

## **JOB APPLICATIONS: Evidence from France that employers will check your Facebook profile**

Facebook profiles are increasingly being checked by recruiters to decide whether to invite applicants for a job interview. That is one of the findings of research by **Matthieu Manant**, **Serge Pajak** and **Nicolas Soulié**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Mannheim in August 2015. Their study also suggests that employers may use information drawn from people's Facebook pages to discriminate based on applicants' ethnic origins or other characteristics.

The researchers ran a yearlong experiment in which applications for jobs in the greater Paris area were sent out from two fictitious applicants, both with Facebook profiles. The resumes and cover letters were identical, but one applicant was implied to be Moroccan on their Facebook profile.

The 'standard' applicant was called for an interview on average 21% of the time, but the 'minority' applicant was only called for interview 13% of the time, based purely on a single detail on their Facebook profile. This gap shrank after Facebook changed their default settings so that a person's city of origin was no longer immediately displayed on their profile – which suggests that employers only check the front page of a profile.

An important implication of this research is that applicants should know that very early in the hiring process, their personal profiles are considered reliable means of assessment by many recruiters. The findings also suggest potential solutions, ranging from locking one's profile to the use of multiple profiles or an avatar.

### **More...**

With the advance of online social media, increasing amounts of personal data are disclosed online through the various platforms encouraging us to do so. This has led sociologists and economists to hypothesise the end of privacy, and a blurring of professional and personal spheres.

In practical terms, when it is time to look for another job, what impact does the casual release of personal information have on a prospective employer? Surprisingly little is known about this, other than hearsay. Declarative surveys have been conducted, but companies are very likely to misreport such practices due to their potentially sensitive nature.

To investigate the effect on hiring of disclosing personal information online, a team of researchers from the University Paris Saclay has been applying to real job openings in the greater Paris area using two fictitious applicants. In this field experiment, the resumes and the cover letters were the same, but the content of their Facebook profile was slightly modified by hinting about the foreign origins of one of the two applicants. Only if the employers went to the Facebook profile could they learn this information.

Applications were sent over a period of 12 months. From March to September 2012, the standard candidate was called back for a job interview on average 21.3% of the times, or one callback for about five applications. The minority candidate, however, received a phone call from the employer for only 13.4% of his applications, or one callback for seven or eight applications. Again, this gap is due to a single difference

introduced in the Facebook profile of one candidate and that employers cannot find in the resumes.

At some point during the experiment, Facebook changed the default layout for the public profile, going from a long, single page to the now-familiar layout of a main page that includes subpages accessible by a tab. The information about the city of origin stayed on the main page, but the listing of the languages spoken went to a subpage.

A change of this nature, unexpected and exogenous to the experiment, constitutes a natural experiment setting. At the same time, the gap between the callback rates of the two applicants shrank. Shortly after the change of the layout, the control applicants receive as many phone calls as the other applicant... as if employers were no longer able to distinguish them.

As the saying goes, 'The best place to hide a body is the Page 2 of a Google search result'... or inside a Facebook tab. An item available just slightly deeper into the profile goes virtually unnoticed, in contrast to information displayed on the front page of an online profile.

The results strongly suggest that online presence, especially on Facebook, is regarded by employers as a part of the application package – in addition to resume, cover letter and references. An important implication of this research is that applicants should know that, very early in the hiring process, their personal profiles are considered reliable means of assessment and selection by many French recruiters. It is therefore important during a job search to treat the profile as a part of the application material.

These findings also suggest potential solutions, ranging from locking one's profile, to cleaning one's profile during job search or various assessment periods, to the use of multiple profiles (an 'official' accessible to anyone, and a private one), to the use of an avatar.

A communication campaign could be organised to inform people of the secondary use of their online personal information and the potential consequences for the likelihood of finding a job and for their professional careers.

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Facebook as a new source of information for recruiters?

Evidence from a field experiment

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