



How experienced autonomy can improve job seekers' motivation, job search, and chance of finding reemployment

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ABSTRACT

Job seekers can have different motivations to search for jobs. Some search to find a better job, others because reemployment guidance stimulates them to do so. Understanding how reemployment guidance impacts these different types of job search motivation, and how these types of motivation impact job search behavior, is important in fully comprehending the reemployment process. This study examined how experienced autonomy during reemployment guidance relates to job seekers' types of motivation, how these types of motivation relate to high-quality job search behavior and, in turn, how high-quality job search behavior predicts finding reemployment. In a three-wave field study ($n_{T1} = 440$; $n_{T2,T3} = 172$), we assessed unemployed people's need for autonomy, experienced autonomy, job search motivation, and job search behavior quantity and quality. Unemployed participants were surveyed at the start of reemployment guidance (T1) and six weeks thereafter (T2). Their reemployment status was assessed six months later (T3). Results showed that experiencing more autonomy was directly associated with autonomous job search motivation and indirectly associated with high-quality job search behaviors and a higher chance of finding reemployment, regardless of job seekers' individual need for autonomy. Additionally, experiencing less autonomy was directly associated with amotivation, and indirectly associated with low-quality job search behaviors and a lower chance of finding reemployment. The implications of our findings for the reemployment process and for reemployment guidance are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Job loss and unemployment are disruptive life events with a far-reaching impact on people's lives. Research has shown that unemployment is associated with a variety of negative consequences, ranging from decreased physical and psychological well-being to increased mental health problems and mortality rates. Additionally, unemployment bears negative consequences for society: unemployed people often receive welfare benefits and do not contribute to economy production (for an overview, see Wanberg, 2012). It is thus of utmost importance that individuals find suitable reemployment. Although there are several factors beyond the individual's control that can influence reemployment success (e.g., labor market demand, discrimination), research indicates that individuals themselves can significantly enhance their chances of finding reemployment through their job search behavior (cf. Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012; Wanberg, 2012).

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Job seekers can engage in different kinds of job search behavior. They can, for example, use the internet to locate job openings and/or send out resumes to potential employers. According to most research, job seekers are more likely to find reemployment when they put more time and effort in these job search activities (i.e., show higher job search intensity: cf. Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002). More recently, however, researchers have begun to emphasize the importance of the quality of job search in addition to its quantity (Saks, 2005; Van Hooft, Wanberg, & Van Hooft, 2013; Vinokur & Schul, 2002). After all, spending more time and effort on searching will be less effective when one searches in an unsystematic, thoughtless, and haphazard way (Van Hooft et al., 2013). In other words, research has proposed that job seekers may be more likely to obtain reemployment with high-quality rather than low-quality job search behavior.

Sustaining such high-quality job search behavior, however, can place significant strain on job seekers (Lim, Chen, Aw, & Tan, 2016) and requires them to self-regulate how to search, when to search, and what jobs to pursue (Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). As such, motivation plays a crucial role in the job search process (Van Hooft et al., 2013; Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). Yet, we know very little about how high-quality job search behaviors are affected by job seekers' different motivations, which can range from autonomous (i.e., engaging in an activity because it is enjoyable or important) to controlled (i.e., engaging in an activity because people feel pressured to do so) (cf. Self-Determination Theory; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Understanding how these different types of job search motivation impact job search behavior is particularly important in fully comprehending the reemployment process, because many countries provide reemployment guidance that involves compulsory job search or substantial interference from counselors (e.g., Koen, Klehe, & van Vianen, 2015; Lindsay, *in press*; Vansteenkiste & Van den Broeck, *in press*). Consequently, job seekers may engage in job search because they believe that finding reemployment is important (i.e., autonomous motivation) or because others – such as reemployment counselors – require them to do so (i.e., controlled motivation).

One critical factor that may determine job seekers' motivation in the reemployment process is their experience of autonomy during reemployment guidance (i.e., volition, willingness and choice with respect to a behavior or experience one is engaged in; cf. DeCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). However, it remains unclear how autonomy exactly influences job seekers' motivation, because scholars articulate different views on the role of autonomy. Some theoretical perspectives, such as SDT and Reactance Theory, state that experiencing a sense of autonomy fosters optimal motivation and behavior, while situations or environments that fail to satisfy individuals' need for autonomy can lead to suboptimal motivation and behavior (e.g., Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Brehm, 1966; DeCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 2000). These perspectives specifically assume that the need for autonomy is a universal, innate psychological need – thus, all job seekers would benefit from experiencing autonomy during reemployment guidance. However, other theoretical perspectives suggest that the relationship between experienced autonomy and individuals' motivation and behavior depends on individual differences in the strength of their need for autonomy (e.g., Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Van Vianen, 2005). In that case, job seekers will only show optimal motivation and job search behavior when reemployment guidance affords them as much autonomy as they desire. Reemployment guidance that provides either less autonomy or more autonomy than desired will, then, result in suboptimal motivation and poorer job search behavior.

The aim of the present study was to investigate how experienced autonomy during reemployment guidance related to the subsequent reemployment process (i.e., job seekers' different types of motivation, the quality of their job search behavior, and their chance of finding reemployment). As such, this study bears four important contributions. First, while previous research has stressed that the quality of job search is a key dimension of job search effectiveness (e.g., Manroop & Richardson, 2015; Van Hooft et al., 2013; Vinokur & Schul, 2002), empirical studies have paid relatively little attention to this presumably important determinant of finding reemployment. Our study seeks to fill this void by including both the degree and the type of people's job search behavior. Second, despite its theoretical and practical relevance for understanding the reemployment process, SDT has received relatively little attention in the job search literature (with the exception of da Motta Veiga & Gabriel, 2016; Koen et al., 2015; Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, De Witte, & Deci, 2004). Our study extends previous research by detailing the process by which different types of motivation may affect the reemployment process, that is, job seekers' job search behavior and their chance of finding reemployment.

Third, this study contributes to motivation theory by examining whether the need for autonomy moderates the relationship between experienced autonomy and job seekers' motivation. Interestingly, despite scholars' different views on the universal versus idiosyncratic effects of experiencing autonomy, very few studies have directly investigated the moderating influence of the need for autonomy (also see Chen et al., 2015). By doing so, this study may also have important implications for reemployment practice. That is, understanding how experienced autonomy during reemployment guidance relates to subsequent job search motivation and job search behavior can help counselors to decide how much autonomy should be provided in interventions, and how job seekers can be guided to search in more optimal ways. Finally, while research has examined the role of job search motivation and job search behavior at particular points in the reemployment process, our study examines unemployed job seekers at several points throughout the reemployment process (i.e., from registration at reemployment services, to reemployment guidance, to job search, to reemployment).

1.1. The reemployment process

Job search intensity is one of the most frequently examined predictors of reemployment success, although its contribution is modest (cf. Boswell et al., 2012; Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg, 2012). Research has therefore proposed that reemployment success may not only depend on the amount of time and effort job seekers dedicate to their search (i.e., the quantity of job search

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