

TWO EXPERIMENTS IN HIRING DISCRIMINATION
VIA ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Executive Abstract

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*This is a preliminary draft. Please do not cite this manuscript,
so as to avoid contaminating the results. Thank you.*

EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

Many job seekers publicly disclose, online, personal information that is risky for employers to ask in face-to-face interviews or use in the official hiring process. In most of the United States, for instance, an employer who asked a job applicant questions about her religious affiliation, sexual preference, or family status, may be sued for discrimination under the Equal Employment Opportunity laws. Thus, even in extensive interviews, much of that information remains frequently private. Employers' costs of acquiring the same data online, however, are much lower: the information is often a few clicks away, and the risks of detection are substantially lower. With the rise of social networking sites, micro-blogging, and other Web 2.0 services, new opportunities for labor market discrimination have clearly arisen.

Anecdotal evidence and self-report surveys suggest that U.S. firms have, in fact, started using various online services to seek information about prospective hires. According to the employers, the information sought online is benign: firms admit to searching blogs or online profiles for evidence of professional or unprofessional behaviors and traits. However, so much more can be gleaned about a prospective hire from their online presences. A tweet can reveal her place of worship. A blog post can imply a person's sexual preference. A photo on LinkedIn can show her race. A comment on Facebook - or even just an image chosen as the online profile's background - can indicate her family status.

To date, however, no controlled experiment has investigated the extent to which firms use online resources to find information about job applicants, and how their hiring activities are influenced by the information they find. In particular, no experiment has established whether "protected" information that employers are discouraged from asking during interviews, but

which can be found on social networking sites, affects their employment decisions. This is the focus of our research.

We present two controlled experiments of the impact that information posted on a popular social networking site by job applicants can have on employers' hiring behavior. In two studies (a survey experiment and a field experiment) we measure the ratio of callbacks that different job applicants receive as function of their personal traits. The experiments focus on sensitive traits that are either unlawful or risky for U.S. employers to enquire about during interviews, but which can be inferred from applicants' online presences. The results from both the survey experiment and the field experiment provide evidence of potential hiring discrimination via social networking sites.

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