



Self determination theory and employed job search

Riccardo Welters^{a,*}, William Mitchell^{b,c,1}, Joan Muysken^{d,2}

^a James Cook University, School of Business, Townsville, 4811 QLD, Australia

^b Centre of Full Employment and Equity, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, 2308 NSW, Australia

^c Charles Darwin University, Brinkin, 0810, NT, Australia

^d Maastricht University, School of Business and Economics, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Self Determination Theory (SDT) predicts that employees who use controlled motivation to search for alternate (better) work are less successful than their counterparts who use autonomous motivation. Using Australian labour market data, we find strong support for SDT. We find that workers who face externally regulated pressures (pressure arising from involuntary part-time or casual labour contracts) to search for alternate employment are less likely to find better work, than workers who use autonomous motives to search for work. Our findings suggest that labour market policies trending towards 'labour market flexibility/deregulation' – which provide workers with controlled motives to search for work – will contribute to workers cycling through spells of insecure employment and possibly intermittent spells of unemployment with no realistic prospect of career development.

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1. Introduction

In 1994, the Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development (OECD) made various recommendations to “increase wage and labour cost flexibility” and “reform employment security provision” in an attempt to reduce unemployment. OECD (1994) claimed that a more flexible, deregulated labour market would entice employers to create more employment and hence lead to lower unemployment. This induced most OECD member countries to promote labour market policies which (among others) reduced job security of employees.

However, when the OECD evaluated its reform agenda in 2006, it concluded: ‘... the reduction of unemployment does not correlate very strongly with reform intensity’ (OECD, 2006: 69) indicating its reform package had not been a success – see also Mitchell and Muysken (2008) for a comprehensive critique of the OECD Jobs Study reforms at the macroeconomic level.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 (0)7 4781 4325.

E-mail addresses: Riccardo.welters@jcu.edu.au (R. Welters), bill.mitchell@newcastle.edu.au (W. Mitchell), j.muysken@maastrichtuniversity.nl (J. Muysken).

¹ Tel.: +61 (0)2 4921 7283.

² Tel.: +31 (0)4 3388 3808.

This paper will look at the consequences of the OECD reform agenda at the micro-level. We will use insights from Self Determination Theory (SDT) to test the consequences of this climate of reduced job security on job search behaviour and job satisfaction of workers (for an extensive overview of SDT see [Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). When applied to the labour market, SDT claims that there are two broad motives why workers may search for alternative employment: (a) autonomous motivation which refers to activities that the individual engages in freely or for external reasons that have been internalised; and (b) controlled motivation which arises from externally regulated pressures. SDT argues that autonomous motivation is more likely to lead to a successful outcome (find alternative better employment) than controlled motivation and therefore more likely to promote job satisfaction following a job change. Clearly, reduced job security is an externally regulated pressure that may prompt controlled job search motivation, because the employee's job security is at stake.

The [OECD \(2001: 14\)](#) concluded that in terms of labour market policies, Australia '*... has been among the OECD countries complying best with this Strategy*'. Therefore, we decide to test the micro-level consequences of the OECD's reform agenda in the context of the Australian labour market. We will draw on data from the first eleven waves of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Australia (HILDA) data set.

Though SDT has been applied to the labour market before (see [Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, De Witte, & Deci, 2004](#); [Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, & Feather, 2005 and 2007](#)), that research focuses mainly on the unemployed. Instead, we focus on employees searching for work and their motivations. Since, the unemployed are at the bottom of the job ladder, they do not face substantial downside risks from not searching, as opposed to employees, who may lose their job. Consequently, we expect effects of externally regulated pressures to lead to stronger controlled behavioural effects for employees than for the unemployed.

If SDT has explanatory power then we should see that reduced job security stimulates more externally regulated job search. We should also observe that such job search will be less successful and if successful associated with lower increments in job satisfaction following job change.

The paper will first briefly describe SDT in the context of the labour market followed by a discussion of the increased precariousness of employment in Australia. Section 2 will describe our data sources and hypotheses, while Section 3 discusses the methods we use to test our hypotheses. Section 4 contains the results, while Section 5 presents a discussion of our results and concluding remarks.

1.1. Self Determination Theory

Self Determination Theory posits that to achieve psychological well-being, people have to fulfil several needs ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). Three broad categories of such needs are identified: the need for competence, relatedness and autonomy. Paid employment contributes to the satisfaction of all three needs simultaneously. That is, workers can show their competence in a job; develop relations and networks at work to address the relatedness need; and employment is a means to generate income which provides the worker a route towards autonomy. Once employed, climbing the job ladder addresses the needs for competence and autonomy.

Consequently, SDT argues that people work towards goals that enable them to achieve needs satisfaction, which – if successful – leads to positive psychological outcomes. There is ample evidence that employment or career advancement indeed contributes to psychological wellbeing (see for example [Warr, Jackson, & Banks, 1988](#); [Winefield, Winefield, Tiggeman, & Goldney, 1991](#)).

However, SDT claims that the type of motivation used to work towards goal achievement crucially impacts on the likelihood that goal achievement is accomplished. Consequently, SDT may provide insights into why some job seekers are more successful than others, which – as we will see – may include the institutional setting in which job search takes place.

SDT distinguishes autonomous and controlled motivation – see [Deci and Ryan \(2000\)](#). Autonomous motivation can be intrinsic, identified or integrated. Intrinsic motivation refers to activities people freely engage in; identified or integrated motivation refers to external reasons to engage in an activity that people have internalised, i.e. the motivation is considered autonomous. Consequently, the locus of control is internal for autonomous motivation, as opposed to controlled motivation, which has an external locus of control. That is, the reason for engagement in an activity is external and not integrated.

Applied to the case of employed job search, the employed job seeker who searches for other jobs because she enjoys attempting to find out the value of her skills in an alternative work setting is intrinsically motivated. The employed job seeker who for example searches for alternate work to expand her career uses identified or integrated motivation. However, the employed job seeker who searches for alternate work, because her present job is at risk, does not search because she dislikes her present job, but because external forces (potential job loss) force her to search.

The vast body of empirical literature in this area of psychology provides ample evidence that (a) both autonomous and controlled motivation drive people to set and strive for goals in order to satisfy needs, but (b) that people with autonomous motivation are more successful in achieving these goals than people led by controlled motives and hence more successful in satisfying needs with better psychological wellbeing as an outcome.

Empirical studies have tested SDT in various settings, including education, sport and health care (see [and Williams, Rodin, Ryan, Grolnick, & Deci, 1998](#); [Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, & Cury, 2002](#); [Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992](#) as representative examples). Though job search has been widely researched in both psychological and economic literature (see [Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001](#) for a meta-analysis), studies linking SDT to job search are surprisingly rare.

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