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# The use of job search strategies among university graduates

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## Abstract

Labour-market entrants are able to choose within a wide range of job search methods. They may send direct applications to employers, search through the employment services, or utilise more informal search methods as relatives and friends. Using data from the Norwegian Graduate Surveys 1995–2000, this study investigates university graduates' entry into the labour market and the use of search methods. The use of informal search methods is affected by the distribution of social capital. The use of the public employment service (PES) is strongly affected by the graduates' characteristics. Graduates with the poorest job prospects are over-represented among the PES users.

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## 1. Introduction

Questions concerning how people find jobs and how vacancies are filled are claimed to be among some of the most under-researched topics within labour-market analyses. Spokane and Hawks (1990, p. 111) conclude from their review of the literature that “perhaps the most understudied area in contemporary career development is the job search”. Petersen et al. (2000, p. 763) state that “the hiring process is perhaps the single most important but least understood part of the employment relationship”. According to Granovetter (1995,

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p. 177), the impact of networks on inequality is “the single research gap most in need of filling” in the research agendas of labour scholars. The impact of graduates’ networks on job search is one of the questions that I am going to pay attention to in the article.

Economic analyses have developed job search theories and supplied numerous empirical studies investigating the relationship between search intensity and the number of job offers, the individual choice of acceptance criterion (the reservation wage) and the outcome in the labour market (unemployment spell duration, job probability, wage etc).<sup>1</sup> Most of these studies ignore the fact that there are several different search methods, that the access to different job search methods may be unevenly distributed between groups of job searchers, and that the relative effectiveness of alternative search methods may differ (Wielgosz and Carpenter, 1987; Blau and Robins, 1990; Montgomery, 1991; Addison and Portugal, 2001; Cahuc and Fontaine, 2002).

I will investigate the access to different job search methods and their implications for the use of search strategies. Unequal access to informal job referral networks has direct implications for the discussion on inequality of opportunity. Job searchers disadvantaged with regard to networks of friends and relatives may have to rely on more formal methods in order to find a job (Holzer, 1987). The public employment service (PES) constitutes the major public intervention in this area. It is targeted directly at disadvantaged groups in the labour market. Whether PES reaches their target group is another question that is raised. There have been few attempts to explore systematically the determinants of search method choice in detail.<sup>2</sup> This article is an attempt to extend our understanding of this issue.

The analysis is limited to the labour market for university graduates. The transition from initial education to work is a very important transition. The early histories of new entrants into the labour market may turn out to be decisive for subsequent career and earnings. The growing number of higher education graduates and the growing employment problems of graduates in many countries are making the transition period of university graduates a more visible phenomenon, which meets increased public attention (Teichler, 1998, 2000). Therefore, an understanding of the search process of graduates is important for both theoretical and policy reasons.

In the present study, I shall follow the standard classification between formal and informal methods of job search. The formal methods cover advertisements (ads) through newspaper or other public media and public or private employment services. Informal methods include both direct approaches to potential employers and approaches through relatives, friends or associates (social network).

The article is arranged as follows: in the section immediately following, I discuss how social capital and labour-market selection processes may work in the choice of search methods. The data set is presented in Section 3, and Section 4 analyses the choice of job search strategies. Section 5 concludes the discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mortensen (1991) or Mortensen and Pissarides (1999) for a theoretical overview of job search models, or Neumann (1997) for an overview of empirical studies.

<sup>2</sup> Holzer (1988) estimates the use of search methods by a very limited set of explanatory variables, while Blau and Robins (1990) estimate the number of search methods used. In addition, several analyses of the effectiveness of the PES model the selectivity of this search method specifically (e.g. Osberg, 1993; Gregg and Wadsworth, 1996; Thomas, 1997).

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