



Trait affect and job search outcomes

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Received 4 June 2005

Available online 13 October 2005

Abstract

The present study examines the role of trait affect in job search. One hundred and twenty-three university students completed measures of positive and negative affectivity, conscientiousness, job search self-efficacy, job search clarity, and job search intensity during their last year of school while on the job market. At the end of the school year, participants completed the measure of job search intensity again, and indicated the number of interviews and offers they had received and whether they had accepted a full-time job. As hypothesized, positive affectivity predicted job search clarity over and above conscientiousness and job search self-efficacy. Job search clarity mediated relationships between positive affectivity and job search intensity and between job search self-efficacy and job search intensity. Negative affectivity, however, did not predict job search clarity. Job search clarity predicted job search intensity, which led to interviews, offers, and employment. The results suggest that job seekers high in positive affectivity find a job because they achieve job search clarity and, in turn, look for a job intensely.

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Keywords: Affect; Job search; Job search clarity; Job search intensity; Employment status

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1. Introduction

Job search has become an integral and fundamental aspect of work life today. Workers will increasingly find themselves changing jobs, employers, and careers because of shifts in the economy, changes in the nature of work, organizational restructuring and downsizing, and labor shortages. As a result, workers will search for employment more often than ever before. These changes have made job search research an increasingly important and relevant area of study.

Several studies have helped us understand the processes through which individuals seek employment, engage themselves in job search pursuits, and obtain employment. These studies are useful for the design of programs to improve the success of job search. Even so, affective constructs are for the most part absent from these studies. In particular, the potential role of trait affect (Crossley & Stanton, 2005) has been discussed but seldom examined. Trait affect refers to people's dispositions to experience certain emotions and moods across situations and over time (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Researchers have identified two orthogonal dimensions of trait affect. Positive affectivity reflects the tendency to experience positive affective states such as enthusiasm and excitement, and negative affectivity reflects the tendency to experience negative affective states such as distress and shame. Common wisdom may suggest that qualifications and experience, and not whether a person is typically happy or unhappy, predict a person's success in finding a job. We propose, however, that trait affect predicts job search outcomes because affect influences the way people think and act during the job search.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the role of trait affect in the job search process. Are job seekers high in positive affectivity more likely to find jobs than persons who rarely feel positive states, and if so, why? Conversely, are job seekers high in negative affectivity doomed? We propose that trait affect is associated with job search, and that this association is mediated by the clarity of one's job search. Positive affectivity is expected to enhance, and negative affectivity is expected to reduce, job search clarity. Job search clarity, in turn, is expected to enhance job search intensity and job search outcomes. To rigorously examine the role of trait affect, we include in our investigation two variables that are among the strongest individual predictors of job search outcomes (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001) and that are theoretically and empirically linked to job search clarity: conscientiousness and job search self-efficacy.

1.1. *Trait affect in job search*

Positive and negative affectivity are related to multiple workplace behaviors (see George, 1996; Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994, for reviews). For example, Staw and Barsade (1993) found that individuals high in positive affectivity make better decisions in a managerial simulation than their counterparts. Job search seems to involve many affective states that can influence job search outcomes (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Philips, 1994) and therefore, trait affect may be related to job search behavior and success. A recent study demonstrated associations between negative affectivity and

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