

# Who Recruits and How? The Economic Expertise of Youth Integration Professionals<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

How do job placement specialists acquire knowledge of the markets, and do they put it to use? At deliberative committee meetings on the funding of youth integration projects, we observed the construction of a shared representation of the workings of local-level job markets. Transition-to-work professionals develop their economic expertise primarily from two sources to which they are professionally close: the young jobseekers themselves and the vocational training professionals. The unequal distribution of economic expertise is intensified by structural differences in the capacity to put it to use for each of the deliberative stakeholders.

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In the sociological and economics literature, public job placement services are generally treated as labour market brokers, i.e. professionals with the role of matching the supply of work to the demand. This function is interpreted through different prisms, depending on the labour market paradigms that the authors espouse.<sup>1</sup> In a unified market as understood in standard economic theory, their function is to maintain a flow of information on available job offers and applicants' skills at minimum cost. For economic sociology, their function is to reduce uncertainties about the quality of work. However, if we look at what job placement services actually do, it has to

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<sup>1</sup> We will refer to the article by Marie-Christine Bureau and Emmanuelle Marchal for an exploration of the role of job placement specialists in different sociological and economic labour market theories (Bureau and Marchal, 2009).

be acknowledged that the linking role is neither exclusive nor even central. With a new remit to support jobseekers, equipped with a proliferation of workshops, clubs and training schemes, the role of many of these professionals has been upgraded to that of jobseeking experts with the task of passing on — as Sophie Divay (2000) has shown — a certain body of knowledge about the markets and know-how for the “professional jobseeker”.<sup>2</sup> Through support and advice, as well as “coaching”, they are as much providers of knowledge as suppliers of information on the workings of the labour markets.

How is this expertise in recruitment constructed and manifested? The literature in sociology of employment or economic sociology gives us few pointers to the way in which the different protagonists construct their representation of the workings of the labour markets. While it is obvious to sociologists that these markets are social institutions and therefore framed by a set of formal and informal rules, little is known about how they are understood by the main parties concerned. It is revealing that Mark Granovetter’s (1974) social network theory only covers one type of economic information: available jobs. The “*job information*” that M. Granovetter advanced in response to Georges Stigler’s (1962) standard theory is restricted here to the awareness of a job opportunity. The same is true for all the authors working on “information networks” (Rees, 1966; Ionnides and Loury, 2004). In a similar vein to these works, though enriched by an approach drawn from the economics of conventions, the available data — statistical in nature — relate essentially to the systems of access to employment (institutional brokering, spontaneous job applications, professional social networks, etc.; see Marchal and Rieucan, 2010). However, the development and handling of economic information relating to work and employment, together with the process of development of an “economic culture” that can contribute to action, remain largely neglected in the social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

Our work seeks to understand how job placement specialists develop the economic expertise that helps to give them legitimacy as employment professionals. We take the view that the right approach to the work of job placement specialists is to identify their economic beliefs, how those beliefs are forged and, finally, the processes whereby they achieve the status of expertise. By beliefs, we mean the adherence to a certain representation of the economy, which includes different forms of knowledge, both scientific and nonspecialist. These beliefs draw on the multiple mechanisms implicated in the construction of ordinary knowledge. Following on from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), we adopt a sociology of knowledge that sees it as more than the practice of a small number of people engaged in the commerce of ideas and theories.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we considered the social construction of the labour market as a “reality” for the social actors. Job

<sup>2</sup> The comprehensive perspective that we adopt in our analysis prompts us to espouse a pluralistic vision of our stakeholders’ markets and therefore to use the plural rather than the singular. We have continued to use the singular when referring to literature where this is the only form employed or to a market that is specified from the point of view of the profession or the territory.

<sup>3</sup> For its part, the extensive sociological research on labour market experts, job counsellors, recruitment professionals or job placement organisations has concentrated heavily on their systems of action (Meyer, 1998) and the selectivity that results from their activity. Themes such as the rationalisation of activity, sorting (Benarrosh, 2000) and activation (Divay, 2009; Lavitry, 2009) have dominated the way sociologists interpret the data, to the extent that the role of knowledge about the labour market has remained invisible. This knowledge is taken for granted and not questioned. Research that has looked at the relations between staff of France’s national employment agency (ANPE, *agence nationale pour l’emploi*) and companies has emphasised the “brokering practices” (Delfini and Demazière, 2000) implemented, with varying degrees of aggressiveness or commerciality, in dealings with employers, which lead to the establishment of portfolios of job offers, an approach that similarly reduces the work of job placement specialists to a purely brokering role.

<sup>4</sup> So these ordinary economic beliefs cannot be entirely equated with those studied by Frédéric Lebaron (2000) within the academic, political and economic elite.

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