

WHAT MATTERS WHEN: A MULTI-STAGE EXAMINATION OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO JOB SEARCH EFFORT

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INTRODUCTION

Progress in understanding how individuals search for jobs has been advancing (e.g., Creed, King, Hood, & McKenzie, 2009; Kanfer, Wanberg, Kantrowitz, 2001; van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009; Wanberg, Glomb, Song & Sorenson, 2005; Wanberg, Zhu, & van Hooft, 2010) and continues to be critical given a confluence of stakeholders with an interest in knowing what influences job seeker effort and success. Job search has been characterized as a motivational self-regulatory process (see Kanfer et al., 2001, for a complete review). According to Kanfer et al., job search is “a purposive, volitional pattern of action that begins with the identification and commitment to pursuing an employment goal” (2001: 838). Although more attention has recently been paid to self-regulation of effort in longitudinal job search contexts, progress is still needed in simultaneously accounting for the multitude of factors that might differentially affect job seeker effort at various job search stages. In this paper we expand the self-regulatory approach to job search by developing a multi-stage theoretical perspective on cyclical job search effort. This perspective integrates job search research streams to include individual differences (e.g., Kanfer et al., 2001), social networks (e.g., Kilduff, 1990), and dynamic self-regulation across an extended job search cycle (e.g., Wanberg et al., 2010). Throughout this paper we refer to the *job search goal life span* as representing the job search cycle where job seekers establish goals to attain employment, and often have either formal or informal life spans in which to accomplish these goals.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Proximal and Distal Outcomes of Job Search Effort

In keeping with a dynamic self-regulatory view of job search, our focus centers on the antecedents and outcomes of job search effort. Job search effort has been deemed a key measure of job seeker motivational force to move successfully through the job search process and eventually secure employment (Kanfer et al. 2001). We therefore first seek to establish consistency with prior research by demonstrating that effort is critically important to a successful

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job search experience. Specifically, we argue that an aggregate level of effort across a job search goal life span is likely to be associated with important proximal (number of interviews) and distal (securing employment) job search outcomes (e.g., Cote et al., 2006). Furthermore, we propose an indirect effects model (e.g., Mathieu & Taylor, 2006) by which effort will relate to attaining employment indirectly via first attaining a critical mass of interviews. Stated formally:

Hypothesis 1: Job search effort will be positively related to the number of interviews attained over the job search goal life span.

Hypothesis 2: Number of interviews attained during the job search goal life span will be positively related to attaining employment by the end of that goal life span.

Hypothesis 3: Job search effort is positively related to attaining employment by the end of the job search goal life span via number of interviews attained during that goal life span.

Antecedents of Job Search Effort

We now turn to theorizing about the antecedents of job search effort as well as when in an extended job search cycle (i.e., job search goal life span) these antecedents will be most predictive of effort. Self-regulation is defined as the “self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals” (Zimmerman, 2000: 14). Understanding such processes helps us understand how individuals, once they have set a goal, will either stay on course or diverge from that goal through varying their actions and behaviors based on feedback or newly discovered information about their own progress or the progress of others in their social environment (Carver & Scheier, 2000; Higgins, 1998).

Given the dynamic nature of job search, we expect that the means by which individuals self-regulate toward goal achievement (i.e., attaining employment) will vary across stages of the goal life span. Studies have compared the relative effects of proximal versus distal goals on performance (e.g., Donovan & Williams, 2003) but we believe there is more complexity to the role of time in self-regulation. A goal’s life span refers to the span of time from when a goal is first assigned or adopted through the point in time at which the goal must be achieved. To separate the issue of time remaining to achieve a goal from the initial length of a goal’s life span, we define *goal proximity and distality* in terms of a goal’s distance in time or its location in time within its life span (Halvari, 1991). That is, a proximal goal is one that is near the end of its life span (e.g., the fifth month of a six-month cycle) while a more distal goal has a longer amount of time remaining (e.g., the first month of a six-month cycle).

Specifically, we argue that two opposing forces culminate to suggest likely antecedents of, and reasons for fluctuations in, job search effort at various stages of the job search goal life span: availability of information and opportunity for adjustment. Specific to our context, *availability of information* refers to the degree of accessibility and usability of information regarding an individual’s job search progress, or information about the job searches of others in one’s social milieu. Information availability might include information quantity or quality, such that information may be available, but may not be of very high quality at earlier stages of a goal life span. *Opportunity for adjustment* refers to how distal or proximal a goal is at various stages of job search, and thus the degree to which adjustments can be made to self-regulatory strategies or breadth of information sources that are drawn upon to achieve a goal such as finding employment. Because of differences in information availability and opportunities for adjustment as a job search goal such as finding employment becomes more proximal, we argue that different

antecedents of job search effort will exert varying effects across the goal life span.

Job search effort inertia. Classic theories of behavioral consistency (Funder & Colvin, 1991; Wernimont & Campbell, 1968) suggest that prior, or baseline effort levels are likely to affect future effort levels. That is, an individual's effort level at stage t is likely to be influenced by the effort level at stage $t-1$, and job seekers are likely to use their prior effort as a baseline from which to either increase or decrease effort in the next stage. Consistent with prior research (Wanberg et al., 2010) and our model, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4: Prior job search effort will be positively related to next-stage job search effort across all stages of job search.

Individual differences. Research has shown that individuals vary in their predisposition to exert effort toward their job search, regardless of other socio-contextual or situational factors. Consistent with Wanberg et al. (2005), we examine how individual differences in core self evaluations (CSE; Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998) might affect job search effort. CSE, which has also been labeled "positive self-concept," is based upon fundamental, global assessments that individuals hold about themselves (Judge et al, 1998; Judge, Locke, Durham, 1997). Individuals with higher CSE are less likely to be constrained or hesitant to exert effort toward their job searches, nor should they be hesitant to take the necessary steps to move from the preparatory to the active stage of job search. However, whereas CSE should relate to job search effort, we believe that this effect will be limited to early-stage job search effort levels. Fundamental to the individual differences perspective as it relates to behavior is that individual differences tend to exert effects only in weaker rather than stronger situations (Barrick & Mount, 1993; Mischel, 1977). It is at the earliest stage of job search where situation strength is lowest, and thus the effects of CSE are likely strongest.

Hypothesis 5: Core self evaluations will be (a) positively related to job search effort in the early stage of job search, and (b) unrelated to job search effort in the intermediate and late stages of job search.

Job search success feedback. We turn next to proposing effects of feedback that job seekers receive about their progress toward securing employment. A proximal indicator of this progress or level of success is one's efficiency in generating job interviews, operationalized in our context as a ratio of interviews to job applications (i.e., the number of interviews one generates out of all the jobs applied for). In keeping with a self-regulatory perspective, adjustments to job search effort from one time period to the next are thought to depend in part on prior feedback (Bandura, 1986). According to prior literature (Wanberg et al., 2010) and based on control theory, we believe that job seekers will vary their effort levels counter to perceived progress (e.g., increase effort when perceived progress is low). We further believe that this effect will only be evident at later stages of job search. At the early stage of job search, there is likely to be little if any feedback with which to evaluate one's effort to date (low information). That is, information about one's progress is likely to be scant and, if available, lower in quality.

Hypothesis 6: Job search success feedback will be (a) unrelated to subsequent job search effort in the early stage of job search, and (b) negatively related to subsequent job search effort in the intermediate and late stages of job search.

Socio-contextual job search information. Early work examining the impact of socio-contextual factors on job search outcomes found that the individuals to whom one is weakly connected provided the most useful job search information (Granovetter, 1973). Otherwise, the job search literature has been largely devoid of a socio-contextual perspective, with a few exceptions (e.g., Wanberg et al., 2005, Kilduff 1990). A self-regulatory approach as well as more fundamental social comparison and contagion processes (Festinger, 1954; Galaskiewicz, 1985) suggests that one's effort might depend on effort levels of those to whom one is tied in one's focal environment. We investigate the role of social influence, via job seekers' networks, of those with whom they share job search related information. We specifically examine their motivation to exert effort as a function of effort levels of those to whom they are tied during various stages of job search. That is, we examine the average level of job search effort exhibited by a job seeker's peers as a predictor of focal job seeker effort.

We expect that when job seekers are surrounded by peers in their job talk exchange network who display higher or lower average levels of job search effort, this will influence those job seekers to exhibit commensurate levels of effort. Consistent with our theoretical perspective, we argue this effect will only materialize during the early and intermediate job search stages. In the early stage there is insufficient job search information available, creating a high level of uncertainty regarding the job search process (e.g., when to start, how hard it will be to secure employment or generate interviews, which companies are hiring or are a good fit etc.). Thus, at this stage, peers (referent others) serve as a way to reduce uncertainty by mimicking those peers' job search effort levels. In addition, at this early stage there is plentiful time remaining in the goal life span to adjust effort levels to ensure personal job search success relative to peers. Thus, early in the goal life span, job seekers are not likely as concerned with enjoying job search success that is superior to their peers, but rather concern themselves with putting forth sufficient effort to ensure they do not fall behind peers in their job search process.

At the intermediate job search stage, where according to Rees's (1966) and Blau's (1993) combined perspectives job search is most active, job seekers likely sense that there is not only still sufficient opportunity to exchange valuable information among peers, but also sufficient opportunity to act on that information in regulating their own effort levels. According to Barber et al. (1994), informal sources such as relatives or friends are an important source of information during the active job search phase. Moreover, enough time has passed in the job search cycle such that information from the social environment is not only sufficient but also relevant and useful. However during the late stage of job search as the employment goal becomes more proximal, we do not expect peer effort levels to influence job seeker effort levels. Although information from those networks is likely to be plentiful if accessed during the later stage, time to access extensive information from one's networks or to make adjustments to one's effort level is ever-decreasing. Taken together, the preceding suggests:

Hypothesis 7: Peer job search effort will be (a) positively related to job search effort in the early and intermediate stages of job search and (b) unrelated to job search effort in the late stage of job search.

METHODS

Participants, Design, and Procedure

Participants in this study were full-time students involved in an intensive one-year Master's of Business Administration (MBA) program at a large public university in the United States. In total, 61 students (out of 78) participated in every wave of the data collection for a response rate of 78%. Of the 61 participants, 12 were not included in our analyses because they were not actively seeking a job for after graduation.

Students attended school during the 2008-2009 academic year. Based on a series of structured focus group interviews with MBA students in the 2007-2008 class, we designed our primary study such that we would gather data at four time points throughout the school year: two months after program entrance (Baseline); November of 2008 (Time 1, or preparatory stage); February of 2009 (Time 2, or active-extensive stage); and May of 2009 (Time 3, or active-intensive stage).

Independent Variables

Job search effort (T₁). The effort that each participant expended in the job search process in the prior stage was included as a lagged independent variable at each of the three subsequent job search stages. Participants were asked at each time point to rate their job search effort level since the previous survey was administered. At the Baseline time point, participants were asked to rate their effort level since the beginning of the MBA program. Job search effort was evaluated with an adapted version of a four-item measure of general job search effort (Blau, 1993). Coefficient alphas ranged from .93-.96.

Core self-evaluation (CSE). CSE was measured during a preliminary data collection in July 2008. CSE was measured with the 12-item Core Self-Evaluations Scale (CSES; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). Coefficient alpha was .71.

Job search success feedback. The questions asked at each time point were: "how many jobs would you say you applied to since the beginning of the MBA program?" and "how many interviews have you been on since you started the MBA program?" We then calculated job search success feedback as the ratio of the number of interviews obtained to the number of applications submitted.

Peer job search effort. Social network data were gathered from each participant at time points 1-3. Participants were provided with a roster of every other student in the MBA program and asked to "please put a check mark next to people with whom you have talked about post-graduation jobs (e.g., career or job search activities or issues) since [date of previous survey]." Peer job search effort for each respondent was calculated with UCINET 6 social network software (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) by taking an average of the sum of job search effort scores for each respondent's indicated discussion partners at each of the three time points.

Dependent Variable-Job Search Effort

Job search effort at each stage of the job search process was our primary dependent variable. This measure has already been discussed in the section above, as job search effort at T₁ was an independent variable in our analyses.

RESULTS

Hypotheses 1-3

We controlled in all analyses for each participant's GMAT score, major, and the overall size of each individual's network of peers with whom they discussed job search matters. Hypotheses 1-3 were supported using a structural equation modeling approach utilizing Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis with Smart-PLS 2.0 (Ringle, Wende, & Will 2005). Specifically, effort was related to number of interviews attained ($\beta = .41$, $t = 4.38$, $p < .01$) and number of interviews attained related to employment status at the end of the job search goal life span ($\beta = .26$, $t = 2.48$, $p < .05$). Results of a Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) were significant (Sobel = 2.16, $p < .05$). In combination with a non-significant direct effect and in accordance with Mathieu and Taylor's (2006) procedures, this provides support for Hypothesis 3.

Hypotheses 4-7

We ran separate hierarchical regression models for each of our three time points, entering control variables in the first step and the four focal independent variables (prior effort, CSE, progress feedback, peer effort) in the second step.

Hypothesis 4 is partially supported. The relationship between prior effort and next-stage effort at Time 1 is positive and significant ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$); this relationship at Time 2 is positive and marginally significant ($\beta = .30$, $p = .055$); this relationship at Time 3 is positive and significant ($\beta = .54$, $p < .01$).

Hypothesis 5 is partially supported. The relationship between core self-evaluation and job search effort was not significant at any of the three time points (Time 1: $\beta = -.08$, $p > .10$; Time 2: $\beta = -.20$, $p > .10$; Time 3: $\beta = .01$, $p > .10$).

Hypothesis 6 is fully supported. At Time 1 we find no significant relationship between job search success feedback and effort ($\beta = .07$, $p > .10$). We find this relationship to be negative and significant at both Time 2 and Time 3 (Time 2: $\beta = -.44$, $p < .01$; Time 3: $\beta = -.33$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 7 is fully supported. Results show that there is a significant positive relationship between peer job search effort and individual job search effort at Time 1 ($\beta = .32$, $p < .05$) and Time 2 ($\beta = .32$, $p < .05$), but not at Time 3 ($\beta = -.02$, $p > .10$).

DISCUSSION

The results provide considerable support for a self-regulatory perspective on job search behavior. Our theoretical development suggests that trade-offs between information sufficiency and time remaining for goal attainment translate into more or less job seeker emphasis on individual or external factors in determining ongoing levels of job search effort. We also find considerable support for our hypotheses regarding stages in a job search goal life span at which various independent variables will relate to effort levels. Taken together, the above pattern of findings lends considerable credence to the need to study job search phenomena longitudinally, and to continue to investigate multiple antecedents of job search behaviors simultaneously.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

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