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SHOPPING THE JOB MARKET: STUDY SHOWS PERSISTENCE AND A POSITIVE ATTITUDE REALLY DO PAY OFF IN JOB SEARCHING

A new study confirms what some job seekers may suspect: The more effort people put into a job search, the more likely they are to find employment even in difficult economic times.

The Georgia Institute of Technology study also reveals how certain personality traits affect job-search behavior. For example, people tend to look harder for jobs and consequently have more success if they are:

- Optimistic and view the job loss as an opportunity to improve their position.
- Higher in self-esteem and self-efficacy; they're confident in their ability to search for a job.
- Extraverted
- Conscientious, in the sense that they are more organized and concerned with follow-up.

“That doesn't mean that introverts or less conscientious individuals have poor re-employment prospects,” said study director Ruth Kanfer, a Georgia Tech psychology professor. “But those personality traits are less conducive to the path that they're up against. In contrast, some people are naturally outgoing or predisposed to set goals and follow through.”

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Kanfer is completing a two-year study on job-search behavior in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Labor. Although researchers are still crunching numbers,

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preliminary findings show a positive relationship between active job-search behavior and re-employment success – even in a time of recession.

“That may seem intuitive, but it’s something people forget -- especially if the economy is bad,” Kanfer said. “When jobs are scarce, people often assume that there’s no point in looking.”

Most job-search studies examine human capital factors, such as education and age, when predicting job-search success. But Kanfer’s focus on behavior provides practical, new information, she said.

The study results will help professionals in the human-resources industry respond to the different needs that job seekers have.

“A formulaic approach to outplacement doesn’t work,” said John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray and Christmas, a Chicago-based consulting firm that specializes in outplacement. “The job search is a process where there is constant rejection.”

And not everyone has the emotional resiliency to bounce back from those rejections, Challenger said. Yet companies too often focus on delivering administrative services, such as daycare or places where job seekers can make phone calls, rather than one-on-one counseling support, he added.

The idea is to enhance job search behavior. If outplacement counselors can identify individuals who aren’t strong in the personality traits conducive to a job search, they can be more proactive with training and counseling, Kanfer explained.

One surprising result of the Georgia Tech study: Many laid-off workers reported that a change in their routine positively affected their ability to find work.

“There’s been an implicit notion that people should try to maintain the status quo after losing a job,” Kanfer said, “but we’re finding that people who change their daily routine – for example, engaging in more exercise or going to more church activities – were more successful in finding re-employment.”

That makes sense, she added, because exercise or connecting to social support groups can help buffer the stress that comes from losing a job.

Although the study of 100 workers – primarily high school graduates averaging 40 years in age – is smaller than Kanfer hoped for, it provides a pool of rich information on the processes and activities involved in a job search, she said.

The study also provides a useful complement to studies of job search behaviors that have focused on new entrants to the workforce -- mostly college graduates -- who are in a more structured search

environment, Kanfer added.

“For job seekers, a job search is self-managed and self motivated -- no one is offering them opportunity,” she noted.

Kanfer’s study differs from previous research in two other ways, as well:

- Greater ethnic mix. About half of the participants were African Americans.
- Organizational diversity. Participants came from a variety of different companies.

Often job-search studies look at downsizing within a single organization, which can skew results. In contrast, Kanfer’s study provides a look at job-search behaviors across different occupations and industries.

Almost half of the participants in this study had been laid off at least once in the previous five years. “That really speaks to how the work world has changed – that job loss is no longer an infrequent event,” Kanfer said.

On the brighter side, the study shows that job loss doesn’t necessarily mean settling for less. Among the study participants, several reported they were happier in new situations than the ones they had left.

The study also points to areas that warrant more research, such as the impact of age on job-search behavior. Older people may limit their options because they feel they don’t have the right skills. “And that’s a vicious cycle because the more you look, the more likely you are to find employment,” Kanfer said.

Granted, in a poor economy, chances of finding a job are lower, but it’s still an active approach that can win results.

“You can’t make employment happen,” Kanfer stressed. “But you help control what happens by managing your assets, marshalling your skills and getting yourself out there.”

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