

Social media content matters for job candidates, researchers find

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Job recruiters are less likely to select candidates who appear to be too self-involved. In their study, Penn State researchers showed this Facebook image, along with two possible text posts, to job recruiters to gauge their likelihood of hiring the candidate. "Day 6 of my birthday week. I wouldn't usually post this bad of a picture, but my birthday week continues. Finally getting presents from Grandma. It's a great week to celebrate yours truly. I'm looking good at 22. My big brown eyes are still breaking hearts." vs. "Happy 84th Grandma. She's always been there for us!" Credit: Michael Tews, Penn State

Applying for a job? Don't come across as self-absorbed on your Facebook page. Don't express your strong views on potentially

controversial topics either. According to researchers at Penn State, job recruiters are less likely to select candidates who appear to be too self-involved or opinionated in their social media posts. The team also found that recruiters are less likely to hire employees who post content suggestive of drug or alcohol use.

"In 2018, 70% of employers reported looking at [social media sites](#) to help them evaluate potential employees, and almost that many—60%—eliminated candidates on the basis of negative content," said Michael Tews, associate professor of hospitality management, citing a recent report by CareerBuilder. "It's important for job candidates to be aware of how they portray themselves in social media."

Tews noted that little is known about how much weight hiring managers give to potentially negative social media content. Therefore, he and his colleagues investigated the effects of three potentially negative topics—self-absorption, opinionatedness and alcohol and drug use—on hiring managers' decision making.

The team recruited 436 hiring managers from a variety of organizations, 61% of whom were employed in the hospitality industry and the remainder in industries ranging from information technology to healthcare. The researchers gave participants a scenario to read depicting a hypothetical job candidate who answered interview questions well and exhibited enthusiasm, but also appeared to be prone to job hopping. Next, they asked the participants to review components of the candidates' Facebook profiles and to rate their employment suitability.

Each of the participants was randomly assigned to view one of 16 different Facebook profiles showing either a male or female exhibiting self-absorption or not, opinionatedness or not and alcohol and drug use or not. After reading these profiles, the hiring managers evaluated the candidates' employment suitability by providing an assessment of person-

organization fit and an overall candidate evaluation. The team's results appeared on Dec. 10 in the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*.

The researchers found that self-absorption negatively impacted recruiters' perceptions of candidates' employment suitability and that self-absorption was more important than opinionatedness or drug and [alcohol use](#) in driving these negative perceptions.

"Social networking sites are often lamented as incubators of self-absorption, motivating people to tell others about their every deed and thought," said Tews. "It could be that hiring managers view individuals who are more self-absorbed and focused on their own interests to be less likely to sacrifice for the benefit of other employees and the organization."

The team also found that opinionatedness negatively affected perceptions of employment suitability.

"Social networking sites have given rise to unprecedented numbers of individuals expressing extreme and controversial ideas in a public forum," said Tews. "People who post divisive subject matter may be viewed as more argumentative and less cooperative. Additionally, their views could run counter to those of hiring managers, which may influence managers' beliefs in candidates' qualifications for jobs."

Finally, the team found that content suggesting alcohol and drug use negatively affected hiring managers' perceptions of employment suitability, although the effect was much smaller than for self-absorption and opinionatedness.

"The [social media](#) content we showed hiring managers was fairly benign; there was no reference to binge drinking or actual drug use," said Tews.

"One possible reason for the relatively small effect alcohol and drug use content is that hiring managers may perceive the content as relatively normal. It is also possible that people have become accustomed to references to marijuana in the United States as more states have legalized its consumption for both medicinal and recreational use."

The researchers conclude that individuals should refrain from posting content on [social networking sites](#) that suggest self-absorption, opinionatedness and alcohol and [drug](#) use during the job search process.

"From the employer perspective, hiring managers should be trained on how best to use social networking content in making selection decisions," said Tews. "To maximize the benefit of using social networking content for selection purposes, organizations should set guidelines for what content is relevant and should be examined, specify what content is irrelevant and potentially discriminatory and develop standardized rating systems to make the evaluation process more objective."

More information: Michael J. Tews et al, The effects of negative content in social networking profiles on perceptions of employment suitability, *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/ijsa.12277](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12277)

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