Job search as goal-directed behavior: Objectives and methods ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between job search objectives (finding a new job/turnover, staying aware of job alternatives, developing a professional network, and obtaining leverage against an employer) and job search methods (looking at job ads, visiting job sites, networking, contacting employment agencies, contacting employers, and submitting applications). In a sample of 205 employed individuals from Belgium and Romania, job search objectives were significantly related to job search methods even after job satisfaction was controlled. Furthermore, particular objectives predicted specific methods. While the finding a new job/turnover objective predicted all search methods, staying aware of alternatives predicted using job ads and sites; the network objective predicted networking and contacting employers; and the leverage objective predicted contacting employers. Results suggest that search objectives are important for understanding job seekers' search behavior and support the view that job search is a self-regulatory process that begins with objectives which activate search behavior.

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1. Introduction

The mobility of the workforce has increased drastically over the last decade as individuals search for work following job loss and pursue opportunities to advance their careers (Saks, 2005). Job search has become so pervasive and frequent that it is now considered to be an integral part of people's worklife (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). At the same time, there has been a dramatic increase in research on the prediction of job search behavior and employment outcomes (Saks, 2005). In their meta-analysis, Kanfer et al. (2001) found that personality traits, self-evaluations, motives, social context, and biographical variables were significantly related to job search behavior and that job search behavior was related to employment outcomes.

Given that job search is typically conceptualized as a self-regulatory process initiated by goals (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2005), an important limitation of previous research has been the failure to consider the role of job search objectives. As noted by Boswell, Boudreau, and Dunford (2004), there is little understanding of job seekers' goals or objectives for engaging in job search. This is perhaps not so surprising given that most research assumes that the main if not only objective of job seekers is to find a new job (Kanfer et al., 2001). However, job search does not always result in turnover or employment and there are many other reasons for job seekers to engage in job search, especially for employed individuals, such as seeking bargaining leverage to improve one's present job situation (Boswell et al., 2004). Research on job search objectives is important because job seekers' search behavior is likely to depend in large part on their job search objectives. For example, if job seekers' objective is to develop a network of professional relationships, they might make more use of search methods allowing them to

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meet and talk to other people. Thus, the study of job search objectives is important for better understanding the job search process (Kanfer et al., 2001).

In addition, previous research has typically operationalized job search behavior as overall job search intensity, a composite measure of various search methods (Kanfer et al., 2001). Although some research has investigated general job search categories (e.g., preparatory versus active, Blau, 1994) or strategies (e.g., focused versus exploratory versus haphazard, Crossley & Highhouse, 2005), we know very little about job seekers' use of specific job search methods. However, a few recent studies have found that job seekers vary in their use of particular search methods (e.g., looking at job ads versus contacting employment agencies, Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005) and that some methods (e.g., networking) have specific determinants (e.g., networking comfort) that are not predictive of other methods (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000).

Along these lines, the present study contributes to the job search literature by investigating the relationship between distinct job search objectives (i.e., what the job seeker wants to achieve) and specific job search methods (i.e., the activities that the job seeker will engage in to achieve his/her objectives). We believe that job seekers' variation in the use of specific search methods might be explained by the extent to which they are pursuing different job search objectives. On a theoretical level, the current study aims to enhance our understanding of job search as a self-regulatory process that begins with objectives that activate job search behavior. While most unemployed job seekers probably engage in job search primarily to find a job, employed individuals are likely to show more variation in their pursuit of job search objectives. Therefore, similar to Boswell et al. (2004), we test our hypotheses in a sample of employed job seekers. In Section 2, we discuss job search objectives in more detail followed by the study hypotheses.

2. Job search objectives

The importance of goals and objectives in job search has been recognized for some time (Kanfer & Hulin, 1985). The strongest case was made by Kanfer et al. (2001) who conceptualized job search as a "purposive, volitional pattern of action that begins with the identification and commitment to pursuing an employment goal. The employment goal, in turn, activates search behavior designed to bring about the goal." (p. 838). Thus, when viewed as a self-regulatory process, job search behavior is defined as goal-directed activities. Yet, given the lack of previous research, goals were not included in Kanfer et al.'s (2001) meta-analysis.

However, two other variables in the Kanfer et al. (2001) motivational self-regulatory framework are goal-related constructs that can motivate an individual to search more intensely. Employment commitment refers to the importance or centrality that an individual places on employment, whereas financial need consists of the financial hardship experienced by a job seeker. Meta-analytic results revealed small to medium size relationships for these goal-related constructs in predicting job search behavior (Kanfer et al., 2001).

Job search goals and objectives have been recognized in other models of job search as well. For example, based on a review of the job search literature, Saks (2005) developed an integrative self-regulatory model of job search predictors, behaviors, and outcomes in which employment goals and job search goals predict job search behaviors. Latack, Kinicki, and Prussia (1995) developed a coping with job loss model in which coping goals directly influence coping strategies (e.g., actively searching for employment) that are intended to achieve one's goals. Along these lines, Prussia, Fugate, and Kinicki (2001) found that unemployed manufacturing workers' reemployment coping goals were positively related to job search effort and that job search effort was positively related to reemployment.

Recently, Wanberg, Hough, and Song (2002) introduced the concept of job search clarity (i.e., the extent to which job seekers have clear job search objectives and a clear idea of the type of work desired) and found that this goal-related construct was positively related to job-organization fit and lower intention to quit in a sample of unemployed job seekers. Côté, Saks, and Zikic (2006) found that job search clarity was positively related to the job search intensity of graduating university students and mediated the relationship of positive affectivity and job search self-efficacy with job search intensity.

With respect to the goals and objectives of employed job seekers, several theoretical models of turnover have recognized the existence of multiple paths toward job search and turnover (Steel, 2002). Whereas traditional turnover research has mostly focused on job dissatisfaction and perceived job alternatives as major precursors of job search and turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000), Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of voluntary employee turnover suggests that people follow different psychological paths that are often precipitated by unexpected events or shocks when they decide to leave an organization. Empirical findings support the notion that voluntary turnover is not always preceded by job dissatisfaction or a deliberate search for job alternatives (Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, & Hill, 1999; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996; Van Vianen, Feij, Krausz, & Taris, 2003).

Although previous research has investigated several goal-related constructs, we know of only one published study that has focused specifically on job search objectives. Boswell et al. (2004) investigated the predictors and outcomes of two types of job search objectives: leverage-seeking search objectives (i.e., job search for the purpose of obtaining leverage against one's current employer) and separation-seeking search objectives (i.e., job search for the purpose of changing jobs). In their study of employed high-level managers, they found that separation-seeking objectives were positively related to voluntary turnover and leverage-seeking search objectives were positively related to leverage use one year later. The authors concluded that "a more explicit treatment of job search goals in future research may enhance our understanding beyond the traditional implicit assumption that individuals search only to find a new position after deciding to leave." (p. 1089).