



Job loss as a blessing in disguise: The role of career exploration and career planning in predicting reemployment quality

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Abstract

Job loss is one of the most difficult work related situations that an individual may encounter. Yet, sometimes job loss may also turn into a blessing in disguise. Combining the careers literature with the literature on unemployment, the current paper addresses potential positive outcomes of job loss by focusing on specific career adaptability activities that individuals can undertake to obtain these outcomes. Three hundred and four unemployed outplacement attendees reported their use of self and environmental career exploration and career planning, as well as of job search (general and networking) and the availability of two resources that may foster these activities, general self-efficacy and social support. Six months later, 215 individuals reported their current reemployment status and, when applicable, the quality of that reemployment. Results replicate the positive effects of job search on finding reemployment but moreover outline the relevance of career planning and exploration during unemployment on ensuring the quality of this reemployment. Theoretical implications and directions for practice and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Involuntary job loss is one of the most stressful life events that affects many individuals, regardless of their qualifications. Most unemployment literature focuses on the negative effects and profound difficulties that job loss creates for the affected individuals (e.g., McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005), and many studies address the importance of job search and of finding a new job as the primary goal of the unemployed. Yet, upon reemployment, many individuals, especially higher level professionals, are underemployed (Feldman & Leana, 2000): they work at lower levels, are paid less than in their last jobs, and experience a step downwards in their careers. Thus, the cycle of job search continues as individuals look for yet another job (Kinicki, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2000). Although more attention is now paid to the prevention of underemployment and to understanding ways of improving the quality of reemployment (Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002), very little variance has been explained in outcomes such as job improvement, identification with the new organization and turnover intentions, and job loss continues to be seen as a disruption to one's career (Leana, Feldman, & Tan, 1998, p. 88).

Without denying the negative impact of job loss, this study examines the other side of job loss, namely the positive yet often ignored effects that job loss may have on individuals' careers upon reemployment. For example, Jones (1989) found that some individuals experienced unemployment as a blessing in disguise: while they viewed it as a negative life event, they also appreciated it as an opportunity to change their direction in life and to improve their career prospects. Latack and Dozier (1986) also acknowledged the difficulties of unemployment, but proposed that the maintenance of structured activities might contribute to subsequent positive reemployment outcomes. However, they did not specify the nature of these structured activities, and no empirical research so far has examined activities that might be particularly beneficial for obtaining high quality reemployment. To fill this gap, we make use of the career development perspective, in particular the career adaptability concept (Super & Knasel, 1981; Savickas, 1997). According to this perspective, to manage new career related circumstances and their respective pressures across the life course, adults typically exhibit a certain amount of career adaptability, defined by two core processes, career exploration and career planning.

1.1. Career adaptability during unemployment

Involuntary job loss undisputedly presents a negative and stressful external demand. However, it may also trigger affected individuals' career adaptability, that is, forward looking, proactive career behaviors aimed at coping with external and internal demands (Super & Knasel, 1981). In searching for reemployment, unemployed individuals are active agents who can use a wide repertoire of behaviors for adapting to and handling their current situation. This adaptation is characterized by reflection, the exploration of various career options, and by career planning. Yet, while scholars have noted the importance of these processes throughout one's career (Flum & Blustein, 2000; Super, 1990; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996), research has focused primarily on students during their school-to-work transition (for an exception see Phillips, 1982) and never on the context of unemployment. Yet, contemporary careers are more complex. Particularly higher status professionals experience repeated career transition cycles. Unemployment transition is still not well understood in this group of professionals, whose demanding careers

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