

# Does cybervetting lead to moral judgments?

Checking out the social media profiles of potential job candidates is a popular activity for many recruiters, but researchers suggest that this is more about moral evaluations than proper skills assessment

**“IS** cybervetting valuable? Is it something employers should be doing at all?”

So asks Steve McDonald, professor and director of graduate programs, sociology, at North Carolina State University, in discussing the practice of screening job candidates by evaluating information collected from internet searches and social media profiles.

“If you’re going to be engaging this, then you really should be assessing the effectiveness of this, the utility of what’s going on, and part of that assessment really should be about what this means for the diversification of the workforce.”

The use of social media in hiring may have opened up the scope of moral judgment in the hiring process overall, says Amanda Damarin, associate professor of sociology and assistant chair

of cultural and behavioural sciences at Georgia State University.

“It is just treated as routine and normal by many people, that we look into people’s personal behaviours she says. “Have we, as a society, accepted this level of moral scrutiny as just a natural, normal part of the labour market that we can’t do anything about? That’s a concern.”

There’s this belief that the social media representation is the accurate portrayal of the person’s self, she says, and yet “there’s sort of a moral imperative to present yourself in a certain way online. And, so, it’s very contradictory.”

**Risk of bias**

The two academics are among a group that published a study in *Socio-Economic Review* after conducting in-depth interviews with 61 HR professionals involved in recruitment across several industries, ranging from in-house HR staff to executive recruitment consultants and professionals at staffing agencies.

Their major finding? While recruiters cybervet to minimize hiring risks and maximize organizational fit, their judgments are based on assessments of job candidates’ moral character and how it might affect workplace interactions.

As a result, cybervetting is a “morally performative practice.”

While recruiters focus on trying to assess the “authentic person” behind the job candidate by looking at social media activity, they’re very much moral types of evaluations, says McDonald.

“The problem is that these types of evaluations map on to lots of potential bias. How it is that we think about what is moral and what is immoral or amoral depends in a lot of ways on our own perspective and what we consider to be normative in the world. And that may be

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Steve McDonald, North Carolina State University

very different for people that come from different types of backgrounds, that have different types of characteristics, gain different types of experiences.”

For example, recruiters might look for people who are physically active, so there’s the potential for bias around age or ableism. And “living an active lifestyle is related to a moral sense of worth going back to Calvinism and the basic tenets of Protestantism,” he says.

“Even the types of activities that were being used, like going camping or going on hikes, for example, these are very white and very middle-class types of activities. And, so, you can see that this focus on morality can actually lead you toward biased hiring.”

Following the Black Lives Matter protests, there’s been a huge emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), says Damarin.

“But you do wonder, are people going to talk about DEI on the one hand and then continue to engage in these kinds of practices on another? And I think probably they are and they will, unless people begin to realize that there might be something here that is harmful to that.”

**Best practices**

Considering the potential downsides, employers and recruiters should really ask themselves whether cybervetting is the best approach, says McDonald.

“It’s an important question: Is this even of any value at all, considering all the risks that are associated with this, not only to workers but the organizations and society writ large?”

There should be more guidance or thought that goes into how or why cybervetting should be done, he says.

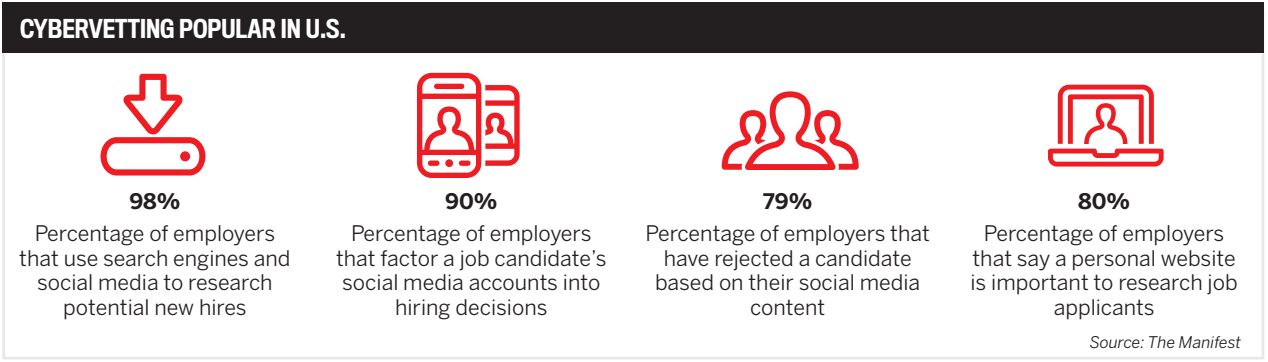
“It’d be great if organizations thought more clearly about what the goals are, what are the risks? What are the types of outcomes that [we] would want to try to assess?”

If recruiters still want to do these social media searches, they need to proactively ask themselves how this relates to job tasks, says McDonald.

“What are the tasks that need to be completed for this job? And how is this important? Or what are the types of information that are out there that would help us to understand that and what type of information is relevant? What type of information is perhaps redundant with what we would get through a resumé?”

Employers worried about potential red flags in job candidates should rely instead on background checks, says Damarin.

“Think about what you’re looking for, and if this is really a legitimate way to find out information about the qualities that you’re looking for in that candidate. Is it really going to help you judge their skill or their ability in that job?” **CHRR**



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