



# You've been tagged! (Then again, maybe not): Employers and Facebook

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**Abstract** Social networking sites, such as Facebook, have exploded on to the cultural and business landscape. Not only can firms use social networking sites to present organizational information to interested parties, but also perhaps gather information regarding job applicants. As an employer, checking out an applicant's Facebook page—much like Googling a candidate's name—is very tempting. It is understandable that managers would like to know as much about a candidate as possible. Facebook pages can provide a wealth of information beyond, or even possibly contradicting, an applicant's submitted documents. While this may represent a potentially useful tool, there are several reasons for caution. For instance, an organization's selection process may be biased if an applicant's Facebook page contains inaccurate information, if some applicants do not have Facebook pages, and/or if legally protected demographic information ends up being part of the selection process. Facebook's own policies suggest that an organization may face legal challenges if it considers an applicant's Facebook page as part of the selection process. Just as importantly, there are ethical issues—in particular, an individual's right to privacy—which must be considered. We wish to encourage organizations to develop guidelines regarding the use of social networking sites in the application process, based on the practical, legal, and ethical issues covered in this article.

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“We have a Facebook page,” said one official of the Department of Homeland Security. “But we don't allow people to look at Facebook in the office. So we have to go home to use it. I find this bizarre.” (Hansell, 2009)

A co-worker apologized to me recently for being slow on a task. “It's probably just your insomnia from last night,” I said. She was confused about how I knew, but I reminded her we were Facebook friends, and that she had posted a ‘status update’ about her sleeplessness. (Cohen, 2008)

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“I'm 23 years old, and despite the successes I have had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and

inappropriate way, not in a manner that people have come to expect from me,” Phelps said. “For this, I am sorry. I promise my fans and the public—it will not happen again.” - *Michael Phelps, following the disclosure of pictures posted to Facebook showing him smoking marijuana (CNN, 2009)*

## 1. Logging on: The emergence of social networking

Social networking sites represent a new stage in the evolution of the Internet, what is sometimes termed *Web 2.0*. Web 2.0 and social networking sites are characterized by user-driven content, combined with interactivity with other users; this dynamic electronic environment extends far beyond static personal Web pages. The most popular social networking sites include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter. While there are design and feature differences between these platforms, their basic elements are the same. Because of its dominance in the field, we will herein be focusing on Facebook, but our arguments also apply to other social networking sites.

Facebook provides users with a standard format that can be employed to upload desired information (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). For example, users can post personal photos, contact information, picture galleries, and status updates (i.e., messages declaring what the person is doing at the time). Any picture can be “tagged,” which entails listing the names of the people in the shot. Facebook interactivity is facilitated via “friending,” or approving access to a user’s page content. Individuals can choose other registered users to be friends; once accepted, a friend has access to the user’s information (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Users can also search for other users, often found through “tags,” and ask them to become friends. Friends also have the ability to post messages on the user’s “wall,” a location designed to display comments from other people besides the user. The status updates of friends are streamed on the user’s Facebook page.

There is a growing base of anecdotal information describing how companies augment existing screening tools with information collected from social networking sites such as Facebook. Sometimes these inquiries uncover positive information about potential candidates, such as skills or backgrounds that don’t always reveal themselves on a résumé. More interesting cases emerge, however, when the employer discovers a candidate’s “dark side” on a Facebook site. In this article, we examine the

implications—both good and bad—that Facebook presents for managers making hiring and other employment decisions. Based on this examination, we will also propose some issues that organizations should consider as they evaluate the “Facebook question.”

## 2. Building the network: Why is Facebook so popular?

Based on current statistics, Facebook is now the dominant global social networking site. In the brief period spanning August 2008 to April 2009, the number of Facebook users doubled from 100 million to 200 million (Stone, 2009). During a typical week, approximately 5 million new users join Facebook (Hempel, 2009). Facebook was created in 2004 by a Harvard University student who wanted to provide a way for his fellow classmates to interact and stay connected. Once the exclusive domain of the college student population, the number of new users older than age 25 grew 276% during the last 6 months of 2008 (Orenstein, 2009). On average, users spend about 2-3 hours a month on Facebook (Hempel, 2009).

There are two reasons why social networking sites such as Facebook are experiencing wild popularity. The most commonly cited reason revolves around Facebook’s intended goal of creating and extending a user’s community. In addition, especially for younger users, Facebook is a way to shape personal identities.

### 2.1. A sense of community

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) observed a worrisome trend in American society: participation in bowling leagues and many other forms of civic participation had dramatically declined over the previous three decades. Other scholars have also lamented the weakening of social capital in the United States (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). There are many benefits of social capital, in terms of both strong and weak ties with others. Networks of relationships provide common norms, values, goals, and a common language. In the “good old days,” churches, fraternities, and unions provided opportunities to network; this aided individuals in meeting influential people and finding job connections.

Interestingly, the social networking phenomenon emerged shortly after Putnam’s provocative book. We are now faced with considering how, and to what extent, social networking sites such as Facebook represent new forms of social capital. The major

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