

Digital Footprint Background Checks

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Finding a job is already difficult and once you have found one there are many obstacles that you have to pass through in the quest for gaining employment. These include criminal background checks (police clearance), drug screens, personality tests, and skills assessments. In the past decade, a new background check has emerged. This is in response to the way social media has transformed the job market. This background check focuses on your *digital footprint or online presence*. In a research titled “What is a digital footprint?” (Hamles, 2014), it was stated that digital footprint is the records and traces that we leave behind when using the Internet. Your digital footprint can either be positive or negative, but it is never irrelevant. The digital footprint can affect your online records and even your credibility. You leave a digital footprint with every social media interaction that you make.

Brown and Vaughn in 2011 said that employers have acknowledged that the information available on social media sites had, at least, some effect on *human resource decisions* including recruitment, training, promotion, and termination. *Recruiters* especially have taken an interest in this and now tend to search online in order to conduct a background check on potential employees.

The founder of Reputation.com, Michael Fertik, a pioneer in the field of reputation management, said that “You can’t imagine that your private life and your business life are perfectly separable for your prospective employers.”. Nagendra, 2014, explained how social media can impact various types of HR functions across the life cycle of an employee. In particular, how social media affects the attraction and recruitment of employees (Colao,2012), collaboration (Byrne, 2015), and employee retention (Coy, 2015).

A study on employers who do *digital footprint checks* found that 70% of surveyed human resources managers have rejected job applicants because of an unreliable online reputation (McGrath, 2012). This solidifies the importance of having a *good online reputation*. The use of social media and *digital footprint for recruitment* is increasingly greater than other areas of potential expansion concerning digital human resource practice (Pais & Gandini, 2015). More recently in a 2017 survey by CareerBuilder, a US recruitment company, found that 70% of companies used social media to screen candidates when hiring, up from 60% in 2016 and 11% in 2006. More than half of employers had found postings that led them not to hire a candidate for an open role.

These *new background check* has led to the emergence of companies such as Fama Technologies, which uses machine learning to sift through online posts and identify undesirable traits and habits such as sexism, racism, and drug use. Fama Technologies says it has helped its corporate clients screen more than 11 million pieces of publicly available content from employees and job seekers. About 14% of the content examined raised flags for sexism or misogyny; 10% raised alarms for bigotry, racism or hate speech. This new practice is also being adopted in Europe although a tighter data protection regime has limited the extent of screening that employers can conduct while hiring. New guidelines specifying that

companies would require a “legal ground” to check applicants’ social media profiles, specifying that the data collected must be necessary and relevant to their job performance. Given that this is now a global trend it is only a matter of time before Africa catches on.

It is important to bear in mind your use of *social media* and how it may affect your professional life. Employers will be looking to see if a candidate fits in with their company culture and by looking at our social media profiles, potential hirers can gain valuable insight into our personality and the way we conduct ourselves. Social media can be advantageous if we understand and control the digital footprint that we leave behind. Candidates should ask themselves the following questions; Am I happy with the image my social media profile portrays? Do I have any photos that give a bad first impression? Do I have any inappropriate comments on any of my accounts? What will a potential employer find if they google my name? Once you have answered these questions it is then vital to make changes to fix any red flags that you would have identified.

The digital footprint background check identifies and flags the following:

- Potentially illegal activity
- Potentially violent conduct
- Sexually explicit material
- Demonstrations of racism/intolerance

In July 2017, Walt Disney fired James Gunn, the writer, and director of its Guardians of the Galaxy film franchise, over old, deleted tweets containing distasteful jokes about paedophilia and rape. “The offensive attitudes and statements discovered on James’ Twitter feed are indefensible and inconsistent with our studio’s values and we have severed our business relationship with him,” the company said in a statement. Gunn, for his part, apologised on Twitter, saying “I used to make a lot of offensive jokes. I don’t anymore.” This is just one example of how a *negative digital footprint* can affect your employment and have dire consequences.

Making sure an employer can find the positive things you have done on social media like articles you have written about a topic in your career field or links to news stories you have shared on Twitter, LinkedIn or Facebook shows that you are engaged in your industry and can help buffer the impact of less flattering information.

The advantages of undertaking these checks are that it allows companies to be proactive rather than reactive. It enhances the complexity of employment processes and it keeps human resources current with global trends with little to no risk. The digital footprint background check should however not be an alternative practice, but a complement to traditional checks.

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