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### Searching for a job

*Problem- and emotion-focused coping*

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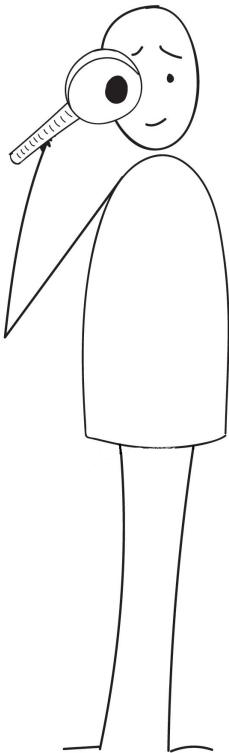
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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



## INTRODUCTION

In our mutual economy and increasingly flexible labor market job transitions during the lifespan are increasing. The number of jobs held between ages 18 and 50 is 11.9 (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2017) and is estimated to increase over the next generations, making job search an inseparable part of people's working lives. Consequently, many people search for a job at some point in their lives, such as graduates who make the school-to-work transition, people who lose their jobs due to downsizing or temporary contracts, people who change between jobs, and people who return to the labor market after a period of unemployment.

When people do not successfully find (re)employment they risk (prolonged) unemployment, which is undesirable for numerous reasons. Firstly, unemployed individuals have a severe risk of both mental and physical health problems (e.g., Korpi, 2001; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009; Strully, 2009). The negative effects of unemployment on mental and physical health intensify as unemployment prolongs (Paul & Moser, 2009) and ill health increases the risk of remaining unemployed (Korpi, 2001; Van Hooft, 2014), creating a vicious circle. The negative effects of unemployment are not limited to unemployed individuals, but spill over to their families, resulting in reduced well-being of spouses and children of unemployed individuals (McKee-Ryan & Maitoza, 2018; Ström, 2003). On top of the negative consequences for individuals and their families, unemployment is costly to society as a whole because unemployed often receive social benefits without contributing to economic production (cf. Stenberg & Westerlund, 2008). It is therefore of paramount importance for individuals themselves, for their families, and for society that job seekers find a job successfully.

The present dissertation aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How can job seekers effectively search for a job? (2) Which factors facilitate such way of searching? (3) How can they adaptively cope with the negative experiences they encounter during job search? (4) What negative job search events do job seekers

encounter while searching for a job, and how do job seekers respond to these events?

Below, I will first introduce the concept of job search and discuss people's job search behaviors in terms of intensity (quantity) and content (quality) as a form of problem-focused coping. Then I will outline the difficulties associated with job search and their negative impact on job seekers emotions. Subsequently, I discuss the need for adaptive emotion-focused coping and suggest self-compassion as a potentially beneficial coping strategy. Finally, I discuss the need to examine the content and consequences of negative job search experiences.

### **Job Search: Intensity and Content**

The literature on job search suggests that the key to finding a job is to search for one (e.g., Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2005; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005; Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). Job search entails specific behaviors to identify labor market alternatives, find information about these alternatives, and pursue labor market opportunities (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994; Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994). Examples of such behaviors are browsing the web for vacancies, responding to applications, and going to network events and job interviews. More time spent on job search generally translates to a higher likelihood of finding a job (Kanfer et al., 2001). As such, job search is an important problem-focused form of coping with job loss, school-to-work transitions, and job-to-job changes (Van Hooft, 2018a), as it attempts to resolve the "root" cause of the stressful situation (e.g., being or becoming unemployed; DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Job search positively influences job seekers' feelings when they perceive progress towards their employment goal (Wanberg et al., 2010). Therefore, one could advise job seekers to simply put as much time

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and effort into the task of finding a job and treating job search as a full time job itself (Asselbergs, 2018).

Although spending time and effort on job search mostly indeed improves the chances of getting (re)employed (e.g., Kanfer et al., 2001), the relation between job search intensity and (re)employment success is modest. In part, this may be explained by a range of non-search factors that contribute to the chance of getting a job, such as the economic conditions, job seeker qualifications, and hiring discrimination (Wanberg et al., 2002). Other factors that play a role are individual differences in *how* job seekers spend their job search time. Previous research (Kanfer et al., 2001) has conceptualized job search behavior as a pattern of thinking, affect, and behavior that can be evaluated along three different dimensions: (a) intensity-effort (frequency and effort with which job seekers engage in job search activities), (b) content-direction (the activities job seekers engage in and the quality of these activities), and (c) temporal-persistence (job seekers' persistence and how the job search is changed over time). The intensity-effort dimension reflects *how much* job seekers search in terms of time and effort, reflecting job search quantity, whereas the other two dimensions exemplify *how* job seekers search, reflecting job search quality. While much of the job search literature has focused on job search quantity, relatively less attention has been given to job search quality (Van Hooft, Wanberg, & Van Hoyer, 2013; Van Hoyer, 2018; Wanberg, 2012). The focus on quantity is also reflected in unemployment policies. For example, in The Netherlands to receive unemployment benefits, unemployed people have an application requirement (i.e., "sollicitatieplicht") that dictates the *number* of job search activities that recipients of unemployment benefits have to engage in monthly (UWV, 2019).

However, the other job search components, *how* people are searching, are also important. Intuitively it makes sense that *how* job seekers search is an important predictor of job search success. Searching in the wrong place or sending poor applications likely negatively influences people's chances of finding a job. Various

scholars have coined the notion of job search quality (i.e., Saks, 2005; Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009; Van Hooft, Van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009; Vinokur & Schul, 2002; Vuori & Vinokur, 2005; Wanberg et al., 2002; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000) and recent theorizing has conceptualized job search quality and emphasized its importance for finding a job (Van Hooft et al., 2013). There is however still limited empirical research that tests the presumed relation between job search quality and (re)employment success.

To be able to inform job seekers on how to spend their time effectively to secure a job and avoid the negative consequences of unemployment, it is important that we move beyond job search quantity (i.e., job search time, effort, and intensity) and increase our understanding about how job seekers can improve their job search quality. In the present dissertation, I broaden the construct space of job search by integrating theorizing on the content and persistence dimensions of job search (Kanfer et al., 2001) with theorizing on job search quality (Van Hooft et al., 2013). I identify *job search systematicity* as an indicator of job search quality and assess its predictors and outcomes. A highly systematic way of searching indicates an adaptable and persistent approach towards job seeking. This involves actively seeking ways to improve search behavior and adjusting the search strategy based on what is learned and persisting even when this was hard. A non-systematic way of searching is at the other end of the spectrum of systematicity and reflects less adaptable and persistent behavior.

By identifying ways to become more effective in the job search process, job seekers can be helped to optimize their chances to find a job. To the extent that effective job search results in perceived progress towards the employment goal, progress perceptions can temper the distress associated with (looming) unemployment (Wanberg et al., 2010). Unfortunately, there are still factors outside of job seekers' control which make that perceiving progress during job search is not always a given. Therefore, in the

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next part I examined how job seekers can emotionally cope with difficulties and lack of progress.

### **Job Search as Source of Agony**

Job search is a lengthy and complex process towards a rather distal goal (Van Hooft et al., 2013). Engaging in job search places people in uncertain, competitive situations and challenges them to engage in novel, non-routine activities for which they have limited skilled experience (Noordzij, Van Hooft, Van Mierlo, Van Dam, & Born, 2013; Van Hooft, 2018a; Wanberg, 2012). For job seekers there is no clear pathway towards finding employment and they receive little feedback along the way. It is often unclear what has to be done to meet the requirements of recruiting parties, and actions to find reemployment are often unsuccessful (Wanberg, Basbug, Van Hooft, & Samtani, 2012). Some job seekers experience job search as a “black hole” that swallows efforts and energy without returning a positive outcome (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012). As a consequence of the uncertainty, difficulties, setbacks, and repeated rejections associated with job search, rather than relieving job seekers of distress, job search can form an additional source of agony. The more time job seekers engage in job search, the more negative job search experiences they encounter, and the worse they feel (Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009). Consequently, many studies found an inverse relation between job search effort and mental health (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005).

**Emotions during job search.** Many people experience negative emotions at some point in the job search process, which also puts an emotional strain on their families (e.g., Song, Foo, Uy, & Sun, 2011; Song et al., 2009). However, while negative emotions are overrepresented during job search, especially positive emotions have been found to help attaining job search success (Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Turban, Lee, Da Motta Veiga, Haggard, & Wu, 2013; Turban, Stevens, & Lee, 2009). Hence, although job search is necessary and increases the likelihood of finding a job, it may also hamper finding

a job when it is associated with negative rather than positive emotions.

While studies on job search typically distinguish between positive and negative emotions, contemporary emotion research adheres to a two-dimensional structure of emotions (Russell, 2003; Yik, Russell, & Steiger, 2011) and affect (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1998), characterized by hedonic tone (i.e., positive vs. negative) and activation level (i.e., activating vs. deactivating). Negative affect can have a high (e.g., feeling distressed) or low (e.g., feeling down) activation level, and positive affect can have a high (e.g., feeling energized) or low (e.g., feeling at ease) activation level (Yik et al., 2011). In the present dissertation I apply this two-dimensional model of affect by taking activation level into account. As such, I align my conceptualization of affect with the increasing amount of literature distinguishing activating and deactivating affect (e.g., Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Carver, 2004; Taylor, 1991; Watson & Tellegen, 1985; Wrzus, Luong, Wagner, & Riediger, 2015). Throughout all studies in this dissertation I make this distinction to examine whether the results differ for activating and deactivating affect.

Surprisingly, little research has examined how negative affect can be reduced and positive affect can be fostered during job search. In order for job seekers to effectively search for a job and avoid the negative consequences of unemployment it is highly important that we identify emotional coping mechanisms that job seekers can use to reduce negative affect and sustain positive affect when dealing with negative job search experiences. Beneficial emotion-focused coping involves identifying, understanding, and expressing emotions in a psychologically adaptive way (Pennebaker, 1993; Stanton, Danoff-Burg, Cameron, & Ellis, 1994). In the present dissertation I introduce self-compassion to the job search literature as an adaptive coping mechanism to deal with negative job search experiences.



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### **Self-Compassion**

Self-compassion is an example of adaptive emotion-focused coping (Neff, 2003a), with its origins in Buddhist tradition. Taken into contemporary western psychology, it entails three basic components: “1) self-kindness—extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism; 2) common humanity—seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating; and 3) mindfulness—holding one’s painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them” (Neff, 2003a, p. 89). Self-compassion has been shown to be beneficial for people who experience negative events such as receiving unfavorable feedback or academic failure (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005).

In the present dissertation, I examine whether a self-compassioned mindset can function as an adaptive emotion-focused strategy to deal with negative job search experiences. In two correlational studies, I study self-compassion as a trait and test the extent to which this trait benefits job seekers in dealing with their negative job search experiences. Subsequently, because previous research has shown that self-compassion can be induced (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007; Breines & Chen, 2012; J. W. Zhang & Chen, 2016) and is trainable (Adams & Leary, 2007; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010), I conduct a field experiment. I test whether self-compassion can indeed be increased by an online intervention, and whether it impacts job seekers’ affective responses to their negative job search experiences. I further examine self-criticism as underlying mechanism to explain the positive effects of self-compassion. Practically, showing that a self-compassioned mindset can be taught to job seekers and can buffer the negative affective consequences of job search experiences opens up the possibility to equip job seekers with a mindset that helps them to cope with these experiences.

## **Negative Job search Experiences: Content and Consequences**

The fact that job search is often accompanied by negative job search experiences and that these experiences negatively impact job seekers' wellbeing has been recognized in the field (e.g., Klehe & Van Hooft, 2018; Song et al., 2009; Wanberg, 2012; Wanberg et al., 2010). These negative experiences are mostly operationalized in general terms such as job search difficulties or lack of job search progress (Kreemers, Van Hooft, & Van Vianen, 2018; Song et al., 2009; Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). Although this is useful for quantitative examination, these generic measures do not offer in-depth knowledge about the specific negative events that job seekers encounter. Also, such generic measures do not allow for examining whether specific (categories of) events relate to different affective and behavioral responses. This in-depth knowledge is, however, worthwhile because it can enrich theory on the link between events and emotions. Further, it can inform job search professionals about the difficulties that job seekers encounter in specific stages of the job search process and the types of support they may need. This knowledge can also inform hiring parties in the labor market about the impact that their hiring practices can have on job seekers' experiences and associated emotions, and consequently on an organization's attractiveness as an employer (Anderson, Salgado, & Hulsheger, 2010; Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). Therefore, in this dissertation, I explore the specific content of job seekers' negative job search experiences.

## **Overview of this Dissertation**

The ultimate goal of the studies presented in this dissertation is to explore how job seekers can effectively spend their time on job search and deal with negative job search experiences, as such extending theory on job search. This dissertation is built around four empirical chapters presenting research findings from samples of job seekers who were actively searching for a job.

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Chapter 2 addresses the first two research questions by examining how job seekers can effectively search for a job and which factors predict that way of searching. In this chapter, I broaden existing approaches to studying the concept of job search behavior by identifying job search systematicity as a problem-based coping strategy to deal with the unpleasant situation of being or becoming unemployed. In a 5-wave diary ( $N = 217$ ) study I examine both predictors (i.e., goal clarity, goal valence, and different types of affect) and outcomes (job attainment) of job search systematicity.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the third research question by examining an emotion-focused coping strategy, self-compassion, that can help job seekers deal with their negative job search experiences. Chapter 3 presents findings from a cross-sectional study (Study 3.1;  $N = 99$ ) and from a 5-wave diary study (Study 3.2;  $N = 227$ ; i.e., part of the Chapter 2 study) investigating the role of trait self-compassion for job seekers' (de)activating positive and negative affect. Chapter 4 involves an intervention study ( $N = 180$ ) aiming to replicate and extend the findings reported in Chapter 3. This intervention study used an online writing exercise to test whether job seekers' self-compassion can be increased and whether this positively impacts their affect. Furthermore, this intervention study tests whether this positive influence on affect can be explained through reduced self-criticism.

The study presented in Chapter 5 addresses the fourth research question by examining negative job search experiences in more detail. This study entails a qualitative analysis of anecdotes ( $N = 192$ ) of negative job search experiences that job seekers were asked to describe and their reports of the specific emotions and behaviors that followed these experiences.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I discuss and integrate the main conclusions of the preceding chapters along with implications for theory and practice. I finish this dissertation giving suggestions for future research.