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***My Blog is My CV... or not?
Do HR companies in Macedonia value the on-line activities of job candidates?***

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Abstract

Social software in most of its forms is predominately used by young people. This is the case with Macedonia as well. More and more people every day start their own blogs or other social software accounts where they publish information that are easily available to the public.

The same group of people faces the challenge to find a job after graduation – a task that is considered very difficult in a struggling economy. In recent years HR and employment agencies, as well as in house HR departments in big companies, started to play a bigger role in the overall job hunt in Macedonia. More and more people receive job proposals through these agencies and find themselves in need to meet the demanding conditions of the labor market.

In this pilot research we try to find out whether these two meet and if so what the consequences are. The research was performed through interviews with HR managers in local companies and other professionals whose job is to seek out candidates with a qualified work experience, as well as appropriate background.

We tried to learn if Macedonian labor force recruiters know enough about the emerging social software and do they consider it to be a valuable resource in evaluating people's skills, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes.

With new generations coming out of University and connecting on the Internet, these issues might prove important. We tried to get a sense of what is the situation today and what is to be expected.

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1. Introduction

Many say blogs are just for fun, and there is probably a lot of truth in that. However, with more and more people creating blogs and joining different on-line communities everyday, even in Macedonia, the question about the possible utilization of those resources becomes important.

Another important issue in Macedonia is the job hunt. Many say there is nothing fun in it, as the market is small and demanding. Finding a job is not as easy as signing up for a new on-line account. And without question, almost all graduates must face this challenge.

The question that is before us is simple, and possibly, very controversial: Will some employer have second thoughts on hiring someone who writes on-line on a topic that does not fit it taste? Blogs are great tools for personal promotion and they can be used for building a public image of the writer. At the same time there are many open questions, mostly about credibility and identity of the authors.

Having in mind that recruiting activities are regulated to prevent discrimination, we try to find out if the new technologies open up new perspectives for both the employers and the prospective employees, here in Macedonia.

1.2. Why this research, or the relevance of blogs

In the last couple of years blogs and other social software erupted in Macedonia. This was mostly because of emergence of local blogging platforms, most notably <http://blog.com.mk>, and certainly because of the increased Internet penetration in the same period.

After a while bloggers started to talk about their importance in society, their role as media, their rights as journalists and so on. A local NGO even held a conference about blogs and blogging. While there were different topics discussed on every occasion, we feel that the prevailing debate in most of the cases was the one about self promotion and the fact that blogs make it possible and even more so easy to show how good a person is in one thing or another.

This is why we set out to find whether someone actually looks at blogs (and other social software) when it comes down to something important – or in this case employment. There has been talk that someone in Macedonia, somewhere got a job offer because of his/hers blog. However, one case does not prove anything and thus this research.

Social software is predominately used by young people – high school and university students. The same group of people face a challenging task to find a job in the struggling Macedonian economy, where in recent years HR companies started to play a bigger role on the job market.

We wanted to learn if people can benefit or suffer damages as a result of their on-line activities,

when looking for a job. If either one of these is to be found as true, then people should start investing more effort in their blogs and other on-line resources. If not, we should at least be able find out if blogs just are not relevant at this moment, and whether or not employers think they will be important some time in the future.

2. The on-line debate

As expected, the issue we want to explore in the local community is widely discussed on the Internet. There have been cases when people lost their job over their blog, and there is a word for that - they were “dooxed”. In the US, “more than half of all employers use some kind of on-line screening technology including social networking sites like FaceBook and MySpace” - according to NACE, and “career advisors caution students to be discrete about the information they put on the web” (Humphries, 2007).

One of the frequent examples in on-line discussion on this topic is an imagined situation in which “an interviewer [is] asking to see the photo albums of job applicants” (Abasolo, 2008) and/or other private information such as sex orientation, religious beliefs or even if the person uses drugs. Surely in off-line life this is not possible, and probably even banned with laws¹ that prevent discrimination on the labor market. Yet, most of these information are easily available to the whole public, including the employer, thanks to blogs and sites such as Facebook and MySpace where people voluntarily publish the very same information..

The on-line debate lists points about the reasons for and against employers looking on social networking sites for information about their prospective employers. The obvious reason against, is that profiles on social networking sites simply are not resumes. They can contain inaccurate information. There is rarely verification, so someone can impersonate another person. Also, people often publish information on-line “to portray themselves as they want to be seen rather than as they really are” (Fish, Lee, 2008). Then there is the issue of potential charges if an employer did not like a user's profile which identifies the user as “a vegan Democratic atheist who enjoys basket weaving” (Fish, Lee, 2008). The reasons for, show the opposite side of the debate – at least for some types of professions. To quote the same article:

Employees in sales, public relations, and customer service function as representatives for the companies they work for, so employers have a legitimate interest in ensuring potential workers won't embarrass the company.

(...) When hiring a writer, for example, I'd be more likely to choose one who had a blog

1 Macedonia is awaiting new, tighter legislation that is supposed to tie the hands of employers when conducting job interviews, in order to prevent discrimination.

(assuming it was well-written) than one who did not, even if I disagreed with some of the views it contained.

The latter is mostly true for other professionals as well: programmers, designers, photographers among others.

Also there is the issue of protecting the company by avoiding candidates that may cause trouble. Assuming that the information on-line is valid, employers can eliminate candidates that, for example, are violent, had a lot of problems with their previous employer or have a bad reputation among colleagues.

Obviously, there is a thin line here that can be crossed either way. A possible trade off is offered between professional dedication and personal attitudes, and it is made easier by the new technology.

3. Research design

The goal of this research was to explore if Macedonian labor force recruiters know enough about the emerging social software and do they consider it to be a valuable resource in evaluating people's skills, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. This empirical research was conducted among HR managers in local companies, as well other professionals whose job is to seek out candidates with a qualified work experience. The criterion for the selection of the HR companies was based on the frequency of the recruitments i.e. the activity of the company. This criterion was also used when selecting the companies; however the size of the company also played an important role. The research was performed through semi-structured interviews. This form allowed finding out concrete information about the topic, but in the same time it gave enough freedom and flexibility for expressing personal opinion. The questionnaire is consisted of four parts addressing different aspects of the subject. The first part explores quantitative information regarding the structure of perspective employees. The second part examines the respondent's knowledge for social software, and their personal utilization of it. The third and the fourth part of the questionnaire inspect the companies attitude towards new technologies and their exploitation of the social software applications.

In total twelve companies were contacted: 6 HR companies, 4 telecommunication companies, 1 software development company and 1 marketing agency. Seven of the companies (5 HR and 2 telecommunication companies) accepted to be interviewed. At the end we managed to conduct six interviews, as one of the HR companies could not find the time to meet with us in accordance with our time schedule. The respondents in most companies were either managers, who in the same time

perform the recruitments in the company, or HR managers or employed in the HR department.

4. Results

Having in mind that the research sample was rather small and therefore not representative, the obtained data could not be generalized. The information that will be presented can be considered only as trends and grounds for further researches on the topic. The research was conducted among labor recruiters who are part either of HR companies or other types of companies with own HR departments. It is important to mention that there is significant difference between the recruitment practices of the former, who tend to follow clients wishes and requirements, and the later who have strict rules of their own. The data presented here are grouped and the names of the companies are not used when presenting specific information.

4.1. Familiarity with the term social software

Almost all of the respondents, with the exception of two, were not familiar with the term “Social software”. After the presentation of the definition they concluded that they are acquainted with it by another name (social networking) or they had superficial knowledge on the topic. In the questionnaire we listed a number of social software applications (Blogs, LinkedIn, Facebook, My space, Flickr, Del.icio.us) which helped in the explanation of the subject. Some of the respondents recognized applications that they were using, but did not know it can qualify as social software.

At the same time, most of the respondents believed that new technologies can help with their work. One of the issues they regarded as important is the fact that face to face interviews sometimes can not yield all wanted information, and that if possible they would use some kind of technology to discover the missing parts. Two of the respondents especially referred to the new anti-discrimination law (already mentioned above) that will hinder the work of the recruiters – at least in theory, thus turning them towards alternative ways of collecting information about candidates.

4.2. Personal and professional use of social software applications

Two respondents answered affirmative on the question about the use of social software applications. Both of them use LinkedIn for professional purposes, while My Space and Facebook was an application used for personal satisfaction. One of the respondents, that does not use any application personally, encourages its employees to use LinkedIn as a primary base for search of candidates. None of the respondents have their own personal blogs, and they also do not follow the blogs of their employees, at least not on a regular basis. Two of the respondents consider blogs to be private, and if they read a blog of an employee it is for an entertaining purposes. None of them considered

the possibility control the content or check if it is written during working time. Some even stated that it is irrelevant what or when the employees do as long as it does not interfere with their work obligations – which by some point is encouraging.

4.3. Current use of Internet for recruitment

All respondents use written media for advertising job ads, and currently this is the most efficient way for gathering candidates applications. The corporate web page is another additional medium where companies publish their job ads. In the last years few local on-line job search services appeared and they are used by some of the companies as means for advertising. These on-line job search services are available at <http://www.najdirabota.com.mk>, <http://www.vrabotuvanje.com.mk>, and <http://www.tendernik.com.mk>. One of the respondents used LinkedIn as a service for advertising a job, but they emphasized that the number of candidates that applied was smaller than ads published in the written media. Nevertheless they considered the attempt on LinkedIn as useful exploration of new possibilities.

Another company have personal software web application which they use for communication with their candidates. Most of the companies have an exclusively used e-mail address that is used only for receiving applications.

4.4. Relevance of candidates' blogs

When it comes to recruiting new candidates, one of the respondents stated that the content of potential candidates blog can play an important role in the recruitment process. According to this respondent, having a blog that supports certain political party can influence the selection process, if it is not in accordance with the clients requirements. To put things bluntly, having an anti-smoking blog can be a good reason for a disqualification of a candidate who applied to work in a tobacco company. As far as employers wishes and requirements are considered, the above is regarded as conflict of interests and an issue that can influence the working atmosphere. However, even if blogs can be useful tools for discovering information, all of the respondents consider checking blogs of potential candidate's time consuming.

Three of the respondents raised the issue of credibility and identity on the Internet, and thus on blogs and other on-line personal spaces. In their words, they were worried about the trustworthiness of the presented information for several reasons: they can not be sure who is writing if it is done anonymously; they worry about misrepresentation – or at least they do not know how to check the validity of all these information, and they can not be sure if the writing really represents the beliefs

and attitudes of the author or it is part of a public image that the person is trying to build.

Two of the respondents said that they would consider blogs and on-line profiles of people when looking for specific candidates, especially when recruiting for higher positions (head hunting²), in the final phase of the process or when the number of potential candidates is narrowed.

On the other hand those with strict recruiting procedures state that blogs, as well as other personal activities, have no influence on the recruitment process.

4.5. Future expectations

One of the respondents stated that the expansive and euphoric use of blogs and other applications have deduced this phenomenon to a pure trend. According to this respondent, the lack of surveillance endangers the intellectual property, both of those who write on blogs and other authors. The need for a control and professional engagement was mentioned as one condition that will change their attitude towards social software applications – if there is a professional blog that has an editor, who reviews all incoming content, and publishes only professional texts, it can be a good ground for inviting a blogger for an interview.

Nevertheless, almost all of the respondents said that they believe the attitude towards blogs will change in near future. This belief is mostly based on previous experience, namely with the Internet which also was not considered important some years ago, but now hardly any company can work without it. Some of them also expect that the change will happen when the blogosphere in Macedonia will mature. If this is to be the case, remains to be seen.

5. Conclusion

Social software and blogs in particular play important part in people's everyday life. This is certainly true for Macedonia, as well as the rest of the world. However, when looking for something particular, as in this case employment, things do not look as significant.

The companies that were a part of this research overall were rather skeptical towards the constant use of social software applications. There are the questions of privacy, identity and credibility as well as practical issues such as workload. The research discovered that only one company employed a person because of its on-line presence and activity.

However, at the same time there is a sense of optimism. The climate is changing and what is more

2 The practice of approaching people already working for one company with an offer of a job at another. Headhunting is usually carried out by a recruiter either an employee within a company or an employment agency who keeps an eye on the performance of targeted personnel. Headhunters most often perform executive searches, but they may also work at lower levels with the intention of picking out those with management potential; <<http://dictionary.bnet.com/definition/headhunting.html>>

important the people working as recruiters are open to this change. It is hard to say when blogs are going to become relevant, but it seems it is not too early for people to start investing more in their blogs.

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