

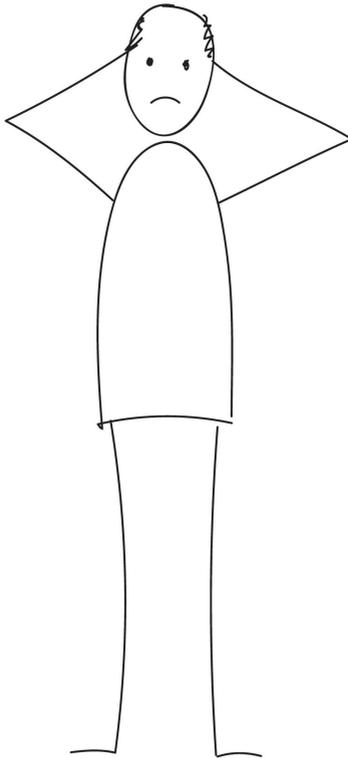


*Searching for a Job: Problem- and Emotion-Focused Coping*  
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# Summary



## SEARCHING FOR A JOB

In our increasingly flexible job market job search has become an inseparable part of people's working lives. An inability to secure a job may lead to (prolonged) unemployment which gets harder to recover from with time (Aaronson, Mazumder, & Schechter, 2010). Unemployment is associated with negative consequences for individuals, their families, and society as a whole (e.g., Korpi, 2001; McKee-Ryan & Maitoza, 2018; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Stenberg & Westerlund, 2008; Ström, 2003; Strully, 2009). It is therefore of paramount importance that job seekers find a suitable job timely. However, job search is a difficult process full of obstacles and insecurities. Spending time and effort on searching for a job increases chances of finding a job (Kanfer et al., 2001), but only modestly. In addition, the affective consequences of the negative experiences associated with job search can hinder the process of finding a job (Côté et al., 2006; Song et al., 2009; Turban et al., 2013; Van Hooft et al., 2004).

In this dissertation, I advance our understanding of the job search process. My first aim is to examine *how* job seekers can search for a job to increase the likelihood of (re)employment and to uncover which factors facilitate such way of searching. My second aim is to examine how job seekers respond to negative job search experiences and how they can cope with them adaptively. These aims are articulated in the following four research questions: (1) How can job seekers effectively search for a job; (2) Which factors facilitate such way of searching; (3) How can job seekers adaptively cope with the negative experiences they encounter during job search; (4) What job search events make job search so hard and how do job seekers respond to these events?

To answer these questions, I conducted multiple field studies among active job seekers. The results of these studies and their practical implications are summarized below.

## **Empirical Findings**

### **Systematic Job Search as Predictor of Job Search Success**

The first empirical chapter (Chapter 2) focuses on how job seekers can search effectively for a job and which factors facilitate such way of searching. In addition to the time job seekers spend in job search (i.e., job search intensity), extant theory suggests that other dimensions of job search behavior are important in predicting employment outcomes (Kanfer et al., 2001; Stumpf et al., 1983; Van Hooft et al., 2013). Building on this theorizing I identify systematic versus non-systematic job search as an important dimension of job search behavior that may predict the likelihood of finding a job. A highly systematic way of searching indicates an adaptable (i.e., adjusting one's behavior based on what has been learned) and persistent (i.e., using routines and persevering with setbacks) approach towards job seeking whereas low systematicity reflects a less adaptable and persistent approach, characterized by less deliberate thoughts on how to improve the job search. Based on recent models of job search and research (Liu, Wang, et al., 2014; Song et al., 2009; Wanberg et al., 2010) I proposed that job search clarity, financial need, employment commitment, and emotions would relate to systematic job search.

As theorized, the results of a five-wave correlational field study among highly educated new labor market entrants showed that job search systematicity was positively related to job search success when controlling for job search intensity. Job seekers who searched for a job in a more systematic way had a higher change of getting a job than job seekers who searched in a less systematic way. Following a learning based perspective on job search change (Barber et al., 1994), results showed that over time job seekers searched in an increasingly systematic way. Furthermore, this study showed that goal clarity, employment commitment, and activating affect were positively associated with job search systematicity, while financial need and deactivating emotions were not related to job search systematicity. These findings extend theory by broadening the

## SEARCHING FOR A JOB

conceptualization of job search and inform job seeking career starters and employment and career counselors about how to approach the job search process.

The knowledge of what search strategy increases the likelihood of finding a job may help job seekers shape their search behavior to become more effective. They will nonetheless still have to put time and effort in their job search, which most likely leads to encountering negative job search experiences. Next to learning how to be more effective, job seekers also need to deal with negative experiences during the job search process.

### **Self-Compassion as Emotion-Focused Coping**

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on examining how job seekers can cope adaptively with the negative experiences they encounter during job search. An adaptive emotion-focused coping strategy that has been shown helpful is self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). It entails viewing one's experiences: with self-kindness rather than self-judgment, as part of the larger human experience (i.e., common humanity) rather than as separating and isolating, and with mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them (Neff, 2003a). Previous research showed that individuals with self-compassion react more beneficially to unpleasant personal events like receiving unfavorable feedback than individuals with less self-compassion (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005). The two studies described in Chapter 3 show that trait self-compassion also benefits active job seekers. Results of the cross-sectional Study 3.1 indicated that trait self-compassion related positively to (de-)activating positive affect and negatively to (de-)activating negative affect. Furthermore, the negative relationship between difficulties during job search and different types of positive affect (i.e., deactivating and activating) was less negative for job seekers with more self-compassion. Thus self-compassioned job seekers felt more positive and less negative during job search and maintained positive regardless of experiencing job search difficulties while less self-

compassioned job seekers felt less positive as difficulties increased. The results of the five-wave correlational Study 3.2 were in line with the results of Study 3.1. They showed that self-compassioned job seekers reported less negative affect and more positive affect than less self-compassioned job seekers during job search episodes in which they perceived a lack of progress. Furthermore, self-compassion was found to function as an adaptive mindset that attenuated the positive relationship between perceived lack of job search progress and different types (i.e., activating and deactivating) of negative affect. Again, self-compassioned job seekers were more positive and less negative overall. Moreover, they felt less negative even when they perceived less or no search progress. The combined findings of studies 3.1 and 3.2 suggest that trait self-compassion can be beneficial for job seekers' well-being in difficult times during the job search process.

Chapter 4 follows up on the correlational studies in Chapter 3 as in the study described in this chapter I tested the causal effects of self-compassion on job seekers' affect during their job search. Rather than examining trait self-compassion like in Chapter 3, I now focused on state self-compassion, the self-compassioned cognitions that can be influenced (e.g., Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010; J. W. Zhang & Chen, 2016). I examined whether an online self-compassion intervention, composed of writing exercises that facilitated taking a self-compassioned perspective towards job search difficulties, made job seekers feel better in comparison to a control condition composed of writing exercises in which job seekers reflected freely on their difficulties. The results of this study showed that the writing exercise increased the state self-compassion of job seekers who performed the self-compassion exercise as compared to job seekers who performed the free exercise. State self-compassion in turn related to job seekers' affective responses to job search mediated through reduced self-criticism. So, increased self-compassion had a positive effect on job seekers' feelings by reducing their self-criticism. Specifically, job seekers'

## SEARCHING FOR A JOB

negative deactivating affect (e.g., sadness) was lower and their positive deactivating affect (e.g., calmness) was higher immediately after the self-compassion writing exercise than after the free writing exercise.

Differences between conditions were no longer apparent in a follow-up measurement one week after the exercise. All job seekers felt better: they reported more deactivating positive affect and less deactivating negative affect in the follow-up measurement in comparison to the baseline measure. Thus, job seekers in the self-compassion condition felt better sooner (i.e., immediately after the intervention), while job seekers in the control condition caught up feeling equally well one week later.

### **Negative Job Search Experiences and Their Consequences**

In Chapter 5, I examined in more depth what job search events make job search so hard, and how job seekers respond to these events. Based on 192 anecdotes about negative job search experiences I made an overview of the types of negative events that job seekers are confronted with during their job search and how they responded to these events affectively and behaviorally. Using qualitative analyses I arrived at a classification of negative job search events which aligns with the conceptualization of job search as a multiphase process. Most of the described negative job search events could be categorized into one of four job search phases: Forethought and exploration, preparatory job search behavior, active job search behavior, and selection result (i.e., rejections). There were three general themes that emerged across the job search stages: (1) job seekers' insecurity of finding a job (e.g., fueled by competition or dissatisfaction with one's resume), (2) a poor job search flow (e.g., dissatisfaction with progress, feeling stuck, procrastination), and (3) indifference of hiring organizations (e.g., ignoring requests for feedback, breaching agreements). Most of all emotions reported by job seekers were high in activation (47%; e.g., despaired, angry, frustrated, nervous, shame, self-blame, and hurt), followed by

emotions low in activation (40%; e.g., disappointed, sad, discouraged, and resigned). However, disappointment was the most frequently described (34% of all respondents) emotional response to negative job search events, followed by sadness (17%). To deal with the negative emotions, job seekers engaged in emotion regulation strategies (e.g., emotional suppression and cognitive reappraisal, social support and seeking distraction and taking time of job search). Overall job seekers tended to respond with constructive and polite behaviors rather than expressing their displeasure with the situation. Job seekers mentioned several times that negative job search events made them underperform, which is a negative experience in itself. Some job seekers aimed to improve their performance by asking for feedback and reflecting on improvements, others started ruminating on their flaws.

While job seekers responded with a mix of responses to particular negative job search events, there were trends visible in the pattern of responses. For example, job seekers felt discouraged mostly after not being able to find a fitting vacancy whereas they felt disappointed mostly after being rejected to a highly anticipated job, and they felt insecure mostly after an unpleasant interaction during an interview. Furthermore, while in all job search phases job seekers experienced mostly activating emotions, in the final phase, after a rejection, they mostly felt negative deactivating affect.

### **Implications for Practice**

#### **Search Systematically**

The results in this dissertation can be used to guide job seekers' behavior. The first lesson that can be taken from this research is that it matters *how* job seekers spend their time on job search. Deliberate thought on *how* job seekers are searching and the awareness that it is possible to improve the search is an important step towards higher quality job search. Specifically, job seekers improve their chances of (re)employment by being adaptable, by actively seeking information on how to search and by using this

## SEARCHING FOR A JOB

information to further improve the search. Asking for feedback on one's job search behavior can bring about an important source of information. On top of being adaptable, it is important that job seekers are persistent even when job search causes uncertainty or is experienced as tedious and that they build in routines. Other factors that may stimulate high quality job search is having a clear employment goal, being intrinsically committed to employment, and feeling activated.

### **Have Self-Compassion**

The second lesson that can be taken from this research pertains to dealing with negative job search experiences. The more time job seekers spend on job search the more likely they will encounter different events that make them feel bad, which may interfere with their search motivation. Therefore, it is important that they find an adaptive coping strategy to deal with negative experiences. Having self-compassion can make them feel better and more resilient to negative job search experiences. Self-compassion means that individuals are kind rather than critical to themselves, realize that they are not unique in their struggles, and that they keep their emotions in mindful awareness rather than suppressing, ignoring or exaggerate them. A guided writing exercise in which one is asked to describe (1) what a friend would say, (2) how other people would experience a similar event, and (3) the types of emotions they experienced, can help to increase one's self-compassion. The self-compassion brought about by these exercises has an immediate positive effect on job seekers' feelings by reducing their self-criticism.

### **Communicate Properly**

Job seekers' negative job search experiences may in part be reduced if hiring parties take more responsibility for proper communication at various stages of the recruitment and selection procedure. Poor communication by the hiring organization may make

job seekers, among other things, discouraged, disappointed, wronged, angry, and despaired. These emotional responses not only negatively impact job seekers' wellbeing and their motivation for subsequent job search, but also their perception of the organization (Hausknecht et al., 2004). To reduce or prevent emotional damage to job seekers and reputational damage, companies should strive for clear and honest communication during selection, the provision of correct information, and a respectful treatment of applicants. For example, they should ensure that they provide a realistic job preview that does not misinform applicants about the content of the job or the selection criteria; they should give applicants a fair chance to present themselves during the job interview; and they should be considerate in their communication about the rejection.

Job seekers themselves may to some extent also play a part in improving communication. Taking into account their dependent position job seekers may strive to clarify expectations by explicitly addressing those and contacting the hiring companies timely. For example, by contacting an organization about the content of a vacancy before applying to it, or by politely asking about the subsequent procedure at the end of a job interview when this was not previously communicated. This may not prevent poor communication altogether, but can help to create clarity on both sides about what is expected.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this dissertation show that even though the process of finding a job can be very tough and unpleasant, job seekers can get better at it by trying new ways of searching, seeking feedback, adapting their strategy based on what they learn, persevering and having self-compassion when dealing with negative job search experiences. While hiring organizations cannot take away the pain of a rejection, they can prevent further negative spinoffs by treating their applicants with transparency, honesty, and respect.

## SEARCHING FOR A JOB