Different ways new information technologies influence conventional organizational practices and employment relationships: The case of cybervetting for personnel selection

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Abstract

Cybervetting—employers’ use of online information from social media and search engines to evaluate job candidates—may displace, supplement, or shape conventional personnel selection and employment relationships in unexpected ways. Analysis of 45 interviews suggests that typically extractive approaches to cybervetting have the potential to displace less recognized, yet valuable, relational functions of more interactive practices depending on the functions and values users apply to the adoption and use of particular information and communication technologies. These findings highlight the need to consider how people implicitly and explicitly compare the functions of emerging technology-enabled practices with conventional organizational practices and salient values to understand when an emerging practice may displace, supplement, or have no effect on a conventional practice. This study offers a preliminary framework for understanding how emerging sociotechnical practices evolve and with what effects, thereby providing insight into information and communication technology adoption and use beyond personnel selection contexts. It also suggests the emergence of a type of parasocial employment relationship should employers conflate interacting with applicants’ information with interacting with applicants themselves.

Keywords
cybervetting; employment interview; employment relationships; information and
communication technologies; information technology; online screening; organizational processes; parasocial relationships; personnel selection; social media; technology adoption and use

Cyervetting is a taken-for-granted, if still contested, aspect of the contemporary career landscape. Many employers cyervet—covertly gathering online information from informal, non-institutional online sources via social media and search engines to help decide whom to recruit, hire, promote, or fire (Berkelaar, Scacco, and Birdsell, 2016). In personnel selection contexts, cyervetting is typically practiced as extractive rather than interactive information seeking (Berkelaar, 2014). Whereas interactive information-seeking involves seekers and targets engaged in more overt, two-way exchanges, with more equality of awareness by involved parties; extractive information seeking involves more covert, indirect information acquisition, usually from digital sources (e.g., social media; search engines; Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank, 2002).

Despite concerns of privacy violations and illegal discrimination, industry surveys show most employers cyervet and its popularity continues to rise (CareerBuilder, 2015). Employers face a “catch-22” situation: Even as cyervetting may contribute to illegal discrimination, employers also face liability for negligent hiring (i.e., “reasonably foreseeable” harmful actions by workers; Peebles, 2012). Access to more and different information via social media and search engines seemingly offers more honest signals about future performance and fit; yet, research on cyervetting outcomes remains limited (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013) and mixed (Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth and Junco, 2015). Cyervetting is often framed as a complement
or extension to conventional selection strategies: Typically, people frame cybervetting as a social media background check (i.e., an extension to credit or criminal background checks that leverages the increasing number of artifacts now visible online), or as an extension of résumé screening (i.e. useful for evaluating knowledge, skills, and abilities). This analysis suggests cybervetting may do more than automate, supplement, or extend background checks or résumé screening: Cybervetting may displace other conventional practices because of the functions ascribed to this emerging practice.

Language offers a useful way to understand how people make sense of a new practice by providing a framework for critique, research, and action. Language carries assumptions—here, about when and for what ends cybervetting should be used. Despite growing research on cybervetting’s prevalence, validity, and outcomes, sensemaking about cybervetting remains understudied. Yet how people make sense of specific practices and associated technologies is consequential because sensemaking helps people structure the unknown, creating “a springboard for action” by answering questions like: “What’s going on here?” and “What do I do next?” (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005: 409, 412). Because language shapes and reveals beliefs, understanding employers’ sensemaking can offer insight into the range of possible ways cybervetting may influence selection processes and outcomes. Plus, cybervetting also provide an exemplar that helps illustrate how sensemaking about specific (technology-enabled) practices may differentially influence conventional practices.

Thus, rather than presupposing a specific digitally-enabled practice corresponds to a specific conventional analog practice, I propose that people who understand how users frame the functions of a practice will better understand whether and how that practice will affect conventional practices and broader organizational processes. That is, people’s linguistic frames
offer clues as to whether an emerging practice is likely to supplement or displace an existing practice; or alternatively be rejected. By questioning taken-for-granted analogies, people can better anticipate whether and how new technologies may be adopted and how technology-enabled practices may affect overall organizational processes and outcomes, while also offering insights into how employment relationships are organized, structured, and evaluated.

Drawing broadly on adaptive structuration, sociomateriality, and the discursive turn, this study examines employers’ talk to offer complementary, yet unique, insights into how and why conventional selection practices might be changing, and with what possible consequences. Such insights have implications for organizational processes and policymaking around selection, with particular consequences for employment relationships and technology-enhanced practices. This study also offers broader insights: Understanding how people frame the functions of an emerging practice relative to existing practices offers insight into how, if at all, a new practice may affect conventional practices. Thus, even as this analysis is situated in personnel selection research, it also offers a framework to help explain the evolution of technology-enabled practices broadly.

The functions and goals of contemporary personnel selection

Personnel selection is often framed as a multi-stage process where employers acquire information needed to screen out undesirable applicants and to identify desirable candidates efficiently (Dipboye, 2014); however, selection also accomplishes other functions. In particular, selection helps organizations achieve relational goals. For example, in addition to screening applicants to create a manageable pool, first interviews also offer occasions for rapport building, applicant information-seeking about organizations, and early organizational identification (Miller and Buzzanell, 1996). Even less interactive selection practices (e.g., background checks) can
serve relational and information goals since applicant perceptions at each stage affect the development of organizational trust and identification (Anderson, Salgado, and Hülsheger, 2010). Selection, thus, involves more than information acquisition and use. Selection is also crucial for effective socialization, helping to introduce an organization’s culture and management style (Anderson, 2001) and laying the foundation for the psychological contract between employees and employers (Herriot, 1989). Yet although relational functions affect individual (e.g., employee retention and satisfaction; Gilliland, 1994) and organizational outcomes (e.g., organizational reputation, productivity, competitive advantage; Ployhart and Weekley, 2010), relational functions are often backgrounded in practice; overshadowed by research and practice focused on optimizing information-seeking tactics and outcomes (Derous and De Witte, 2001).

Researchers who attend to personnel selection’s relational functions often focus on how applicants evaluate and respond to the perceived fairness of selection procedures. When applicants consider selection procedures just (Gilliland, 1994), they assess the organization more favorably and express greater intent to accept offers and establish an employment relationship (Anderson et al., 2010). Applicants deem selection procedures fair if procedures meet expectations for participation and control; offer transparency; provide feedback; respect privacy; and gather job-relevant information (Derous, de Witte and Stroobands, 2003). Yet as popularly practiced, cybervetting violates procedural justice expectations: Applicants consider the practice less fair, less job-relevant, and more invasive than conventional techniques like résumé screening (Berkelaar, 2014). Experts also express concerns. Not only does cybervetting lack structure (the gold standard for accurate and just selection; see Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge and Thatcher, 2016), cybervetting’s potential to create disparate impacts suggests ethical and legal implications as well (Clark and Roberts, 2010). Procedural injustice lowers organizational evaluations and
intent to accept offers, even as it increases litigation (Stoughton, Thompson and Meade, 2015).

Procedural justice perspectives thus suggest cybervetting and résumé screening are not analogous, at least from applicant perspectives. Applicants rarely receive feedback on their résumés. Yet, most people consider résumé information job-relevant, in part because they have greater control over, awareness of, and involvement in deciding what information is included and how on which résumé. In contrast, online information used in cybervetting is made visible by sources beyond applicants themselves. Along with applicants’ (unintentional) self-disclosures, other people and/or technologies also make applicant information visible online. Plus, online information artifacts are selected, re-ordered, and re-constructed by employers and the technologies employers use in ways increasingly outside of applicants’ control (Berkelaar et al., 2016). Background checks and cybervetting as practice are also not analogous as background checks in the U.S. have permission and due process requirements that increase transparency, respect privacy, and offer feedback and recourse for problematic information.

Even as cybervetting increases concerns of procedural injustice, technology-enabled practices promise to improve efficiency and provide more information. Employers have long sought ways to optimize selection by increasing the efficiency and amount of information available. In recent decades, employers have privileged information and communication technology (ICT) solutions that automate and replace analog practices (e.g., electronic applications; résumé scanning; Chapman and Webster, 2003). Research on ICT use in selection emphasized the degree to which ICTs alter information accuracy or outcomes (e.g. comparing online versus face-to-face interviews, tests, or applications; Chapman and Webster, 2003; Strohmeier, 2009; or social media versus traditional personality assessments; Brown and Vaughn, 2011). Yet such research rarely considers how ICT use affects selection’s relational
functions despite links between effective employment relationships and competitive advantage (Dipboye, 2014); and ICTs effects on organizational processes and employment relationships. Longitudinal research shows that the information ICTs make visible shapes organizational processes, relationships, and outcomes in subtle and dramatic ways (Zuboff, 1988). When acknowledged, relational functions are rarely the focus of this research: Chapman and Webster briefly noted that employers missed personal contact after moving to computerized application screening as employers rationalized that ICTs would allow more “face time” with “the best” (118). Research on whether later interactions increased in length or quality was not found.

Until recently, research on ICT use in selection focused on organizational technologies. Yet the ICTs enabling cybervetting differ in form and affordances. Organizational or enterprise technologies include ICTs purchased, developed, or leased by employing organizations. They differ from ICTs enabling cybervetting in their goals and types and range of information made visible (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Namely, the uses and affordances of ICTs implicated in cybervetting alter opportunities for participation and control; expand what employers count as job-relevant information; and thus, extend the times, contexts, and sites in which workers must manage present and future careers and employment (Berkelaar et al, 2016).

Yet despite differences in applicant perceptions and the underlying ICTs used, research continues to frame cybervetting as an extension or automation of existing selection practices. On the surface framing cybervetting as an extension of, or a complement to, existing practices such as background checks, pre-screening, or résumé checks for “red flags” seems intuitive. Framing cybervetting as a social media background check provides a sense of familiarity that informs and validates behavior (Berkelaar, Scacco and Birdsell, 2015). Yet such analogies oversimplify the varied ways in which a technology’s materiality (i.e., physicality, form, affordances) entangle
with sociality (e.g., norms, values, discourses, goals) to create the possibility of divergent, and sometimes multiple, trajectories. Considering the entanglement of a technology’s materiality and its sociality could help explain mixed results from cybervetting research (e.g., Although evaluations of Facebook™ profiles offer accurate predictors of Big-5 personality traits linked to performance (Brown and Vaughn, 2011), cybervetting does not always appear to predict job performance (Van Iddekinge et al., 2015)). The common assumption that cybervetting offers a digital analog to an existing offline practice fails to acknowledge how social factors shape and inform organizational processes (Leonardi, 2012): Assuming cybervetting only complements, extends, or automates a conventional practice does not consider how employers’ sensemaking about cybervetting’s functions, the possibilities afforded by particular ICTs, or how such sensemaking becomes entangled with ICT uses to shape organizational processes and outcomes.

People’s talk about ICTs and their associated practices offer clues as to what ICTs will likely do or become in practice, especially during early phases of technological appropriation. By examining competing or coalescing motivations for technologies and their associated practices, researchers can gain insight into the developing spirit of a technology: how people think technology should be used and is being used; that is, its goals, values, and functions (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). Over time practices like cybervetting and their underlying ICTs intersect with norms, perceptions, attitudes, and so forth to create, sustain, or disrupt organizational processes (Zuboff, 1988). Thus, it is not that ICTs intrinsically alter organizational processes; rather, it is the new organizational processes enabled by ICTs and people’s sensemaking about those ICTs that alter processes and outcomes (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). That is, people “decide how they will let the technology influence their work” based on social understandings and material constraints (Leonardi, 2012, p. 32).
Technology’s materiality—its physicality and form (Leonardi, 2012)—is important to this process. Without the distinct characteristics of social media and Internet technologies, cybervetting, as practiced, would be unlikely. Yet, materiality is not deterministic. Search engines, personal websites, and blogs existed prior to cybervetting’s emergence. People’s increased information sharing—enabled, but not determined, by social media and search engine affordances, along with popular discourse that framed information found on social media or via search engines as “public”—helped construct cybervetting as appropriate, even necessary (Berkelaar, 2014). That is, ICTs material properties melded with social norms, practices, and discourses to inform organizational practice, affecting people’s perceptions of what a technology can do (i.e. affordances), and consequently people’s goals, and their behavior (Leonardi, 2012).

Because talk often reveals why and for what ends people engage in specific practices (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), one way to understand to what extent and in what ways a practice might replicate, shift, displace, or otherwise shape other practices involves studying how employers frame the functions of a practice, here, how they make sense of what cybervetting is for. Thus, to understand whether and how cybervetting might affect personnel selection, I asked:

**Research question 1:** How, if at all, do employers report using cybervetting in their overall personnel selection process?

**Research question 2:** For what purposes, if any, do employers report using cybervetting as part of their personnel selection process?

Existing research has started to address these questions, yet the answers are incomplete because
surveys either presuppose a relatively specific fixed set of functions for cybervetting, assume cybervetting occurs at one specific stage, or isolate cybervetting from the overall process. Yet research hints at a more diverse range of possible or perceived functions.

By examining the language used to describe cybervetting, this study helps illuminate how employers constrain or expand what is considered possible and desirable given new ICTs. Focusing on employers’ talk about cybervetting’s reported functions and goals answers numerous calls to examine the communicative processes underlying selection (Dipboye, 2014), and the affordances and uses of non-organizational ICTs on selection specifically (Berkelaar et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2016), and organizational processes generally (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Leonardi, 2012). This study also offers an exemplar of an emerging sociotechnical practice that can help illustrate how the functions ascribed to a specific technology-enabled practice affect conventional practices, as well as its anticipated effects on larger social processes and outcomes.

Method

Sampling

Participants were recruited as part of a larger project on online information in personnel selection and job seeking. Because various personnel are involved in selection decisions (Dipboye, 2014), I purposefully recruited participants from different occupational roles and levels who had been involved in selection in the past year. Because legislation shapes personnel selection practices, I limited participants to US employers. Consistent with theoretical sampling, I recruited employers likely to help refine, clarify, and test emerging insights about how online information affected personnel selection (Charmaz, 2009). I solicited initial participants from professional networks and cold calls, via social media, phone, and email, complemented with
network sampling: After each interview, I asked participants to recommend people who might offer different perspectives. I contacted referrals likely to help refine and test emerging themes. For example, although existing research suggests conventional selection processes tend to translate across industries (Dipboye, 2014), early interviewees suggested things “might be different” in large versus small or white-collar versus blue-collar companies. Thus, I purposefully sampled diverse industries and organizations to help refine and test findings. I complemented recruitment-via-referral with ongoing recruitment of non-referred participants, intentionally sampling a diverse set of participants primarily outside my personal network.

The sample included 45 participants (23 to 60 years; median=35 years; men=24; women=21). Participants worked in 13 different states in varied industries (e.g., manufacturing, politics, information technology, higher education, utilities, non-profits, recruiting, small business). Organization size ranged from 10 to 10,000 employees. Selection experience ranged from 3 to 30+ years: Some participants had substantial experience prior to cybervetting’s popularization; others only had experience following its popularization, with most in between. Consistent with industry surveys (e.g., Mulvey, Esen, and Coombs, 2016), more than three-quarters of these participants acknowledged cybervetting directly. Despite attempts to recruit participants who did not cybervet, participants who denied cybervetting also reported behaviors consistent with cybervetting by themselves and/or members of their organizations.

Data collection

I developed and tested a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit rich, detailed, and comparable data within and across interviews, with the goal of situating cybervetting within employers’ overall selection process. Semi-structured interviews help
researchers find out “what the subjects of the study think they are up to;” providing opportunities for “intensive sensemaking” by interviewees that reveal taken-for-granted or unexplored aspects of organizational practices (Alvesson, 2003: 19-20). Interviews also offer unique opportunities for abduction (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), giving researchers the chance to “stumble upon complex phenomenon that might otherwise remain hidden” (Tracy, 2013: 132). I tested the protocol by asking researchers with industry experience and industry experts to explain how they understood and might respond to the questions. I refined the protocol using their feedback.

During data collection, I first asked participants to describe selection experiences and critical incidents, before inquiring about information types and sources used, and attributions formed based on acquired information. Participants usually spontaneously referenced online sources. If needed, I prompted participants about the use of online information. Given cybervetting’s debated legality and ethicality, I incorporated indirect and hypothetical questions that help increase response rates for sensitive questions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). For example, if someone could or would not describe using online information for selection, I would ask them to “tell me about a person you know who used online information…” or to “imagine a situation where someone might use online information….” Participant responses were often revelatory as talk often quickly shifted from referencing others (“she” or “he”) to self (e.g., “I”), or from hypothetical (“I could imagine…”) to actual (“I looked…”). Three initially willing participants (not included in the 45) dropped out of the study after their HR departments warned them not to participate. Following each interview, I ask participants to complete a brief demographic survey.

With participant permission, I audio-recorded each interview. The 45 interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes (median=54 minutes) for a total of 38.7 hours and 682 single-spaced typed pages. Following each interview, I recorded more than 150 pages of observational notes,
which included my reflections on each interview and interviewee. I also typed 10 pages of single-spaced notes for two recordings with technical difficulties: One recording was corrupt and the other’s poor sound quality impeded transcription.

**Data analysis**

As a secondary analysis of qualitative data gathered for a larger project, I initiated this analysis after a participant described cybervetting as “the beginning of a relationship” during a member check for the earlier study (Berkelaar, 2014). Qualitative secondary data analysis can extend research insights when the data afford opportunities for analysis of different concepts (Heaton, 2004), as is the case here. This data set has been used in part or full to consider different information types used to assess fit (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2014), shifting expectations for contemporary careers (Berkelaar, 2014; Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015), and workers’ online impression management (Berkelaar, 2016), as well as to complement the analysis of a separate data set on career stories (Berkelaar et al., 2016). As the original researcher, I avoided decontextualization concerns and met the standards for rigorous qualitative secondary data analysis given my access to field notes, memos, and other supplementary data (Heaton, 2004).

I took a systematic abductive analytic approach, moving back and forth between data and existing research. Abduction involves making disciplined creative leaps that reconceptualize data in theoretically and practically meaningful ways (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). I identified broader trends as well as “extreme cases” in small subsets of data because such “anomalies” help expand understandings of the phenomenon being studied (Timmermans and Tavory, 2014). Although not grounded theory *per se*, I appropriated grounded theory strategies because they are well developed and effective at identifying implicit and explicit themes; and encourage constant
comparison of data and theory consistent with abduction (Charmaz, 2009).

I paid close attention to participants’ talk about cybervetting because language influences behavior, framing what counts as “normal, natural, and true” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011:1131). Taking a paradigm-type discourse approach, I considered how employers’ talk about cybervetting produce and stabilize perceptions about how practices and processes do and should work. Although this approach emphasizes how language influences meaning and behavior, it assumes discourse and action are coupled, not collapsed, leaving possibilities for autonomy (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). That is, just because people frame something in a specific way does not mean it is that way ontologically. Yet how people frame phenomena is real in its consequences, since even subtle changes in language use can alter perceptions, behavior, and thus, outcomes (Shah, Boyle, Schmierbach, et al. 2010).

I noted initial thoughts and reactions using flexible rather than formulaic strategies (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), specifically looking for data segments that illustrated explicit and implicit motivations, rationales, and functions ascribed to cybervetting, as well as how people described cybervetting in practice. As themes emerged, I memoed possible descriptions, explanations, and interpretations continuing to cycle between interview data and extant research. Given the number and length of excerpts generated using Atlas.TI, I further classified the data around employers’ implicit and explicit functions for cybervetting, principally as they contrasted or compared to the implicitly and explicitly ascribed functions of conventional selection. I then collapsed the codes into conceptually meaningful categories taking time to consider alternative groupings individually and in conversation with method and content experts.

After reducing the themes to a description of reported cybervetting practices and three ascribed functions, I returned to existing research on the purposes and functions of different
selection tools (e.g., first and second interviews, background checks, résumé screening). The goal of this stage was to refine and test proposed groupings in concert with existing research on the functions and values of personnel selection. When confident in the groupings, and consistent with Tracy’s (2013) guidelines for credible and rigorous qualitative work, I reanalyzed the data for notable absences, negative cases, and additional occurrences; requested expert feedback; conducted member checks with select participants; and provided exemplars to illustrate findings.

Findings

Participants described cybervetting practices in ways consistent with extractive information seeking. They also ascribed three primary functions to cybervetting: screening, efficiency, and relational. Initially, these findings seem to reinforce extant efficiency and information screening goals of personnel selection. Yet, considered together, these findings also complicate taken-for-granted assumptions that cybervetting is exclusively analogous to, or an extension of, conventional background checks or résumé screening; Rather, these data suggest some employers frame extractive practices as interactive and relational—a framing consequential for selection processes and outcomes including employment relationships.

As context for participant responses, I offer some details on the reported prevalence of cybervetting. Without prompting, more than three-quarters of these participants directly acknowledged looking online for applicant information, although the reported timing and tools varied somewhat. Some participants also reported cybervetting current employees. Participants who did not directly acknowledge cybervetting often referenced “legal” or “compliance” departments, describing how “from a legal perspective, I’m basing everything on the résumé,” and “only using employment-related” information, on occasion noting how cybervetting violated
“personal ethics.” Yet, even participants who explicitly denied cybervetting when directly asked, still reported that they and/or other organizational members known to them engaged in behaviors consistent with cybervetting—for example, using Google to “clarify résumé details” or noting “they might come across information” online if they were “somehow connected” to an applicant. Such language situates cybervetting within known, expected, common, and legal selection procedures and provides a context for the three functions ascribed to cybervetting.

Describing cybervetting as (primarily) extractive information-seeking

When describing how they and their colleagues cybervetted, participant descriptions aligned with theoretical conceptualizations (Ramirez et al., 2002) and operationalizations (Carr and Walther, 2014) of extractive information seeking. Participants reasoned such covert information extraction was necessary because: “what they’re [applicants are] putting forward is not always what the employer is going to see on a daily basis,” because “some people are really good interviewers and they can hide a lot of things, too, so you really try to work through that.” Such talk situated the potential employment relationship as one of mistrust, with employers working around applicants’ seemingly competing or contradictory motivations.

Yet employers did not always presume intentional deception. Rather, employers generally focused on getting more information from less formal contexts. Ostensibly, cybervetting could help to manage inevitable impression management by given employers access to contexts where applicants “let their guard down.” As another person asserted: “It’s not always that there are things that people will deliberately want to hide, but the more information you have on the candidate, I think the better you are able to make an appropriate selection.” Such more-is-better language helps justify the value of extractive information seeking given a persistent
valuing of more information in Western cultures (Case, 2012), even as experiments show more information often undermines predictions about human qualifications (Bartlett and Green, 1966).

Most participants reported considering any and all types of visible information from human or non-human sources: “If there's information that is publicly available, blogs and things like that then you just go look, you just go look at it.” Yet, because non-work information is also available online, employers tend to consider it (inadvertently) in evaluations (Roth et al., 2016). Indeed, employers attempts to discount irrelevant information often backfire making information hyperaccessible and more likely to influence decisions (Wenzlaff and Wegner, 2000).

If desired information was password-protected, employers reported doing one of three things: Most often, participants labeled applicants “responsible” because they “used privacy settings appropriately.” Such framing validated cybervetting, allowing it to remain an extractive strategy as employers assessed digital “professionalism.” Less commonly, employers might invite highly qualified candidates for interviews and shoulder surfing. Two participants shared stories in they were asked to log into their password-protected accounts during interviews to share information that might accidentally become public because of a “tech failure” or sharing by one’s “friends” (making air quotes). Although such practices make cybervetting somewhat more interactive, applicants still have limited options for participation and control since refusal likely results in elimination from consideration. Third, when faced with password-protected sites of interest, one employer reported trying to gain access via a “friend request:” “If it's information that's protected you get their permission by “friending. …You send a little note along with ‘Hey do you want to be my friend?’ …If they respond or not, either way you know.” In using social media language of “friending,” this employer (unintentionally) blurred the lines between employment and friendship, framing the employment relationship as one that included friendship
or minimally had access to information friends share. Yet such talk backgrounds the power differential for applicants who must “decide” whether to “friend” prospective employers, while considering tradeoffs between privacy and employment. Although situations where employers friended applicants or required applicants to log into accounts still demonstrated a substantial power imbalance and consequently limited applicants’ available options, these examples suggest alternate possibilities for practicing cybervetting—namely, a typically extractive practice could become somewhat more interactive, and more overt. Technology-enabled practices need not follow a singular, determined trajectory; but rather could follow a range of possible trajectories influenced by perceived and actual constraints, opportunities, and goals.

Still, most people reported practicing cybervetting extractively. It is this extractive approach to information seeking which helps distinguish typical reports of cybervetting from conventional selection practices, which are relatively more interactive, if asynchronous. Interactive and extractive information seeking are differences in degree rather than kind: Even as face-to-face interviews offers the gold standard for interactive communication, many other common selection tools also offer some degree of interaction. For example, conventional résumé screening initially seems as extractive as cybervetting. Yet résumé screening includes least some (albeit limited) aspects of interactive information seeking: First, résumé screening involves overt, two-way, information exchange (even if the exchange usually involves one exchange by each party); both parties are aware of the specific purpose, timing, and goal of the information exchange even if the information exchange is asymmetrical; and the employer offers some, limited feedback. In contrast, although individuals are aware of cybervetting, it is a generalized sense of covert surveillance, rather than specific knowledge about which employer is acquiring what information when. Although such awareness of surveillance changes how information
targets behave (Ramirez et al., 2002) and alters expectations for how employment relationships work (Berkelaar, 2014), it does not constitute an interaction. Because even subtle differences in the degree of interactivity are consequential to an individual’s level of awareness and control over information disclosure, differences between conventional practices like résumé screening or background checks and cybervetting could prove consequential to select practices and outcomes.

Although participants consistently described cybervetting extractively as part of their broader goal of efficiently assessing the “overall person” to “get a sense of fit,” these data revealed three specific, intertwined functions ascribed to cybervetting: As expected, employers framed cybervetting as serving *screening* and *efficiency* functions. Unexpectedly, some employers also framed cybervetting as serving *relational* functions. That is, even as they reported cybervetting behaviors consistent with extractive information seeking, a subset of participants suggested cybervetting also allowed for interactive processes and outcomes. Such functions were entangled with different values informing personnel selection.

*The ascribed functions of cybervetting*

*Screening: Weeding out applicants*  As anticipated, many employers considered screening cybervetting’s primary function. Reports of “weed[ing] out someone who might be a bad employee” or who might “not reflect what we stand for” align with research on key functions of selection (Miller and Buzzanell, 1996). Participants reported that cybervetting offered a useful tool to cull applicants with “questionable behavior” or other “red flags.” One career director summarized why so many employers reported cybervetting to her:
Let’s face it, when you go to do an interview, you’re going to put your best foot forward; you’re going to say, hopefully, all the right things. Even in terms of references, when they make calls to make reference checks, you’re going to pick people who are going to say nice things about you. So, it’s another way for an employer to weed out folks. If they’ve got five great candidates, it might weed out a couple in terms of ones they don’t think are becoming of their organization [emphasis added].

Cybervetting’s value partly stemmed from its perceived value for screening for relational skills: “Twitter is relatively ideal because you see them as they’re interacting with their friends.”

In addition to it [cybervetting] being a shortcut, you’re also kind of like a fly on the wall, observing their, at least their online, interactions, with their guard down. You know, when you’re talking to them…they’re presenting a certain side to me that is probably going to be somewhat, and maybe even drastically, different than what they would present to a peer, you know, so you see them a little more naturally.

Such talk reinforces popular perceptions of social media and the Internet as “naturally” interactive and justifies cybervetting’s value for reducing risk efficiently. Concerns over negligent hiring and competitive advantage may require avoiding unnecessary risk (Peebles, 2012), yet, such wariness (when evident in prospective supervisors’ talk) can undermine or delay the development of trust effective employment relationships need (Derous and de Witte, 2001).

Participants differed in the value cybervetting offered for screening. In contrast to people who considered cybervetting a useful “kind of initial HR kind of screening process,” a few
participants shared that “we just use it as just a very rough screening device,” questioning the value of online information to serve selection goals. Although cybervetting could be “potentially useful” or even “necessary,” some participants suggested cybervetting could be “insufficient” or “incomplete” for weeding out people because of the limited types or amounts of information: “See that’s the thing is, the other red flags I’m not sure if you would gather from Facebook, but if you’re going down work history and someone hadn’t held a job for more than 3 months, that’s a red flag.” Such assertions suggest employers will cybervet if or when they believe the practice serves salient values such as information sufficiency when compared to conventional practices.

**Efficiency: Streamlining selection**  Often entwined with cybervetting’s screening and relational functions, participants also described how cybervetting serves efficiency functions and values. Consistent with ongoing concerns that conventional selection tends to be time-consuming and expensive (Dipboye, 2014), these data reveal that “people are looking because it is much easier now…also it’s cheaper. People probably wouldn’t do it if it cost money.” For many participants, cybervetting helped “streamline” selection while improving outcomes because cybervetting allows employers to acquire more information and information no longer available or not easily available from conventional, interactive practices such as reference checks. Efficiency claims offer a multi-purpose validation and a de facto goal for most work practices, because efficiency is often considered *the* key value for organizational success (Ritzer, 2013)

For many participants, technology promised an obvious path to efficient personnel selection. When employers described conventional, pre-cybervetting, selection practices “back in the Dark Ages in terms of technology,” they repeatedly described efforts to decrease the time, energy, and money needed to hire qualified candidates by automating processes with ICTs:
“With the old process you printed off a stack of résumés and started going around and meeting people face to face. And that's too costly. It takes too much time.” As others noted, “It was just terrible. Things took so long.” Employers reported cybervetting because: “We are on a mission. Time is money for us. We don’t waste time.” Cybervetting reportedly mirrors efficiency benefits offered by previous automations because “employers can look at thousands of employees every day,” plus now “you can go online” and “prequalify without having to take the precious time to meet with them.” For some employers, new ICTs, and the cybervetting ICTs enabled, increased information throughput, allowing employers to skip the cumbersome, time-wasting, and what one participant described as the “messy” process of interacting with applicants until necessary.

Employers’ talk about cybervetting’s efficiency function also highlighted how efficiency and information are valued highly in contemporary organizations. Participants who found cybervetting efficient did not reflect on how ICT affordances allowed them to de-relationalize selection to streamline information processing. Rather talk often focused on the value of “online tech” and online information to serve information acquisition and use goals efficiently:

Efficiency is a major aspect of it, it's a way to learn things about a potential employee that you could not in an interview. Nobody in their right mind is going to go into an interview and discuss the type of thing that they might put in a blog or they might put on their Facebook profile.

In reinforcing efficiency’s value for selection, this manager’s response reinforces a common, although not universal, notion that social media enables efficient and more accurate selection because it can provide more and better information than conventional selection tools.
Underlying efficiency claims for cybervetting offered a shared assumption that online information would improve selection. Cybervetting offers “a quick and easy way for them [employers] to kind of get a finger on the pulse of what a person is into, you know, and what’s kind of driving them.” In an economy where employees are considered drivers of competitive advantage and extensions of organizational brands (Edwards, 2005), cybervetting promised:

the right decision…[Companies] don’t want to be hiring the wrong person and then training them and then finding out, two or three weeks later that this person is not the right choice so they just wasted two or three weeks of their time and money.

Thus, by helping employers efficiently and effectively “find the truth,” participants suggested that online information could serve both screening and efficiency functions without having to waste time on an emerging relationship with a person who “is not the right choice.”

The almost universal valuing of efficiency was also evident when participants did not consider cybervetting as functionally efficient. For these participants, efficiency provided a rationale for avoiding cybervetting as a primary selection tool “at least for right now” because “it’s just not efficient” or “it takes too much time” or “is too time-consuming.” Yet the few participants who “don’t have the time” to cybervet often expected others earlier in the hiring process (e.g., recruiters) to cybervet, asserting that it was more efficient “for someone else to do it.” Thus, values also influenced who cybervetted at which point in the selection process.

Talk about cybervetting’s relative efficiency reveals how functions and values become entangled when making sense of organizational practices. Given efficiency’s role as a dominant technological and cultural value (Ritzer, 2013), it is unsurprising that participants offered
efficiency as a primary rationale for how often and how much they cybervetted. Broader discourses about technology’s inherent efficiency also provide a convenient shorthand to validate the assumption that cybervetting helps automate and improve existing selection processes and outcomes, or may do so when cybervetting is optimized. Plus, as hinted at already, some participants suggest that cybervetting also offers opportunities to streamline interaction and accelerate relationship development by using so-called interactive technologies.

**Relational: Accelerating and streamlining relationships** In addition to screening and efficiency functions, just under a third of these participants explicitly or implicitly framed cybervetting in conversational, interactive, and relational ways. This *relational frame* offers insight how cybervetting, the ICTs enabling it, and employers’ sensemaking thereof can influence selection, work, and employment relationships in unexpected and differential ways. In describing their cybervetting practices in ways consistent with extractive information seeking, but simultaneously framing cybervetting as interacting with applicants, employers (implicitly) gave themselves permission to use cybervetting to replace other more interactive practices, even though employers’ practices as described were not actually interactive or relational.

In ascribing a relational function to cybervetting, employers in this subgroup repeatedly talked about “getting to know someone,” more than “getting to know about someone” (emphasis added); sometimes before, and sometimes after interviews were scheduled:

**Employer:** And it’s funny because I Google people as well. You know, if I’m interviewing with somebody, I would Google them. You know, if I know the name or the position, I would definitely Google them to see
Interviewer: Okay. And why would you do that?
Employer: Just to see if I can get to know them to better prepare me for the interview [Chief Operating Officer (COO); emphasis added]

Such subtle language changes (e.g., know vs. know about) have proven influential in shaping attitudes and behaviors in other contexts (Shah et al. 2010).

A subset of these employers framed cybervetting in ways that suggested cybervetting could fulfill some of selection’s relational functions. Participants described cybervetting as “another way to get to know people” by “making connections” with search results that offered information about “hobbies,” “interests,” “character,” or “whatever.” They argued cybervetting offered “an interesting connection tool” that gave them a way to “build relationships” based on information retrieved online. Further, some participants also articulated that cybervetting presumably could “accelerate the process of” or “deepen” the employer-applicant relationship because: “I think it’s just another way to get to know the people that they’re interviewing, a different perspective” (emphasis added). For these employers, online information from informal, non-work social networking sites could provide “depth to the relationship” even though applicants are rarely aware of, nor could they respond to, specific employers’ so-called relationship-building via cybervetting. Some participants even equated cybervetting practices with face-to-face interviews: “So you know in the same way that you ask in an interview, ‘What are your hobbies? What do you do for fun?’ it’s just something that gives me an indication of somebody’s [passion].” Although interviews also involve information acquisition and use, cybervetting is not analogous to interviews since information flows in one direction in
cybervetting (as practiced), rather than the bidirectional, if asymmetrical, question and answer format of interviews. Thus, some participants equated interacting with technology and the information it made visible, with interacting with the person.

To some degree it is unsurprising that participants framed interacting with technology as analogous to interacting with people, since scholars also often conflate the two (Stromer-Galley, 2004). In part, this is likely because the new or “social” media technologies strongly implicated in cybervetting are usually framed as interactive rather than extractive; as friendly rather than formal: “So it’s more of an interaction, and that’s what social networking is. It’s not predatory detective work on some parts. That takes place during the interview process and reference check.” Employers often justified using cybervetted information because the ICTs underlying cybervetting are “more personal than other technology” allowing employers to “get to know people” in ways that conventional procedures do not allow “because it [looking online] tends to be more personal than formal interviews.”

When employers ascribed relational functions to cybervetting, it ostensibly allowed them to displace (aspects of) a time-consuming interaction of conventional selection (i.e. interviews), with a more efficient process (i.e., cybervetting). Early in my research interviews each employer described their conventional selection process which usually consisted of an initial résumé and application screening followed by two or more interviews and then a background check. As participants described their “typical selection process,” they often reported feeling “overwhelmed” by the volume of applications; expressed concern about accurately evaluating qualifications given extreme impression management and “outright lying;” and saw “technology as changing everything.” They also felt pressure to be “personal, and also personable,” quickly and efficiently. People who ascribed relational functions to cybervetting situated it differently
within their broader selection process, than those who did not frame cybervetting as relational.

Employers who framed cybervetting as more interactive reported that cybervetting could replace (aspects of) the more interactive parts of their overall selection process even though their reported cybervetting behaviors were highly extractive. Specifically, a small subset of employers reported saving time by “cutting out” part or all of the first interview; using cybervetting to get a sense of the person’s “fit” rather than engaging in rapport-building aspects of interviews or first interviews altogether. Thus, although “efficiency is a major aspect of it,” cybervetting:

> Adds a great depth and breadth to narrowing down the candidates and discerning who they are, what they're capable of, how they could help the company, how you might be able to help them. Facebook in particular, the first thing I'll do is just look at their profile and I'll read as much of it as is available to me. It tells me the things they're interested in, their hobbies, what movies do they like. *It can to some extent cut through the social aspects of the job interview* [emphasis added].

As another employer suggested, cybervetting lets employers “get past the small talk” so they could spend interview time gathering and assessing other information. The “social function of the technology” offered a “shortcut,” ostensibly letting them reduce their process to one interview, saving time and money. Thus, cybervetting’s ascribed relational functions entangled with efficiency and screening functions, as well as efficiency and information values as participants conflated increasing contact with information about an individual with increasing contact with the individual:
You know, I think most hiring managers would agree that the more contact you have with a potential candidate, the better decision that you can make. Sometimes you have the luxury to have a protracted search process and you can bring somebody in for many different interviews or even have time to take them out to dinner and spend time with them. Every touch you have with that person, you learn something more about them, and using these social networking sites is just a shortcut route to that, so it can take the place, maybe, of an extra interview, or taking them out to lunch.

As this Vice President of Human Resources exemplified, cybervetting’s “social” efficiency allowed people to avoid the inefficiencies of interaction when the “luxury” of face-to-face interaction was not possible. Cybervetting provided a shortcut to connection, “more contact”, and “touch.” Such language highlights the value placed on efficient information processing while also suggesting that the relational and interactive functions of interviews could be deferred or backgrounded to privilege information processing and efficiency goals.

Only participants from the subset of people who had framed cybervetting in more interactive or relational ways spontaneously reported eliminating the first interview, or its rapport-building or relational aspects. The “social aspects of the information online” presumably let employers “jump” to later, more instrumental goals, like making a final check in one interview—should an applicant make it that far. Indeed, framing online information as “social” or “personal” seemed to helped participants feel more connected or at least rationalize that cybervetting could offer “human connection” and “touch” while fulfilling efficiency demands. In contrast, participants who did not use relational or interactive language framing cybervetting considered cybervetting as supplemental to résumé screening or background checks. Although
removing rapport building from interviews might satisfy advocates of highly-structured interviews, scholars interested in socialization and employment relationships would likely express concerns since rapport-building is linked to effective socialization and trust (Anderson, Salgado and Hülsheger, 2010; Miller and Buzzanell, 1996). Altering or removing the first interview would likely affect recruitment, socialization, and employment relationships in, as yet, untested ways.

Thus, in emphasizing cybervetting’s value for “getting to know” people, some participants’ talk implied that digital artifacts could replace (aspects of) rapport- or relationship-building in selection—reportedly deepening relational closeness via extractive information acquisition and use. From this study, it remains unclear whether employers believed cybervetting was essentially relational or whether employers were attempting to justify a contested practice. However, framing cybervetting and its underlying ICTs as relational and interactive seemed to expand different possibilities for what cybervetting could accomplish within the overall selection process and contemporary valuing of efficiency. The argument is not that cybervetting “is” relational, but that some employers are framing and treating cybervetting “as if” it is relational and/or can be a replacement for interactive parts of selection. Thus, this is not to say that cybervetting necessarily displaces first interviews when employers frame cybervetting as relational or interactive; that cybervetting never supplements or extends résumé screening or background checks, or that cybervetting is actually relational or interactive as practiced. Rather, these data suggest technologies do not always bring predictable effects to organizational practices. Instead, people’s interpretations, uses, and everyday practices come together with a technology’s materiality to shape how a practice evolves and whether and how it becomes integrated into organizational practices and processes (Leonardi, 2012).
Discussion

In describing employers’ sensemaking about cybervetting, this study provides insight into the likely, if unintended, results of technology-enabled practices on personnel selection, employment relationships, and broader organizational processes (see Berkelaar et al., 2014; Dipboye, 2014; Leonardi, 2012). Understanding how cybervetting “works” in contemporary selection matters given the individual, organizational, and societal consequences of personnel selection. Cybervetting also offers a useful exemplar to help illustrate how talk can provide clues into whether and how emerging sociotechnical practices may affect conventional practices. These findings suggest as last two key theoretical contributions.

First, this study highlights the crucial role of sensemaking in shaping the trajectory of emerging sociotechnical practices within broader social processes. Most extant research presumes cybervetting replaces a conventional information-seeking practice that most people consider relatively extractive, albeit more interactive than cybervetting (i.e., résumé screening; interviews). Yet these data suggest that employers may also consider cybervetting a replacement for the relational functions of more interactive practices. This is not to say that because some employers frame cybervetting as relational or interactive, that cybervetting is necessarily relational or interactive. Rather when people ascribe different functions to cybervetting, they change what behavior is considered desirable, possible, and likely, especially when frames are subtle (Shah et al., 2010). Such frames are real in their consequences. Specifically, when participants framed cybervetting as relational or interactive, employers considered and sometimes reported acting on the possibility that cybervetting could replace the first interview or social aspects of interviews, even as they reported cybervetting behaviors consistent with
extractive information seeking. In contrast, employers who did not frame cybervetting as relational or interactive, but framed it as serving efficient and/or screening functions and fulfilling informational or efficiency values, reported using cybervetting to *supplement* conventional practices. The few employers who felt cybervetting was not efficient, accurate, and/or fair tended to *reject* cybervetting themselves “at least for now” (although they often expected or wanted others to cybervet). Thus, the functions people ascribe to an emerging practice can constrain or enable possibilities for whether and how an emerging practice becomes situated within a broader organizational process.

These data also suggest that salient social values shape whether and how cybervetting fit into the overall selection process. Efficiency and the perceived availability of more information offered dominant values by which employers evaluated the relative effectiveness of cybervetting at serving desired functions. In reporting whether and how they incorporated cybervetting into their overall selection process, participants also drew on perceived affordances of ICTs (e.g., information visibility; “social nature”). Employers combined these affordances into their sensemaking about the functions ascribed to cybervetting (screening, efficiency, relational) and salient individual or collective values (e.g., “efficiency,” “sufficiency,” “humaneness,” ethicality, “legality”) and then acted based on entangled (often implicit) assessments of the social and technical aspects of emergent practices. Such behavior aligns with a long tradition in the sociology of technology whereby technological development involves contesting, negotiating, and (re)defining what it means to say that a particular technology “works” given particular material and social conditions (see Leonardi, 2012 for summary).

Beyond providing insight into personnel selection, this study also offers a useful exemplar for understanding how emerging sociotechnical practices evolve generally:
Specifically, I propose that whether participants reported supplementing or replacing a conventional practice with an emerging practice, or rejecting the emerging practice, seems to depend on at least two key factors: (1) the salient values linked to the practices being considered; and (2) the degree to which employers felt the functions ascribed to the emerging practice aligned with those of the conventional practice (see Figure 1). Although functions and values are entangled in these data, this framework proposes a means of disentangling and testing values and functions as potential causal factors.

That is, this framework proposes that when people frame an emerging practice in a way that highly aligns with salient values and the ascribed functions of a conventional practice, they are likely to displace the conventional practice with the emerging practice, especially when the conventional practice has a lower alignment with salient values. Moreover, I suspect such processes and outcomes are not exclusive to personnel selection. Consider the emergence of mobile-app-enabled ridesharing organizations (e.g., Uber, Lyft). Imagine a woman who compares ridesharing (emerging practice) to taxis (conventional practice), frames the function of transportation as providing on-demand transport, with a salient value of affordability: She would likely replace taxi service with ridesharing. In contrast, when an emerging practice highly aligns with the ascribed function of a conventional practice, yet does not align with the salient value as highly, the emerging practice is more likely to supplement, rather than replace the conventional practice. In the ridesharing example, if the passenger’s salient value was safety, she might supplement taxis services with ridesharing only if ridesharing drivers were verified. Conversely, if an emerging practice is comparatively lower than the selected conventional practice in terms of salient value(s) and ascribed function(s), people will tend to reject the emerging practice: Imagine a man comparing ridesharing (emerging) to his current form of transportation (personal
car) and who views the function of transportation as moving between locations without waiting. His salient value is control. This man would likely to reject ridesharing. One could also imagine situations where low value alignment might constitute a personal or professional ethical violation, in which case people might reject the emerging practice, change their value, or reframe the practice to align with the value.

What remains unclear is the anticipated trajectory when an emerging practice highly aligns with salient values, but is relatively low on ascribed functions. Although the lack of data for these conditions might be an artifact of data collection; should a practice emerge under this fourth set of conditions, I tentatively suggest it might supplement an existing practice until it was considered to have a comparative functional advantage within a “reasonable” amount of time, or otherwise it would be rejected. It is also remains unclear how and when people decide on the conventional practice with which to compare the emerging practice; whether ascribed functions reflect people’s beliefs or operate exclusively persuasive strategies to accomplish organizational goals; or how contextual or temporal changes shift behavioral choices. This framework also does not consider whether a practice actually offers a functional advantage. More research is needed.

This proposed framework aligns with notions that institutional and organizational norms, values, and discourse shape how people use technology and how a technology (or set of technologies) unfolds as part of a sociotechnical process (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Orlikowski and Scott, 2005; Leonardi, 2012). By focusing on how people compare the ascribed functions and alignment of salient values of conventional and emerging practices, this study extends conversations on sociomaterial practices. In so doing, it provides a tractable means for testing the evolution of other sociotechnical practices central to contemporary life. Specifically, this study reinforces the need to “challenge the separation of technology, work, and organization,” but
rather to consider how technology (e.g., mobile apps), work (e.g., gig economy), and organizations (e.g., Uber, Lyft, city councils) overlap and entangle as *equivoque* not *entailments*: Whereas *equivoque* allow for ambiguity and multiple possible interpretations, entailments suggest logical and necessary consequences (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008: 433). As a technology-enabled practice, cybervetting is *equivoque*—cybervetting did not (and does not) have to evolve in one particular way. Rather, alternate interpretations about the functions of cybervetting and its underlying technologies, along with differences in salient values afford opportunities for different sociotechnical evolutions that might better address the instrumental and ethical challenges of personnel selection (see e.g., Clark and Roberts, 2010; Roth et al., 2016) and ongoing concerns about the problematic trajectory of contemporary employment relationships (e.g., Berkelaar, 2014). This framework also provides a way of understanding the space of actions for other contemporary and controversy technology-work-organization entanglements (e.g., the gig economy; electronic health records) potentially offering a means of predicting current or likely trajectories and offering options for resisting deterministic trajectories. In sum, this study encourages people to question the functions and values ascribed to practices considering empirical data on actual functions and values enabled by particular practices.

Second, these findings also highlight the need to understand the different modes of *relating* in organizations, including how people make sense of employment relationships. Within this study, a subset of participants considered cybervetting a tool for relational development or interaction even as they reported using extractive means for cybervetting. Although there were at least two people involved in the movement of information—insofar as one was the seeker and one was the target—cybervetting, as reportedly practiced, rarely offered a reciprocal exchange of information, despite being framed by some participants as relational. Conventional modes of
relating assume reciprocal, usually overt, information exchange (whether synchronous, asynchronous, asymmetrical, or symmetrical). However, these findings suggest employers may relate to applicants, or rather applicant information, via covert information extractions. By leveraging the information and clandestine affordances and features of search and social ICTs, extractive processes separate the interactive functions of relating to another person from the informational functions of relating to another person: “Relating” with a target from this perspective does not necessarily involve the target relating with the seeker via back and forth interactions, but rather “relating” unidirectionally via information about the target.

Unidirectional targeted relating of one individual to another via information cues aligns with media research on parasocial interactions (Giles, 2002). Parasocial interaction or parasocial relationships describe “relationships” in which people respond to a media figure as if in a typical social relationship. Historically, parasocial relationships target celebrities or fictional characters. Because of the growing amount of information visible online, people can now relate parasocially to non-celebrities. Although parasocial interactions exhibit many of the same qualities of social relationships for the person directing the relationship, one person remains a “stranger.” Such estrangement could prove problematic in employment relationships. Even as extractive communication seems to offer a functional alternative to some key challenges of contemporary selection; it does not come without costs. Although cybervetting may offer more efficient information seeking, the distribution of relational control in extractive information seeking, and by extension parasocial employment relationships, undermine applicant needs for voice, awareness, and space for action. Such imbalances have implications for procedural justice (Gilliland, 1994) and the establishment of a healthy psychological contracts and employment relationships (Derous and de Witte, 2001; Herriot, 1989).
These findings challenge scholars to reexamine the fundamental notions of what constitutes an employment relationship—an imminently practical consideration given ongoing debates about what constitutes a worker in a gig economy. This study also highlights and extends conversations about the ways in which new ICTs which make it possible for parasocial relationships to be established more widely, by more people, and in more relational contexts (Giles, 2012). Perhaps employment relationships also exist on a continuum from parasocial to social determined by the varying combinations and orders of social versus information encounters. Understanding how people make sense of and practice one-way (online) information-based “relationships” can expand research on parasocial relationships, while providing insight into the development and structure of contemporary employment relationships.

These findings also offer corresponding practical insights. First, the findings suggest the need to pay attention to sensemaking about the sociomaterial aspects of organizational processes. By framing cybervetting as a chance to build a sense of rapport and connection, employers could justify focusing on more immediate information and instrumental goals like assessing information during the time-intensive practice of interviewing, or excluding one or more interviews altogether. Such choices could (unintentionally) decrease the proportion of relatively more interactive information-seeking, potentially delaying or otherwise altering the development of the employer-employee psychological contract (see Derous and de Witte, 2001; Herriot, 1989). Practitioners would benefit from considering communicative approaches when evaluating emerging practices and their desired and likely effects on organizational processes such as personnel selection. Such an approach would include at least two foci. Practitioners should consider their goals for personnel selection overall, moving beyond job screening and fit to consider how competent interactions can improve selection, retention, and engagement through
effective socialization and identification. Practitioners should also engage in research and reflection on which strategies best accomplish relational and informational goals. Such an approach could allow employers to be more strategic with limited time and fiscal resources, while providing opportunities to encourage just, fair, and effective selection processes. As suggested in recent European Union considerations of the “right to be forgotten,” policymakers also should consider how to legislate information in ways that offer people greater voice, interaction, and/or control over digital artifacts given visibility, persistence and replicability affordances of online information, while also recognizing employers’ needs for accurate, job-relevant information. Plus, given the growing using of big data and algorithms, policymakers and practitioners should also consider how computational cybervetting might affect practices, processes, and outcomes related to voice, fairness, and personal information control.

By attending to talk of what a tool or practice does or should do, practitioners can better understand the assumptions and implications of sensemaking surrounding a specific practice (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Orlikowski and Gash, 1994). When pooled with attentiveness to technology appropriations and organizational processes, such an approach helps practitioners anticipate and strategically intervene to encourage desirable trajectories and outcomes and redirect undesirable ones. Relatedly, employers should attend to the language used when describing practices as well as their imagined relationships with the people online information references: What do I (others) think I am (we are) up to when engaging in a particular practice or overall process (Alvesson, 2003)? Who is that I (they) think I am (they are) relating to? Attending to language helps reveal assumptions about what constitutes possible and desirable actions and outcomes given material opportunities and constraints (Phillips and Oswick, 2012).

These findings provide avenues for future work. Since this study employs a purposive
sample, it should not be used to make generalizable claims. Rather, the preliminary framework proposed here should be tested to help disentangle how values and ascribed functions influence the evolution of (sociotechnical) organizational practices and processes. Specifically, future research should draw on experimental, field, and survey approaches to help examine under what conditions and to what extent employers’ talk affects conventional practices, the overall selection process, and short- and long-term outcomes of cybervetting specifically, and technology-enabled practices generally. Research into the frequency, timing, and intensity of cybervetting could offer missing insights or help untangle mixed results of existing research. Broadly speaking, scholars should consider to what extent the proposed framework holds across different practices, processes, technologies, contexts, and over time; and whether and how different degrees of relationality are enacted across time and contexts. That is, how and in what ways do sociotechnical practices and employment relationships evolve?

In conclusion, this study addresses Orlikowski and Scott’s (2008) call to consider the role and influence of technology on organizational practices and processes. It encourages scholars and practitioners to consider how ascribed functions and salient values influence the trajectories and outcomes of sociotechnical practices, rather than assuming technology-enabled practices are altogether different or altogether the same as conventional analogs. Specifically, findings encourage people to consider how talk affects the likely, potentially unanticipated, consequences of cybervetting on personnel selection practice and employment relationships. Findings also offer a preliminary, testable framework to help explain how sociotechnical practices emerge and with what likely effects, offering avenues for future research, practice, and intervention.

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**Notes**

1 Since the time of data collection some US states have passed legislation banning employers from requesting applicants’ social media passwords during interviews.
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Figure 1: How will an emerging practice affect a conventional practice?

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