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COMMENTARY

Holding cybervetting to the same standards as traditional vetting methods

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At the outset, Wilcox et al. (2022) distinguish cybervetting from "traditional hiring and selection procedures," which might be a mistake. Their approach implies that cybervetting warrants special consideration when evaluating its appropriateness for making selection decisions, even though it is subject to the same criteria for establishing the validity of personnel selection procedures that more traditional methods are. The evidence laid out by Wilcox et al. establishes that cybervetting is not being used consistently or appropriately—within or between organizations—and there should be a strong recommendation to organizations that they not be used. However, the focal article's recommendations are somewhat lackluster and generic, with advice that organizations adhere to basic personnel selection principles, like establishing an empirical link between cybervetting and job-related outcomes. Although cybervetting is considered to be a new or emerging practice and research area, the fundamental principles and issues affecting fair and accurate decisions are the same for both cybervetting and traditional vetting, and cybervetting has been shown not to follow standardized procedures for avoiding bias in hiring decisions. Rather, cybervetting is a collection of inconsistent, informal, and haphazard methods of data collection that are subject to the personal biases that industrial-organizational psychologists have historically tried to minimize, if not remove, from selection systems.

Cybervetting is also not a single methodology. It is a broad categorization of methods that hiring agents engage in that are superficially similar because they make use of computers and reside in the intangible world of cyberspace. However, conducting interpretable validation studies on cybervetting in the same way we might evaluate structured interviews is not appropriate. The examples of Facebook and LinkedIn used in the focal article are understandable, as they are both well known and similar enough to make somewhat fair comparisons (i.e., social information vs. professional information). But the focal article does not mention the larger context and mediums through which cybervetting occurs such as the use of blogs, personal websites, YouTube, Twitter, and Skillshare instructing to name just a few. All of these are "cyberspacy," but that is the only common denominator; they are otherwise incomparable. Their goals, information content, frequency of change, and the manner in which they are accessed are very different. The broad way in which cybervetting is being considered would be akin to combining studies involving cognitive ability tests, personality tests, and in-basket measures and concluding that the results characterize the overall validity of "papervetting." All of this is not to suggest that Wilcox et al. (2022) are not aware or otherwise ignore the need to apply current standards for evaluating selection procedures to cybervetting, only that their recommendations for how cybervetting should be implemented going forward are presented as though such considerations are unique to cybervetting rather than recognizing them as the traditional criteria and considerations that should apply to all screening and selection tools.

A benefit of treating different cybervetting approaches like any other screening or selection tool is that it provides a direct link to the existing, well-established research literature as to how hiring should be conducted and the scientific reasons why cybervetting—as it currently stands—should not be used. Many of the selection tools we recommended as a field are designed specifically to remove problems inherent in cybervetting practices, like cognitive biases (e.g., halo errors) and the implicit attitudes (e.g., aversive racism) that can lead to the discriminatory evaluation of minority group members. Let us not treat cybervetting as a field of research and practice in its infancy, as though we have no clear, established research foundation by which to evaluate its appropriateness. Instead, treat every screening and selection method that falls under the umbrella of cybervetting individually, scrutinizing the validity as we would any other traditional method. Once this reality is realized, then many conclusions and decisions regarding cybervetting methods are clear. For instance, in the United States and Canada, applicants are restricted from including their pictures on resumes because of strict antidiscrimination laws. Googling an applicant's picture violates the underlying principle of restricting the inclusion of superficial, non-job-related factors into that applicant's evaluation. In today's climate it might seem somewhat quaint to restrict the inclusion of headshot pictures on resumes, but that does not change the problem that it is a bias that we should be trying to mitigate or remove. Even cybervetting approaches that involve screening websites, such as LinkedIn, which individuals use for the express purpose of sharing their information to potential employers, should not be used for screening. These websites still allow users to post their photos and other personal information, which creates the same issues with implicit biases that apply to all other social media platforms. How you restrict hiring agents from seeing pictures is a technical, social, and logistic challenge, but whether it is problematic for hiring agents to see candidate pictures should not be open to debate.

To answer the question, "Is cybervetting valuable?" As it is currently conceptualized and used, no, it is not—quite the reverse.

Reference

Wilcox, A., Damarin, A. K., & McDonald, S. (2022). Is cybervetting valuable? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, **15**(3), 315–333.