



Insight into job search self-regulation: Effects of employment self-efficacy and perceived progress on job search intensity

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ABSTRACT

This study builds on a self-regulation framework to examine the influence of employment self-efficacy and perceived progress on job search intensity. Results from a repeated-measures study with new labor market entrants indicated that job seekers with higher between-person chronic employment self-efficacy put more intensity in their job search compared to those with lower chronic employment self-efficacy. Notably, however, within-person analyses indicated that as employment self-efficacy increased, job search intensity subsequently decreased. These results provide support for social cognitive theory for between-person employment self-efficacy, and for control theory for within-person employment self-efficacy. Furthermore, increased perceived progress was positively related to subsequent job search intensity. The positive relationship of perceived progress with subsequent job search intensity was moderated by chronic employment self-efficacy, such that the relationship was positive only for job seekers with lower chronic employment self-efficacy.

1. Introduction

As job seekers search for employment, they need to regulate their job search intensity to find acceptable employment (da Motta Veiga & Turban, 2014; Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). An important predictor of job search intensity is self-efficacy, typically defined as job seekers' confidence in their ability to successfully complete job search behaviors and obtain employment (Kanfer et al., 2001). Perhaps because self-efficacy plays a central role in self-regulation theories (e.g., Bandura, 2012), it "is one of the most studied variables in the job search literature" (Saks, Zikic, & Koen, 2015, p. 104). Nonetheless, there remains considerable ambiguity about whether and how self-efficacy is related to intensity in job search, with studies finding a positive relation (e.g., Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks et al., 2015; Zimmerman, Boswell, Shipp, Dunford, & Boudreau, 2012), a negative relation (e.g., Liu, Wang, Liao, & Shi, 2014; McFayden & Thomas, 1997), and a null relation (e.g., Sun, Song, & Lim, 2013). However, given the importance of self-efficacy in self-regulation (Bandura, 1991), understanding whether and how self-efficacy is related to job search intensity has important theoretical and practical implications (Liu et al., 2014; Saks et al., 2015).

As noted by scholars (Liu et al., 2014; Saks et al., 2015), one reason for the different results of self-efficacy with job search intensity is that some studies examining job search self-efficacy used scales that include items measuring both job search behavior self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to execute job search behaviors) and employment or job search outcome self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to obtain job offers or employment). Recent evidence indicates, however, that different types of self-efficacy have different relationships with job search intensity (Liu et al., 2014; Saks et al., 2015; Wanberg, Zhu, & van Hooft, 2010).

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For example, using a within-person design, Liu et al. (2014) found that job search intensity was positively related to job search behavior self-efficacy and negatively related to employment self-efficacy. Additionally, using a between-person design, Saks et al. (2015) found similar results as job search intensity was positively related to job search behavior self-efficacy and negatively related to job search outcome self-efficacy. Thus, one reason for the variability in results in the relationship of self-efficacy with job search intensity is that researchers have not differentiated job search behavior self-efficacy from employment self-efficacy (da Motta Veiga, Turban, Gabriel, & Chawla, 2018; Liu et al., 2014; Saks et al., 2015).

A second reason for variability in the relationship of self-efficacy with job search intensity is that results may differ depending on whether researchers examine between-person differences in self-efficacy or within-person changes in self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2014; Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013; Vancouver, Thompson, & Williams, 2001; Yeo & Neal, 2006, 2013). Most studies examining the relationship between self-efficacy and job search intensity have used between-person designs and thus examined chronic self-efficacy (e.g., Ali, Ryan, Lyons, Ehrhart, & Wessel, 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2012). In general, such studies indicate that individuals with greater self-efficacy tend to have greater job search intensity, which is consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991, 2012). However, since self-regulation is a dynamic within-person process (Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010), other scholars have used within-person designs to examine the relationship of transient self-efficacy with job search intensity (Liu et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2013). Evidence from within-person designs indicates that self-efficacy is negatively related to intensity, which is consistent with control theory propositions (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 2012). Specifically, increased self-efficacy is seen as a signal regarding goal attainment, such that when job seekers become more confident in their ability to find employment, they reduce their job search intensity.

To better understand the role of self-efficacy in job search, we extend prior research by using the same measure of employment self-efficacy to examine the relationship of job search intensity with both between-person differences in self-efficacy and within-person changes in self-efficacy. We examine employment self-efficacy, which we define as job seekers' confidence in their ability to successfully obtain employment, because employment is the ultimate goal of the job search and because we expect that job search intensity will be related to both between-person differences and within-person changes in job seekers' confidence to find employment. Thus, we use both a within- and between-person design to examine the relationships of transient (i.e., within-person) and chronic (i.e., between-person) employment self-efficacy with job search intensity using a sample of actual job seekers.

As noted above, control theory proposes that individuals who are increasingly confident in their ability to attain a goal will exert less effort than those with lower confidence (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 2012). We theorize that as individuals conduct their job search, they evaluate the extent to which they are making progress toward the goal of obtaining employment, which influences the extent to which they perceive a need to increase or decrease their job search intensity. Although perceived progress is thought to be important in self-regulation processes, it has received little attention in the job search literature (for exceptions see Liu et al., 2014; Wanberg et al., 2010). We extend prior research and examine the within-person relationship of changes in perceived progress with job search intensity. Furthermore, consistent with recommendations to examine whether between-person variables moderate within-person relationships (da Motta Veiga et al., 2018; da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; Sun et al., 2013), we further investigate whether the within-person relationship of perceived progress with intensity differs depending on job seekers' level of chronic employment self-efficacy.

Overall, we contribute to the literature in the following ways. Our primary contribution is to provide insight into important self-regulation processes during the job search. To do so, we examine possible differences in the relationships of within- and between-person employment self-efficacy with the job search intensity of actual job seekers. As such, we provide insight into the role of self-efficacy, an important self-regulation variable, in the job search. We also examine whether within-person perceived progress, an internal signal capturing whether job seekers are getting closer to goal attainment, is related to job search intensity, and whether and how chronic employment self-efficacy moderates that relationship.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Self-efficacy and self-regulation

Job search is a self-regulated process in which job seekers need to manage their motivation to accomplish the distal goal of finding a job (da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; Kanfer et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2014). Job seekers with greater job search intensity tend to have more successful searches, which has led to considerable research examining influences on intensity (Kanfer et al., 2001). However, there is considerable variability between job seekers in their level of job search intensity, as well as considerable within-person variability in motivation and job search intensity during the search (da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; da Motta Veiga & Turban, 2014; Liu et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2013). Perhaps one of the most important motivational constructs related to job search intensity is whether job seekers believe they have the ability to attain employment, namely employment self-efficacy (da Motta Veiga et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2014; Saks et al., 2015), although evidence from job search studies is mixed, and different self-regulation theories make somewhat different predictions regarding that relationship.

Consistent with self-regulation theories, the job search process is thought to begin when a person perceives a discrepancy between their current situation and a desired situation (i.e., current vs. desired employment status). Following this discrepancy, job seekers set goals, assess progress, and adjust their actions, such as job search intensity, to accomplish the set goals (Bandura, 1991, 2012; Carver & Scheier, 1981, 2012). Job seekers' confidence in their ability to successfully complete job search behaviors and obtain employment is theorized to influence their intensity (Saks et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2012). For example, individuals with no confidence in their ability to find a job (i.e., employment self-efficacy) are not likely to begin the job search process (Saks et al., 2015). Analogously, a person who is confident they can find a job with little effort will, presumably, have lower levels of job search intensity. The prior

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