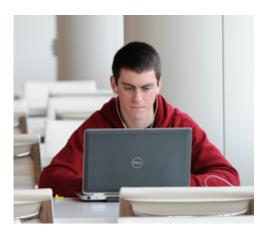# Companies look at wrong things when using Facebook to screen job applicants

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The study found companies may be looking for the wrong things on social media profiles, and weeding out good job candidates.

(Phys.org) —Employers are increasingly using Facebook to screen job applicants and weed out candidates they think have undesirable traits. But a new study from North Carolina State University shows that those companies may have a fundamental misunderstanding of online behavior and, as a result, may be eliminating desirable job candidates.

Researchers tested 175 study participants to measure the personality traits that companies look for in job candidates, including conscientiousness, agreeableness and extraversion. The participants were then surveyed on their Facebook behavior, allowing researchers to see which Facebook behaviors were linked to specific personality traits.

The results would likely surprise many corporate human resources officials.

"Companies often scan a job applicant's Facebook profile to see whether there is evidence of drug or alcohol use, believing that such behavior means the applicant is not 'conscientious,' or responsible and self-disciplined," says Dr. Lori Foster Thompson, a professor of psychology at NC State and co-author of a paper describing the study. However, the researchers found that there is no significant correlation between conscientiousness and an individual's willingness to post content on Facebook about alcohol or drug use.

"This means companies are eliminating some conscientious job applicants based on erroneous assumptions regarding what social media behavior tells us about the applicants," says Will Stoughton, a Ph.D. student at NC State and lead author of the paper.

And companies that are looking for extroverts – such as those hiring for sales or marketing positions – may be doing themselves an even worse disservice. The study found that extroverts were significantly more likely to post about drugs or alcohol on Facebook. So companies weeding out those applicants are likely to significantly limit the pool of job candidates who are extroverts.

However, the researchers did find one online indicator strongly correlated to the personality traits that employers look for. Study participants who rated high on both agreeableness and conscientiousness were also very unlikely to "badmouth" or insult other people on Facebook.

"If employers plan to keep using social media to screen job applicants, this study indicates they may want to focus on eliminating candidates who badmouth others – not necessarily those who post about drinking

beer," Stoughton says.

More information: The paper, "[Big Five Personality Traits Reflected in Job Applicants' Social Media Postings](#)," was published online July 1 in Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking and was co-authored by Dr. Adam Meade, an associate professor of psychology at NC State.

Abstract

Job applicants and incumbents often use social media for personal communications allowing for direct observation of their social communications "unfiltered" for employer consumption. As such, these data offer a glimpse of employees in settings free from the impression management pressures present during evaluations conducted for applicant screening and research purposes. This study investigated whether job applicants' (N=175) personality characteristics are reflected in the content of their social media postings. Participant self-reported social media content related to: (a) photos and text-based references to alcohol and drug use; and (b) criticisms of superiors and peers (so-called "badmouthing" behavior), were compared to traditional personality assessments. Results indicated that extraverted candidates were prone to postings related to alcohol and drugs. Those low in agreeableness were particularly likely to engage in online badmouthing behaviors. Evidence concerning the relationships between conscientiousness and the outcomes of interest was mixed.

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