

Online Conduct and Hiring

What the current research shows and what it doesn't

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Why This Report Exists

Employers are being asked to make hiring judgments about people whose public lives are larger, faster-moving, and harder to verify than at any point in the last decade. This summary collects what the current published research actually establishes about that shift and is explicit about where the evidence runs out.

How to read this:

Ferretly conducts social media background checks. We surface and categorize publicly available content and present it for review. We do not make or recommend hiring decisions—findings, not decisions. This report follows the same discipline: it reports what the research found, with the data-collection date attached to every figure—the period when responses were actually gathered, which often predates publication by months or years.

PART 1 • WHAT EMPLOYERS ARE FACING

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Workplace Conduct Cases Are at Decade Highs

HR Acuity's Tenth Annual Employee Relations Benchmark Study, released June 2026, drew on data from 274 U.S. organizations representing 8.8 million employees, reflecting calendar year 2025.

Key figures:

- Discrimination, harassment and retaliation allegations reached an all-time high of 15.5 per 1,000 employees.
- Overall employee relations case volume reached 145.5 issues per 1,000 employees, just short of the decade high.
- The share of organizations reporting a rise in social media-related cases nearly doubled from 22% in 2024 to 39% in 2025.
- Employee relations staffing moved only from 0.60 to 0.68 professionals per 1,000 employees over the same period.

The takeaway:

The doubling of social media-related cases against essentially flat staffing is the operative finding. Organizations are absorbing more conduct matters connected to online activity without added capacity to review them.

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Candidate Information Is Getting Harder to Trust

Four independent 2025–2026 studies converge on the same conclusion from different angles.

Deloitte, 2026 Global Human Capital Trends

9,000+ business and HR leaders, 89 countries

- 95% of executives report concern about the accuracy and legitimacy of candidate data.
- Only 5% say their organization is making significant progress on the quality and trustworthiness of workforce data.

Gartner, July 2025

- Projects that by 2028, one in four candidate profiles worldwide will be fake.
- In a survey of 3,000 job candidates, 6% admitted to participating in interview fraud; posing as someone else, or having someone pose as them.
- Four in ten candidates reported using AI during the application process.

Equifax, HR Trends Survey, July 2026

350+ HR professionals at the SHRM Annual Conference

- 73% encounter challenges with fabricated or misleading candidate information.
- 50% cite employment history specifically. 36% say AI-generated candidate content has reduced their confidence in hiring decisions.
- Compliance with laws and regulations rose as a stated workforce challenge, from 23% in 2025 to 27% in 2026.

First Advantage, 2026 Global Workforce Trends Report

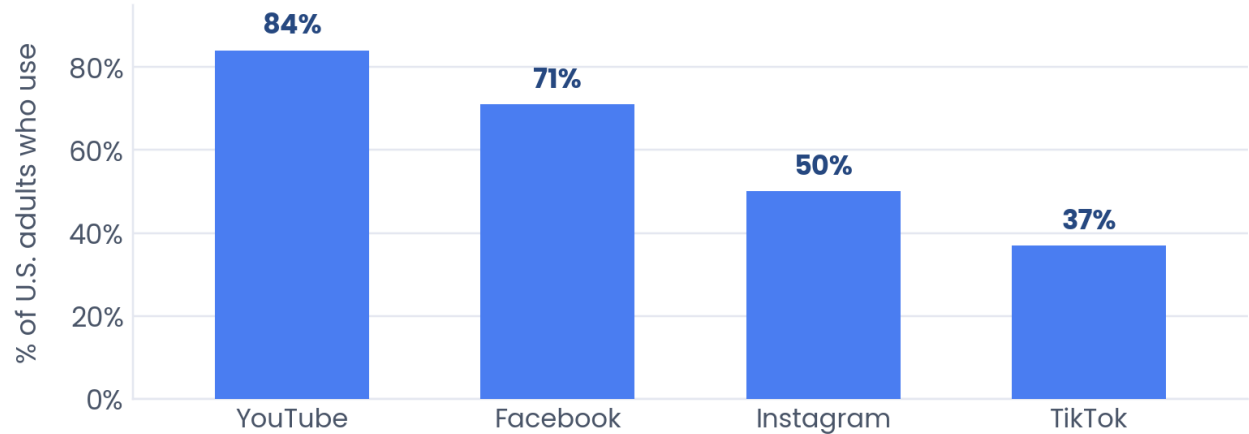
5,000+ CHROs, HR leaders and job seekers across nine industries and five regions

- 76% of hiring professionals report encountering falsified employment details.
- 45% have encountered candidate identity misrepresentation.
- 89% plan to add background check or identity verification capability within two years.

Taken together: the documentary layer of a hiring decision; the resume, the profile, the stated history is losing evidentiary weight at the same moment employers are being asked to make faster decisions on it.

4 Where Public Activity Happens

Pew Research Center's Americans' Social Media Use 2025, published November 2025 with responses collected February through June 2025 among 5,022 U.S. adults, gives the current reach picture.



Share of U.S. adults reporting use of each platform. Source: Pew Research Center, November 2025.

Reach is not evenly distributed. Among adults aged 18 to 29, roughly eight in ten use Instagram and 63% use TikTok, against 19% and 5% respectively among adults 65 and older. Reddit shows a similar split. 48% of younger adults against 6% of the oldest group.

The practical consequence for employers is that a candidate's public footprint varies substantially by age, and that reviewing only the obvious professional platform will produce very different coverage for a 24-year-old than for a 55-year-old. Consistency of process matters more as that spread widens.

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Where Scrutiny Concentrates by Sector

No one has surveyed which sectors examine candidates' online conduct most closely, so there is no data to report here. What follows is our own reading of where the stakes are highest, based on the legal duties each sector carries and what happens when a conduct matter surfaces after someone is hired. Read it as context, not as a finding.

- Regulated and high-trust sectors such as financial services, healthcare, education and childcare, public sector, legal carry statutory duties of care and licensing exposure that raise the consequence of a conduct matter surfacing after hire.
- Customer-facing sectors such as retail, hospitality, media and entertainment, consumer services face faster public amplification when an employee's online conduct becomes visible.
- Remote and distributed roles carry elevated exposure to identity misrepresentation, consistent with the First Advantage and Gartner findings above.

PART 2 · WHAT EMPLOYERS SAY

This is the weaker half of the evidence base, and it is worth being direct about why. Employer attitudes toward social media background checks specifically have not been surveyed at scale in roughly six years. What follows separates what is current from what is dated.

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Adoption: The Number Everyone Quotes Is Nine Years Old

FINDING	SOURCE	DATA COLLECTED
70% of employers review candidate social media; 54% found content that led them not to hire	CareerBuilder / Harris Poll, 2,380 hiring managers	Feb–Mar 2017
71% agree social media is an effective way to screen applicants; 67% research candidates this way	Harris Poll / Express Employment, 1,005 hiring decision-makers	Apr–May 2020
73% of hiring managers use social media to evaluate applicants	ResumeBuilder.com	2023

These are the three studies underpinning virtually every current claim about adoption rates.

No comparable study has been conducted since. Any 2026 article citing a 70% adoption rate is, on inspection, citing 2017.

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What Concerns Employers, and Their Confidence in Traditional Checks

What employers say concerns them:

The commonly cited red-flag list originates in the 2017 CareerBuilder work. Ranked by the share of employers who cited each as a reason not to hire:

- **39%:** provocative or inappropriate photos, video, or information
- **38%:** content about drinking or drug use
- **32%:** discriminatory comments related to race, gender, or religion
- **30%:** negative comments about a previous employer or colleague

Current research does not replace this list, but it does suggest the emphasis has shifted. The HR Acuity finding on rising social media-related conduct cases, and the Deloitte, Gartner, Equifax and First Advantage findings on misrepresentation, point toward harassment, threats, and authenticity as the areas where employer attention has moved since 2017.

Confidence in traditional background checks:

- 89% of hiring managers plan to add background check or identity verification capability within two years (First Advantage, 2026).
- 73% encounter fabricated or misleading candidate information, with employment history the single most common category (Equifax, 2026).
- 95% of executives are concerned about candidate data accuracy, while only 5% report significant progress on workforce data quality (Deloitte, 2026).

Criminal history, employment verification and education verification confirm the record. They do not speak to recent public conduct, and none of the 2026 research suggests employers believe otherwise.

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What Drives a Purchase Decision

The following synthesizes the drivers visible across the 2026 research and published legal analysis. It is our reading of that material, not a surveyed finding.

Consistency and defensibility

Ad-hoc review by a hiring manager exposes protected characteristics and produces an undocumented process. A structured, FCRA-aligned report reviewed under a defined policy produces a record.

Basis: published legal analysis and Section 9. Not a surveyed finding.

Coverage

Coverage that traditional checks do not provide, particularly for customer-facing, high-trust, and remote roles.

Basis: Sections 4, 5 and 7.

Volume

Manual review does not scale, and the platform spread documented by Pew means thorough manual review is now a materially larger task than it was in 2017.

Basis: Sections 2 and 4.

Regulatory pressure

Compliance rose as a stated workforce challenge between 2025 and 2026 (Equifax). Jurisdiction-specific rules add documentation duties: NYC Local Law 144 requires a bias audit and candidate notice for automated employment decision tools (enforced since July 2023), and Illinois HB 3773 requires notice when AI is used in covered employment decisions (effective January 2026).

Basis: Section 3, plus the statutes named above.

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Where Ferretly Fits

Ferretly conducts social media background checks on publicly available content. The distinction that matters for everything above is what we do with what we find.

- We surface and categorize. Clients decide. Ferretly makes no hiring recommendation and assigns no pass or fail.
- Reports are FCRA-aligned and built to be reviewed under a consistent, documented process.
- Categorization is performed by AI that is purpose-built, explainable, and human-supervised – every finding traces to the content that produced it.
- Only publicly available content is reviewed. Private accounts may be identified but are never accessed or scanned.
- Protected characteristics are excluded from reporting, which is the specific exposure created by informal manager-led review.

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Sources

STUDY	PUBLISHER	SAMPLE	DATA COLLECTED
Tenth Annual Employee Relations Benchmark Study	HR Acuity / Isurus	274 organizations, 8.8M employees	Jan–Mar 2026
2026 Global Human Capital Trends	Deloitte / Oxford Economics	9,000+ leaders, 89 countries	2025–2026
Candidate fraud research and projection	Gartner	3,000 job candidates	Q2 2025
HR Trends Survey 2026	Equifax	350+ HR professionals, SHRM Annual	Jun 2026
2026 Global Workforce Trends Report	First Advantage / ClearlyRated	5,000+ HR leaders and candidates	2025–2026
Americans' Social Media Use 2025	Pew Research Center	5,022 U.S. adults	Feb–Jun 2025
Annual social media recruitment survey	CareerBuilder / Harris Poll	2,380 hiring managers	Feb–Mar 2017
Social media screening survey	Harris Poll / Express Employment	1,005 hiring decision-makers	Apr–May 2020
Social media in hiring survey	ResumeBuilder.com	Not disclosed	2023

All figures in this report are drawn from publicly reported research by the organizations listed. Ferretly did not conduct or commission any of the studies cited.