

Job search and social cognitive theory: The role of career-relevant activities

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ABSTRACT

Social cognitive theory was used to explain the relationships between career-relevant activities (environmental and self career exploration, career resources, and training), self-regulatory variables (job search self-efficacy and job search clarity), variables from the Theory of Planned Behavior (job search attitude, subjective norm, job search intention), and job search intensity. Based on a sample of employed and unemployed job seekers, we found that job seekers who spent more time in career exploration, attended more training programs, and used more career resources reported higher job search clarity and job search self-efficacy. Job search self-efficacy, job search attitude, and subjective norm predicted job search intention, and job search clarity and job search intention predicted job search intensity eight months later. The results of this study provide practical information on what job seekers can do to improve their job search clarity and job search self-efficacy and demonstrate the application of social cognitive theory for understanding and predicting job search behavior.

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1. Introduction

Job search has received a considerable amount of research attention in the last decade. Much of this research has investigated job search models in which individual differences and situational variables predict job search behaviors and outcomes (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Wanberg, Watt, & Rumsey, 1996). Two theories that have been the focus of job search research are self-regulation theory (SR) (Kanfer et al., 2001) and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & Van Der Flier, 2004b; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van Der Flier, & Blonk, 2004a). Although variables from both theories have been found to predict job search behavior, there has been little attempt to combine them in one model. One of the purposes of this study was to integrate variables from both theories using social cognitive theory as a framework.

A second and related purpose of this study is to investigate career-relevant activities that can influence two key mechanisms of job search self-regulation. Although job search research has the potential to inform job seekers and career counselors on how to improve search success, few studies have focused on the practical aspect of what job seekers can do to improve their job search. For example, we know that job search self-efficacy is an important predictor of job search behavior, however, research has not examined how job seekers can strengthen their job search self-efficacy other than through job search training or instruction (Van Hooft et al., 2004b). Furthermore, many models of job search begin with individual difference variables such as self-efficacy and tend not to consider the factors that precede and influence them.

The present study focuses on career-relevant activities that job seekers can employ to improve their job search self-efficacy and job search clarity. Job search self-efficacy and job search clarity are important because of their role in the self-reg-

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ulation process and because they predict job search intensity (Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Kanfer et al., 2001). The present study also includes variables from the theory of planned behavior (TPB) because they have also been found to be important predictors of job search intensity. As described in the next section, we use social cognitive theory as a framework to integrate and explain the relationships between the variables in the present study.

1.1. Social cognitive theory and job search

Social cognitive theory explains human psychosocial functioning in terms of the interaction between behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events. These three factors interact as determinants of each other in a process known as triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986). In addition, social cognitive theory encompasses a number of self-regulatory and self-reflective processes such as self-efficacy and goals. In recent years, social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has been used to understand career development processes (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). According to Lent et al. (1994), SCCT describes how people's environments expose them to career-relevant activities that influence the development of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, interests, and goals which influence career choices and behaviors.

Social cognitive theory provides a useful theoretical basis to understand the relationships between the variables in the present study as both self-efficacy and goals can be influenced by career-relevant activities. In the present study, we maintain that career-relevant activities function as environmental factors that can influence job seekers' job search self-efficacy and job search clarity. In addition, the variables from the TPB can also be understood within a social cognitive theory framework as they represent environmental (subjective norm), cognitive and personal (job search attitude, job search self-efficacy), goal-related (job search intention), and behavioral variables (job search intensity) that are all related to each other.

Fig. 1 provides an overview of our social cognitive theory model of job search behavior. Career-relevant activities are shown to be positively related to job search self-efficacy and job search clarity; job search self-efficacy, job search attitude, and subjective norm are positively related to job search intention; and job search clarity and job search intention are positively related to job search intensity. Although our model suggests that these relationships are of a causal nature, it is important to recognize that our methodology does not allow us to make causal conclusions about the relationships shown in the model.

1.2. Job search self-efficacy and job search clarity

Kanfer et al. (2001) conceptualized job search behavior as the product of a self-regulatory process "that begins with the identification and commitment to pursuing an employment goal" that "activates search behavior designed to bring about the goal" (pp. 838). They identified trait and contextual variables that affect self-regulatory mechanisms and the direction and intensity of job search behavior. As described earlier, two mechanisms that are central to the self-regulatory process are self-efficacy and goals (Bandura, 1991). In the job search literature, these variables have been conceptualized as job search self-efficacy and job search clarity.

1.2.1. Job search self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a major mechanism of the self-regulatory process of social cognitive theory and plays a central role in the exercise of personal agency. Within social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is the most proximal regulator of human behavior and a strong predictor of thought, affect, motivation, and action (Bandura, 1991). Self-efficacy beliefs influence the courses of action people choose to pursue, the amount of effort one exerts in the pursuit of goals, and how long one will persevere in the face of difficulties and setbacks (Bandura, 1991).

Job search self-efficacy is the belief that one can successfully perform specific job search behaviors and obtain employment (Saks & Ashforth, 1999). In their meta-analysis, Kanfer et al. (2001) obtained an effect size of .27 between self-efficacy

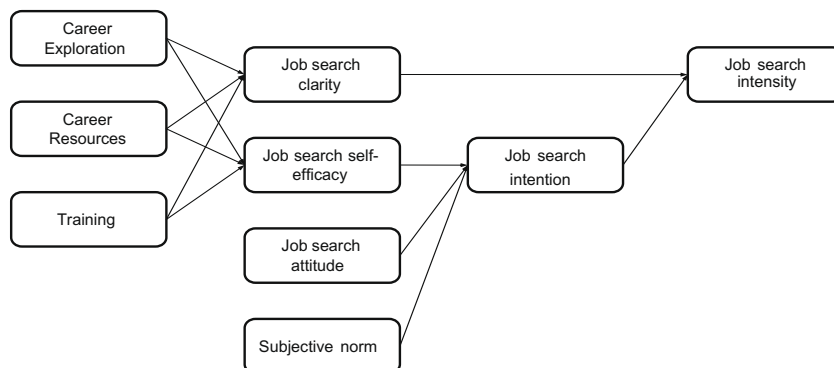


Fig. 1. Social cognitive theory model of job search behavior.

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