

# Chapter 2

## Social Media as a Personnel Selection and Hiring Resource: Reservations and Recommendations

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**Abstract** Employers are often using Internet searches, social networking websites, and social media to examine detailed public information about job candidates, and sometimes private information about these job candidates as well. Such social media prescreening and human resource (HR) selection practices may have the potential to offer value-added information above and beyond that which is assessed using more traditional HR selection methods. However, details concerning the legality and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of these social media screening methods are only now emerging. Here we examine the legality, standardization, reliability, and job-relevance (i.e., validity) of job candidate data obtained via social media, along with reservations regarding this practice. We also provide recommendations for HR practitioners in using social media for selection purposes, should they choose to do so and hopefully with an awareness of the caveats that we provide. Suggestions for future research on social media HR selection practices are also discussed.

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## 2.1 Introduction

In May of 2015, an anonymous software engineer had to choose between two jobs with San Francisco tech companies, Zenefits and Uber. Unsure of which to select, he posted his dilemma on Quora, an online venue where people ask questions and others answer. One of the people who saw his posting was Parker Conrad, the CEO of Zenefits. Conrad told the engineer that he should go work for Uber, because Conrad was revoking the job offer. Notably, Conrad suggested that the engineer was not a good fit for Zenefits, as he values people who are action-oriented and decisive, rather than hesitant, and if someone was debating about whether they want to work at Zenefits, that would be a “bad sign” (Petroni, 2015).

The above scenario really happened and is a prime example of the “Wild West” world of personnel selection that is occurring in the realm of social media. There are clearly different ways in which one can interpret this particular event. Some may not fault the CEO of Zenefits for withdrawing a job offer based on a candidate’s indecision with respect to joining the company—after all, a company may want someone who will be engaged and committed from the outset of an employment contract and has enthusiastically decided to choose that company as its future employer. Of course, such an unquestioning desire to work at a company *may* signal, or be a manifest indicator of, such potential commitment and enthusiasm. The candidate’s indecision and/or questioning between two potential employers *may* indicate a lack of such enthusiasm. Alternatively, the job candidate’s actions could be indicative of desirable employee traits, such as taking one’s time to question various options and also listening to others’ opinions regarding those options, and Conrad’s actions could have been overly hasty in rejecting the candidate for his web-based inquiry.

However, the question that is of importance and relevance to personnel selection is whether social media assessments of various sorts are related to job performance and what other implications might such practices have for organizations. In the current example, the withdrawing of the job offer and thus the rejection of the job applicant based on his social media posting could very well have been based on job-irrelevant information, and thus ill-advised from a personnel selection standpoint. In all likelihood, the CEO of Zenefits was attempting to draw conclusions of person-organization fit, or rather misfit, from the social media posting, but such inferences from social media *may* very well be inaccurate and thus lead to poor HR hiring practices.

In the current chapter, we will examine the issues of whether social media is a valuable and legal source of information about job candidates. First, we will provide an overview of what social media is and how it is currently being used as a selection device. We will also provide a brief comparison of how it differs from and is similar to more traditional selection devices. Next, we discuss the laws relevant to using

social media for selection. In this section, we make an important distinction between whether (or under what circumstances) it is legal to even use social media for selection, vs. whether considering the content of social media can be legally defended. We then discuss the potential usefulness of social media from the perspective of traditional psychometric properties, including standardization, reliability, and validity, also with particular attention paid to the legal issues. Finally, we provide guidance as to why, and why not, to use social media for selection and detail best practices for those managers and human resource (HR) professionals who wish to use social media in selection.

## 2.2 Overview of Social Media as a Selection Device

The evaluation or assessment of social media or social networking websites (SNWs) is a relatively recent development in the arena of personnel selection, but over last 10 years or so, it has become somewhat mainstream. For example, a society for human resource management (SHRM, 2013) study found that 20% of the participating organizations surveyed used SNWs for screening, with another 12% planning to use SNWs. This is not a trivial amount of use for a single, intended predictor of job performance as cognitive ability tests are used by approximately 16–20% of employers, and approximately 42% use aptitude tests (Rogelberg, 2006; Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology, 2001). However, about 68% of the SHRM (2013) study respondents indicated that they have never used SNWs for screening job candidates and do not plan to, a percentage which has stayed roughly consistent since 2008. This is interesting, suggesting that the use of SNWs for personnel selection has leveled out somewhat, and that perhaps SNW screening has not become the panacea that it was once touted to be. However, here it should be noted that the SHRM (2013) survey may represent a more HR-sophisticated audience than other organizational audiences or populations who might also make organizational hiring decisions. For example, according to Stoughton, Thompson, and Meade (2015), the use of Google or other social media screens by organizations in general often ranges from 27% to roughly 65%.

In particular, the SHRM survey indicated that employers seem to have more concerns about legality and job-relevance of evaluating the information on SNWs than they did in 2008. For example, in 2008, 54% of the respondents who did not use SNWs for screening indicated that they had “concern[s] about legal risks/discovering information about protected characteristics”; by 2013, 74% of the respondents shared that concern. Concerns about the job relevance of the information obtained from SNWs also increased from 36% in 2008 to 63% in 2013 and concerns about whether the SNWs provide information about candidate fit for the organization also increased from 26 to 61% over that same time period.

In considering these findings, it appears that perhaps HR community members, or those HR professionals with enhanced training and education, have begun to decide that social media might not be as useful for making inferences regarding the future performance of job candidates as once believed, and that its use for such a

purpose carries greater legal risks than originally assumed. The SHRM (2013) study findings with respect to the most common websites used may support this supposition. For example, LinkedIn remains the most commonly used SNW for screening (92%, up from 85% in 2011), and use of professional or association SNWs has also increased (from 9% in 2011 to 14% in 2013). In contrast, use of Facebook and MySpace for screening has declined over that period (from 78% to 58% and from 13% to 4%, respectively). However, we should note that the reduced use of MySpace, for example, could be due to the more general decline in use of that site, and the decline in the use of Facebook might be due in part to increased use of privacy settings by users, reducing its usefulness for employers. However, Twitter use for screening purposes rose from 11% to 31% from 2011 to 2013, which could be due to its greater openness than Facebook or MySpace, as well as greater familiarity with Twitter by organizations. Thus, although use of more job-relevant SNWs appears to be on the rise, we cannot necessarily conclude that employers are using the more personal SNWs (e.g., Twitter) less for screening purposes. At the very least, recent evidence suggests that the 20% base-rate of SNW use for selection purposes (SHRM, 2013) is comparable with the base-rate of situational judgement test use (23%), personality testing (22%), and interviews with behaviorally anchored rating scales (26%; Meinert, 2015).

Though again, surveys of possibly less sophisticated HR populations appear to show rather high use rates, and perhaps as high as 65% (Stoughton et al., 2015). Indeed, we suspect that managers who have the power to hire and assess applicants and yet are less familiar with employment laws and standard HR practices will be highly likely to take the route of the CEO of Zenefits because (a) it is so easy to, for example, Google a job applicant at this point and thus (b) is very tempting to do so. In fact, we would go so far as to assert that it may very well be fun and entertaining for the assessor to conduct such web-based searches on potential future work colleagues, and thus the 65% found by Stoughton et al. (2015) may very well be closer to the norm of the use of social media for selection purposes.

We consider the greater use of job-oriented websites when it is used for assessment to be a positive development, given the concerns that we detail in the following sections. Specifically, in the remainder of this chapter, we address the various legal issues of using SNWs for selection, as well as the psychometric and ultimately the very practical issues of whether any reliable and job-relevant information can be gleaned from SNWs. We also provide a series of recommendations and best practices for using social media in selection and conclude with suggestions for future research in this area.

### **2.3 Legal Issues of Using Social Media for Selection**

In examining whether social media should be used from a legal perspective, it is important to make a distinction between whether evaluating social media for screening is legal or not, or under what conditions it may be considered, vs. whether use

of the *content* in social media can be legally defensible. We should note here that we are primarily focusing on US Federal law, although some important issues that cross national borders may be raised. We should also note that our discussion here is also largely with reference to the dominant platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, although the concerns enumerated here will also be applicable to various other platforms (e.g., MySpace).

### ***2.3.1 Laws Relevant to the Legality of Using Social Media in Selection***

Our first question is whether examination of social media for use in selection is legal. In this respect, the major issue revolves around violations of job applicants' privacy. Certainly, there are many things that individuals post on SNWs, whether illegal, embarrassing, or simply personal in nature, which they would like to keep private, and SNWs have also responded by updating the privacy settings (Mgrditchian, 2015). Many of these things that individuals wish to keep private are things that employers would like to learn about prospective employees, whether to determine if the candidate lacks job-relevant skills, would be a performance problem, could represent a liability, or simply fits with the organization.

Given that job candidates can make their SNW profiles private or inaccessible, some employers turned to requiring job candidates to disclose their usernames and passwords as part of the screening process. For example, several years ago the Maryland Department of Corrections requested that applicants login to their SNW accounts so an interviewer could scroll through, ostensibly looking for indications of gang connections (Sullivan, 2012). Although such a practice likely violates the SNW terms, some employers persisted in this practice. As a result, at least 18 states have passed legislation that prohibits employers from asking for access to current or prospective employees' personal social media accounts, and another 28 states are considering such laws or have them underway (Wright, 2014). For example, a recent law review made an analogy between requiring job candidates to disclose their private SNW account login information to requiring the disclosure of "...whether they are in a relationship, contents of their recent correspondence matters between family and friends, whether they have children, what their political thoughts are, their social agendas, and a list of books and movies they have read and watched" (Lusk, 2014).

However, there is currently no national legislation that broadly protects the privacy of SNW users from employers, although it has been proposed and struck down at least twice (Wright, 2014). There are other federal laws that apply in specific cases, however. For example, the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution provides privacy protections to public employees. This is not an unlimited right to privacy, however, as the government employer could have cause to view an employee's SNW, as in cases of harassment, defamation, trade secrets, etc. (Naito, 2012), and it is possible that screening of applicants' SNWs might also be justified.

With respect to private employers, there is legal debate as to whether privacy torts provide protection for users of SNWs. In particular, the tort of “intrusion upon seclusion” may provide protection for users’ expectation of privacy in social media (Lusk, 2014). Although some courts have recognized this expectation of privacy, others have not. The central debate seems to be on the concept of “seclusion,” which depends on whether a user has “a reasonable expectation of privacy in information that has been shared with some, yet kept private from the public” (Lusk, 2014). Thus, under tort law, there may be some privacy protection, but it is by no means guaranteed.

Other laws that are not explicitly about privacy nonetheless are also relevant here. The Stored Communications Act (SCA; a part of the Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986) was created to provide privacy protections comparable to those of the Fourth Amendment in online communications (Feuer, 2011), and thus is potentially applicable to both public and private employees. Specifically, the SCA prohibits “intentional and unauthorized access to online stored communications” (Lusk, 2014). In particular, the SCA was intended to stop theft of data by hackers, but could also apply to searches of SNWs for information that the user intended to be private (Juffras, 2010).

Compliance with the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) is also increasingly a concern for employers in using SNWs for screening purposes. The FCRA “promotes the accuracy, fairness, and privacy of information in the files of consumer reporting agencies” (Federal Trade Commission, 2015), where a “consumer reporting agency” is “any person which, for monetary fees ... engages ... in the practice of assembling or evaluating consumer credit information or other information on consumers for the purpose of furnishing consumer reports to third parties...” (Federal Trade Commission, 2012). The FCRA is relevant to HR practice insofar as individuals must give consent for reports to be given to employers, and individuals must be informed if information in their credit file or another type of consumer report has been used to deny them employment, insurance, or generate another adverse action. Individuals also have the right to know what information about them is in the files of a consumer reporting agency and to dispute incomplete or inaccurate information. Consumer reporting agencies also must correct or delete information determined to be inaccurate, incomplete, or unverifiable and may not report outdated negative information (Federal Trade Commission, 2015).

Thus, the FCRA comes into play when an employer contracts out the screening of SNWs to a third party (e.g., companies such as Social Intelligence) that would be considered a consumer reporting agency. In this case, the FCRA requires that job candidates provide their consent before a background check can be conducted by any consumer reporting agency (Ebnet, 2012), and if a candidate receives an adverse employment decision on the basis of such a check, notice must be provided to that candidate (Lusk, 2014). As third-party screening may be becoming more common given concerns about discrimination and standardization issues (as discussed in the following sections), many employers may nonetheless be violating the FCRA by failing to realize that the FCRA does apply to such employment-related checks as well.

Finally, employers need to be particularly cautious when considering international hires. Other nations have even more restrictive privacy regulations, including the European Union's Data Privacy Directive (Davison, Maraist, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012). With respect to screening of applications using social media, the Data Privacy Directive requires, among other things, that European applicants give explicit permission for searching SNWs (see Dowling, 2009; Massey, 2009). Insofar as organizations become increasingly global in orientation, we should expect the Data Privacy Directive to become more of an issue when conducting assessments of SNWs for screening purposes. Of particular issue would be the fact that avoiding the use of such social media information for the screening of European applicants, done in order to prevent violating the European Union's Data Privacy Directive, while assessing such information for applicants who are US citizens, could potentially be a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 based on national origin (i.e., disparate treatment in the hiring process).

### ***2.3.2 Laws Relevant to the Legality of Using the Content of Social Media in Selection***

Thus, even if it is determined to be legal to evaluate social media content for selection purposes, the question remains as to whether the content obtained on SNWs is legal to consider in selection. In particular, concerns in this area revolve around violations of the major US civil rights laws that affect private employers, namely Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, amended in 2008. These three laws protect individuals from discrimination on the basis of their class of race, color, religion, sex, national origin (Title VII), age 40 and over (ADEA), and disability (ADA). When considering social media, it is quite clear that a variety of protected class information is readily available on SNWs. For example, pictures of a job candidate posted on LinkedIn or Facebook can reveal not only sex and race, but also color and even age. A candidate's affiliations or postings can provide details as a candidate's membership in any of these protected classes, including national origin (e.g., membership in cultural societies or clubs), religion (e.g., church membership), age (e.g., high school reunions, dates of college graduation), and possibly disability (e.g., postings about "awareness days"; see Disabled World, 2015). Even a platform such as Twitter, which relies on short texts for communication, rather than on rich detail (e.g., as with Facebook), can communicate a great deal of protected class information, via not only the content of the tweets but also potentially the use of certain phraseology that is indicative of age, race, national origin, etc.

In addition, a more recent law, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) of 2008, prohibits discrimination on the basis of genetic information, including "information about an individual's genetic tests and the genetic tests of an

individual's family members, as well as information about the manifestation of a disease or disorder in an individual's family members (i.e., family medical history)" (EEOC, 2015). Insofar as individuals post information about their health or the health of their family members online (e.g., "please pray for my mother who is having surgery for breast cancer"), the content of these posts could fall under the protection of GINA. A hiring manager who views such posts and decides not to interview or hire a candidate with a genetic condition or whose family members have medical condition could thus be liable under GINA.

Employees of the US Federal Government have additional protections under the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, including protection from discrimination on the basis of marital status, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and conduct not adversely affecting job performance (US Securities & Exchange Commission, 2015). Marital status and political affiliation, like age, are often readily available from the candidate's profile. Sexual orientation can be determined from one's memberships or postings, or even inferred from one's "likes." Moreover, individuals post information or pictures of a variety of legal activities in which they participate, and which do not necessarily affect job conduct, which nonetheless might be viewed negatively by a hiring manager.

In the above discussion, we have focused on the possibility of disparate treatment (i.e., intentional discrimination) based on protected class membership. However, adverse impact is also a concern here. In particular, adverse impact can occur when there are group differences (based on protected class status) in the use of social media or in the use of certain SNW platforms. Adverse impact can also occur when there are group differences in the evaluations of candidates' SNW profiles. This topic will be discussed in greater detail later, when addressing the question of criterion-related validity.

Beyond the civil rights laws and Civil Service Reform Act, additional protections of the content of SNWs may be had under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). We see this as a particularly difficult area for employers when evaluating the content of social media for selection. Many employers assume that if they are not a unionized workplace, then they do not need to be concerned with the provisions of the NLRA. Nothing could be further from the truth. First, employers are prohibited from refusing to hire job applicants based on their membership in a union, or their union activities or sympathies under Section 8(a)(3) of the NLRA. Thus, if a job candidate posts information about union membership or even union sympathies on their SNW, evaluating such information in screening the candidate could violate the NLRA.

Moreover, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has clearly stated that the NLRA "...protects the rights of employees to act together to address conditions at work, with or without a union. This protection extends to certain work-related conversations conducted on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter" (NLRB, 2015a). Specifically, if employees engage in protected concerted activity, then they are covered under the NLRA. However, not all speech meets the standards to be protected concerted activity. Specifically, "concerted" refer to whether multiple employees were involved in the activity; this could be "two or more employees acting

together to improve wages or working conditions” or a single employee who “involves co-workers before acting, or acts on behalf of others” (NLRB, 2015b). “Protected” activity is activity that seeks to benefit other employees, such as improvements in pay, safety, working hours, workload, etc., and is not simply in the form of a “personal gripe.” Protected activity also must not involve reckless or malicious behavior (e.g., sabotage, threats of violence) that can result in a concerted activity losing protection under the NLRA (NLRB, 2015b).

Most of the current issues surrounding protected concerted activity under the NLRA in social media involve terminations or discipline (as well as the legality of employer policies on social media use). However, insofar as employee postings on SNWs might also be used for determining who would receive a promotion (i.e., an internal selection decision), if the posting met the standards for protected concerted activity, then the organization might also run afoul of the NLRA. Thus, employers should take care to abide by the NLRA when considering social media in their hiring and promotion decisions.

### 2.3.3 *Summary*

Here we must acknowledge that managers may be tempted to search for job applicant information on SNWs, believing that such a search would not be detected by anyone, even though the search might lead to an illegal employment decision. However, we should make several important points. First, this issue is not unique to SNW screening, as oftentimes applicants have no way of knowing why they were turned down for a job. For example, applicants may be turned down for illegal, discriminatory reasons based solely on their resume content. Gender bias based on the applicant’s name on the resume has been demonstrated (cf. Davison & Burke, 2000), and racial bias has been found based on names on resumes as well (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Thus, employers may use SNWs for screening and “get away with it,” but this concern is not unique to SNW screening.

Second, we believe that it may become more difficult for employers to search for information on applicants anonymously. For example, Facebook users can set privacy settings to limit who sees their profiles, many LinkedIn users can see who has looked at their profiles, and Twitter lists a user’s followers. Third, if an employer conducts a search without the applicant’s knowledge, and the applicant subsequently sues for discrimination, there may still be records of the search in the computer system, such as in the browser’s history, and possibly in servers and SNW systems, that could provide evidence of the web-based search.

Finally, our concern with the use of SNWs for screening goes beyond the question of whether they are legal to use—we consider the primary concern to be whether using these sites provides an employer with reliable and valid (i.e., job-relevant) information. In other words, we are not simply recommending that employers avoid using these sites for screening in order to avoid lawsuits. We assert that employers should not use these sites in order to avoid making bad business

decisions, namely incorrect applicant selections and false applicant rejections, based on unreliable information that has not been proven valid.

Having cautioned the reader as to the various laws relevant to screening using social media, in the next section we address the question of whether useful (i.e., job-relevant) information can be obtained by evaluating social media. This question is of importance for two primary reasons: if job-relevant information cannot be obtained from a SNW, then (1) the employer has no defense against a charge of adverse impact, and (2) why is the employer evaluating social media at all if it is unhelpful for improving selection decisions?

## **2.4 Potential Usefulness of Social Media as a Selection Device**

When investigating the potential value of any selection technique, several aspects should be of focus, including a sound theoretical rationale for why the technique may be relevant to the job, consistency of scoring, various forms of reliability, and various forms of validity (Binning & Barrett, 1989; Gatewood, Feild, & Barrick, 2008). It is likely, in most instances, that SNWs have been used for selection with little consideration of these factors. Here we explore what is known about the psychometric properties of SNW screening, with a focus on validity and related issues.

### **2.4.1 Standardization**

Standardization is a key issue in understanding many aspects of how SNWs might be used in personnel selection. We first note the likely differences among platforms and uses as well as types and varying amounts of information available to personnel decision-makers. This key issue begins to shed light on many concerns related to the reliability and validity of SNW assessment.

Standardization is the extent to which the scoring, content, and administration of a selection measure are consistent across applicants, locations, and administrators (Gatewood et al., 2008). SNW screening likely lacks standardization on all of these aspects, as much screening is often performed in an unstructured manner. First, a lone screener (e.g., an individual manager or HR representative) typically reviews the applicant's SNW, *without* using established criteria for evaluating the webpage's content. Different screeners may be looking for different information and using their own idiosyncratic standards for evaluating applicants. Thus, *scoring* is unstandardized, and adequate measurement of the applicant's SNW is therefore likely lacking, preventing consistent, reliable, and valid evaluation of an applicant's SNW. In this respect, SNW screening is similar to a holistic approach to evaluating application forms or unstructured interviews, which have been criticized for lack of standardization, reliability, validity, and scientific rigor (Gatewood et al., 2008; Highhouse, 2002).

Moreover, as SNWs and their *content* differ among applicants in the type of information contained within a particular SNW and the differences in information across different SNW platforms, SNW content is therefore unstandardized. Users present what content they and their acquaintances choose, resulting in widely varying profiles. Although platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, for example, suggest new users include certain information on their webpages, these guides do not *require* the user to complete all sections. Twitter has no restrictions, except in terms of the character limit of 140 characters per “tweet.” Thus, missing information is of particular concern in all of these platforms, but it seems particularly likely in Twitter and could therefore often generate selection criteria deficiencies (Gatewood et al., 2008).

SNW screening also lacks standardization in terms of its “*administration*.” For example, a screener may examine various applicant SNWs and view LinkedIn pages for some applicants, Facebook for others, Twitter for still others, etc., which leads to further inconsistency in content among applicants. This is also legally problematic if there is protected class information within the SNW platforms, a concern that will be addressed later in more detail.

Other standardization concerns in SNW screening are that some applicants will not have a particular SNW that an employer uses for screening purposes, some applicants might apply security settings which limit access to the screener whereas other applicants do not, and still more applicants may include such a limited amount of information as to render the SNW useless for the purpose of evaluation. For example, if a screener examines applicant Facebook pages, some applicants may not have a Facebook account, some may restrict access, and some will have limited information available for evaluation, while still others may allow full access to a wide range of information. This variability in terms of not only the content but the amount of information available across applicants creates problems for employers from a psychometric perspective. Specifically, some applicants are being judged on a large sample of information, which should provide greater reliability, whereas others are being judged on a smaller sample of information. If we were to make an analogy to testing, we would be judging some applicants on a large number of items (or tests) and judging other applicants on just a few or no items (or tests). Thus, some applicants are being assessed with less error and others with much more.

One potential approach for enhancing the standardization of assessments of SNWs would involve the use of automated (i.e., computer-based) approaches, such as latent semantic analysis or other text analytic approaches. For example, Park et al. (2015) used a language-based assessment (i.e., an open-vocabulary method for language analysis) of Facebook posts to obtain assessments of personality. They found that these assessments correlated significantly with self-reports of the Big Five in the .30 to .46 range, as well as with informant reports of personality ( $r$ 's in the .20–.30 range). Thus, it appears that personality may be measured using computer-based approaches in a more standardized manner than typically performed by a human screener, although we believe that more research is warranted given the relatively modest correlations found in the Park et al. study. We must also keep in mind that although the assessment would be standardized using such methods, the material being assessed (e.g., SNW posts) remains unstandardized as previously discussed, which can harm reliability and subsequent validity of the assessment.

In sum, the lack of standardization, measurement difficulties, and scoring differences in SNW screening are particularly problematic when used for employment selection purposes. Research on the aspects of SNWs that screeners generally attend to would be useful. Future research on SNWs should develop more effective ways to score content on SNWs. Additionally, although some SNW platforms share common elements and functional building blocks (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Mayfield, 2008) such as conversations, user presence, and connectedness, they vary in the identity users employ on diverse SNW platforms, social motivations, openness to technology, and the platforms' reputation (Kluemper, Davison, Cao, & Wu, 2015), leading to additional unstandardization.

## **2.4.2 Reliability**

Reliability represents various ways to demonstrate that a measure is consistent and, hopefully, not overly plagued with errors. Three methods of estimating reliability may be readily applied to SNW screening: internal consistency reliability—consistency of results across independent evaluations/items designed to measure the same thing within a test, test-retest reliability—consistency of scores from one test administration to the next, and interrater reliability—consistency of test scores when measurements are taken by different evaluators. Here we should note that to calculate reliability, empirical scoring of SNWs is necessary.

### **2.4.2.1 Internal Consistency Reliability**

Evaluating internal consistency reliability with SNWs is more complex than with most established selection tests, in which answers on different test items measuring the same construct can be compared. Kluemper and Rosen (2009) and Kluemper, Rosen, and Mossholder (2012) demonstrated adequate internal consistency reliability for the Big Five personality traits assessed via SNWs using trained evaluators who viewed a user's entire profile, and then completed structured ratings of personality (i.e., a self-rated personality test was reworded so that the trained evaluator conducted ratings after viewing a SNW profile). However, the number of characteristics that could be assessed within and across posts is vast, as is potentially the content of a user's profile (e.g., Facebook has been around since 2004, thus over 10 years' worth of posts could potentially be viewed).

### **2.4.2.2 Test-retest Reliability**

Test-retest reliability assesses the temporal consistency of a test at two or more time intervals. Test-retest reliability could be evaluated by examining SNWs users' ratings at different points in time to determine whether assessments of social networking

website applicant characteristics remain consistent across time. However, one issue is in the determination of an appropriate time interval. With established selection tests, applicants take the same test on two different occasions. With SNWs, examining an applicants' SNWs at two different times may reflect either more or less change than has actually occurred. For example, imagine that a SNW was examined on two occasions, one month apart. The content posted on the SNWs could include pictures that were *taken* during that one-month period. However, it could also contain pictures taken years earlier but *posted* during that 1 month period. In this latter case, changes in behaviors across phases in one's life (Slovensky & Ross, 2012) could lead to inconsistent or masked SNW screening results over time, potentially distorting test-retest reliability. At present, there is very little research on the test-retest reliability of SNW screening. For example, Park et al. (2015) examined the test-retest reliability of language-based assessment (LBA) across four consecutive 6-month subsets (i.e., Time 1, Time 2, Time 3, and Time 4) of Facebook posts, and correlated the LBA's personality predictions across those four subsets. They found average test-retest correlations of .70 for consecutive subsets (e.g., Time 1 with Time 2, or Time 3 with Time 4), and the lowest average correlation of .61 for Time 1 correlated with Time 4. Thus, there is some evidence of test-retest reliability for measuring personality in SNWs using LBA. However, to our knowledge, no SNW studies address test-retest reliability using human raters.

#### 2.4.2.3 Interrater Reliability

Interrater reliability in SNW screening is evaluated by comparing two or more rater evaluations of a set of SNWs. Although such comparisons can be based on the raters' holistic judgments (e.g., "acceptable" vs. "unacceptable"), more precise scoring can be advantageous for assessing interrater reliability. Such rigorous comparisons are rare, however, as only one screener likely screens the profiles, and likely without a standardized scoring rubric. Thus, little is known about the interrater reliability of SNW screening. Kluemper and Rosen (2009) conducted an interrater reliability study in which 63 raters from an undergraduate employment selection course assessed the personality traits and cognitive abilities of six Facebook profiles by spending 10 min evaluating all aspects of the Facebook profile. Intra-class correlation coefficients (ICCs) ranged from .93 for extraversion, to .99 for conscientiousness. Further, raters were generally able to distinguish those with high- versus low-grade point average. These results demonstrate that scholastic aptitude and the Big Five personality traits can be reliably assessed via Facebook, at least under certain conditions with a substantial number of trained raters using a structured approach (e.g., five raters). As noted above, the Park et al. (2015) study also examined the correlations between LBA and informant ratings of personality, which showed rather modest "interrater" reliabilities (i.e.,  $r$ 's .20–.30) between the computer and human raters.

A major issue associated with interrater reliability is that ratings are potentially affected by what is being rated and rater characteristics (e.g., similarity with the ratee; see Turban & Jones, 1988), resulting in multiple sources of potential measurement error. Further, inconsistent and/or incomplete information across SNW

profiles may lead to different rater attributions and resulting evaluations which could magnify problems in interrater reliability. For example, if an applicant has a SNW profile with limited information, one rater may attribute the information to the applicant's introverted nature, another might believe the applicant is hiding something, and yet another may assume the applicant is too lazy to complete the recommended profile information. Regardless of the rater's perception, it is likely that the rater will score the applicant with complete information more positively, all other things being held equal (cf. Jaccard & Wood, 1988).

In sum, there are various problems with assessing reliability in SNW ratings. There is some initial evidence that personality can be reliably assessed, specifically, interrater and internal consistency reliability, with the latter typically requiring a substantial number of raters. However, reliability has only been examined for a few personality traits, and whether other characteristics can be measured reliably warrants further investigation.

### **2.4.3 Validity of SNW Screening**

Validity in personnel selection consists of "the degree to which available evidence supports inferences made from scores on selection measures" (Gatewood et al., 2008). Applied psychologists and HR researchers and practitioners often examine several types of evidence of validity, each of which we now address.

#### **2.4.3.1 Content Validity**

Content validity assesses whether (a) the content of the instrument is a representative sample of the content of the job performance domain and (b) the degree of fidelity of the measure relative to job performance is adequate (Gatewood et al., 2008). Implicit within these ideas is that content validity typically involves a process in which job analytic information is first considered to explicate the job performance domain and then the assessment device is developed to relate to that performance-based information (e.g., Section 14. C.1 of the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, 1978). When SNWs are screened without careful consideration of the job analysis and the particular constructs, meaning the job-relevant knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) being measured, the measure may not reflect the content of the job. Further, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, 1978) has indicated in the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures* (1978) that content validation is inappropriate when measuring what they refer to as mental processes (e.g., intelligence, personality, judgment). Content validation might be more appropriate when assessing observable behaviors via SNWs. As an example, certain marketing or interior design jobs might involve creativity and artistic expression. Such factors might be assessed on SNWs via posted pictures of the applicant's previous work, and thus might relate to subsequent job performance.

Content validity may also be particularly problematic for assessing SNWs. Recall that most SNWs do not require individuals to post any standardized information and the purpose of many SNWs is not employment-related (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). These problems may manifest themselves in several ways. Content validity may require consideration of how much of the job content is being assessed. The *Guidelines* note that content validity should be based on critical work behaviors or important work behaviors that cover most of the job in question (14.C.2). Thus, job analyses supporting the use of SNWs may require careful consideration of critical work behaviors per se, which may or may not be typically assessed in an organization's job analysis procedures or cover a majority of the job performance space. This may be troublesome when there is no standard information required by the social media platform and when so much information is missing due to the factors noted above. That is, it may be difficult to make assessments when information is either posted inconsistently or not posted at all.

It is also unlikely that SNW posts have high fidelity with most jobs. Recall that the *Guidelines* (1978, p. 21) note "the closer the content and the context of the selection procedure are to work samples or work behaviors, the stronger the basis for showing content validity." The *Guidelines* (1978) go on to state that the less that a predictor resembles the work product or work setting, the greater the need for other types of evidence of validity (Section. 14.C.4). It is unclear how much fidelity a SNW will have with most jobs that do not involve web design or a few other areas that might involve high correspondence between the nature of the specific work in question and the nature of the SNW-based activities themselves.

Overall, the use of SNWs based on content validity will require careful job analysis, development of the SNW assessment, and, perhaps, how this assessment relates to other assessments to cover a substantial portion of the job. It would appear clear that a quick look at a SNW with no structured process by a manager with little background in selection could easily fail to show content validity. Thus, organizations wishing to use content validity to justify assessment of SNWs will need to do substantial work to justify such inferences or be faced with problematic results, such as low levels of content validity.

### 2.4.3.2 Construct Validity

Construct validity is present when a measurement assesses what it claims to be measuring. However, assessors may often have no specific construct in mind when screening SNWs, but instead often casually scan profiles to screen out potential new hires. Again, a key issue is to identify what job-relevant construct(s) might be measured via SNW profiles. Another issue is to show that what hiring managers are measuring via SNW profiles is in fact what they believe themselves to be measuring, assuming they have a set of constructs (i.e., KSAOs) in mind. Probably, the most common current approach to SNW screening is that of disqualifying information, as a type of background check. SNW information pertaining to illegal drug use, discriminatory comments, misrepresented qualifications, or shared confidential

information about a current employer (CareerBuilder.com, 2009) might provide what appears to be a strong basis to reject an applicant. At present, little is known about the construct validity and accuracy of using SNW screening in this manner. Recent work by Becton, Walker, Schwager, and Gilstrap (2013) suggests that SNW screening may have some use for predicting alcohol use. However, in their study SNW screening failed to predict counterproductive workplace behaviors (CWBs); thus, it may be unclear how judgments of disqualifying information would be related to the job itself (see Section 14.D.2 of the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, 1978). A study by Stoughton, Thompson, and Meade (2013) also examined self-reports of badmouthing and substance use postings in SNWs and found that agreeableness and conscientiousness were related to badmouthing, whereas extraversion was related to substance use. These findings suggest there may be some convergent validity in measuring such counterproductive behavior via SNW postings, but it is important to note that their study examined self-reported badmouthing and substance use, rather than measures of these counterproductive behaviors taken directly from actual SNW postings.

Empirical evidence has begun to emerge which suggests that traits such as the Big-five personality dimensions (Kluemper et al., 2012; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009), narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), and cognitive ability (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009) can be measured with SNWs, assuming rater training, structured assessment, and the use of multiple raters are in place for the assessment. Further, a range of additional KSAOs have been suggested in the literature, including job-relevant background information, such as education, work history, and professional memberships (Davison et al., 2012), language fluency, certain technical proficiencies, creative outlets, teamwork skills (Smith & Kidder, 2010), network ability and social capital (e.g., Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), creativity (Davison et al., 2012), communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, persuasion, and negotiation skills (Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, *in press*). However, empirical work is needed to demonstrate whether these characteristics can be accurately assessed with SNW profiles. Hiring managers may also attempt to measure person-organization (P-O) fit via SNWs (Roth et al., *in press*; Slovinsky & Ross, 2012). In this case, employers may search for similarities between the person and the organization (Kristof, 1996) in terms of interests, goals, values, and attitudes that may lead the applicant to fit well within the organization. However, assessors may not have specific P-O fit characteristics in mind when screening SNWs.

In sum, it is apparent that various constructs *might* be measured via SNW screening, but much scientific work is needed to provide empirical evidence as to whether each potential construct can be measured validly. Evidence is accumulating that certain personality traits might be measured successfully under the right circumstances. For example, all of the Facebook-rated (i.e., rated by humans) Big Five personality traits have been shown to demonstrate convergent validity with self-rated personality traits (Kluemper et al., 2012). There is also evidence that computer-based analysis of language and other SNW mechanisms (e.g., Facebook “Likes”) can assess personality traits (e.g., Kosinski, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2013; Park et al., 2015). Beyond personality, little is known about whether other disqualifying information, KSAOs, P-O fit, or qualifications can be measured accurately via SNWs. Research could involve

obtaining established measures of relevant KSAOs from participants, and then using standardized procedures to screen SNW profiles of those participants. This would provide an initial step of establishing convergent and discriminant validity of SNW screening. However, even if this evidence of construct validity were obtained, other and perhaps more important, meaning selection-relevant, aspects of validity (e.g., criterion-related and incremental validity) are also needed before SNWs should be used in applied settings for employment selection. In other words, a construct-valid measure is not inherently job-relevant because job-irrelevant constructs can also be reliably and validly measured. Ultimately, we also caution that individual organizations will likely have to go through a substantial process of construct validation for their SNW assessments, and such processes can take large amounts of time to satisfy the technical requirements of construct validity in the *Uniform Guidelines* (1978).

### 2.4.3.3 Criterion-related Validity

Criterion-related validity assesses whether test scores are correlated with scores on a job-relevant outcome such as a measure of job performance. This is particularly important given the *Uniform Guidelines* (1978) titles Section 9 “No assumption of validity.” The *Guidelines* state that casual reports of validity, testimonials, and promotional literature are not acceptable substitutes for evidence of validity. Further, the *Guidelines* encourage the use of professional supervision of selection procedures. Such standards may be particularly important if untrained individuals or those with limited HR backgrounds are quickly performing an employment screen without thoughtful consideration of job analytic information.

Limited research has examined whether ratings of traits from SNW profiles correlate with job performance. Kluemper et al. (2012) provide initial evidence that Facebook-rated personality traits correlate with supervisor ratings of job performance (Study 1) and academic success (Study 2). However, SNWs were evaluated for a hypothetical position, while job performance was measured for the student’s current job while they were a student. Thus, it is unclear if such a performance measure would satisfy the requirements for a criterion in the *Uniform Guidelines* (Section 14.B.3). Further, only roughly 10% of the originally rated student SNWs were able to be matched with a criterion. So, data loss was also substantial (see Roth et al., [in press](#)).

A more recent study by Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth, and Junco ([in press](#)) found that Facebook ratings of KSAOs did not predict job performance. That is, the functional validity of actual recruiters looking at job applicant Facebook pages, using whatever process was typical of their organization, was empirically unrelated to subsequent measures of job performance by supervisors overseeing the jobs subsequently acquired by the students (i.e., criterion-validity was functionally zero). Although this study used college recruiters to rate student Facebook profiles and obtained supervisor ratings of job performance one year later, this study utilized only one untrained evaluator per profile, with different evaluators across profiles, which likely results in unstandardization against which we previously cautioned, and thus subsequent unreliability of assessment. Further, the 10 KSAOs measured were not necessarily relevant to each of the wide range of students’ subsequent occupations, although other summary performance evaluations were also available.

A potentially troubling result of the Van Iddekinge et al. ([in press](#)) study was the presence of standardized group differences. Recall that the *Uniform Guidelines* explicitly address the issue of adverse impact (Section 4). That is, there is concern when a substantially smaller portion of one protected group is hired relative to the highest scoring group (often the “majority” group, as per section 4.D). We are not aware of any other studies addressing this issue. Van Iddekinge et al. found evidence of standardized group differences ( $d$ ) in favor of Whites relative to Blacks and Hispanics in some cases. Thus, adverse impact could occur if such an approach was used for hiring, further necessitating evidence of validity for legal defensibility. Interestingly, females, on-the-average, scored somewhat higher than males. Thus, there was no evidence indicating adverse impact against females in their sample.

How one summarizes the evidence of criterion-related validity depends upon how one weighs the evidence. A more optimistic view is that taken together, the above studies provide initial evidence that Facebook information based on personality, but not on other KSAOs, can be used to identify individuals who are more successful in college and on-the-job. Thus, SNW screening has some limited evidence of criterion-related validity. However, we urge caution when interpreting these findings. Far more replication and extension in the peer-reviewed academic literature is needed before drawing firm conclusions about the potential criterion-related validity of personality measurement via SNW assessment, as well as in drawing firm conclusions about the lack of viability of measuring other KSAOs via SNW screening.

A less optimistic view is that there is little professionally acceptable evidence of validity at this time. The study by Kluemper et al. (2012) emphasizes the importance of assessor training, analyzing the job, and multiple raters as key issues for organizations to consider. Yet, the data based on actual recruiters, using whatever practices their organization currently supported, and with the measurement of actual subsequent job performance showed *no* evidence of validity (Van Iddekinge et al., [in press](#)). At the same time, there was evidence of standardized group differences against Hispanics and Blacks in some instances. Thus, use of SNW screening by actual recruiters may be associated with the worst of two worlds: no validity and adverse impact. This could be considered as discrimination in Section 3 of the *Uniform Guidelines* (1978) and according to legal precedent (e.g., *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, 1971). The absence of validity and the presence of adverse impact would make it difficult to defend such procedures. Finally, at present we have *no* information about the criterion-related validity of personality (or other traits) measured via automated computer-based text analytic methods (e.g., language-based assessments).

#### 2.4.3.4 Incremental Validity

Incremental validity, whether an additional test adds predictive value beyond existing methods, of SNW screening is also an important area of inquiry (cf. Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). As such, SNW selection techniques should be evaluated to demonstrate if they add incremental validity beyond tests such as application blanks, biodata, personality tests, etc. (Roth et al., [in press](#)) to be considered value-added

(Cronbach & Gleser, 1957). Again, results here are somewhat mixed. The Kluemper, McLarty, and Rosen (2013) studies show incremental validity beyond self-rated personality (Study 1) and self-rated personality and ACT/SAT scores (Study 2). In contrast, the study by Van Iddekinge et al. (in press) shows little functional incremental validity beyond constructs such as personality and cognitive ability. Of course, such incremental validity results will depend upon what constructs the SNW assessment measures and what other selection procedures, and the constructs they assess, are present. Once again, relatively little is known about the incremental validity of this new type of information gathered from SNWs.

#### 2.4.3.5 Generalizability Across Platforms

The question of generalizability deals with the issue of whether what works in one context also works in another context. In particular, there are numerous SNWs with divergent purposes and different user demographics, along with different access limits, and different amounts and types of information provided. For example, Facebook and LinkedIn differ substantially in terms of their intended purposes, including connections with friends vs. professionals, the number of users, and the amount and type of information provided, etc. The SNW platforms may also differ in demographic characteristics (e.g., age; Duggan & Brenner, 2013) and user occupational characteristics.

Furthermore, these applications are constantly changing. Therefore, issues regarding Facebook may not be relevant to LinkedIn or Twitter, and establishing reliability and validity with one set of constructs, one SNW platform, or at one time-point in the evolution of a particular SNW, does not mean that such psychometric properties will hold for others, or at different points in time. Research is needed to determine what constructs are measured most accurately using which SNW platform. For example, personality and negative traits might be more accurately measured via Facebook, which has a very flexible format (i.e., a weak situation) that may be conducive to expressing such traits (cf. Blackman & Funder, 2002). Alternatively, more traditional KSAOs (e.g., work experience, problem solving) might be better assessed via the more structured and work-oriented LinkedIn platform.

## 2.5 Directions for Future Research

As the previous sections have detailed, numerous questions remain unanswered in the existing literature. A traditional first step would be to determine what constructs can most easily be assessed via SNW-based information (e.g., work experience, personality, etc.), and of those constructs, which ones may consistently demonstrate criterion-related validity. For example, as has been previously discussed, automated computer-based text analysis of SNWs may generate assessments of personality. However, future research is needed to see if these particular assessments of personality, obtained on unstandardized SNW-based text, can be used to predict job performance.

In addition to the questions about what constructs (i.e., job-relevant KSAOs) can be measured reliably and validly via SNWs, other questions also bear addressing. For example, future research should investigate differences in user demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, cultural background, socioeconomic status) across platforms or across social media use in general. Also, are there behavioral differences (e.g., differences in information disclosure, identity presentation) across platforms, such that individuals are presenting different “selves” on different platforms? If this is the case, then that would make the choice of platform for screening more crucial.

On a related note, research is needed to determine to what extent individuals “fake” or engage in impression management on SNWs.<sup>1</sup> For example, to what extent does innate impression management (see Roulin & Levashina’s Chap. 15 in this book), or self-deception enhancement, occur when one generates a profile on a SNW? Future research should assess job applicants on various measures indicative of test faking, such as overclaiming (e.g., Bing, Kluemper, Davison, Taylor, & Novicevic, 2011), bogus items (e.g., Levashina, Morgeson, & Campion, 2009), and the more traditional self-report measures of impression management and self-deception enhancement, and correlate these assessments with those obtained on construct scores (e.g., personality scores) obtained from SNW information to determine the extent to which such SNW-based assessments are tainted with faking attempts. Research is also needed to determine whether faking on SNWs is necessarily “faking good” (see Davison et al., 2011), such that SNW users are trying to present a more socially acceptable or desirable picture of themselves. Alternatively, some users may be “faking bad” by presenting a less socially desirable (e.g., reckless, irresponsible, “devil-may-care”) picture of themselves, perhaps in order to attempt to appear outgoing, fun-loving, or cool to peers. Moreover, there may be age, racial, or gender differences in faking good vs. faking bad on SNWs that are worth investigating.

Furthermore, do patterns of connections across social networks differ among SNW platforms (e.g., personal friends vs. colleagues, close friends vs. acquaintances or even strangers)? For example, many non-acquaintances are connected via Twitter, whereas acquaintances tend to be connected via Facebook. Investigations into such variations in social networks across SNW platforms will further our understanding of the amount and quality of information available.

## 2.6 Recommendations and Best Practices for Using Social Media as a Selection Device

In determining recommendations and best practices for using social media in selection, we first review the reasons why employers might want to avoid using social media based on the current state of the research and the legal environment. We then

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<sup>1</sup>One of the authors has heard that some college fraternities encourage their graduating seniors entering the job market to delete their current Facebook profile, if showing certain parties and events over the years, and then creating a new, sanitized Facebook account that would be highly unlikely to offend any potential employer.

detail the reasons why employers might want to use social media for screening, and with the caveats that if employers do choose to use social media in this manner, there are various best practices that can help the employer to obtain more reliable and valid data while mitigating legal liability.

### ***2.6.1 Reasons for Not Using Social Media***

There are several reasons for not using social media assessments. First, published validity evidence is not supportive of its use. As noted above, the case for content validity will be difficult to make given the lack of SNW use by some applicants and the unlikelihood of having information on any one area uniformly posted by others. Further, assessment of SNWs is not likely to have high levels of fidelity with most jobs. The evidence for criterion-related validity in the published literature is also not encouraging. In particular, the results for predicting job performance by actual supervisors was essentially zero (Van Iddekinge et al., [in press](#)) as were the non-significant results for predicting counterproductive work behaviors (Becton et al., [2013](#)).

Second, there is some evidence that social media assessments can be associated with standardized ethnic group differences that negatively impact Blacks and Hispanics (though not females). Van Iddekinge et al. found a number of instances in which the standardized group differences existed and could be associated with adverse impact, depending upon selection ratios. Again, this could represent a real liability as adverse impact without evidence of validity is typically viewed as illegal discrimination (e.g., *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, [1978](#)). Additionally, there is the real possibility that adverse impact could occur simply by using SNWs for selection, or using certain platforms, given that there are racial differences in SNW platform use (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, [2014](#)).

Third, it is not clear that applicants have a positive view of organizations that use assessments of social media information. While published studies in this area are rare, at least one study suggests that assessments from Facebook resulted in negative reactions from applicants (Stoughton et al., [2015](#)). Students who understood that their Facebook pages had been accessed reported in one study that they felt their privacy had been violated, they had been unjustly treated, and their reactions toward an organization engaged in such efforts were negative. A second study found similar results and also noted that self-reported intentions to litigate were elevated. The findings should be interpreted in light of the fact that the participants were students applying for what they thought was a real, though short-term job.

### ***2.6.2 Reasons for Using Social Media***

We see two possible reasons to examine social media, though even these may be considered with great caution. Organizations may wish to avoid negligent hiring claims. For example, an organization hiring transportation workers may wish to

look for examples of driving while intoxicated. Or they may infer that individual's with many posts involving alcohol and parties are a risk, though this is potentially a weak and unwarranted inference, as such posts may have more to do with extraversion than with conscientiousness (see Stoughton et al., 2013). Yet, this places organizations in a dilemma. Do they use a predictor of job performance that does not have a track record of validity, or might be considered as having a track record of no validity, and the potential for adverse impact, all in order to avoid negligent hiring claims? Or, do they risk a charge of negligent hiring for failing to thoroughly investigate the candidate's background? While we lean towards using some other predictor such as a structured verbal background interviews of former supervisors, this is a difficult managerial decision. Managers wrestling with this dilemma may wish to consult Davison et al.'s (2012) risk-benefit analysis for insight.

Organizations that wish to use assessments of social media for selection purposes should have internal, well-conducted, and well-documented evidence of social media assessments predicting job performance. Organizations should be careful to note that the rather small, published literature does not provide support for predicting job performance at this time. Some organizations may have the technical expertise to conduct well-thought-out validity studies and may find positive results (e.g., analysis of gaps in employment on LinkedIn predict future turnover). Again we caution organizations that the validity studies should be able to stand up to legal discovery, critiques by unfriendly expert witnesses, and also that the data will convince legal decision-makers that there is meaningful criterion-related validity. Specifically, a four-page technical report in which the consulting organization (sometimes) changes the name of the contracting organization with a shoddy cut-and-paste is not likely to suffice in these circumstances! Further, we predict some sort of class action lawsuit over the merits of social media in selection is likely to ensue in the coming years. Organizations should be ready.

### ***2.6.3 Recommendations/Best Practices***

#### **2.6.3.1 Recommendation #1: Do Not Use Social Media for Selection**

All joking aside, we urge most employers to refrain from using social media. The validity and adverse impact "landscape" is not conducive to enhancing the quality of the workforce while avoiding litigation. Additionally, applicant reactions may be negative regarding the use of social media for selection purposes.

However, some employers may determine that the risks are worth the benefits. There are various best practices for assessing SNWs that may help the employer to obtain job-relevant information on job candidates and to do so in a more legal manner. Nonetheless, we again believe that social media assessments should probably come with a surgeon general's warning on the side of the package. We recommend that organizations consider both the principles of procedural justice, such as voice

in decision-making, consistency in applying rules, accurate use of information, opportunity to be heard, and safeguards against bias (see Greenberg, 2011; see also Folger, Konovsky, & Cropanzano's, 1992 due process metaphor), as well as professionally endorsed practices in test development and application.

### **2.6.3.2 Recommendation #2: Best Practices: Proceed with Great Caution or Not at All**

If one is to use SNWs for selection purposes, then we highly recommend that the following guidelines are followed.

**Guideline #1** Begin the process with job analysis (see Davison et al., 2012). That is, understand the job in question and the behaviors that are to be predicted by this “test” of social media website assessment. The job analysis may be particularly important if organizations wish to predict a relatively small portion of the job performance domain such as an individual counter-productive work behavior. In this case, the job analysis will have to be structured to allow subject matter experts to rate various behaviors not just on importance, but on criticality (*Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures*, 1978). Related to this recommendation is our suggestion that screening be done selectively; do not simply screen SNWs for all jobs, but instead determine if the legal risks are worth the possible benefits obtained (see Davison et al., 2012). For example, if it is a job in which negligent hiring is a significant concern, then *perhaps* assessment of SNWs is appropriate.

**Guideline #2** We suggest that organizations focus on employment-based websites. For example, it is likely that analyses of LinkedIn would have more work-related behaviors and be viewed more positively by legal decision-makers, although no published evidence directly supports this supposition at the present time.

**Guideline #3** Provide safeguards against bias. One such safeguard might be to train social media assessors in what to search for (i.e., job-related information such as “employee of the month”). Such information is more likely to be considered judgment based on evidence than judgment based on demographic stereotypes. Similarly, train decision-makers about information not to consider such as ethnicity, gender, or other factors that might not be job-related. Another safeguard might be to have individuals who conduct the social media assessment separate from those individuals who conduct the interviews. Further, there should not be sharing of information between these separate assessors to avoid self-fulfilling prophecies, halo and horn effects, etc.

**Guideline #4** Have the HR department do such checks given their familiarity with issues of validity, adverse impact, and disparate treatment. Practicing managers may not have these same sensitivities and expertise as the HR professionals and may be too tempted to examine non-job-related factors, particularly in such an interesting and technological environment (see Van Iddekinge et al., [in press](#)). There are also

third-party consultants (e.g., Social Intelligence) that will screen SNWs for various characteristics and provide a report with demographic information omitted. However, in this case compliance with the requirements of the FCRA is absolutely necessary, as discussed previously.

**Guideline #5** Organizations should consider getting written permission from job candidates before assessing SNW information, but should never ask for the candidates' usernames and passwords. Again, obtaining written permission is consistent with procedural fairness, and indeed required by the FCRA if the assessment is done by a third party. However, organizations may suffer negative reactions in the process of notifying applicants or applicants may "clean up" their SNWs (see Footnote 1). Similarly, organizations may wish to give applicants the chance to respond to negative information or assessments, again consistent with the FCRA. For example, an applicant may wish to respond to several pictures of him/her drinking beer in Bavaria on vacation as not being job-related or illegal (i.e., applicants should be given an opportunity to explain or be "heard"). Of course, this may also entail legal risks when organizations use job-related, or non-job-related information, to make reasonable or unreasonable inferences about job candidates, which they would often like to keep secret.

**Guideline #6** Organizations should have evidence of criterion-related validity *before* they operationally use assessments of SNWs for selection decisions. That is, we suggest that organizations conduct a full-scale validity study of assessing SNW information before it is used in selection in order to develop evidence that judgments from assessments of these SNWs are valid. Within this effort, adverse impact analyses should be conducted and consistent with professional standards.

**Guideline #7** Compare assessment of SNWs with alternative predictors, such as traditional personality tests, background checks, etc. This comparison should include both comparisons of validity and adverse impact/standardized ethnic group differences. Organizations should consider that predictors with higher validity are typically preferred, particularly when they have less adverse impact. The incremental validity of SNW assessments should also be evaluated.

**Guideline #8** The entire procedure should be structured, meaning standardized. Standardization is designed to give all applicants the same and equal opportunity to "perform" well on a test. Standardization should pervade the assessment process from job analysis to documentation of which behaviors are to be predicted, to the process of which sites are to be examined, and how the examination proceeds to the ratings made by assessors. Such standardization has helped HR professionals for years to generate structured interviews, and we believe it will mitigate problems for social media assessors (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997). Of course, the procedure should also be done consistently across candidates.

**Guideline #9** We also believe that the SNW screening should be done later in the process, once visible protected class memberships are likely already known (see Segal, 2014). Whereas some managers may be inclined to use it early to weed out certain candidates in a quick and dirty manner, that practice clearly invites legal

challenge. Thus, SNW screening should be conducted late in the selection process, as is recommended with other kinds of background checks, drug testing, medical screening, and other tests of a private nature (Gatewood et al., 2008).

**Guideline #10** Again, we do *not* endorse the use of social media screening at this point. While some individuals may infer that we do, given our guidance immediately above, we reiterate our first piece of advice in not using these screens in the vast majority of instances. Thus, distilling our advice is “when in doubt, don’t.” If you proceed, proceed with an overabundance of caution. To paraphrase Gene Roddenberry’s *Star Trek*, when using social media for screening, “Do NOT boldly go where no one has gone before,” and, instead, do so very cautiously.

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