



## Self-control trumps work motivation in predicting job search behavior



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### ABSTRACT

Current labor market entrants face an increasingly challenging job search process. Effective guidance of job seekers requires identification of relevant job search skills. Self-control (*i.e.*, the ability to control one's thoughts, actions, and response tendencies in view of a long-term goal, such as finding employment) is assumed to be one such relevant job search skill. The current study is the first to empirically assess the importance of self-control in the job search process. This is compared to the role of motivation, which is generally considered a crucial predictor of job searching. Based on a sample of 403 Dutch prospective vocational training graduates, we found that higher levels of self-control were related to higher levels of preparatory job search behavior and job search intentions half a year later, shortly before labor market entrance. Self-control was a significantly stronger predictor of job searching than work motivation. Moreover, relations between self-control and job searching were largely independent of motivation, which may suggest that job-seekers benefit from self-control through adaptive habits and routines that are unaffected by motivation. We propose that job search interventions, which traditionally focus on strengthening motivation, may benefit from a stronger focus on improving self-control skills.

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### 1. Introduction

Recent unemployment rates illustrate the scarcity of employment options for current job seekers. Especially among younger job seekers, for whom unemployment rates have exceeded 50% in parts of the US and Europe (Eurostat, 2012; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), a successful transition into the labor market has become increasingly challenging. Furthermore, early careers are characterized as turbulent due to temporary contracts, unstable jobs, and multiple transitions between employment and unemployment (Eurostat, 2012; Russell & Connell, 2001). Given the societal and individual consequences of unemployment (Petersen & Mortimer, 2006; Wanberg, 2012), it is of no surprise that the Action Plan for Youth of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) aims “to produce better outcomes for youth in the longer run by equipping them with relevant skills and removing barriers to their employment.” (OECD, 2013, p. 2).

Effective equipment of labor market entrants starts with the identification of the most relevant skills and barriers in the labor market. Focusing on the job search process as a quintessential component of the transition into the labor market (Saks & Ashforth,

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1999), correlational and intervention research has yielded considerable insight in relevant success factors (Saks, 2006). For example, a meta-analysis of correlational studies found that positive expectancies and motivation are related to more intensive job search behavior and better employment chances (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Accordingly, several intervention programs have been successful in increasing skills of coping with setbacks and more general feelings of self-efficacy, leading to better employment chances (see Wanberg, 2012, and Price & Vinokur, *in press*, for overviews). However, a comparison of the conceptual description of job searching and its empirically assessed correlates suggests that prior empirical studies may have overlooked an important characteristic: job seekers' self-control.

### 1.1. Self-control

Conceptually, job search behavior is described as a process in which self-control plays a pivotal role (Kanfer et al., 2001): job seekers largely manage their own search process as they decide on their investment in terms of job search intensity, diversity and persistence.<sup>1</sup> Self-reflection on the search process and its outcomes may lead to further adjustments in search-related thoughts, affect, and actions. Hence, the ability to regulate one's thoughts and actions seems essential to a successful job search process (Kanfer et al., 2001; van Hove & Saks, 2008). This ability to control thoughts and actions, together with the ability to alter or override dominant response tendencies in view of a long-term goal (e.g., finding a job), is referred to as self-control (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). Job search behavior fits the typical description of a self-control dilemma, as people need to make a trade-off between immediately gratifying actions (e.g., video gaming) and actions that have a higher pay-off in the long run (i.e., spending time searching for vacancies that eventually may lead to a job).

Despite self-control potentially being a relevant factor in job searching, it has mainly been considered from a conceptual point of view (Kanfer et al., 2001). One related study has considered the role of controlling one's motivation and emotions (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999), but we know of no empirical studies linking the job search process to the general ability to control oneself. Our primary goal in this paper is to fill this gap.

Empirical findings in related fields suggest that self-control may be important in job search behavior. Across a wide range of behavioral outcomes, self-control relates to the promotion of positive outcomes (e.g., happiness, relationship commitment) and the avoidance of negative outcomes (e.g., overeating, overspending, unwanted pregnancy, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, and lifetime delinquency) (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; de Ridder et al., 2012; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Vohs & Faber, 2007). Most notably, self-control is even more predictive of academic achievement than IQ (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). Based on these studies and the conceptualization of job-searching as a self-regulated process, self-control is important in achievement settings like job-searching. Therefore, we hypothesize that higher levels of self-control predict more job searching.

### 1.2. Self-control and motivation

The extent to which self-control plays a role in the job search process may depend on the job-seeker's motivation to find employment. While the direct role of motivational aspects in the job search process is evident (Kanfer et al., 2001; Zikic & Saks, 2009), it is less evident whether motivation moderates the relation between self-control and job search behavior. As elaborated upon below, it could be that motivation amplifies self-control effects (i.e., people may invest more self-control in job searching when they are more motivated to find work), compensates for self-control (i.e., high motivation may compensate for a lack of self-control, and *vice versa*) or does not influence self-control effects (i.e., self-control is beneficial in job searching irrespective of someone's motivation). The role of motivation in self-control is conceptually debated in the self-control literature (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012; Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014), but empirical studies are scarce. Studying the interactive effects of self-control and motivation in the job search process may therefore add insight to both the job search literature and self-control literature.

Amplifying effects of self-control and motivation can be expected when self-control investment is perceived as a conscious decision. Building on the finding that people have limited self-control resources (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), individuals may need to be selective when deciding in which goals they invest their self-control. These decisions on self-control investment may be related to people's motivation (Zimmerman, 2000), which is empirically demonstrated in the context of a problem-solving task (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). Similarly, people may invest self-control in job searching to the extent that their motivation gives reason for that, rendering a stronger effect of self-control if their work motivation is higher.

Compensatory mechanisms of motivation and self-control may be present in light of motivational conflict (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Tasks for which motivation is high, or without conflicting desires, do not constitute a self-control dilemma. However, if two desires clash (e.g., a friend's invitation for video gaming shortly before a job vacancy's application deadline), self-control may be needed to strive for the long-term instead of the short-term goal. Hence, self-control may be most needed in cases of low motivation or

<sup>1</sup> Different types of job seekers experience the job search process differently (Kanfer et al., 2001). For unemployed job seekers in the labor force, job searching may be less autonomous and self-regulated as they need to meet certain criteria to be eligible for unemployment benefits (e.g., Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005). Also for prospective labor market entrants without unemployment benefits, which is the type of job seeker considered in the current paper, external factors may influence the job search process. For example, students may be influenced by work norms in the social environment (Baay, van Aken, van der Lippe, de Ridder, 2014) or career counseling support (Whiston, Brecheisen, & Stephens, 2003). In the presence of these contextual factors, job seekers can still shape their own job searching to a large degree.

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