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Social Media and Job Searching Among Young Canadian Workers: A Summary of Government Initiatives

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***Social Media and Job Searching Among Young Canadian
Workers: A Summary of Government Initiatives***
(Background Paper)

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOB SEARCHING AMONG YOUNG CANADIAN WORKERS: A SUMMARY OF GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

1 INTRODUCTION

The popularity of social media as job search and career advancement tools is on the rise in Canada. In fact, in 2011, nearly one quarter of Canadian job seekers used social media in their job search. Of those using social media in this way, people in the 18-to-29-year-old age group were most likely to believe in the importance of being active on social media in order to advance their careers.¹

Although young people face a high rate of unemployment, they will be called upon to play an increasingly important role in Canada's economic future, particularly given the aging population.² As a result, the growing role of social media in job searching is an issue that Canadian parliamentarians may be asked to consider.

This publication will examine the role that social media play in the job search process of young Canadian workers.³ Although there are many other social media platforms, this analysis will focus on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, which are the platforms that are most commonly used for job searching. This study will also provide a summary of the various federal government initiatives that offer support to job seekers, as well as an overview of ground-breaking programs that have been implemented by other governments.

2 YOUNG WORKERS IN CANADA: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

According to the International Labour Organization's most recent report, countries around the world are experiencing record high unemployment rates among youth,⁴ and Canada is no exception. Data from Statistics Canada show that young men between the ages of 15 and 24 are most affected by unemployment in Canada. Young people with a high level of education who are married and without children are less likely to be unemployed.⁵

In 2011, 13% of young Canadians between the ages of 15 and 29 were neither in school nor did they have a job⁶ (the percentage of youth who are neither enrolled in school nor employed is referred to as the NEET rate).⁷ Although Canada ranks fairly well compared to the other G7 nations,⁸ the NEET rate (13%) was still 5.6 points higher than the unemployment rate of the rest of the population (7.4%) in 2011.⁹ Of all the G7 countries, Germany had the lowest NEET rate (11.6%) in 2011, while Italy had the highest (21.2%).¹⁰

The unenviable position in which youth find themselves in Canada's labour market, combined with their daily use of new Web technologies, have resulted in social media becoming part of the job search process of people in this age group in particular. Statistics on the use of social media show that youth use this type of

communication more than their elders: in 2009, 86% of Canadians aged 18 to 34 who used the Internet had a profile on a social networking site, compared with 44% of people aged 55 and over.¹¹

3 MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

A 2012 survey of approximately 8,000 American university students indicates that almost half of Generation Y plans to use social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to find a job, a proportion that has quadrupled in the past two years.¹² Here is an overview of these three platforms.

3.1 FACEBOOK

Facebook¹³ is the most popular social media platform in the world. Users can create a profile where they can publish personal information, such as their marital status, their employment history and their education, and communicate with other users either publicly or privately.

Almost 18 million Canadians use Facebook, and 54% of these users are between the ages of 16 and 34.¹⁴

Facebook is also the most popular job searching platform. According to a survey conducted by Jobvite in the United States in 2011, 48% of job seekers with a Facebook account conducted at least one job search using this platform. This same survey indicated that 18.4 million Americans said that they found their current job through Facebook.¹⁵ The Kelly Index shows that Facebook is Generation Y's preferred platform for job searching.¹⁶

In addition, Facebook plans to launch its own job board by fall 2012.¹⁷ This job board will allow third parties to post job offers that Facebook users can view.

3.2 TWITTER

Twitter¹⁸ is a microblogging platform that allows users to publish messages of 140 characters or less.

According to a survey conducted in 2009, 81% of Twitter users are between the ages of 15 and 29. Canadians represent 5.69% of all of the site's users, behind people in the United States (62.14%) and in the United Kingdom (7.87%).¹⁹

The Jobvite survey carried out in the United States indicates that 42% of respondents who use social media to look for work said that they obtained the job they had at the time of the survey through Twitter.²⁰

3.3 LINKEDIN

LinkedIn²¹ is the world's biggest social networking site for professionals. It allows users to post their resumés, communicate with other people working in their field and build a professional network. Maintaining a profile allows users to be more visible in the labour market. The LinkedIn platform has a section reserved for job postings.

According to the data published on the LinkedIn site, people aged 18 to 34 represent 58.2% of the site's subscribers²² and approximately 5.8 million Canadians have an account.²³

A total of 35% of respondents to a 2012 survey said that LinkedIn was their social media platform of choice for job searching.²⁴

4 SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOB SEARCHING: FINDING A BALANCE

Clearly, some workers can benefit from the use of social media in the job search process. Let us briefly look at the main advantages of and the risks associated with using Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn in the context of the labour market.

4.1 ADVANTAGES

For youth, there are many advantages to using social media to search for a job. Today, these networking sites represent the tools of choice for connecting employers with potential employees.²⁵

The biggest advantage of Facebook and LinkedIn is that they offer users the opportunity to post resumés, and thus work experience, skills and education. These platforms allow users to showcase their knowledge in a field without having to send documents to every employer and even without having to apply for a specific job. Users can also share their career goals and priorities on these sites.

Facebook and Twitter allow potential employees to show other sides of themselves, such as their personality traits and their leisure activities. These sites provide an opportunity for users to paint a picture of themselves that is pleasing to employers; users can benefit from projecting a carefully constructed professional image, as long as that image corresponds with the values of the employer in question and the dynamic of that employer's work environment. A 2011 survey of 300 American human resources workers showed that 68% of recruiters had hired a candidate based on the positive image he or she portrayed on social media sites.²⁶

These three platforms also provide access to information that cannot be found anywhere else.²⁷ For example, LinkedIn allows users to look for the names of a company's recruiters, information that is not usually accessible on a company's official website; it also allows users to contact these recruiters directly. The culture of a company, the type of employee it is looking for and other such information can also be found on the various platforms on which the company is active.

Among other things, social media sites offer the opportunity to create a solid network and to communicate with potential referral sources.²⁸ For example, users can invite influential people in their field to join their network on LinkedIn, or they can follow these people on Twitter.

4.2 RISKS

There are also many risks associated with using social media to search for a job.

Potential candidates who show a lack of professionalism on social media sites can seriously jeopardize their chances of finding employment. According to a 2011 survey of recruiters who used social media to screen candidates, 69% said that they had screened out certain candidates for posting inappropriate photos, negative comments about a former employer or discriminatory comments. This same survey revealed that Facebook and Twitter are the two most commonly used platforms for screening potential candidates during a hiring process.²⁹

Users can also hurt their chances of finding employment by posting false information about their career history or level of education on Facebook or LinkedIn. A writer for a Sun Life Financial blog advises that users avoid being dishonest or posting information that is inconsistent from profile to profile or conflicts with their resumé.³⁰

It can be just as harmful to be absent from social media sites as it is to be present on them in an inappropriate manner: a candidate who projects a particularly positive image online may seem more interesting to an employer than one who does not have a profile.³¹ A blogger for Randstad Canada has said that “at the other extreme from sharing too much information is sharing nothing at all.”³²

Observers agree that users must therefore try to achieve a balance: they must be present on social media sites while being careful to project an image that corresponds with what employers are looking for.

5 GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

The new trends observed in Internet use are changing the way that governments are planning their employment assistance programs. A report commissioned by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) states:

In recognition that job seekers are increasingly turning to the Internet to help them make career decisions and search for job opportunities, governments across Canada and around the world are investing in Web-based career development services tools to help their citizens navigate the labour market and make better-informed career decisions.³³

In Canada, the federal and provincial governments share jurisdiction over work and employment. At the federal level, labour-force-related learning and skills development fall under the jurisdiction of HRSDC.

A number of HRSDC's initiatives, projects and programs teach young people about the various aspects of Canada's labour market. The department's programs are particularly visible on various social media platforms.

However, to date, there are very few government programs and initiatives that provide young people with information on the use of social media for job searching or that encourage such practices. Because of the speed with which new technologies

are changing, it is sometimes difficult for the government to stay on the leading edge and keep up with new trends in this area.

5.1 CAREERMOTION

The CareerMotion project was part of a research and experimentation initiative operated by HRSDC in 2010. The department provided funding for a study conducted by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), a non-profit organization that specializes in social experimentation in Canada. SRDC prepared a report on the study that was published in 2012. The purpose of the study was to provide:

... reliable evidence on whether the labour market competencies of young workers could be improved by providing them with Web-based job search and career planning tools tailored to their needs.³⁴

A group of 500 post-secondary education graduates residing in British Columbia who felt that they were overqualified for the work they were doing participated in the study. Half of them were given access to a custom-designed professional development services portal for five weeks “to help them understand their own skills and career aspirations and linked [sic] their career objectives to relevant, high quality labour market information elsewhere on the Internet.”³⁵

The portal included a range of Internet tools, which are described as a self-directed, tailored career assistance program:

Users are led through a series of modules or steps that allow them first to gain an understanding of their own interests and ambitions before they are given further information and resources to guide them through the career exploration and job search process.³⁶

The report on CareerMotion describes in detail the effect that these tools had, particularly on the confidence and skills of participants when making decisions related to their career development.

According to the report, the results of the study proved the effectiveness of the career development tools offered through the CareerMotion portal: “After only five weeks of use, CareerMotion had a positive impact on participants’ ability to make career decisions and their job search skills.”³⁷

In fact, according to the results obtained by SRDC in this study, the tools provided “significantly helped participants improve their confidence and their ability to make informed career decisions.”³⁸

5.2 YOUTH CANADA

The employment sections of the Youth Canada website lack information on how to use social media to look for a job.³⁹ In fact, the only page that addresses this issue is a blog entry entitled “Does your profile picture send the right message?” This article provides young people with information on how to fashion their online presence.⁴⁰ It

also provides a link to a slightly more in-depth publication of the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada entitled “I can build a secure online identity,” which briefly addresses the possible threats to a person’s reputation on social media sites.⁴¹

And yet, in its 2012–2013 report on plans and priorities, HRSDC states that social media are a priority in the development of the Youth Canada website:

The Government of Canada announced in January 2012 that it would improve the way it does business to better address the needs of today’s youth, including helping them prepare for, find and maintain meaningful employment. Youth.gc.ca is being redesigned to both better meet the needs of today’s youth and provide them with a more interactive experience, through the use of social media tools such as Twitter and YouTube.⁴²

5.3 PROMOTION OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Some federal government initiatives promote youth employment in Canada in a more general way. A number of them are discussed below.

5.3.1 YOUTH EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

The Youth Employment Strategy, a joint initiative of Service Canada and HRSDC launched in 1997, is defined as:

... the Government of Canada’s commitment to help young people, particularly those facing barriers to employment, get the information and gain the skills, work experience and abilities they need to make a successful transition into the labour market.⁴³

It is a horizontal initiative involving 11 federal departments and agencies and consists of three separate components: Skills Link, Career Focus and the Summer Work Experience Program.

The main findings of a 2009 summative evaluation of the Youth Employment Strategy indicate that the strategy remains relevant to the Government of Canada’s priorities and to the specific priorities of the participating departments and agencies. The evaluation also indicates that the strategy’s three program streams successfully achieved their objectives.⁴⁴

Appendix A of the summative evaluation indicates that one of the strategy’s main activities is “information development and distribution,” including the development and distribution of employment-related information tools and products.⁴⁵ However, none of the measures proposed in this report make any mention of new technologies.

5.3.2 YOUNG CANADA WORKS

Launched in 1996, Young Canada Works, funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, is a program that is part of the Youth Employment Strategy. The program’s objectives are as follows:

- to help young Canadians gain practical work experience, develop their skills, enhance their employability and learn more about their career options;
- to increase nationally the pool of skilled and qualified candidates for the cultural, heritage, official languages and parks sectors; and
- to enhance participants' knowledge and appreciation of Canada's achievements and rich cultural heritage.⁴⁶

Young Canada Works sponsors three summer job programs for students and two internship programs for unemployed or underemployed college or university graduates.⁴⁷

5.4 ALBERTA LEARNING INFORMATION SERVICE

Based on our research, it seems that Alberta is the only Canadian province that offers accessible information on using social media sites to look for work. This information is provided on the Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS) website.

The "Tip Sheets" section of the site contains an article entitled "Using social media in your work search," which provides some advice in this regard.⁴⁸ The tip sheet describes the various social media platforms and provides numerous links to other articles prepared by ALIS, such as "Managing Your Social Media Identity,"⁴⁹ and to other government and external online resources.

5.5 THE UNITED STATES EXAMPLE

The United States is leading the way with its government social media job search assistance programs. There are significant differences between the programs focused on employment and new technology funded by the Canadian government and those funded by the American government.

For a little over a year now, the American government has subsidized a project that seems to address the new realities of the work world: the Social Jobs Partnership. In 2011, the federal government implemented a program in conjunction with Facebook, the U.S. Department of Labor, the National Association of Colleges and Employers and the National Association of State Workforce Agencies.⁵⁰ The purpose of this partnership is to facilitate employment for America's jobless through the use of social networks. In the interest of getting people back to work, the partnership plans to pursue the following five initiatives, which are designed to more effectively promote the use of social media networks in the job market and in job searching. According to the Facebook website connected with the initiative, the partnership will:

- conduct survey research about how job seekers, college career centres, and workforce recruiters use social media;
- develop and launch a page on Facebook for specialized resources, as well as content designed to help job seekers and employers;
- develop systems through which job postings can be distributed virally through the Facebook site at no charge;

- promote existing government employment programs and resources aimed at people looking for work; and
- distribute to recruiters, government agencies and job seekers educational materials about using the social web.⁵¹

This initiative is the only one of its kind and seems to be directly related to the observations made in the recent studies on the use of social media in job searching mentioned in section 3, above. The United States Secretary of Labor, Hilda L. Solis, said in a news release that this partnership was one of the American government's priorities:

Linking American job seekers with the resources they need to get back to work is a top priority of the Obama administration and my department. By leveraging the power of the social Web, this initiative will provide immediate, meaningful and ready-to-use information for job seekers and employers, and a modern platform to better connect them.⁵²

No such program exists in Canada. In addition, although the integration of new technologies into job searching has been the subject of reflection and study in other countries, such as the United Kingdom,⁵³ we found no government program similar to that of the United States in the main countries in which the presence of social media is most prominent.

6 PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS

Over the coming years, as the population ages, the proportion of young people in the labour market will increase. Because social media sites are tools that young workers favour in their search for employment, the role of new technologies should be of particular interest to Canadian parliamentarians. However, over the past few years, Committee work has not addressed the contribution that new technologies have made to the labour market.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities is examining all of the issues related to employment that fall under federal jurisdiction. As part of a series of meetings held in 2005, the Committee considered the issue of youth employment, particularly the Summer Career Placements initiative, which is part of the third component of the Youth Employment Strategy. Taking into account the recommendations made in the Committee's report,⁵⁴ the government launched a new initiative entitled Canada Summer Jobs, which "focuses on helping students acquire career-related skills and supporting them in financing and furthering their education."⁵⁵

In a report tabled in April 2008, the Committee also examined a number of issues related to the future and planning of employability across Canada, including worker mobility, seasonal workers, older workers, skilled worker shortages, workplace literacy and the recognition of foreign credentials.⁵⁶ The report addresses employability issues related to the aging population but does not address new

technologies or possible solutions to remedy the problem of youth unemployment in particular.

Finally, the Committee is currently examining the issue of worker shortages and plans to report on this topic in the fall of 2012.

7 CONCLUSION

The labour market is undergoing a period of major change: young workers are increasingly turning to social media to look for employment and for career advancement opportunities, and employers are becoming increasingly active on these platforms. Both job seekers and employers will need to adapt to this new reality and use these tools wisely. It is therefore legitimate to wonder whether it is the government's responsibility to help Canadians learn about and develop skills in the use of social media for job searching and to promote their use.

The federal government, which has assumed the mandate of developing labour market skills at the national level, has implemented a number of job search assistance programs. However, these labour market integration initiatives for youth do not take social media into account, and it remains to be seen whether the Government of Canada plans to help Canadians find work by connecting employers and potential employees through new technologies. If the federal government decided to move forward in this area, the program implemented in the United States is one that could be considered as a model.

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