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RESEARCH BRIEFS

GETTING BACK INTO WORK: WHAT HELPS AND WHAT HINDERS?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Losing a job is a traumatic and stressful event, with negative consequences for both emotional and physical health. Unemployment also puts pressure on the economy and society. Consequently, getting back to work is a major imperative for unemployed individuals as well as the communities in which they live. Yet getting back into work is a painful, complicated, uncertain, and lengthy process.

We know quite a bit about the reemployment process. For instance, motivation matters. Someone with dire financial need or who faces pressure from important people (e.g., family members, friends) is likely to try harder to get back into employment. However, gaps in our knowledge remain. Research has focused on factors that promote reemployment, but to date has paid little attention to what may hinder job-seeking behaviors and their outcomes. For example, people who do not consider themselves healthy enough for work, regardless of their actual health or whether they think work is important, may put less energy into their job search. In the same vein, procrastination may also be a hindrance. Procrastination is particularly likely with tasks that are critical for achieving a valued outcome but are nonetheless bothersome (e.g., because they are difficult, uninteresting, repetitive, evaluative, or come with the risk of rejection). The process of job seeking contains many such elements. Unfortunately, factors that may hinder the process of reemployment have not been thoroughly studied.

In addition, the role of employment counseling—a service provided by many governments to its unemployed citizens—has not been fully explored.

Thus, despite the importance of getting people back to work, we do not yet know as much as we should about factors that hinder unemployed people's efforts. Moreover, we have not yet exhausted all benefits that employment counselors may be able to bring to the table. These were the issues that Edwin van Hoofft (University of Amsterdam) examined in his research.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

van Hoofft studied 236 job seekers (balanced numbers of men and women) from all parts of The Netherlands. The country places great importance on getting people back to work and emphasizes the involvement of reemployment agencies. A methodological advantage of van Hoofft's study was that he collected data at three different points in time. He examined whether unemployed people's attitudes towards job search, their motivations (e.g., perceived financial need), and hindrance factors (e.g., perceived health problems) predicted how strongly they would be looking for work four months later, and whether they managed to re-enter employment two months after that.

van Hoofft also collected data from job seekers' employment counselors. This allowed him to evaluate: (1) whether counselors' assessments of job seekers' attitudes, motivation, and efforts could provide accurate predictions of reemployment outcomes, (2) the degree to which counselors' assessments concurred with employment seekers' own assessments, and (3) whether counselors' assessments were better, worse, or of no added value to job seekers' own-self assessments. To increase the richness and the reliability of his findings, van Hoofft measured strength of job search behavior in two ways: job search intensity (time and effort put into the search) and job search procrastination. Job search intensity represents a positive type of behavior and a common way to measure job search that most researchers have been using so far. On the other hand, procrastination is a negative form of behavior that represents a hindrance factor that has never been investigated.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the findings confirmed that certain factors do hinder the process of searching for work. In addition, the findings suggested that reemployment agencies and counselors can add value. Specifically, van Hoofft found that counselors' assessments of job seekers' job search intensity and procrastination were able

to predict reasonably well whether these job seekers would find work two months later. On the other hand, job seekers' own evaluations of their job search intensity and procrastination behavior could not reliably forecast whether they would manage to find employment. In addition, counselors were able to predict fairly well from the outset which job seekers would find work six months later. These results were very much supportive of the capacity of counselors to add substantial value in the reemployment process.

The findings also showed that job seekers' attitudes (what they believed about the search itself, the pressure they felt from significant others to find work, and their confidence in their ability to effectively find a job) could predict the intensity of their involvement in job search four months later. Of these attitudes, felt pressure and confidence also predicted whether job seekers would engage in procrastination behavior four months later (lower felt pressure and lower confidence led to greater procrastination). On the other hand, whether they believed in the usefulness of the job search process could not reliably predict job seekers' procrastination behavior.

van Hooft also looked at whether motivators and hindrance factors added any value in our understanding of job search behavior. Motivators included employment commitment (the value job seekers placed on being employed) and perceived financial need, while the hindrance factor was perceived health problems (independent of job seekers' objective health). Employment commitment and perceptions of poor health, but not of financial need, predicted whether job seekers would engage in intensive job search and whether they would display significant procrastination behaviors four months later. Perhaps the most important part of this result was the finding that counselors' assessments of job seekers' attitudes, motivators, hindrances, and job search behaviors generally were more reliable predictors than job seekers' own self-assessments.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In today's highly volatile economic environment the reemployment process is critical. van Hooft's approach was comprehensive, collecting data at different points in time about a variety of factors that influence the job search process from both job seekers and their employment counselors.

The major finding was that employment counselors' evaluations were more potent predictors of outcomes than job seekers' own evaluations. For example, counselors' assessments of the effort job seekers were investing in their job search were much better at predicting whether they would eventually find a job. According to van Hooft, counselors develop a much more accurate impression of job seekers'

behavior than do job seekers themselves. This may be due to counselors' lack of personal bias, but also because they have the opportunity to observe so many job seekers—developing more valid comparison standards in the process.

Indeed, other researchers have noted that job seekers may be unable to accurately evaluate their situation and the job search process (Blau, Petrucci, & McClendon, 2013). van Hooft concludes that we should rely less on job seekers' own assessments in figuring out who will eventually be reemployed and instead focus more on the views of third-party specialists like employment counselors. This should improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the reemployment process, with financial and societal benefits.

van Hooft's research also reveals the importance of taking into account factors that deter the reemployment process. Both hindrance factors in this study were proved of value. In fact, job seekers' views of their own health was the best predictor of the quality of their job search behavior. Furthermore, job seekers' views of their health could tell us who would eventually find a job, something that no motivation or attitudinal factor was able to do. According to van Hooft this further underscores the importance of involving experts, such as counselors, in the design of reemployment interventions. Indeed, van Hooft's decision to include perceptions of health problems in his study was made after discussions with employment counselors, who, based on their experiences, suggested it as a key hindrance element.

Finally, we must keep in mind that perceptions of health, rather than actual health, are something that we need to look at. Indeed, it appears that it is subjective health that is most important when employment is at stake (Cheng, Huang, Lee, & Ren, 2012). If we can improve how unemployed people view their own health, then the chances of going back to work should also improve, independent of other interventions.

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