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Using Social Network Sites to Investigate Employees in the Hospitality Industry

Madera and Chang, Using Social Network Sites to Investigate Employees

ABSTRACT

The use of social network sites to investigate potential employees is a new practice with few studies examining how employers use social network sites for screening applicants. The purpose of this paper was to investigate how employers use social network sites for the selection process. Participants were industry recruiters attending a career fair; 50% of the recruiters reported using social network sites to screen applicants. Negative information from the internet was rated as more important than positive information of the applicants. Recruiters use social network sites more for management level and front-of-the-house employees than entry level and back-of-the-house applicants.

Keywords: Selection process, Recruiting, Social network sites, Positive-negative asymmetry effect, Employee level

Social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have been increasingly popular over the past years. Many of these sites have mechanisms for sharing personal information, such as pictures, favorite music and videos, blogs, other links, and displaying interests and personal demographic information (e.g., age, ethnicity, religion, sexual-orientation, marital status). Given the popularity and availability of accessing such personal information, many US employers have started to use social network sites to screen or investigate job candidates. In particular, a recent study found that 45% of US employers were using social network sites to find information about job candidates, and another 11% of employers had plans to start using them for screening applicants (Shea & Wesley, 2006).

A reason for the use of social networks is that employers might want to verify information provided by applicants. For example, a recent report from ADP Screening and Selection Services found that 44% of applicants lied about their work histories, 41% lied about their education, and 23% falsified credentials or licenses (Levashina, 2009). Other reasons for using social network sites for selection purposes are that social network sites have some advantages over traditional human resource tools, such as being “inexpensive, easy” (Jacobs, 2009) and are perceived to be reliable sources (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009). Thus, social networks provide employers with additional information they can use to screen applicants.

Although this phenomenon has become increasingly popular, only a small body of research has been done in this area, with the majority focusing on the legal issues. What organizational factors predict the use of social networks in the selection process and how employers use social network sites have not been examined by past research. Therefore, the

purpose of this research was to examine what organizational factors predict the use of social network sites for screening applicants and how these sites are used by recruiters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational variables related to the use of social network sites

Although little research has examined the organizational factors that would lead recruiters to use social network sites, strategic human resource management (SHRM) theory states that organizational factors like company size, financial resources, and formal policies affect what and how human resource tools are used for selecting employees (Baron & Armstrong, 2007; Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney 1991). For example, large companies would have the number of employees and the financial resources to invest time and effort on non-traditional selection efforts, such as using the internet to screen applicants. In addition, the number of recruiters available would also be related to the use of social network, because investigating applicants on the internet would be both time consuming and costly (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009). A formal policy restricting the use of the internet for screening employees would as influence whether recruiters use social network sites to investigate applicants.

H1: Company size (H1a), the number of recruiters (H1b), the financial resources allocated to selection costs (H1c), a formal organizational policy (H1d), and the number of selection tools (H1e) will be related to the use of social network sites for selection purposes.

Positive-negative asymmetry effect

Following this line of research, employees represent an important resource for organizations and selection of employees plays a key role in developing a competitive advantage. The information that job candidates post on social network sites might be sorted by how positive and

negative the information is perceived. Research demonstrates that 35% of employers reported that the content they found on social networking sites caused them to reject candidates, however, only 18% of employers report that they hired applicants because of the positive information the candidates posted on their profile (Careerbuilder.com, 2009). This finding is consistent with a phenomenon known as the positive-negative asymmetry effect (Baumeister, Bratslavshy, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), which suggests that negative information usually is more influential than positive information. Positive-negative asymmetry effect has been found in different domains. In particular, negative emotions, negative feedback, and negative information are processed more thoroughly than positive ones. Peeters (2002) suggested that when people express the negative stimuli they use stronger words than when they express the positive stimuli.

Another possible factor that drives employers to search for negative information of applicants on social network sites is “negligent hiring”—when employees cause harm to the third party (i.e., customers) employers can be legally responsible. Hence, employers try their best to investigate more information of applicants to avoid negligent hiring. However, in the selection process, different laws (e.g., Title VII, ADA,) limit information that might be necessary for employers (Byrnside, 2008). Even past employers are afraid to provide negative information now, because of the increasing litigations, in which employers can be accused of defamation for providing negative information about employees to their new employers. Employers’ lack of information from traditional selection tools and fear of negligent hiring can be reasons why employers use social network sites and look for negative information on applicants (Sprague, 2007).

H2: Employers who use social network sites for selection purposes value negative information more than positive information.

Employee level

Madera and Chang: Using Social Network Sites to Investigate Employees

In hospitality operations, there are many different levels of jobs, from front desk clerks and housekeepers to department managers and general managers. According to the scope of authority (Lussier, 2009), there are generally two major levels of employees in an organization, management level (e.g., top management, middle management, first-line management) and entry level (e.g., operative employees). The compensation of entry level employees such as servers, attendants and housekeepers is not calculated by salary; they are paid by the hour and are therefore labeled hourly employees. The employees who are paid by salary are called salaried employees, usually consisting of management level employees.

The recruiting cost of management positions is relatively higher than it of the entry level positions. Also management turnover is more expensive and has a greater impact other than that of the line employee (Stalcup, 2001). Stalcup (2001) stated four reasons of avoiding management turnover: first, management turnover can lead to line employee turnover; second, most of line employees are part-time and planned to leave; third, managers take their job more as a career, therefore, logically, both hotel and individuals invest more on managers; fourth, less management turnover could help hotels to be better informed as to the causes of the employees' termination. On the other hand, online searching is a time-consuming job, using the social network sites to search every entry-level candidate is not practical. Thus the difference between entry level (hourly) employees and management level (salaried) employees may influence the use of social network sites to investigate employees.

H3: Employers use social network sites more for management level than entry level applicants.

Hospitality firms are service providing organizations; therefore service delivering is an important aspect for management. Teboul (2006) defined that service and activities in a service providing organization can be separated by the “line of visibility”, which means any service and activities that are invisible to the customers are behind the line and called “back stage”. On the other hand, service and activities that can be seen by customers are called “front stage”. Following Teboul’s definition, we separate employees as “front-stage employees” and “back-stage employees.” Previous research has demonstrated that customers have different perspectives of front-stage employees and back-stage employees (Mangold & Emin, 1991). Logically, since front-stage employees more frequently interact with customers, more attention is given when firms recruit them. Therefore, it is likely employers will use social network sites to explore front-stage applicants’ information.

H4: Employers use social network sites more for front-stage applicants than back-stage applicants.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The participants were hospitality industry college recruiters (40%), human resources personnel (30%), and operations and general managers (30%) attending a university career fair as their company recruiter representative. About 80 participants from 80 different companies were provided with a paper and pencil version of the questionnaire, which resulted in 50 completed questionnaires. The average age of the participant was 34.3 (SD = 9.1). Participants average years working in the hospitality industry was 13.8 (SD = 8.9) and 7.8 years (SD = 3.4) working in recruiting. Participants’ tenure at their current work was 5.6 (SD = 4.7) years. In regard to the type of company, lodging/hotel represented 54%, food and beverage 36%,

travel/airline 8%, and spas 6%. 10% reported having multiple service facilities (e.g., a hotel with a restaurant and/or a spa).

Questionnaire

Using social network sites. The participants were asked if they currently use a social network site to investigate applicants. The responses were coded as no = 0 and yes = 1.

Company size. Size of the company was measured using an item from Rynes and Rosen (1995) that uses the number of employees as a proxy for company size. The options were less than 50 employees, 50-99, 100-499, 500-999, 1,000-9,999, and 10,000 or more.

Number of recruiters. Participants were asked to estimate the number of recruiters that work in their office.

Financial resources. Participants were asked to estimate the percent of financial resources that the company allocated to recruiting and hiring employees in the last year. The options ranged from “1%-5%” to “more than 50%.”

Formal organizational policy. The participants were asked to indicate if their company has a formal policy restricting their use of social network sites for investigating and selecting employees. The responses were coded as no = 0 and yes = 1.

Number of selection tools. To measure the number of selection tools available to the recruiters, the participants indicated whether their company uses the following for screening and selecting employees: drug tests, personality tests, cognitive/intelligence tests, emotional intelligence tests, interviews (phone/face-to-face), assessment centers, resume screening, work sample tests, and criminal/background checks. The measure was the total or sum of all the tools that were selected by the participant.

Official company social network account. The participants were asked if their current company has an official company social network account. The responses were coded as no = 0 and yes = 1. In addition, the participants indicated which social network account is used by selecting one or more of the following sites: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Youtube, Myspace, and Foursquare. They were also allowed to write another site that was not included in our measure.

Future use of social network sites. Participants that were not using social network sites for the selection process were asked if they had plans to use a social network site to investigate applicants in the future. The responses were coded as no = 0 and yes = 1.

Time of use. For participants using social network sites for selection purposes, they were asked to indicate at what point of the selection process they use social network sites to screen applicants. The options were: during the application process (pre-interview invitation), after the phone interview, after the first face-to-face interview, after a second interview, and after the applicant is hired.

Negative information. To measure the importance of finding negative information of applicants, participant completed a three item measure on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not all important, 5 = very important). The items were: “inappropriate pictures of the applicants,” “inappropriate information of the applicant,” and “negative information of the applicants.” The scale had adequate reliability; alpha reliability was .95.

Positive information. To measure the importance of finding positive information of applicants, participant completed a three item measure on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not all important, 5 = very important). The items were: “appropriate pictures of the applicants,”

“appropriate information of the applicant,” and “positive information of the applicants.” The scale had adequate reliability; alpha reliability was .81.

Employee level. Participants were asked to indicate which level of employee was most important for using social network sites to investigate applicant. The options were: “management/supervisor level,” “entry-level,” or “both.”

Customer interaction level. Participants were asked to indicate which type of employee was most important for using social network sites to investigate applicant. The options were: “employees with a high frequency of customer interaction,” “employees with a low frequency of customers,” or “both.”

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, 78% of the participants reported that their current organization has an official social network account, with 50% using more than one social network site. Of the possible social network accounts used by the organization, 60% reported using Facebook, 48% reported using LinkedIn, 30% reported using Twitter, 16% reported using Youtube, 8% reported using Myspace, and 6% reported using Foursquare. Only 18.6% reported that their company has an official policy regarding the use of social network media for screening purposes.

In addition, 50% reported using social network media to screen or investigate applicants. Of those who do not currently use social network media to screen or investigate applicants, 32% reported that they intend to do so in the future. When asked at what stage of the selection process they use social network sites to screen applicants, 50% indicated during the application process (pre-interview invitation), 20% after the phone interview, 18% after the first face-to-face interview, 8% after a second interview, and 4% after the applicant is hired.

To examine what organizational factors are related to recruiters using social network sites for selection purposes, correlations were conducted. As shown in Table 2, the size of the organization was positively related to using social network sites for selection ($r = .25$). Having a formal policy on the use of social network sites for selection was also related to using social network sites, such that having a formal policy was related to not using social network sites for selecting employees ($r = -.25$). No other organizational variable was related to using social network sites for selection purposes. Thus, hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance with use of social network sites (yes or no) as the independent variable and the measures of positive and negative information importance as the dependent variables was conducted. The results showed that recruiters who use social network sites for selection purposes are more likely to value negative information of applicants ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.01$) than recruiters who do not use social network sites ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.34$); $F(1, 48) = 4.89, p < .05, \eta^2 = .12$. There were no differences on the positive information measure between recruiters who do ($M = 3.72, SD = .91$) and do not ($M = 3.54, SD = .98$) use social network sites for selection purposes; $F(1, 48) = .33, p > .05, \eta^2 = .01$.

To test Hypothesis 2 that employers who use social network sites for selection purposes value negative information more than positive information, a Paired-Samples *T*-test was conducted. A significant effect was found, $t(24) = 2.44, p < .05$, such that recruiters who use social network sites for selection purposes rated negative information ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.01$) more important than positive information ($M = 3.72, SD = .91$). A Chi-square was conducted to test Hypothesis 3. As expected, the results showed that recruiters use social network sites more for management level than entry level applicants, $\chi^2(2, N = 25) = 6.08, p < .05$. A Chi-square was also conducted to test Hypothesis 4. As expected, the results showed that recruiters use

social network sites more for front-stage applicants than back-stage applicants, $\chi^2(2, N = 25) = 8.69, p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current research was to examine what organizational factors predict the use of social network sites for screening applicants and how these sites are used by recruiters. The results showed that 50% of the participants used social network sites for selection purposes, with Facebook being the most commonly used site. The size of the organization and not having a formal policy was related to using social network sites for selection purposes. Thus, these results were consistent with SHRM theory in that organizational factors influence what and how human resource tools are used for selecting employees (Baron & Armstrong, 2007). Recruiters also reported using social network sites mostly during the application process (pre-interview invitation) and after the phone interview.

As expected, the recruiters who use social network sites for selection purposes rated negative information more important than positive information. This finding is consistent with the positive-negative asymmetry effect (Baumeister et al., 2001), which suggests that negative information is more influential than positive information. In addition, recruiters use social network sites more for management level and front-stage applicants than for entry level back-stage applicants. Thus, these results suggests that management applicants and employees with more customer interactions are more thoroughly investigated using social network sites than other types of employees.

The current research has potential limitations. First, this sample is based on a convenient sample consisting of recruiters attending a college career fair. Second, the sample size was low;

although significant findings were found. Third and last, many of measures were one-item, which limits the analysis of reliability.

Despite these limitations, this research has important implications for the hospitality industry. First, this research suggests that recruiters do indeed use social network sites to screen or investigate applicants. This has important legal implications because personal information that is often protected by employment laws is available on social network sites. For example, Title VII, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act restrict the use of religious affiliation, age, disability, and pregnancy when making employment decisions. Second, this research has implications for selection research and theory because the validity of using social network information to screen applicants is unknown. Third and last, this research has implications for applicant privacy, because research shows that applicants perceive privacy violations as unfair and leads to negative perceptions of the organization (Truxillo, Steiner, & Gililand, 2004).

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Table 1. The use of social network sites for selection purposes.

Questions about use:	Frequency
Does your company have an official social network media account or profile (for example: Facebook, LinkedIn)?	78% - yes
Do you use any social network sites on the internet to investigate applicants (For example Facebook, LinkedIn)?	50% - yes
If not, do you have any plans to use social network media in the future to investigate applicants?	32% - yes
Does your company have a formal policy to use social network media for recruiting purposes?	18.6% - yes
Questions about the sites they use:	
	Frequency
Facebook	60%
LinkedIn	48%
Twitter	30%
Youtube	16%
Myspace	8%
Foursquare	6%
Ning	0%
Tagged	0%
Questions about the time of their use:	
	Frequency
During the application process (pre-interview invitation)	50%
After the phone interview	20%
After the first face-to-face interview	18%
After a second interview	8%
After the applicant is hired	4%

Table 2. Correlations of the organizational factors and the use of social network sites.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Using social network sites for selection	--					
2. Company size	.25*	--				
3. Number of recruiters	.09	.26*	--			
4. Financial resources	-.08	.04	-.17	--		
5. Formal organizational policy	-.25*	-.29	-.07	-.08	--	
6. Number of selection tools	.18	.08	-.16	.29*	-.02	--

Note. Using social network sites for selection and formal organizational policy were coded: 0 = no, 1 = yes. * $p < .05$.