

## Dilemma

A member of staff from a national museum contacts the Ethics Committee in relation to the use of social media footprints as part of the recruitment and selection process. They are concerned that judgements are being made about certain candidates relating to their activities outside of work. They feel that objective short-listing may be biased and ultimately this may affect appointment to the role.

## Response

The Code of Ethics applies across the broad work of museums and whilst there may be specific professional codes of conduct associated with being a field archaeologist or a fundraiser for example, elements from the Code can influence all ethical practice.

In relation to this dilemma there are a range of issues to consider. It clearly relates to Principle 3 Individual and Institutional Integrity, most specifically:

3.7 Abide by a fair, consistent and transparent workforce policy for all those working in the museum, including those in unpaid positions.

The key words in this point are the concept of fair, consistent and transparent and we will look at each of these words in turn.

Transparency is key in relation to the extent to which the applicants/candidates are informed that a review of their social media footprint will be part of the short-listing or selection process. Whilst some may argue that if an individual uses social media platforms they have less of an expectation of privacy and as such should expect that organisations would routinely review their social media footprint this is not the case as this is not the original intention of the posts and so their look, feel and tone may not meet these requirements.

If an organisation chooses to review a social media footprint as part of their short-listing or selection process they should as the Code of Ethics states: Abide by a fair, consistent and transparent workforce policy for all those working in the museum, including those in unpaid positions; and then communicate this as part of their recruitment process.

Consistent - if this technique is adopted then there should be a consistent application of this across all vacancies.

Fair is the word that is most pertinent. These questions may provide more clarity and insight into adopting this approach:

- How and by whom are those criteria developed?
- To what extent do these criteria impact the ability to do a job – face validity?
- What social media platforms are included?
- What timescale are you interested?
- On what basis would an applicant/ candidate score well or less well?

As you can see it is not straightforward. The following also influence the extent to which 3.7 could be met:

- Research carried out into the perceptions of social behaviours in the US has highlighted that even when exactly the same behaviour is presented across different social media profiles the gender of the subject influences whether this behaviour is perceived as positive, neutral or negative. This creates a biased and discriminatory process.
- Different individuals may not have a social media footprint for a variety of reasons for example due to threats of domestic violence/ stalking. So how can it be used to short-list or select when not all applicants/ candidates have a social media footprint?
- Applicants/ candidates may be very different inside and outside of work and so their behaviours in the latter may not affect their performance in the former. The organisation may want to gather information if this is important but there are other ways to do so for example the application form.

In terms of advice to the member of staff we would suggest that they raise these concerns internally with their line manager or Human Resources department where applicable. Internal exploration is always the best course of action in the first instance. In addition, if their museum recognises a union to also raise these concerns with them. The Code of Ethics for Museums could be referenced in relation to 3.7.