



# Job search self-efficacy: Reconceptualizing the construct and its measurement



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## ABSTRACT

Job search self-efficacy (JSSE) is one of the most studied variables in the job search literature and an important component of the theory of planned behavior and self-regulation theory which have both been used to explain the job search process. However, even though JSSE has been a part of job search research for thirty years, the measurement of JSSE has varied from study to study. This questions both the validity of the measures used and the findings from each study that used a different measure. In this paper, we propose and test a two dimensional measure of JSSE that corresponds to job search behavior (JSSE-B) and job search outcomes (JSSE-O). The results of a longitudinal study of employed and unemployed job seekers support a two-factor model corresponding to the two dimensions of JSSE. We also found differential relationships between each dimension of JSSE and several antecedents and consequences. Among the antecedents, environmental exploration and self-exploration were stronger predictors of JSSE-B while career planning was a stronger predictor of JSSE-O. In terms of consequences, JSSE-B was a stronger predictor of job search intention and behavior while JSSE-O was a stronger predictor of the number of job offers received. These findings provide support for two dimensions of JSSE and have important implications for job search research and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Job search has become increasingly common as individuals are expected to seek employment more often during their career than ever before (Saks, 2005; Wanberg, Zhang, & Diehn, 2010). The instability of contemporary careers often brings about multiple periods of unemployment and can produce serious negative effects on physical and psychological health and well-being (Wanberg, 2012). Consequently, there has been a dramatic rise in research on job search.

One of the most important factors linked to job search behavior and finding (re-)employment is job search self-efficacy (JSSE) (Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, & Shalhoop, 2006). Most studies on job search include JSSE as a predictor of job search behavior (for example, the intensity with which people search for jobs) and/or of job search outcomes (for example, the number of job offers that people receive during their search). Furthermore, JSSE is an important component of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and self-regulation theory which have both been used to explain the job search process. However, the measurement of JSSE has varied from study to study. In fact, there is no generally accepted scale to assess JSSE. This makes it difficult to compare the results across studies and to know if differences between studies are true differences or differences due to the instrument used to measure JSSE.

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The main objective of the present study was to propose and test a reconceptualization of the measurement of JSSE. In particular, we constructed a measure of JSSE using existing scales but separate items that focus on job search behavior (JSSE-B) from items that focus on job search outcomes (JSSE-O). In the following sections, we discuss previous research on JSSE and its measurement after which we present a two dimensional measure of JSSE.

### 1.1. Job search self-efficacy research

Job search self-efficacy (JSSE) refers to the belief that one can successfully perform specific job search behaviors and obtain employment (Saks & Ashforth, 1999). For three decades, self-efficacy has played a prominent role in job search research as a predictor of job search intention, behavior, and outcomes and as a key variable in job search interventions.

#### 1.1.1. JSSE as a predictor of job search intention, behavior, and outcomes

In one of the first studies on job search and JSSE, Kanfer and Hulin (1985) reported that in a sample of individuals who had been laid-off from a private hospital, individuals with higher self-efficacy engaged in a greater number of job search behaviors (.51,  $p < .01$ ) and were more likely to find employment. The correlation between self-efficacy at the time of job loss and reemployment status one month later was .86 ( $p < .01$ ).

Since the Kanfer and Hulin (1985) study, many other studies have found that JSSE predicts job search behavior and job search outcomes (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Saks, 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 1999, 2000; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005). In their meta-analysis, Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz (2001) obtained an effect size of .27 between job search self-efficacy and job search behavior (i.e., the intensity with which people search for a job). They also reported that job seekers with higher JSSE received more job offers, were more likely to obtain employment, and were unemployed for a shorter period of time. In fact, JSSE was one of the few variables significantly related to all three employment outcomes.

Research on job search and the theory of planned behavior (TPB) also predicts that JSSE is related to job search intention. According to the TPB, an individual's intention to engage in a behavior is the main predictor of the behavior in question, and one's intention to engage in a specific behavior is a function of one's attitude toward the behavior (the extent to which a person has a positive or negative evaluation of the behavior), subjective norm (perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior), and perceived behavioral control which is usually operationalized as self-efficacy or one's confidence to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Many studies have found support for the applicability of the TPB for predicting job search behavior (Song, Wanberg, Niu, & Xie, 2006; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & Van Der Flier, 2004, 2005; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van Der Flier, & Blonk, 2004; Van Hooft & De Jong, 2009; Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur & Caplan, 1987; Wanberg et al., 2005; Zikic & Saks, 2009). Job search attitude, subjective norm, and JSSE have been reported to predict job search intention, and job search intention is the main determinant of job search behavior. However, the results for JSSE and job search intention have been inconsistent. Some studies have reported a significant relationship with job search intention (e.g., Van Hooft, Saks, Lievens, & Weijters, *in press*; Zikic & Saks, 2009) whereas other studies have not (e.g., Song et al., 2006; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & Van Der Flier, 2004). Van Hooft, Born, Taris, and Van Der Flier (2004) did not find a significant relationship between JSSE and either job search intention or behavior. A possible explanation for this inconsistency might be the different ways in which JSSE has been measured (Van Hooft et al., *in press*). We will discuss this in more detail in the section on the measurement of JSSE.

#### 1.1.2. Job search interventions

Another stream of JSSE research has investigated the effects of job search interventions. For example, research on the JOBS intervention has concluded that job search training has a positive effect on JSSE of recently unemployed adults (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989) and that it functions as a mediating variable for the effects of JOBS on reemployment, financial strain, and a reduction in depressive symptoms (Vinokur & Schul, 1997). Van Ryn and Vinokur (1992) reported that a JOBS intervention had a positive effect on the JSSE of unemployed job seekers and JSSE mediated the effect of the intervention on job search behavior. A meta-analysis on the effectiveness of job search interventions concluded that they are more effective in helping job seekers find employment when they boost self-efficacy, and job search self-efficacy partially mediates the effect of job search interventions on employment status (Liu, Huang, & Wang, 2014a).

### 1.2. The measurement of job search self-efficacy

Although JSSE is frequently included in a job search research, there appears to be little consensus or consistency regarding how to measure it. In fact, few studies have used the same scale. While some of the items used across scales closely correspond to actual job search behaviors (e.g., use friends or other contacts to discover promising job openings), others do not directly correspond to search behavior (e.g., make the best impression and get points across in an interview) or are aimed at the outcomes of job search (e.g. job offers, reemployment status).

The first published scale to measure JSSE was designed by Ellis and Taylor (1983) in a study on the role of self-esteem in the job search process. Although they called their scale task-specific self-esteem, it was similar to JSSE scales as it asks respondents about their confidence in the job search context. The 10-item scale includes items on one's confidence in general search ability and in specific job search knowledge and skills. Most of the items refer to one's knowledge of the job search process (e.g., I know a lot more than most students about how to use a wider range of job opportunity sources) and one's job search ability (e.g., I am confident of my ability to make a good impression in job interviews) rather than actual job search behaviors.

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