

Job-search strategies and reemployment quality The impact of career adaptability

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ABSTRACT

Past job-search research has focused on how hard unemployed people search for a job, but we still know little about the strategies that people use during their search and how we can predict the quality of the reemployment found. The first aim of this study was to predict the use of different job-search strategies via job-seekers' career adaptability. The second aim was to examine the impact of different job-search strategies on both the number of job-offers and the quality of the obtained job. In a two-wave study, 248 unemployed people indicated their career adaptability and the job-search strategies that they used. The use of a focused and exploratory strategy contributed to the number of job offers, whereas the use of an exploratory strategy reduced the quality of reemployment 8 months later. Moreover, career decision making and career confidence positively predicted reemployment quality. Implications for reemployment practice and further research are discussed.

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Unemployment can be a stressful, depressing, and literally sickening experience (McKee Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002). Most unemployed people will therefore try to end this unfortunate state as soon as possible by searching for a new job. Yet, job-seekers' job-search activities are not always successful: a successful job-search does not only imply finding just *any* job, but also finding a suitable and qualitatively *good* job to foster long-lasting reemployment. A mismatch between the job-seeker's needs and the characteristics of the job can lead to low satisfaction with the new job, high employee burnout, turnover intentions, and decreased productivity (Kristof, 1996). Moreover, the negative consequences of such a mismatch are similar to the negative effects of job-loss for people who remain unemployed, such as depressive feelings and a low satisfaction with life (Feldman & Leana, 2000; Leana & Feldman, 1995; McKee-Ryan, Virick, Prussia, Harvey, & Lilly, 2009). Therefore, the focus in reemployment research should be on the quality of reemployment, instead on solely on finding reemployment.

Past research on the intensity with which people search for a new job (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001) has failed to predict meaningful variance in the quality of reemployment (Hanisch, 1999; Saks, 2005). In the current study, we try to diminish our lack of understanding about the determinants of reemployment quality by combining two streams of relevant literature that have so far remained unconnected. More precisely, we examine the impact of people's direct behaviors in searching for a job in the form of the job-search strategies as well as the impact of people's readiness and preparation to search for a job, as reflected in their career adaptability.

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The different *strategies* that job-seekers use when searching for reemployment have received little scientific attention, despite preliminary indications that these strategies might well impact job-seekers' subsequent reemployment quality (Crossley & Highhouse, 2005). For example, job-seekers may focus on one specific type of job during their search and may keep searching until they find precisely what they are looking for, or they may fully explore all their options by examining various types of jobs (Stevens & Beach, 1996). The basic premise of the current paper is that the use of these different strategies will impact the number and the quality of the jobs found. Furthermore, we assume that the degree to which people use these strategies will depend on people's mental readiness and resources to seek reemployment, that is, their career adaptability.

Career adaptability, generally defined as the ability to change to fit into new career-related circumstances, has been conceptualized in the past in a number of ways, such as by planfulness, exploration, decision making, information, and realism (Super, 1974), by career planning and career exploration (Zikic & Klehe, 2006), by a boundaryless mindset (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007) or by career planning, career decidedness, and career confidence (Skorikov, 2007). The concept of career adaptability as presented by Savickas (1997, 2002) may be particularly helpful in understanding the job-search process as this conceptualization represents the readiness and different adaptive resources that arguably help people to prepare for and manage career transitions such a move from unemployment to reemployment. According to Savickas (1997, 2002, 2005), career adaptability includes looking ahead to one's future career (*planning*), knowing what career to pursue (*decision making*), looking around at various career options (*exploration*), and having a feeling of self-efficacy to successfully execute the activities needed to achieve one's career goals (*confidence*). Recent studies show that these four dimensions well represent a multidimensional measure of career adaptability (e.g., Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Hirschi, 2009). Moreover, research on these different facets of career adaptability supports the usefulness of each facet for predicting reemployment quality (Morrison & Hall, 2002; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Yet, past research has not been able to clarify the means by which career adaptability influences reemployment quality.

We propose that people's career adaptability influences the way in which they search for jobs and the quality of their reemployment. Job-seekers who lack adaptive resources to resolve their current state of unemployment may use a different and less beneficial search strategy than those who have these resources. As a consequence, job-seekers portraying less career adaptability may find a less satisfying job, show more turnover intentions, and end up right where they started.

Thus, the aim of the current study was to offer a theory-driven approach in predicting reemployment quality by combining mental preparation and preparatory activities in the job-search process (i.e. career adaptability) with actual job-search activities (i.e. job-search strategies). First, we aim to predict the use of job-search strategies of unemployed individuals from the readiness and beliefs that reflect the dimensions of career adaptability. Second, we aim to investigate how each job-search strategy relates to different outcomes of job-search, such as the number of job-offers and the quality of the obtained job (see Fig. 1 for a conceptual framework).

Job-search strategies

The most commonly studied job-search behavior in reemployment research is job-search intensity: the effort that people make during their search for a new job (Blau, 1994). Job-search intensity is usually measured via the frequency and scope of engagement in job-search behaviors, such as looking at employment advertisements or calling potential employers (Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002). In general, the higher an individual's job-search intensity, the higher is the chance of finding reemployment (Wanberg, Watt, & Rumsey, 1996). However, successful reemployment may not only depend on job-seekers' job-search intensity but also on the specific strategies with which they search for a job (Crossley & Highhouse, 2005; Kanfer et al., 2001; McArdle et al., 2007).

Past literature distinguishes three types of job-search strategies: an exploratory strategy, a focused strategy, and a haphazard strategy (Stevens & Beach, 1996; Stevens & Turban, 2001). Job-seekers who use a more *exploratory* strategy are dedicated to their search and are motivated to fully explore their options. Inherent in the use of an exploratory strategy is the openness to arising opportunities. Exploratory job-seekers actively gather job-related information from various sources, such as friends, family, and former employers. People use a more *focused* strategy when they identify their top choices early in their search and have clear employment goals. They tend to concentrate their search efforts on a small number of carefully screened employers and only apply for jobs that fit their needs, qualifications, and interests. Finally, job-seekers who employ a more *haphazard* strategy use a trial-and-error approach during job-search, switching tactics without rationale and passively gathering information both inside and outside of one's area of education or previous work experiences. Crossley and Highhouse (2005) argued that job-seekers using this strategy often have low and unclear employment standards and tend to

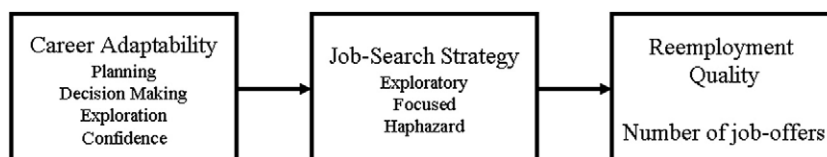


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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