

Are School District Employers Using Social Media Sites, Too?

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Facebook...LinkedIn... Twitter... YouTube. Hardly a month goes by that we don't read something about how employers are using social media sites in recruitment and hiring activities, as well as in efforts to market or "brand" their company/organization. College students everywhere are being advised to "clean up their online identity" to prevent employers from forming anything less than a positive first impression. They're also encouraged to actively use sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to support job search activities such as finding job postings, networking with career professionals, and learning about different organizations or industries by following discussions and company updates.

Does all of this advice also hold true for K-12 employers (school districts) and teaching candidates who are pursuing opportunities in this industry? For the second year in a row, I conducted a short survey asking about social media usage by employers in this field. The survey consisted of eleven questions and an option to share open comments. Social media was defined as tools such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, Instagram, and blogs. The survey was shared via email, paper copy at teacher job fairs, and online via targeted LinkedIn groups. Last year (2012-13), administrators from almost 200 schools/school districts participated in the survey representing 19 states and two countries. This year (2013-14), participation increased by 63% with 312 surveys returned representing 28 states and three countries. Information that follows includes highlights from this year's survey, as well as in some cases, a comparison to the previous year.

Highlights:

- ✓ Use of social media to support recruitment and employment activity by K-12 employers has increased significantly over the past year: 71% of the respondents are using these tools for this purpose (to any degree – occasionally/frequently/always) as compared to 52% last year.
- ✓ 74% use social media tools as a way to advertise their current or anticipated job openings, some more than others (10% indicated they always do).
- ✓ Regarding the use of tools like Facebook or LinkedIn to screen or "vet" applicants/potential employees, 70% report this activity to any degree, which is consistent with last year (73%).
- ✓ The most common point in the recruitment/interview process when administrators check a candidate's presence or image on various social media sites is after second or follow-up interviews (67%).
- ✓ While most are quick to warn students/applicants about the negative implications of damaging content in their social media accounts (i.e. rejecting a candidate due to undesirable indiscretions), 31% of school district administrators report "action decisions" (i.e. interview/don't interview; hire/don't hire) attributed to both positive and negative content found online.
- ✓ K-12 employers don't limit review of social media contents and activity to just job applicants; 77% report having to take negative action against an employee when they learned of this type of occurrence or behavior (verbal/documented warnings, disciplinary action or sanctions, probation, and/or termination); 39% report that they have fired employees because of unprofessional or inappropriate use of social media.
- ✓ School districts have significantly increased use of social media for marketing or "branding" purposes over the past year; 78% of the respondents report that they do use these tools to advertise, market or promote their school districts – this almost doubles the 42% who reported similar activity last year.

Reviewing the results of the survey and comments shared by school administrators, it appears that the use of social media to support recruitment and hiring activity is strong and continues to grow. Teacher education majors/future teachers should follow the same advice shared with those pursuing jobs and careers in other industries - including both personal use/professional branding as a candidate as well as utilizing these tools to identify job prospects, learn more about specific schools/school districts, and networking with professionals in the education field.

Again this year, school district administrators shared advice and tips regarding smart use of social media by job applicants. They stressed the importance of managing one's online image. The discovery of indiscretions such as drunken party photos, foul language, excessive personal information, or dishonesty will typically contribute to a negative first impression, which then often ends a candidate's employment consideration. On the other hand, social media can positively enhance one's online image, too. Many administrators expressed their pleasure in finding noteworthy items contained in a candidate's Facebook or LinkedIn profile such as community service, civic involvement, special recognition or awards, and personal achievements. This information often reinforced other already-positive materials acquired on an applicant, thus helping – rather than hindering – their candidacy.

Advice from a few of this year's survey respondents regarding social media usage:

- ✓ *We look for evidence of professionalism. We're interested in seeing how candidates conduct themselves online. Candidates who don't maintain a degree of professionalism across their social media accounts aren't teachers we're interested in working with.*
- ✓ *We discontinue the consideration of any candidate we find undesirable online information for (e.g. inappropriate photos, posts, tags, blogs) as we consider this to be a reflection or indication of what they would be or bring if hired.*
- ✓ *Social media usage can significantly help/support teacher candidates in the job search process – and can also diminish chances for employment completely. Be wise about what you choose to do online.*
- ✓ *While monitoring privacy settings is critical, young people should think seriously about the overall image they project via various social media tools. The competition for teaching jobs is fierce in some teaching fields and/or regions of the country. This is an easy way to be eliminated from consideration before the "real screening" even begins.*