



The role of personality, situational, and demographic variables in predicting job search among European managers

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Abstract

This research investigates predictors of job search activity among high-level European managers. We examined the role of personality in predicting job search over and above the effects of situational and demographic variables. Results found that the personality traits extraversion and neuroticism predicted job search, and the effects were found in the presence of situational and demographic variables shown in prior research as particularly important determinants of job search activity.

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1. Introduction

Organizations are finding that in order to compete in a demanding and rapidly changing global environment they must rely more and more on the capability and commitment of their human resources for operational efficiency, product innovation, service quality, and ultimately strategic success. At the same time, employees are faced with an increasing number of opportunities for job change and advancement, leading many organizations into a war for talent (Conlin, Coy,

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Palmer, & Saveri, 1999). In this competitive environment, a better understanding of the job search process, including the role of personality in that process, may be central to the development of effective retention strategies.

This research contributes to the literature by examining the effect of personality traits on job search *over and above* situational factors and demographics that have been shown in prior research as key determinants of employee retention. The investigation is conducted using a sample that has several relatively unique characteristics. First, while prior job search research has primarily focused on employees within the US, the participants in this study are all from European countries where cultures, legal, political, and economic systems differ from those in the US and may affect the generalizability of findings based on American samples (Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink, 1999). Our approach is consistent with Adler's (1983) discussion of ethnocentric cross-cultural research to address whether we should use American approaches abroad, and also to address whether culture plays into existing theory. Second, this study focuses on high-level managers, an important subject of research given that such high-demand/high-impact managers are increasingly the battleground in the global talent war, and the fact that most job search research has focused on lower-level employees. Finally, this study addresses the need for research focused on the search processes of *employed* individuals. In contrast, much of the prior research on job search focuses on individuals either entering the job market following a period of full-time education (e.g., Furnham & Rawles, 1996; Saks & Ashforth, 1999) or unemployment (e.g., Wanberg, Watt, & Rumsey, 1996) and as such may have different motivations and influences.

2. Job search hypotheses

2.1. Job search activity

Bretz, Boudreau, and Judge (1994) defined job search as “the specific behaviors through which effort and time are expended to acquire information about labor market alternatives” (p. 278). As noted, the present study focuses specifically on employed individuals, and as such conceptualizes search activity as part of the turnover process (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Yet job search, regardless of whether it leads to turnover, is important. For example, the time and energy an individual spends searching may be put to other task-related uses (March & Simon, 1958). Searching may also create detachment from the organization, reducing commitment and fostering psychological and behavioral withdrawal.

Cappelli (2000) argued that traditional employee retention strategies may no longer be appropriate given the competitive labor market, and that while it is impossible to shield employees from alternative opportunities, employee retention can be managed if organizations are proactive and creative. A proactive approach to retaining talent would arguably include understanding behaviors that occur earlier in the turnover process, such as search activity. Similarly, though situational factors such as job satisfaction are important determinants of why an individual may seek alternative employment, and have been the primary focus of prior research, there are also stable characteristics such as personality that may predict an individual's propensity to seek alternative employment. Understanding the role of these more enduring traits further contributes to a

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