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EMPLOYMENT LAW LETTER

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Vol. 16, No. 11
November 2011

INTERNET RESOURCES

Social media and hiring: You 'like' me, but will you 'friend' me?

by Lauren E. Moak

A new survey from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is shedding new light on employers' use of social networking in the hiring process. Interestingly, the data indicate that employer searches of social networking websites is declining based on a variety of factors.

What SHRM asked

Between December 2010 and February 2011, SHRM conducted a survey of 541 randomly selected HR professionals. The survey addressed a variety of issues related to the use of social networking websites in the hiring process, including:

- use of online search engines to screen job candidates;
- use of social networking sites to screen job candidates;
- which social networking sites are searched most frequently;
- how often job candidates are disqualified as a result of search engine or social networking search results; and
- prevalence of social networking policies.

Survey results

So how frequently are employers using social networking sites in the hiring process? Not very! Among employers surveyed, 59 percent reported that they don't use online searches and have no plans to do so, up from 53 percent in 2008. By contrast, only 26 percent of employers said they were currently using online search engines to review candidates, down from 34 percent in 2008.

As to social networking sites specifically, 67 percent of employers reported that they don't use such websites and have no plans to do so. That was consistent with what employers said in 2008. Among employers responding to the survey, private employers are more likely than government or nonprofit employers to search social networking websites in the hiring process. Predictably, larger employers are also more likely to have a written policy on social networking and hiring than smaller organizations.

The most interesting results, by far, are the reasons employers do or don't use social media in the hiring process. Companies that refrain from social networking indicate that their primary reasons are concerns about (1) legal risks, (2) accuracy of the information, and (3) relevance to job performance. Less prevalent reasons included concerns about invasion of privacy, time and effort involved, and discouraging strong candidates.

Significantly, employers that reported they do use social networking sites in the hiring process contradicted the nonusers' fears. Among the reasons for using social media were (1) availability of broader information, (2) the low time and effort involved, and (3) the ability to more accurately assess the fit between the individual and the organization.

Also interesting is the impact of online searches on hiring. When asked if they actually disqualified candidates as a result of online searches, most employers responded in the negative. Only four percent reported disqualifying an applicant as a result of a third party's social networking page, while 15 percent reported disqualifying candidates as a result of online searches and 30 percent reported disqualifying candidates because of something on their own social networking page. Furthermore, companies that use social networking sites as a screening tool rarely allow candidates to explain negative content on their pages — 73 percent report that they don't allow candidates to explain questionable information at any time.

Bottom line

The takeaway for employers and employees alike is that the use of social networking websites in the hiring process is lower than many would assume. However, it doesn't look like the practice is going away. Employers are still using this resource for hiring — and likely a multitude of other purposes. And if you don't have a social media policy, get one. The number of employers with social media policies is on the rise, regardless of whether they use online information in the hiring process.

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