

THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON JOB APPLICATION PROCEDURE -THE CASE FROM THAILAND-

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Abstract

This research investigates how social networking sites are used in job application procedure as a tool for background check. Researcher used qualitative method to gather data. Depth-interview with HR professionals from different companies was conducted. The results show that social networking sites are widely used in many companies, majorly as a tool for internal communication. Companies use social networking sites to spread information about companies and job vacancies; however they do not research job candidate information on social networking sites. The main reasons are the reliability of the information, the formality of the process and the concern on data privacy. Some companies already use LinkedIn to search and approach mid-career candidate. In conclusion, social networking sites as background check tool cannot be precluded in Thailand, since many companies are already familiar with using social networking sites and this trend has noticed in many countries.

Keywords: Social networking sites, Online background check, Job application

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) or Web 2.0 present a new stage of an online communication tool. It allows individuals to construct their profiles, to articulate a list of other user, with whom they want to share a connection or to view and exhibit list of connections within the system. Among the social networking sites around the world, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and MySpace were ranked as the most popular in 2012 (ebizmba, 2012).

Starting from the private usage, social networking sites are becoming a new business weapon. Marketers use social networking sites to reach customers. Many corporations create a Facebook Fanpage and use it as a medium to present the company, to build up corporate branding and to connect with customers. Organizations use social networking sites for internal communication, since it is a preferred way of increasing knowledge sharing, encouraging teamwork and collaboration and adding value to the employee experience, while human resource professionals use social networking sites to attract and communicate with prospect job candidates.

There is an emerging trend of employers conducting an online background check of job applicants by using social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace after googling them (CollegeGrad, 2006). As consequence, some job candidates were rejected because of the information founded in social networking sites.

Thailand is one of the country, in which over one-third of the populations have regular access to Internet, and is ranked in position 13th as the largest countries on Facebook. But research on how social networking sites are used in job application procedure in Thailand is lacking.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate the use of social networking sites on the job application procedure and to find out how human resource professional perceived social networking sites as a pre-employment screening tool.

Research result will provide a new insight about the use of social networking sites in job application procedure in Thailand e.g. how HR professionals perceive SNSs as screen and selection tool; how information provided in SNSs affect hiring decision etc. Moreover, this research will benefit job applicants, who are active user of social network sites. Since organizations are increasingly conducting online background check, job applicant should know how to prepare themselves before applying for a job.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social networking sites

Social networking site is a new online communication tool that becomes increasingly popular among people around the world. Hundreds of social networking sites exist. Some of them are popular in specific region e.g. TencentQQ or Sina Weibo in China. Some of them are created for specific group of people e.g. LinkedIn and Xing are social networking sites for people in professional occupations. Among these social networking sites around the world, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and MySpace were ranked as the most popular in 2012 (ebizmba, 2012).

With most social media sites, users can create a personal profile and upload desired information such as personal photos, contact information, personal interests and also update status. Users can also search for other users, add them to friend list, like and voluntarily share information. A study from Cambridge University and Microsoft revealed that Facebook users could unwittingly reveal intimate details about their personal lives. By inferring the information in public domain for example the page people had "like", the links, and search history, the personality traits and behavior that one might prefer to keep private, can be accurately predicted (Kosinski *et al.*, 2012).

Some research revealed that social networking sites are relevant and valid means of communicating personality (Goshling *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, the research from Back *et al.* (2009) revealed that the profiles in social networking sites reflect actual personality because social networking sites integrate many sources of information that is difficult to be controlled by users. Therefore, comments from third person, photos being uploaded, status one has shared or pages one has like on SNSs could predict actual personality of a person (Amdady & Skowronski, 2008; Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

2.2 The use of social networking sites in job application procedure

In general, job application procedure consists of different activities, starting from identifying the job vacancy, job description and job specification, which will be used to communicate with job applicants and attract them. Once organizations have enough number of job candidates, organization will go for the next steps which is screening and selecting the right candidate. This refers to the activity of collecting and evaluating information about job applicants before extending the job offer (Gatewood *et al.*, 2008). Organizations may use several recruitment tools from application form, interview, employment test and using background and reference check in order to gather as much information as possible and to detect the right candidate, who fit well to the organization.

A social networking site has played an important role in job application procedures. On one hand social media sites are used to disseminate job information and to enhance employer branding by positioning themselves as the best place to work and to communicate with potential candidates. On the other hand, there is a trend of organizations using social networking sites as employee pre-screening tool and background checks.

Traditionally, employers conduct a background check by considering criminal record, credit report or doing reference check. Variety of pre-employment tests will be additionally conducted, to ensure that the selected candidate has best qualification and personality fit into the organization. When there is a right match between employee's personality and the organization's working environment and culture, it would create synergy in which employees perform better and are more likely to stay committed to organization with high job satisfaction, and therefore, fewer turnovers (Holland, 1959).

Social networking sites help recruiting organization to identify the job candidate's personality that are not directly shown in the resume or find out in the interview (Back *et al.*, 2009; Goshling *et al.*, 2007). It is a ready available public forum to research candidates (Brown & Vaughn, 2011). Moreover, social networking sites provide a quick source of background information with less effort and time to access. It is also less expensive than using third party institutions. And the information obtained via social networking sites may be different than that from traditional background check (Davison, *et. al.*, 2012; Byrnside, 2008).

For this reason, there is a growing trend of using social networking sites to check job candidate's background and to screen some out. A recent study from Careerbuilder in 2012, 37% of employers are checking out prospective employees on social media before they make a final decision. And 11% report they do not currently use social media to screen, but plan to start using it soon. The number has increased, comparing to the survey in 2006 which indicated that 25% of hiring managers have conducted background check via social networking sites. The same trend was cited in social networking survey, 44% of employers reported checking social networking sites for job candidate's information. Facebook (65 %) was the most favorable website employers use research candidates, followed by LinkedIn (63 %) and Twitter (16%) (Careerbuilder, 2012). As consequences, a number of job candidates were rejected according to what recruiting organization found on social networking sites (Career builder, 2012).

Nevertheless, the research on the use of social networking sites in selection and screening process or as background checking tool is lacking. Little is known about the accuracy and validity of the information, the perception of HR professionals on the use of SNSs in job application procedure (Davison, Maraist & Bing, 2011). The legal issues of using social networking sites for screen need to be discussed. In general, legally is only when the background check is done in the context of work. But social networking sites such as Facebook has a leisure-related character. Debatably is also when employer accessed the restricted, private profile on social networking sites by obtaining access by fraudulent means or even when the profile is opened to public, but the content may be leisure-related, therefore it should remain private (Melot de Beauregard & Gleich, 2012). Additionally, whether the use of social networking sites for gathering job-relevant information could create negative impact on job applications 'perception is suggested to be important area for research (Davison, Maraist & Bing, 2011).

This research primarily focus on the investigation of the use of social networking sites on job application procedure, in order to find out how human resource professional perceived social networking sites as a pre-employment screening tool.

3. Research methodology

The present research is a qualitative research. It uses exploratory research methodology, namely a depth interview, which allows researcher to uncover greater insights via free exchange of information that may not possible in focus groups or questionnaires. It also enhances a better initial understanding of the problem, attitude and behavior (Malhotra, 2010). Thus, the researcher aims to understand the attitude of human resource professionals towards to use of social networking sites as a pre-employment screening tool and to find out how social networking sites are use in job application procedure. Researcher will use a list of semi-structured interview questions to interview the respondents on a one-on-one basis. . This allows respondents to express their own viewpoints. The interview will be in Thai language and will take 30-45 minutes. Probing questions will be used to attain deeper information.

Respondents are human resource professionals who involve in recruiting process or are HR policy makers. Respondents are all selected by judgment sampling. Judgment of the researcher is based on size of the company, since researcher believes; the middle to big size company will follow a rigid recruitment policy and could be considered as typical organization that could represent other companies. Research objectives and scope will be explained before starting the interview. The interviews will be audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. Extensive note will be taken during the interview.

4. Research findings

The major findings of the interviews with HR professionals from 10 companies are shown in the table.

Key Issues	Findings
1. Company allows using social networking sites.	Most respondents allow employee to use SNSs during working time.
2. Company uses social networking sites for internal communication.	All respondents use SNSs for international communication since it is costless, fast, and effective.
3. Company uses social networking sites for HR purposes.	Most respondents use SNSs, mainly for job announcement and information providing
4. Company uses social networking sites for background check.	All respondents state investigating candidates' background on SNSs is not company policy. Companies rely on traditional recruitment procedure e.g. behavioral based and competency based interview, reference check.
5. Company believes social networking sites reflect job candidate personality.	Some respondents believe so, however, they think that not all information provided in SNSs is real.
6. Company views social networking sites as privately use.	Most respondents view SNSs as privately used. Employees can post and express themselves, as long as the performance is right and not harming company's reputation.
7. LinkedIn is more appropriate for recruitment.	Most respondents agree, however, they use LinkedIn for finding mid-career and as reference.
8. Data privacy will be concerned in recruitment process.	All respondents concern on data privacy, however, it is not the main reason for not conducting online background check.
9. Company would use social networking sites to conduct background check in the future.	All respondents have no plan to use SNSs to conduct background check in the near future. But they think this trend might come up, when data can be better verified.

Table 1: Research Finding

5. Research discussion

Based on the interviews with HR professionals, major findings will be discussed as followed:

5.1 Social networking sites become a new mean for communication

Most of the interviewed companies allow employee to use social networking sites during working time, as long as their work is not interrupt. Companies found social networking sites are difficult to ban, since most of employees use smartphone. Additionally, companies use social networking sites and chat application such as Line and WhatsApp as an additional mean to communicate with employees, because it can reach a large number of addressees, it allows people to response on a real-time basis and it is costless. It also enhances good relationship between employees and build relaxing atmosphere in the companies. However, traditional mean such as mailing-list and intranet are still used, especially when communicating formal message.

5.2 Social networking sites are used to attract job candidates, but not for background check

Most of the interviewed companies revealed that they use social media sites such as Facebook to promote their companies and announce job vacancies, especially when they target young graduated students. Since these

people are the major users of social networking sites and they connect with Facebook and others social networking sites almost around the clock via their computers or smartphones.

Not only the information about the companies and job vacancies are being post on Facebook fanpage or wall. Many companies revealed that they have to make the page livelier by posting pictures, infographics, cool words or even games because they want to encourage users to join or to like the page and get in touch. Social networking sites are therefore seen as additional channel to attract job candidates. However, companies still rely on corporate website, since it is more formal and contain more useful information. And when it comes to application, corporate website is more appropriate and trustful.

None of the interviewed companies use social networking sites to check job candidates' background or personal lives. They rely on the traditional way of job candidate selection, namely reviewing the application forms and related documents, face-to-face interviewing and conducting reference check if necessary. Many companies believe they could get sufficient information in order to make hiring decision. Moreover, probation period will help proofing whether job candidates are appropriate for the position.

5.3 Social networking sites are privately used and information is not reliable

Most of the companies believe social networking sites can reflect job candidates' personality, however, they do not check candidates' background on social networking sites or google them because the information providing there are private and not job related. They believe employees have the right to spend lives the way they want. They can party every weekend or express their political view, as long as they do not harm company reputation and they can perform well in the companies. However, the situation can be differ among companies due to different corporate culture.

Moreover, profiles or information provided in Facebook can be faked. Users can registered with the wrong name or counterfeit their identities. Users can publicize their name, workplace or educational background but there is no verification of these data. Therefore, there are increasing numbers of frauds and criminal among Facebook users.

When asking about how the information provided on social networking sites affect hiring decision, none of the interviewed company have rejected job candidate based on the information found in Facebook or other social networking sites, since they have never conducted any online background check. But some of the interviewed companies indicated that they would feel skeptical, if they find job candidate posting aggressive message, expressing extremely political view or offending good values in Thai society.

5.4 LinkedIn is more welcomed

As mentioned before that social networking sites can be categorized into different types. LinkedIn is a social networking site for people in professional occupations. It is seen as the world's largest professional network with a wide variety of functions such as Connections, which allows registered users to maintain a list of contact details of people with whom they have some level of relationship; LinkedIn Answers which allows users to ask questions for the community to answer; LinkedIn cites which focus on development of new and more engaging ways to share and discuss professional topics.

Even though LinkedIn are not well-known in Thailand and there is only small number of users comparing with Facebook. Many companies see LinkedIn as appropriate tools for recruitment. Some companies use LinkedIn to recruit people, especially when it comes to hard-to-fill positions or very specific jobs or mid-career. Many headhunters are well-connected in LinkedIn, since LinkedIn is seen as a very large pool of talents; it allows companies to list jobs, search for potential candidates and directly contract with them.

Most of the companies believe information provided in LinkedIn is job related and more reliable than in Facebook. Connections functions in LinkedIn can help verify who these people are and can be used as good references. Additionally, job candidates can present themselves or show their personality and ability by

participating in professional discussions or answering questions in LinkedIn answer. In sum, LinkedIn is a good platform where employers and job candidate can be met.

5.5 Data privacy issue will be concerned – always with consent

Most labor law concentrates on employment terms, working conditions, minimum wages or trade unions, but there is a lack of regulations on personnel recruitment and selection. Only some countries have discrimination law which prohibits racial and gender discrimination against employees as morally unacceptable and illegal. Data privacy law is strongly enforced in many developed countries but it is less concerned in developing countries.

Many interviewed companies concern about data privacy issue. They conduct reference check or criminal history check only with consents of the job candidates. And only job related data will be collected. Therefore, they see online background check conducted without candidate permission as violating data privacy and immoral, however, data privacy is not the main reason of not using social networking sites to check job candidates. Companies believe they have better tools to select the right candidate. Moreover, investigating job candidate online could lead to negative consequences such as damaging company reputation and trust.

5.6 Social networking sites for background check - maybe

The studies in many countries indicated that one-third of employers already research job candidates on social networking sites. Some even rejected job candidates because of the unappropriated information found in social networking sites. However, most of interviewed companies revealed they still have no plan to use social networking sites for background check in the near future. The reasons are as mentioned before. However, they might reconsider it, when information can be better verified, since the companies are familiar with social networking sites. Additionally, companies might increase the use of LinkedIn, when more Thai professionals are active in LinkedIn.

6. Conclusion and implications

These depth interviews demonstrate that social networking sites are widely used in many firms in Thailand. However, the use of social networking sites mainly focuses on internal and external communication. In HR functions, social networking sites are used to attract and communicate with prospect job candidates, but not as a tool for background check. The reasons behind are the reliability of the information, the context and the formality. Most of the companies rely on traditional way of recruitment and background check. However, the trend of using online background check might emerge in the future, since companies are familiar with this technology. Job candidates should be aware of this trend and behave well when using social networking sites, since the information could create bias and lead to negative outcome. Nevertheless, a well presence in social networking sites, especially LinkedIn could increase career opportunities, since many HR professionals view LinkedIn as a good pool of talent and reliable source of information.

7. Research limitations

This research provides the first insight on how social networking sites are used in job application procedure in Thailand. However, the information cannot be generalized due to small number of participants. Further research with a larger number of participants and across industries should be conducted, in order to gain more information and to compare across industries.

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