

KCSIE: How to research applicants' online profiles

The Department for Education published the draft 2022 version of Keeping Children Safe in Education. A few changes caught the eye and the one that most of us in education are discussing relates to a new set of text that suggested checking the online presence of job applicants.

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At the beginning of the year, the Department for Education (DfE) published for consultation the [draft 2022 version of Keeping Children Safe in Education](#).

A few changes caught the eye and the one that most of us in education are discussing relates to a new set of text that suggested checking the online presence of job applicants.

The specific addition is found in paragraph 215 and states: "As part of the shortlisting process, schools and colleges should consider carrying out an online search (including social media) as part of their due diligence on the shortlisted candidates. This may help identify any incidents or issues that have happened, and are publicly available online, which the school or college might want to explore with the applicant at interview."

This proposed addition is quite simple and quite short - and that is where part of the challenge lies.

Consolidating what many already do

When you look at what schools and colleges could be being asked to do there are only eight words of direction: "consider carrying out an online search (including social media)".

This leaves some sizeable gaps for schools and colleges to fill when it comes to the 'when', the 'how' and perhaps most importantly, the 'how far'.

Of course, though employers checking the online and social media presence of prospective employees is not a new issue; various surveys over the last five year or so have found that up to 80 per cent of employers do it as part of their recruitment and onboarding process.

There are also no legal issues that are specific to checking social media, recruiters just need to ensure they do not use the information they find to unlawfully discriminate against a candidate.

This is no different to other aspects of the recruitment process and is why a good number of schools and colleges already include some level of online review as part of their recruitment process.

After all, given we have been telling students to be mindful of their online presence and perception for some time, it is not a surprise that we are to practice what we preach.

A likely change

Given this seems highly likely this new addition will form part of the 2022 guidance from September.

It is also likely the consultation feedback will suggest more detail be added as to precisely what schools should look for and where they should look to give schools more guidance on how to implement it.

Yet recent iterations of this guidance have not provided such detail and so the current drafting of paragraph 215 is likely to closely reflect the finished product.

Therefore, schools and colleges should start planning how they will implement this requirement without a clear-cut set of rules to follow – which is not ideal.

However, there is some best practices guidelines schools can follow in this area – both if the new requirement comes into force and indeed for any current checks of online profiles they may be doing – which can be grouped under four key areas:

1. Why it is relevant?

Before focusing on process, it is important to understand the two broad reasons why these checks will be required – safeguarding and reputation.

Schools and colleges do not want to recruit anyone who is unsuitable to work with children and/or will bring their setting into disrepute.

Some of the more obvious things recruiters should look for would include evidence of offensive or inappropriate behaviour, jokes or language, discriminatory comments, inappropriate photos, drug or alcohol misuse and anything that suggests they may not be suitable to work with children.

2. Where to look

This is where the guidance fails by not providing enough detail.

As such schools and colleges will need to develop a process which sets out the searches it will carry out, which sites it will review and how far back they will look.

Starting with a basic Google/other search engine search then the main social media and video platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube.

It would be wise to set parameters so that each the search for each candidate follows the same process. With that in mind, recruiters should consider what sites they will check routinely and how far back in time they will go. On this latter point, it would be helpful for the DfE to offer some guidance so the sector takes a consistent approach.

3. Who undertakes the search

To minimise the risk of discrimination, it would be sensible for the online review to be carried out by someone not directly involved in the recruitment process and for that person to feed into the process only information that impacts on safeguarding or reputation.

This should avoid any risk of irrelevant information such as age, gender or race being passed on.

4. What to do with the information

Treat it in the same way as you would other information relevant to the process such as that contained in the application form, the DBS certificate and the references: review it and if appropriate give the candidate the opportunity to address any concerns you have.

This can all be quite time-consuming. For example, searches on three shortlisted individuals with a strong online presence could take at least an hour each, depending on what is found.

Add in time to pass on the findings and it is likely to add at least another half day resource need into the recruitment process.

Yet if it becomes part of the official guidance in KCSIE schools will have to incorporate into their recruitment efforts – and it will also be interesting to see what checks Ofsted would expect to see as part of a compliant recruitment process.

Given all this it would seem sensible for schools should start thinking now about how they will manage and resource this new requirement so they are ahead of the game.

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