

Being flexible as unemployed: a blessing or a curse?

In the vivid discussion regarding bottleneck occupations, it is often assumed that part of the solution lies in more flexibility in the search behavior of the unemployed. But is a search flexible attitude by the unemployed rewarded in the job search process? In this article, we try to answer this question by investigating the impact of search flexibility on the numbers of job offers received. Hereto, we draw on data of 1840 Belgian unemployed individuals, collected in the spring of 2010.

unfilled jobs and unemployment. Since flexible individuals have a higher willingness to alter their behavior and explore career options that deviate from their previous employment experience and/or education (Zikic & Klehe, 2006), they are believed to handle periods of unemployment better and hence to be more fruitful in their job search.

Introduction

In recent years, the Belgian labor market is confronted with a deteriorated match between its demand and supply of labor (Herremans et al., 2011). In 2008, the vacancy rate (i.e. the number of unfilled jobs expressed as a proportion of the labor force) was 36% higher than in 2001, while the unemployment rate was fairly similar. This implies that the matching process has become less efficient, which is expressed by a shift upwards of what economists call the Beveridge curve.¹ In 2010, the matching process became even more inefficient, due to a rather remarkable increase in the vacancy rate together with a rise in unemployment rate. This observed mismatch may – among other things – be caused by ineffective search behavior of unemployed individuals. One of the proposed solutions therefore, is to faster reorient unemployed whose work experience or educational background offers no or little labor market prospects (Leroy, 2011). Hence, ‘flexibility’ – i.e. the extent to which people can envision a variety of career options as viable opportunities for them (Forret et al., 2010) – is assumed to be a key attitude to resolve the mismatch between

Accordingly, in recent years, more and more policymakers expect unemployed individuals to display flexibility in their search behavior in order to regain employment. In Germany, for instance, beneficiaries of the unemployment benefit system are required to accept a job offer even if it does not comply with their previous studies or with their aspirations, if the wage level is substantially below that earned in the previous job or if the commuting time is extensive. In Belgium, this type of flexibility on behalf of the unemployed was – until recently – only required after an unemployment period of six months; however, since a recent enactment, the Flemish public employment service – Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling (VDAB) – is allowed to curtail this period of six months for specific unemployed if this seems appropriate (see also Leroy, 2011).

Despite the importance attached to flexibility by both career scholars and policy makers, the HR-oriented recruitment research suggests that a flexible attitude does not necessarily enhance an unemployed’s search success. As organizations base their hiring decisions on the perceived match between

the job requirements and applicant's characteristics like education and aspirations (Kulik et al., 2007), a broad job search – thus a high level of flexibility on the part of the individual – may reduce the perceived match as judged by the organization, in that way reducing the likelihood of a job offer. In addition, a broad job search may signal that the unemployed has no clear focus in his career, has little ambition and/or is little motivated for the job. This could further reduce the job search success of people envisioning a broad variety of job opportunities in their search behavior.

In this study, we therefore examine whether the adoption of a flexible attitude during unemployment stimulates or rather constraints the unemployed's job search success. In particular, we investigate the impact of search flexibility on the number of job offers received, using a sample of 1 840 Belgian unemployed. In line with prevailing interpretations given by policymakers (see higher) and scholars (e.g. Van den Broeck et al., 2010), we define search flexibility as the willingness to accept a job that differs from the previous job (i.e. before becoming unemployed). More specifically, our respondents had to indicate to which extent they were prepared to accept a job that demanded a significant amount of retraining; offered a lower wage; required more commuting time and was not in line with ones interests, among other things.

With our research, we provide insight into the question whether flexibility or people's willingness to cross boundaries can straightforwardly be associated with positive career outcomes. Hence, we explore the 'boundaries of flexibility', in that way responding to the calls made in the career literature to examine the 'dark side' of new careers (e.g. Briscoe et al., 2006; King, 2004) and to further explore the impact of flexibility (Forret et al., 2010; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Research model

As explained above, an unemployed individual's search flexibility may have both a positive and a negative impact on the number of job offers received. In this paper, we examine a model that tests both paths simultaneously (see figure 1).

A positive path

First of all, flexibility may have a positive impact on the number of job offers an unemployed receives. Since highly flexible unemployed individuals are able to envision a broad spectrum of career options (Forret et al., 2010), they are likely to use a broader search scope. We therefore expect them to demonstrate more job search intensity than less flexible individuals, i.e. to engage more frequently in a broader scope of job search activities (Blau, 1994). Moreover, jobseekers who tap a broad array of search sources are believed to have a relatively high awareness of possible job openings and to put in many applications. This is likely to increase their chances of being invited to the recruitment process, which may in turn positively affect the number of job offers received. Indeed, several studies have established a positive relationship between search intensity and the number of job interviews, as well as between the number of job interviews and the number of job offers (e.g. Coté et al., 2006; Saks, 2006). Accordingly, we put forward the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Search flexibility relates positively to search intensity.

Hypothesis 2. Search intensity relates positively to the number of job interviews.

Hypothesis 3. The number of job interviews relates positively to the number of job offers.

A negative path

Next to this positive path, we believe that there can be a negative effect of search flexibility on the number of job offers. Unemployed, highly flexible in their job search, may have less clarity about their career direction and therefore use a scattergun approach in addressing potential employers. Previous research has demonstrated that unemployed jobseekers who have a *clear* view of how their career should unfold, find a job faster (e.g. Coté et al., 2006). Individuals who carefully ponder over their decision, also have less regret and are more satisfied with their decision (Aldag & Power, 1986; Timmermans & Vlek, 1994). Employers may therefore be reluctant in hiring employees who are flexible,

believing that they have a higher likelihood of leaving the organization on their own initiative. Employers also look for employees who fit well with the organization and job (Bretz et al., 1993; Judge & Ferris, 1992), whereas flexible workers may be considered as an inferior match to the organization since they have to make more sacrifices than their less flexible opponents. Moreover, a less flexible jobseeker could be better in tuning his job application to the specific needs of the employer and hence may be more convincing (Koen et al., 2010; McArdle et al., 2007). As a result, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Search flexibility relates directly and negatively to the number of job offers.

Method

Procedure and participants

We collected data with Belgian unemployed individuals in the spring of 2010 through a large online survey (the *Vacature Salarisenquête*). Participants were voluntarily recruited by two widespread weekly job magazines, one published in Dutch and targeting the Flemish population (*Vacature*), the other primarily serving French-speaking Belgians (*Références*).

We restricted the target group to respondents who had been unemployed for at most three years and who had been employed before. A longer time frame would make it too difficult for the respondents to accurately compare their search criteria with the characteristics of their previous job.

The total sample contains 1 840 respondents. The average age was 40.18 (sd 10.77); 52% of the respondents were female and 27% were French-speaking.

Respondents had on average been unemployed for 10.41 months (sd 15.32).

Measures

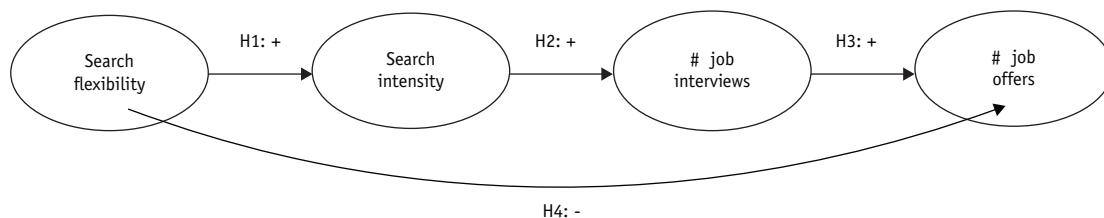
Search flexibility was measured with a 9-item scale. The scale is based on previous research regarding the willingness to accept a job (Sverko et al., 2008). Respondents indicated the extent to which they were prepared to accept a job that, among others, demanded a significant amount of retraining; offered a lower wage; required more commuting time and was not in line with their interests. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale, with anchors, 1 = not at all prepared, to 5 = totally prepared. The alpha-coefficient was 0.71 ($M = 2.81$, $sd = 0.63$).

Search intensity was assessed by a 9-item scale based on Blau (1994). Participants pointed out how frequently they had used a variety of search sources or executed certain search behaviors during the last three months (from 1 = never [0 times] to 5 = very often [at least 10 times]). Sample items included 'Reading job advertisements in the paper', 'Visiting job websites', 'Contacting employment agencies', 'Discussing job leads with friends or relatives'. Similar scales were successfully used in previous research (Coté et al., 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000; Van Hooft et al., 2004; amongst others). The reliability of this scale was $= 0.81$ ($M = 3.33$, $sd = 0.79$).

We measured two indicators of success, namely the number of job interviews and the number of job offers received in the last three months. Both measures have been extensively used in previous research as indicators of job search success (e.g. Koen et al. 2010; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). For respondents who were unemployed less than three months, we adapted the measure in

Figure 1.

Hypothesized model between search flexibility and search success



proportion to their unemployment duration. Dropping this population group from the analyses did not impair our results, so we decided to continue with the complete dataset and to use the adapted measurements.

Gender, age, education, unemployment duration, previous employment position, tenure at last job, job search commitment, job search constraints and family responsibilities were used as control variables, since they are regularly controlled for in job search research (e.g. Sverko et al., 2008; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Additionally, we took up the net wage in the previous job, work motivation and a dummy which distinguished French and Dutch-speaking respondents.

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations of the study variables. On average, an unemployed respondent got four invitations to the selection process and one job offer during the last three months. There was a positive correlation between search flexibility and search intensity ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between search intensity and both the number of job interviews ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$) and the number of job offers ($r = 0.06$, $p < 0.01$). While search flexibility and the number of invitations to the selection process were positively related ($r = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$), no significant relationship was found between search flexibility and the number of job offers.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses of this study, since it allows testing multiple relationships simultaneously. The goodness of fit indices suggest our hypothesized model attains a very satisfactory fit: $\chi^2[1] = .74$, $p = .39$; GFI = 1.00; AGFI = .99; CFI = 1.00; NFI = 1.00;

NNFI = 1.01; RMSEA = 0.00. Modification indices showed that adding additional paths to the model would not improve the fit.

Our findings, presented in figure 2, first of all provide support for the expected *indirect positive* relationship between search flexibility and the number of job offers. Specifically, search flexibility was found to positively affect search intensity ($\beta = 0.12$, $t = 5.20$); search intensity in turn was positively related to the number of job interviews ($\beta = 0.39$, $t = 16.47$) and the latter was positively related to the number of job offers ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 10.12$). Next to this positive path, the results also corroborate the proposed *direct negative* relationship between search flexibility and the number of job offers ($\beta = -0.05$, $t = -2.13$).

Which of the two effects should be regarded as decisive? The total effect of search flexibility on the number of job offers turns out to be negative (-0.10), indicating that the observed direct effect offsets or even counteracts the indirect effect.

Discussion

Our results indicate that an unemployed who is search-flexible receives on average less job offers than his less search-flexible opponent. Hence, search flexibility of the unemployed seems to be penalized rather than rewarded in the job search process. Probably, most employers' desire applicants who are focused – i.e. know what they want in their job and career – whereas unemployed who demonstrate search flexibility may appear to have lost this focus.

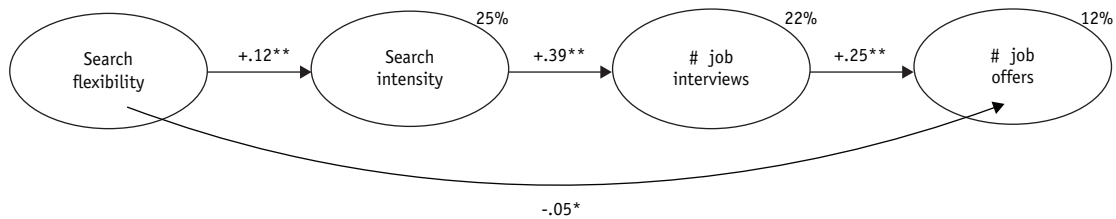
There are however a number of limitations in this study, which warrant caution in the interpretation of our findings. Firstly, due to the cross-sectional

Table 1.
Means, standard deviation, and correlations

Variable	Mean (sd)	1	2	3
1. number of interviews	3.87 (4.92)			
2. job offers	0.69 (1.43)	.26**		
3. search intensity	3.33 (0.79)	.32**	.06**	
4. search flexibility	2.74 (0.61)	.10**	-.02	.25**

Figure 2.

Standardized path coefficients of the relationship between search flexibility and search success.



nature of our data, we cannot make firm statements about the causality between our observed variables. Secondly, also due to the cross-sectional nature, we had to use the number of job offers received in the last three months as our dependent variable instead of, for instance, actual reemployment. The credibility of a respondent reporting a high number of job offers can be questioned, since it seems rather odd that none of these job offers were in fact accepted. Still, only 4.3% of the respondents mention having received more than three job offers and only 1.5% mention having received more than five. Moreover, it is not implausible that a respondent received multiple job offers in the last three months since he might still be considering the offers at the time of the questionnaire. Furthermore, this indicator of success has been used in previous peer-reviewed research (e.g. Brasher & Chen, 1999; Koen et al. 2010; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000) and has been shown to relate positively with actual reemployment (e.g. Saks & Ashfort, 2000).

With the above limitations in mind, the research presented here should be interpreted as tentative indications that flexibility may not be unilaterally positive. Do our preliminary results then counteract the demand of more flexibility on behalf of the unemployed (e.g. Leroy, 2011)? Not necessarily; they rather caution against its inconsiderate use. In particular, it seems important that the demand to broaden one's job search goes hand in hand with a guidance towards a clear career focus, i.e. towards a clear view on the direction the career should unfold. Because it is the unemployed himself who has to convince the employer to offer him a job, it is important that he or she is convinced of this new career direction and is able to communicate this conviction. A reorientation of unemployed individuals, for instance towards bottleneck occupations, may hence work *on the condition* that the

reoriented unemployed has clear career goals and has career decidedness. The importance of careful support through targeted training and guidance to new work should therefore not be overlooked in this process.

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1. The Beveridge curve graphically represents all the possible combinations between the vacancy rate and the unemployment rate which give rise to the same level of unemployment outflow (or matching). The unemployment rate is on the horizontal axis, whereas the vacancy rate is on the vertical axis. The further the Beveridge curve lies from the origin, the less efficient the matching process, since a given level of vacancies is associated with a higher unemployment rate.

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