



Being unemployed in the boundaryless career era: Does psychological mobility pay off?



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ABSTRACT

In the notions of the boundaryless and self-directed careers, being able to adjust swiftly to different work and career circumstances is deemed to be an imperative component of career success. Also for unemployed individuals psychological mobility, i.e. the extent to which people can envision a variety of career options as viable opportunities for them, is assumed to be a key attitude. In this study, we examine whether psychological mobility stimulates or constrains unemployed jobseekers' search success. Hereto, we draw on data of 1840 Belgian unemployed individuals. As hypothesized, we find that psychologically mobile individuals spend more time searching for a job and are invited more often to a selection interview. However, on average they receive less job offers, since they also experience more constraints in their job search process. Overall, our study demonstrates that psychological mobility cannot straightforwardly be associated with positive career outcomes in every context or subpopulation and points to the necessity of taking structure and not only agency factors into account to fully grasp the outcomes of the boundaryless career.

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1. Introduction

Due to the changed and more volatile nature of careers, people are more often confronted with (periods of) unemployment (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Rousseau, 1997). Psychological mobility, i.e. the extent to which people can envision a variety of career options as viable opportunities for them (Forret, Sullivan, & Mainiero, 2010), is assumed to be a key attitude for handling these periods (Forret et al., 2010; Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & De Witte, 2010). Since psychologically mobile individuals see – and are thus likely to explore – more career options (Zikic & Klehe, 2006; Zikic & Saks, 2009), they are expected to be more fruitful in their job search.

Psychological mobility among the unemployed workforce is also associated with labor market benefits (Venn, 2012). In particular, stimulating unemployed jobseekers to be psychologically mobile is seen as a way to address the increased mismatch between labor demand and supply (Herremans, Braes, Sels, & Vanderbiesen, 2011). In recent years, countries across the world are confronted with both a rising number of job openings and a rising, or at least stable, unemployment rate (Barlevy, 2011; Herremans et al., 2011; Kosfeld, Dreger, & Eckey, 2008), a situation resulting from a mismatch between, on the one hand, the characteristics and requirements of the available jobs and, on the other hand, jobseekers' preferences and skills (Kosfeld et al., 2008). Stimulating unemployed individuals to broaden their job search and take into account job opportunities that deviate from their initial preferences would increase the labor supply for a given labor demand and is therefore expected to improve the matching process.

Despite the importance attached to psychological mobility by both career scholars and policymakers, the recruitment literature suggests that psychological mobility may not necessarily enhance a jobseeker's search success. Since organizations generally look for applicants who fit well with the organization and the vacant job (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Kulik, Roberson, & Perry, 2007), psychologically mobile individuals may experience more difficulties in convincing employers of

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their match with the job. Indeed, a high openness to different career options may signal that the unemployed individual has no clear career focus, has little ambition and/or is little motivated for the specific job he or she is applying for, which could reduce the job seeker's persuasiveness and in that way his or her job search success.

To the best of our knowledge, no empirical study has examined the impact of psychological mobility during unemployment to date (Forret et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). With this study, we aim to address this gap. In particular, this study examines if psychological mobility during unemployment stimulates or rather constrains job search success. We test our hypotheses using a sample of 1840 Belgian unemployed. We define psychological mobility during unemployment as the unemployed individual's openness towards jobs that differ from his or her previous job (i.e. the job before becoming unemployed). This definition is in line with prevailing interpretations of psychological mobility among unemployed jobseekers given by policymakers (e.g. Venn, 2012) and scholars (e.g. Van den Broeck et al., 2010). This study provides insight into the question whether psychological mobility or people's willingness to cross boundaries – which is believed to be an important aspect of the boundaryless career (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) – can straightforwardly be associated with positive career outcomes. In that way, we do not only respond to calls to explore the impact of psychological mobility (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Verbruggen, 2012), but we also examine potential downsides of new careers (e.g. Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006; King, 2004).

2. Psychological mobility

Psychological mobility concerns the subjective side of job mobility (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Verbruggen, 2012). The construct has been introduced by Sullivan and Arthur (2006) as a counterweight to the dominantly objective way of interpreting Arthur and Rousseau's (1996) construct of the "boundaryless career". Indeed, most research on the boundaryless career has focused on careers that cross physical boundaries (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), whereas the original conceptualization of Arthur and Rousseau was more general, encompassing both physical and psychological boundary crossing. By introducing the construct of psychological mobility, Sullivan and Arthur (2006) aimed to stimulate more research on the understudied subjective side of the boundaryless career.

Psychological mobility refers to people's attitudes towards crossing career boundaries (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009). It has been defined as people's perceived capacity to envision a variety of career options (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Tams & Arthur, 2010). Just as there are different types of physical mobility depending on the type of boundary that is crossed, there are variations of psychological mobility depending on the kind of transition(s) the attitude relates to (Forret et al., 2010; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009). People may, for instance, feel differently about making promotion than they do about changing organizations or trying to escape unemployment. In addition, just as there are different physical aspects to the 'act of boundary crossing', there are different kinds of attitudes people can have towards transitions (Verbruggen, 2012). Psychological mobility has for instance been viewed as the perceived capacity to move (e.g. Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), as the receptivity or willingness to move (e.g. Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2003) and as the way people interpret a specific career move (e.g. Forret et al., 2010).

The limited research on psychological mobility to date (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) has mainly examined the impact of a boundaryless mindset, a specific type of psychological mobility that refers to people's preference toward crossing organizational and departmental boundaries (Briscoe et al., 2006), with a sample of employed adults. For employed adults, psychological mobility was found to relate positively to job search behavior (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012), salary and promotions (Verbruggen, 2012) and negatively to organizational commitment (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009). Findings on its relationship with job and career satisfaction have been mixed so far (Enache, Sallan, Simo, & Fernandez, 2011; Verbruggen, 2012).

For unemployed individuals, psychological mobility can be defined as a jobseeker's openness towards different career options, including jobs that deviate from the previous job(s) and/or jobs that are not in line with one's educational background (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). This type of psychological mobility thus concerns the unemployed jobseeker's receptivity to cross different career boundaries. This attitude is generally expected to enhance a jobseeker's search outcomes (Forret et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010), like the number of job interviews or job offers a person receives (Koen et al., 2010; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). However, the few studies that examined psychological mobility with unemployed individuals focused on its antecedents (e.g. Forret et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010); hence, its actual value for the job search process remains to be investigated (Forret et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). This study addresses this gap.

3. Psychological mobility and job search success

As shown in Fig. 1, we expect psychological mobility to have both a positive and a negative impact on a jobseeker's search success, in particular on the number of job offers received. First, we expect a positive impact on job search success through job search behavior. A long history of theory and research has shown that attitudes are reliable predictors of behaviors (e.g. Azjen, 1985; Bagozzi, 1992), also in the domain of job search (e.g. Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). The most widely studied job search behavior is without doubt job search intensity (Kanfer et al., 2001). Job search intensity refers to the frequency with which jobseekers, during a set period of time, engage in several job search activities, like visiting job websites, discussing job leads with friends and sending out résumés to prospective employers (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2005). Research has found job search intensity to be affected by several attitudes, including work commitment, job search self-efficacy and attitudes towards unemployment (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999; Zikic & Saks, 2009). In this study, we expect job search intensity to be positively affected by psychological mobility. Since psychologically mobile individuals are open towards many different career options, they are likely to both spend more time exploring these options and to use more diverse search channels – two aspects

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