Facebook and Twitter as well through informal posts. | Remove and avoid adding unfamiliar and questionable contacts. Although boosting the number of friends may increase perception of social skills, employers may make judgments based on the friends that you keep and gain access to your profile through these accounts. For example, your associate from high school that makes public posts about marijuana use may reflect negatively on you and (s)he may even share undesirable information about you. |
| Try to provide evidence of your qualifications. For example, post your awards and accolades. Also, update your SNS information regularly to highlight your latest accomplishments. | Avoid posting any references to sex, alcohol, or drug use. This includes references to your own usage or those of others you know. Do not have any provocative/inappropriate information (photographs, comments, etc.). This includes not posting racy or suggestive song lyrics. |
| Try to be creative and interesting with your posts to demonstrate that you are creative and intelligent. Appropriate, humorous quotes, photos, pictures, and posts are a great way to showcase your creativity. | Do not disclose personal information that you are not comfortable with being made public or being made available to an employer. For example, job applicants may not want their marital status or birth date (i.e., age) available or their current employers to know that they are seeking employment. |
| Use your SNS to demonstrate that you employ discretion, even when friends and colleagues try to encourage you to divulge information online. | Never share confidential or sensitive information from employer(s), past or present. |
| Cross link your SNSs. For example, link your Facebook with you Twitter account by adding your Twitter to your profile page. | Avoid poor grammar and spelling. This demonstrates poor communication skills. |
| Create a professional group to establish relationships with other professionals such as potential references, recruiters, and leaders. | Remove and avoid any inappropriate activity, this includes:<br>— references to alcohol, narcotics, and sex<br>— unprofessional language (swearing) and discriminatory comments (racist, sexist language, or homophobic language)<br>— references to illegal activities or misconduct (even violations of university rules)<br>— association to groups that are linked to any of the above |
| Make use of available privacy settings. This might include making some posts only available to close friends and family, or making positive information openly available to search engines. Sites such as Facebook give you some control over what information is shared and with whom. | As a general rule, do not post any information that you would not want your parents to see. You will not be compromising your ability to show your personality, your interests, and, in general, your life through your SNS(s). |
| Google your name often to help monitor what information has been made public. | |

late to your own personal moral and financial motivations.

This dilemma leaves job applicants with a practical problem: what should they do with their SNS accounts when they enter the job market? This issue is of considerable importance to students who are entering the professional job market for the first time and who may be more likely to have detrimental postings on their SNSs. The obvious question is why not just delete your account? In McGuigge (2012), social networking expert Amber MacArthur argues that privacy does not exist on SNSs. Some would even argue that the lack of privacy necessitates deleting your SNS account. Removing or deactivating accounts would remove any potentially damaging SNS information. Another common solution is to change your real name to a pseudonym that would be unknown to your employer and to effectively try to conceal your personal information from prospective or current employers.

However, there are some limitations to deleting or masking your SNS account(s). The first is that employers might think it unusual that you do not have SNS account(s) given their immense popularity and employers may become suspicious that you are concealing pertinent information. The second is that masking accounts might give job applicants a false sense of security and lead to unfiltered pages that, if found, could be detrimental. For example, an employer might be able find you by e-mail address, telephone number, an association to a university or group, or an association to fellow alumni or to former colleagues. Effectively, hiding your online identity creates a dangerous 'cat and mouse' game with companies that attempt to find your online identity. Moreover, if given the job, your pseudonym will likely become apparent if you start adding your colleagues. The third and most important consideration is that trying to hide your identity is a defensive approach that overlooks the many benefits of a strong professional online identity. Removing or hiding SNS account(s) assumes that employers will only use SNS information to find potential applicants who do not meet the minimum requirements and will remove them from the hiring pool (known as "screening"; see Catano, Wiesner, Hackett, & Methot, 2010, for more information on screening procedures). However, we argue that there are many benefits to maintaining a professional online identity. For the remainder of this paper, we discuss these benefits and provide practical tips to make the most of SNSs.

The first benefit is that employers may use SNS information to discover positive traits or qualities that may help you secure employment. For example, employers might be able to assess your communication skills, your teamwork skills, your ability to impact your peers, your personality (e.g., Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability), or your relevant experience based on your past accomplishments. In other words, you can use your SNS to showcase your positive qualities that might otherwise be difficult to reveal in an interview or resume (McGuigge, 2012). Therefore, rather than deleting your account, we would recommend that you "clean up your act" and use your SNS accounts to make yourself appear more attractive to potential employers. Rather than viewing SNSs as potential liabilities, turn them into assets.

A second major benefit of maintaining an active LinkedIn or Facebook account is that if made public, these results are often easily accessible from search engine results. Cross-referencing real accomplishments with SNSs is a great way to bolster your online identity that may help you get the job and may actually assist employers in verifying those accomplishments. Moreover, although this is a new area of research, it seems intuitive that employers are likely to be impressed when a simple search of an applicant's name yields numerous accomplishments and positive hits in search engine results. It is important to note that deleting or masking accounts will minimize your online presence, including both positive and negative information.

We have prepared a list of simple and practical tips that you can use to bolster your SNSs and improve their appeal to prospective employers. Please see Table 1. This list was compiled from scholarly articles and from news articles (see references marked with an asterisk). Although a number of these suggestions rely on common sense, we urge you to go through your SNS accounts while looking at the list. A quick assessment of how one's SNS information is being portrayed does not necessarily coincide with how it is actually being portrayed. That is why it is important to go through one's SNS account and carefully review the information contained within. From our personal experience, upon careful review of their SNS information, individuals are often shocked about what and how much content they have made publicly available.

In sum, applicants are faced with two major choices in advance of a job search: to delete or hide their accounts from prospective employers, or to turn their SNSs into positive tools that highlight their pos-

itive qualities and bolster their online identity. We advocate for the second approach and have provided a list of practical tips that applicants can follow to make the most of their SNS accounts. Until legal guidelines are imposed concerning the use of SNS information in selection and more is known about the validity of SNSs in selection decisions, we believe that applicants should take a proactive approach and make the most of these tools. However, if applicants are unwilling to adhere to a professional standard when using and posting information on SNSs, measures such as deleting your account might be a better choice than letting potential employers find negative information.

## References

*Bachel, B. (2010, January). Work that network: Social networking can help you along your education and career paths. *Career World*.

Birkeland, S. A., Manson, T. M., Kisamore, J. L., Brannick, M. T., & Smith, M. A. (2006). A meta-analytic investigation of job applicant faking on personality measures. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 14*, 317-335. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2389.2006.00354.x

*Bohnert, D., & Ross, W. H. (2010). The influence of social networking web sites on the evaluation of job candidates. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 13*, 341-347.

*Brown, V. R., & Vaughn, E. D. (2011). The writing on the (facebook) wall: The use of social networking sites in hiring decisions. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 26*, 219-225.

*Buffardi, L. E., & Campbell, W. K. (2008). Narcissism and social networking web sites. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*, 1303-1314.

Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2007). *A guide to screening and selection in employment*. Retrieved from http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/pdf/screen.pdf

*Carter, H. L. Foulger, T. S., & Ewbank, A. D. (2008). Have you googled your teacher lately? Teachers' use of social networking sites. *Phi Delta kappa International, 89*, 681-685.

Catano, V.M., Wiesner, W.H., Hackett, R.D., & Methot, L.L. (2010). *Recruitment and Selection in Canada* (4th Ed.). Toronto, ON: Thomson Nelson.

Christiansen, N. D., Goffin, R. D., Johnston, N. G., & Rothstein, M. G. (1994). Correcting the 16PF for faking: Effects on criterion-related validity and individual hiring decisions. *Personnel Psychology, 47*, 847-860. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.1994.tb01581.x

*Clark, L. A., & Roberts, S. J. (2010). Employer's use of social networking sites: A socially irresponsible practice. *Journal of Business Ethics, 95*, 507-525.

Cunningham, C. (2013). *Social Networking and Impression Management: Self-Presentation in the Digital Age*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

*Doyle, A. How to get started with social networking. *About.com*. Retrieved from http://jobsearch.about.com/od/socialnetworkingtips/a/social-networking.htm

*Edbear. (2011, March 21). The benefits of social networking. *Masuwerte.com*. Retrieved from http://masuwerte.blogspot.com/2011/03/benefits-of-social-networking.html

ERC Survey Briefing. (2009). *Social Media in the Workplace*. Mayfield Village, OH.

*Forsythe, K. Why employers are using social-networking sites to screen candidates. *Office Arrow*. Retrieved from http://www.officearrow.com/software-and-web-tools/exposed-why-employers-are-using-social-networking-sites-to-screen-candidates-oaiur-4936/view.html

*Grasz, J. (2012, April 18). Thirty-Seven percent of companies use social networks to research potential job candidates, according to new CareerBuilder Survey. *CareerBuilder.com*. Retrieved from http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?id=pr691&sd=4%2F18%2F2012&ed=4%2F18%2F2099

*Guizado, R. (2011, February). Facebook: Implications for PA students and the job market. *CAPA*. Retrieved from http://www.capanet.org/uploadedFiles/Content/Resources/Jan_feb2011_Students.pdf

*Havenstein, H. (2008, September 12). One in five employers uses social networks in hiring process. *Computerworld*. Retrieved from http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9114560/One_in_five_employers_uses_social_networks_in_hiring_process

*Herold, C. (2010, May 26). Employers and social networking sites. *Suite 101*. Retrieved from http://cathy-herold.suite101.com/employers-and-social-networking-sites-a237226

*Karl, K., Peluchette, J., & Schlaegel, C. (2010). Who's posting Facebook faux pas? A Cross-Cultural examination of personality differences. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 18*(2), 174-186.

Kluemper, D. H., & Rosen, P. A. (2009). Future employment selection methods: Evaluating social networking web sites. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 24*(6), 567-580.

Kluemper, D. H., Rosen, P. A., & Mossholder, K. W. (2012). Social networking websites, personality ratings, and the organizational context: More than meets the eye? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 42*, 1143-1172. doi: 10.1111/j.1559-1816.2011.00881.x

Landers, R. N., Sackett, P. R., & Tuzinski, K. A. (2011). Retesting after initial failure, coaching rumors, and warnings against faking in online personality measures for selection. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 96,* 202-210. doi:10.1037/a0020375

McFarland, S. (2012, March 20). Job seekers getting asked for Facebook passwords. *CBSNews.com.* Retrieved from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-501363_162-57400518/job-seekers-getting-asked-for-facebook-passwords/?tag=contentMain%3BcontentBody

McGuigge, M. (2012, March 28). Potential employer wants your Facebook password? Just say no. *The Globe and Mail.* Retrieved from http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/career-tips/%E2%80%A6/article2384039/

*Nakagawa, T. (2011, September 13). How to avoid getting fired by Facebook. *Lifehack.* Retrieved from http://www.lifehack.org/articles/featured/how-to-avoid-getting-fired-by-facebook.html

*NCSF. (2010, December 15). Employers using social networking sites to screen job candidates. *NCSF.org.* Retrieved from http://www.ncsf.org/blogarticles/0-18/employersusingsocialnetworkingsitesscreenjob-candidates.aspx

Peterson, M. H., Griffith, R. L., & Converse, P. D. (2009). Examining the role of applicant faking in hiring decisions: Percentage of fakers hired and hiring discrepancies in single- and multiple-predictor selection. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 24,* 373-386. doi:10.1007/s10869-009-9121-5

Peterson, M. H., Griffith, R. L., Isaacson, J. A., O'Connell, M. S., & Mangos, P. M. (2011). Applicant faking, social desirability, and the prediction of counterproductive work behaviors. *Human Performance, 24,* 270-290. doi:10.1080/08959285.2011.580808

*Pierce, T. A. (2007). X-posed on MySpace: A content analysis of "MySpace" social networking sites. *Journal of Media Psychology, 12.*

*Ross, C., Orr, E. S., Sisic, M., Arsenault, J. M., Simmering, M. G., & Orr, R. R. (2009). Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior, 25,* 578-586.

Society for Human Resource Management (2011, October). *SHRM Research Spotlight: Social Networking Websites and Online Search Engines for Screening Job Candidates.* Retrieved from http://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Articles/Documents/PART%202_Social%20Media%20Flier_FINAL.pdf

*Strehlke, C. (2010) Social network sites: A starting point for career development practitioners. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 47,* 38-48.