

Unemployed and exhausted? Job-search fatigue and reemployment quality



Vivien K.G. Lim^{*}, Don Chen, Sherry S.Y. Aw, MingZe Tan

Dept. of Management & Organization, NUS Business School, National University of Singapore, 119245, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Job loss and job search are particularly devastating and stressful events that individuals can experience in their careers. However, less research attention has been paid to fatigue or burnout in the context of unemployment and job search. Drawing from Conservation of Resources theory, this study highlights the role that fatigue plays during unemployment and job search among displaced employees — defined as individuals who have lost their jobs involuntarily and are currently not engaged in any form of paid employment. In a two-wave longitudinal study involving 89 displaced employees, we illustrate how financial difficulties and social exclusion can lead to job search fatigue, while psychological capital serves as a personal resource that reduces job seekers' fatigue. We also demonstrate how job search fatigue at Time 1 can lead to lower reemployment quality at Time 2, which, in turn, can lead to lower organizational commitment and increased turnover intentions. Our findings bring into attention the important role that fatigue can play in the context of unemployment and job search.

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the recent Eurozone crisis, the rate of unemployment remains high in many parts of the world (OECD, 2014), especially in Greece, where record levels of unemployment (25.4%) were reported as of February 2015 (Eurostat, 2015). More telling perhaps is that despite the falling unemployment rate in the U.S., some analysts have argued that this is due to a drop in the overall labor force participation rates. This suggests that in actuality, higher levels of long-term unemployment exist in the U.S. — individuals who are unemployed for more than 26 weeks but still looking for a job (Worstell, 2015). This is consistent with other reports which have highlighted the difficulties that displaced job seekers face in obtaining reemployment, with the average job seeker taking at least 6 months to find a new job, while others spend as long as a year in intensive job search before they are employed (Business Insider, 2015; Ilg & Theodossiou, 2012). Thus, many unemployed job seekers are spending an inordinate amount of time in a process that is commonly regarded by management scholars to be highly stressful and emotionally exhausting (e.g. Wanberg, 1995; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010; Sun, Song, & Lim, 2013).

We define displaced employees as individuals who have lost their jobs involuntarily and are currently not engaged in any form of paid employment. Besides the stressors associated with the loss of one's job, displaced employees have to devote a great deal of time and effort in looking for their ideal jobs, with others likening the job search process to holding a full time job (Amundson & Borgen, 1982). Together, the processes of unemployment and re-employment place significant strain on job seekers, and bring about debilitating consequences in the long run. Afterall, fatigued job seekers are likely to lack the energy required for a successful job search, leading to poorer reemployment outcomes. Although fatigue in the form of burnout has oft been examined in the

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bizlimv@nus.edu.sg (V.K.G. Lim).

context of employed individuals (e.g., nurses, employees), less is known about the experience of fatigue in the reemployment context, which is arguably more important for job seekers who have to deal with the financial difficulties and constant blows to their self-esteem (when faced with rejections, or ignored applications). A better understanding of the antecedents and the impact of fatigue on employment outcomes will thus benefit scholars and career counselors alike in aiding displaced individuals navigate the job search process, for instance by suggesting possible avenues for interventions to bolster job seekers' spirits, and to encourage them to persevere in the job search.

Losing one's job can have a long-lasting, scarring effect on one's career (Arulampalam, Gregg & Gregory, 2001). Understanding how fatigue affects the reemployment outcomes of displaced employees is important as the quality of their replacement job has implications for their future careers, psychological well-being, and health (Lucas et al., 2004). While all job seekers will experience some form of fatigue, not everyone will experience it to the same degree. We argue that displaced employees suffer disproportionately from fatigue during job search, compared to new entrants, because they have to grapple with the demands of looking for jobs, as well as cope with issues possibly triggered by their displacement, such as financial difficulties and diminished social contacts (Wanberg et al., 2010).

Adopting a longitudinal design over a period of one year, and drawing on Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, we examined how financial difficulties, loss of social contacts, and psychological capital can influence the experience of fatigue in displaced workers at Time 1, and their subsequent quality of reemployment, intentions to quit, and affective organizational commitment at Time 2. We argue that financial difficulties and the loss of social contacts deplete displaced employees, leading to heightened levels of fatigue during job search. The quality of replacement jobs that displaced employees take up will then diminish as fatigued job seekers are unlikely to have motivation and persistence to pursue high quality jobs. In turn, poor replacement job quality is expected to negatively impact reemployed individuals' commitment towards, and intention to stay with their new organization. A research model is presented in Fig. 1.

On a more positive note for displaced employees, recent developments in positive organizational behavior suggest that psychological capital is an important resource that individuals possess (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). Psychological capital has been found to affect human flourishing, optimal functioning, and is associated with individuals' abilities to cope with stress and adversity (c.f. Luthans et al., 2007). While the positive benefits of psychological capital have yet to be examined extensively in the context of job loss and job search, job loss (and subsequently the search for reemployment) is certainly stressful for the unemployed, and can be considered an adversity. We argue that high levels of psychological capital (e.g., resilience and optimism) serve as a personal resource that job seekers can draw upon in the job search (akin to financial and social resources), allowing them to engage in their job search with a more positive attitude, and thus to persevere and feel less fatigued.

This study contributes to research on job search by extending the concept of psychological capital outside the workplace. We argue that the four psychological capacities of hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience are an invaluable resource for displaced employees in dealing with the aftermath of unemployment (Chen & Lim, 2012). Our study examines the impact of psychological capital on job seekers' reemployment outcomes. Such a focus will help shed light on the predictors and processes that bring about successful reemployment outcomes, allowing us to predict which job seekers are likely to succumb to fatigue, and consequently, have poorer reemployment outcomes.

Interestingly, while fatigue has been examined extensively in the context of the workplace (e.g. Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003), there has been a surprising paucity of research on fatigue in the reemployment and job search literature. As with employed individuals, displaced employees' finite resources are depleted when they engage in stressful, resource-intensive activities, such as job search. Prolonged depletion of one's resources can result in feelings of exhaustion and the experience of burnout. Incorporating research on fatigue into the reemployment literature can provide a more nuanced understanding of the trials faced by displaced job seekers and the impact of fatigue on the job search process. For instance, while

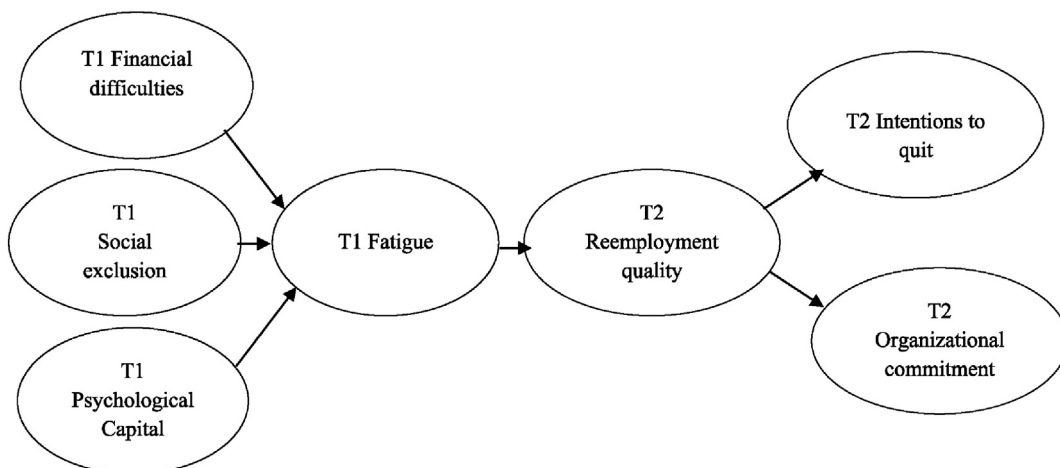


Fig. 1. Proposed research model.

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