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Wendy R. Boswell
Texas A&M University

John W. Boudreau
Cornell University

Benjamin B. Dunford
Cornell University

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Keywords
employee, job, behavior, job search, research, manager, model

Comments

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CAHRS
Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies

CAHRS / Cornell University
187 Ives Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853-3901 USA
Tel. 607 255-9358
www.ilr.cornell.edu/CAHRS/

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Wendy R. Boswell
Department of Management
Lowry Mays College & Graduate School of Business
Texas A&M University

John W. Boudreau & Benjamin B. Dunford
Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies
School of Industrial & Labor Relations
Cornell University

September 12, 2001

http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrs

This paper has not undergone formal review or approval of the faculty of the ILR School. It is intended to make results of Center research available to others interested in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions.

Abstract

This research expands the notion of “job search” beyond traditional models of searching for an alternative yet similar job, arguing that motivations for search are varied. Specifically, we investigate whether search objectives associate with use of different search processes. A study of high-level managers found mixed support for the hypotheses.

This research was supported by a grant from the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) at Cornell University.

The Relationship between Job Search Objectives and Job Search Behavior

Traditional turnover models assume that people search to find an alternative job and that search is a precursor to turnover (Hom & Griffeth, 1995). Yet, individuals' search objectives may include much more than simply moving to a new job. Job search may serve to obtain leverage against the current employer, to expand professional relationships, or simply to stay aware of opportunities. Moreover, search has important implications beyond its relationship to turnover. For example, the time and energy saved when individuals search less may be put to other task-related uses (March & Simon, 1958). In addition, searching may create detachment from the current organization thus reducing commitment and fostering psychological and behavioral withdrawal.

Even when individuals do search with the intent to leave, they may not aspire to obtain a similar position in another organization, as is commonly assumed (Schwab, Rynes, & Aldag, 1987). Individuals may also search for jobs outside their current profession, as evidenced by recent discussions on the permeability of careers (see Sullivan, 1999, for a review of changing nature of careers). The emergence of a growing population of more financially secure workers (Bryant, 1999) suggests that individuals may increasingly explore alternative vocations such as not-for-profit work. Prior research has failed to investigate alternative objectives for job search. While prior research has assessed job search behavior, withdrawal intentions, and actual departure from the organization, no prior research has assessed alternative search objectives. We believe a broader perspective of job search objectives will add to the applied psychological literature by revealing patterns in search activities ignored in traditional research focused only on job changes.

We focus specifically on how different search objectives relate to job search behaviors. Prior research has recognized that there are different types of job search. Blau (1993, 1994), for example, distinguished two search dimensions – "preparatory" search examines whether

desirable alternatives exist, and "active" search attempts to determine the actual availability of those alternatives to the individual. The key finding was that two dimensions were distinct, and that they had different antecedents and outcomes. For example, research suggests a more proximal (and stronger) link between turnover and active search versus preparatory search (Blau, 1993; Somers & Birnbaum, 2000). Extending this general finding we expect that an employees' job search objectives will associate with the incidence of active and/or preparatory search behaviors.

In sum, the present research investigates whether job search objectives associate with different job search processes (i.e., active vs. preparatory search). We expand the "job search" construct in two ways. First, we examine several purposes of search activity that do not involve leaving the employer (e.g., negotiating leverage, keeping abreast of opportunities), and second we include employment alternatives beyond the traditional assumption of an alternative yet similar job. We investigate these issues using a sample of high-level managers. Research on high-level managers is important because these are high-demand/high-impact employees, the kind of roles that are increasingly the battleground in the talent war (Boudreau, Boswell, Judge, & Bretz, 2001; Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994). Moreover, the nature of executive work and careers suggests such individuals likely engage in search activity with varying motives in mind.

Job Search Objectives and Job Search Activity

There are various objectives for engaging in job search. Though we focus on specific job search objectives drawn from prior research and theory (discussed next), we also ask respondents to list additional reasons for engaging in search activity to better ensure that important job search objectives were not overlooked.

Turnover Destinations

As noted above, job search is often viewed as a precursor to turnover (e.g., Blau, 1994; Bretz et al., 1994). There is debate as to whether decisions to leave come before or after the onset of the search process. For example, Mobley's (1977) seminal turnover process model proposed that job dissatisfaction stimulates thoughts of quitting and search for alternatives,

which then leads to intention to quit if the search for alternatives is successful. However, path analytic tests suggest intent to quit (or withdrawal cognition) precedes job search behavior and that job search has a direct effect on turnover (e.g., Hom, Caranikas-Walker, Prussia, & Griffeth, 1992; Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Hom, Griffeth, & Sellaro, 1984). More recently, research by Lee and colleagues (e.g., Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, & Hill, 1999) suggests the withdrawal processes can follow multiple routes and that search and separation are part of complex processes involving "a larger set of ongoing decisions about life" (Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996, p.33). Yet regardless of the causal model, there appears to be general agreement that individuals often search to identify alternatives prior to leaving an organization.

Though prior research suggests a relationship between search and subsequent turnover, whether search behavior varies by the intended destination has not been fully explored in prior research. Though traditional search and turnover models are relatively silent on this issue, most implicitly assume that individuals leave for a similar job (i.e., in the same profession) in a new organization. This focus may reflect the assumption that such turnover is more addressable by organization decisions. Yet, individuals may leave for a variety of alternatives, including a career change. Both destinations likely require active search in order to obtain the new employment. Of the search objectives investigated in this study (discussed next), we expect searching to leave for a new job or to make a career change to most strongly associate with active search (Hypothesis 1).

Turnover may also result in movement out of the traditional workforce such as beginning a foundation or charity. This situation has become more prevalent in recent years given increased employee wealth often due to stock options (Porter & Kramer, 1999). Such wealth may be particularly likely at the highest echelons in the company such as that investigated here. An individual planning a move to volunteer work would be unlikely to engage in active search (e.g., sending out a resume or contacting a search firm) because volunteer positions are unlikely to be filled through a competitive process. Still, individuals must plan for such a change,

perhaps even more stringently than for a move to a similar position, so they are likely to conduct preparatory search behaviors to assess opportunities and gather information.

An individual may also leave an organization to start his/her own company. Again, this may be particularly relevant to high-level employees who perhaps have the desire and means for self-employment. In this case search is likely to focus on assessing the opportunities within the industry and sizing up the "competition." It may also provide an opportunity to expand professional relationships (discussed below) and build social bridges (Birley, 1985). As noted by Carroll and Teo (1996), self-employment is likely to involve extensive communication, information transmission, and reduction of environmental uncertainties through social bridges. Individuals hoping to start their own company, like those moving into volunteer work, will likely search in order to gather information or assess opportunities, which is characteristic of preparatory job search (Blau, 1993; Soelberg, 1967). We expect searching to start volunteer work or a new company to be more strongly associated with preparatory search than active search (Hypothesis 2).

Search Objectives other than Turnover

Network/expand professional relations. Search does not always result in turnover (Boudreau et al., 2001), so it seems logical that search objectives may include purposes other than leaving the job. For example, search activity may be a means to develop or expand professional relationships. Social ties are important to individual careers (e.g., Burt, 1997; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2000), and the sample investigated here may be particularly sensitive to developing social ties due to the nature of executive work and careers (Carroll & Teo, 1996). Individuals searching to enhance networks may be less likely to engage in preparatory search since they would not necessarily be interested in gathering information about jobs or assessing the job market. Rather, we would expect such individuals to engage in active search behaviors which involve actually meeting others in the profession or those with ties to their career (e.g., headhunters). Thus, searching to network/expand

professional relationships should be more strongly associated with active search than preparatory search (Hypothesis 3).

Stay aware of opportunities. Turnover models suggest that employees assess the available alternatives prior to quitting (e.g., Mobley, 1977; Steers & Mowday, 1981) and prior research consistently shows a positive relation between perceived opportunities and subsequent turnover (e.g., Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Yet research has not explicitly investigated whether individuals engage in job search with the specific objective to stay abreast of alternatives. This objective may be particularly related to preparatory search because individuals are most likely interested in whether other opportunities exist rather than actually obtaining new employment. Thus we expect searching to stay aware of opportunities to be more strongly associated with preparatory search than active search (Hypothesis 4).

Prepare for job loss. Preparing for potential job loss is related to staying aware of alternatives, but preparing for job loss suggests insecurity about the job or the future of the company rather than simply wanting to be informed of what else is out there. Searching to be prepared for job loss likely associates with a greater sense of urgency and thus should associate more with active search behavior to better ensure alternative employment. Searching to be prepared in case of job loss or the company falters should associate more strongly with active search compared to searching to simply stay aware of alternative opportunities (Hypothesis 5).

Obtain leverage against employer. Research shows that when negotiating, possession of alternatives increases one's outcomes (Pinkley, Neale, & Bennett, 1994). Consistent with this, alternative job offers may be used as bargaining leverage to improve an existing employment situation (e.g., Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Research has assessed whether individuals obtain multiple offers to use as leverage against a prospective employer, and we propose that the same logic applies to those seeking leverage against a current employer. This suggests an employee would have to engage in active search to obtain a credible alternative thereby enhancing bargaining leverage. Thus, we expect searching to obtain

leverage to be more strongly associated with active search than preparatory search (Hypothesis 6).

Method

Sample and Procedure

Surveys were sent to 11,968 high-level managers contained in the database of Ray & Berndtson executive search firm. It should be noted that this search firm's clients are the companies searching for employees. The search firm does not accept resumes or applications from managers searching for jobs; rather, it identifies potential candidates in response to client needs by examining publicly available information (e.g., proxy material, professional association mailing lists). Thus there is no reason to expect that participants of this study have higher turnover intent or are searching more actively than the general population of U.S. managers.

Questionnaires were prepared and mailed by the search firm. Participants were instructed to return the survey (business reply envelope included) directly to the researchers, under assurances of strict confidentially. A total of 1,601 subjects responded to the survey (13.38% response rate). Respondents were primarily married (90%) and male (89%), and had been in their jobs an average of 2.7 years and in their present organization 5.5 years. The average respondent had a yearly total compensation (base plus bonus) of $236,188, and was two levels below the CEO. Due to the moderate response rate, we assessed whether respondents were representative of nonrespondents by comparing the two groups on information contained in the search firm's database (e.g., salary, demographics, company size). The only statistically significant difference was for age (respondent mean=49.15, non-respondent mean=50.00).

Measures

Job search objectives. Nine job search objectives were included on the survey (see the bottom nine rows of Table 1 for the items). These objectives were drawn from prior research and theory and based on our discussion with top managers at the participant search firm Respondents were also provided the opportunity to list additional objectives for their search

activity. These responses failed to reveal any additional search objectives. Respondents either re-stated an objective already listed or provided an explanation for why they were dissatisfied with their current situation rather than a search objective (e.g., “My talents are underutilized”). Respondents were asked the extent to which each item explained their objective for engaging in any job search in the last 6 months (1=to no extent, 4=to a great extent). A Likert scale was used rather than a dichotomized yes/no response format because we were interested in the degree to which each objective was the reason for job search, and that individuals would vary in the degree to which a particular search objective was important. The 6-month time period was used to be consistent with the job search activity measure discussed next.

Job search activity. Active (e.g., “Sent out resume to a potential employers”; coefficient alpha [α]=.84) and preparatory job search (e.g., “Talked to friends or relatives about possible job leads” α=.76) were assessed using Blau’s (1993) measure. Consistent with prior research using this measure, respondents were asked how frequently they engaged in each behavior in the past 6 months (1=Never/0 times, 5=Very Frequently/at least 10 times).

Results

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. As shown in the table, respondents reported search for a variety of reasons. There was moderate correlation between many of the job search objectives indicating individuals tend to search with multiple objectives in mind.

We also regressed active and preparatory search on the array of search objectives (see Table 2). This analysis was mainly for exploratory purposes, and is useful in assessing the relative effects of the job search objectives. As shown in the table, searching to obtain a new position in similar line of work, change careers, start a new company, and prepare for job loss significantly associated with both search activity dimensions, networking was significantly related only to preparatory search, and start a new vocation was significantly (and negatively) related only to active search. These findings indicate that active and preparatory job search behaviors vary with search objectives, and that searching for reasons such as to network,

prepare for job loss, and make a career change are important predictors of search activity over and above the effect for searching to find a new position in a similar line of work.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that searching to find a new job and searching to make a career change would be more strongly related to active search than the other search objectives. We assessed this hypothesis by comparing the correlations between active job search and each of the search objectives. As shown in Table 1, the correlation between the objective "leave for a new job" and active search (r=.48, p<.01) was higher than the other search objectives. Steiger's (1980) test for the significance of the difference between dependent correlations indicated that the correlation between this search objective and active search was significantly higher (p<.01) than the correlations between the other search objectives and active search. Regarding the objective, "to make a career change," the correlation with active search (r=.20, p<.01) was higher than the other search objectives, even though it was lower than "searching to find a new job." Steiger's test revealed that the correlation was significantly higher than the four of the other search objectives with the exception of networking, being prepared in case of job loss, and staying aware of alternative opportunities. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. The regression analysis supported these results (see Table 2). When active search was regressed on the nine search objectives, searching to find a new job and make a career change were most strongly related to active search (β=.44 & .16, p<.01, respectively).

Hypothesis 2 proposed that searching with the objective to start volunteer work or start a company would associate more strongly with preparatory search than active search. This hypothesis was supported. As shown in Table 1, "searching to begin volunteer work" correlated positively and significantly more strongly with preparatory search than active search (r=.08, p<.01; r=.02, n.s., respectively). "Searching to start a company" positively and significantly correlated with both preparatory and active search (r=.19 & .13, p<.01, respectively), but the correlation with preparatory search was significantly higher (p<.01).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations between Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Preparatory search	12.48	4.76	----									
2 Active search	10.00	4.67	.77**	----								
3 New position/same line of work	2.36	1.15	.50**	.48**	----							
4 Career change	1.58	.88	.26**	.20**	.11**	----						
5 Network/expand relationships	2.17	1.00	.30**	.17**	.20**	.19**	----					
6 Obtain leverage	1.29	.62	.09**	.03	.07**	.01	.18**	----				
7 New vocation (e.g., charity)	1.22	.59	.08**	.02	-.02	.43**	.12**	.05	----			
8 Start new company	1.53	.86	.19**	.13**	.07**	.24**	.26**	.08**	.22**	----		
9 Stay aware of alternatives	2.48	1.02	.32**	.19**	.30**	.13**	.41**	.20**	.04	.17**	----	
10 Prepared for job loss	2.09	1.06	.31**	.18**	.23**	.06*	.30**	.19**	.04	.10**	.52**	----
11 Prepared for company falter	2.12	1.10	.27**	.17**	.28**	.09**	.26**	.17**	.05*	.19**	.48**	.56**

Note: Listwise deletion yielded n=1490; **p<.01; *p<.05

Hypothesis 3 proposed that searching to network/expand professional relationships would associate with greater active search than preparatory search. Table 1 shows a positive correlation between "searching to network or expand professional relationships" and both preparatory and active search (r=.30 & .17, p<.01, respectively), with the correlation involving preparatory search significantly higher (p<.01), contrary to the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4 and 5 involved the objectives "to stay aware of alternatives," "searching to be prepared for job loss," and "searching in case the company falters." In support of Hypothesis 4, searching to stay aware of alternative opportunities correlated more strongly (p<.01) with preparatory search than active search (r=.32 &.19, p<.01, respectively). Searching in case of job loss or the company faltering were also more strongly related to preparatory search (r=.31 & .27, p<.01, respectively) than active search (r=.18 & .17, p<.01, respectively). However, contrary to Hypothesis 5, searching out of concern of job loss or the company faltering did not associate more strongly with active search compared to searching to stay aware of opportunities. Though not significantly different, the correlation between active search and searching to stay aware of opportunities was higher than both concern over job loss and company faltering.

Finally, Hypothesis 6 proposed that searching to obtain leverage would more strongly associate with active search than preparatory search. This hypothesis was not supported. Searching to obtain leverage was not significantly correlated with active search (r=.03, n.s.) but was positively correlated with preparatory search (r=.09, p<.01). Results of the regression analysis (Table 2) also indicate a null effect for "searching to obtain leverage" on active search.

Table 2

Job Search Objectives Predicting Active and Preparatory Job Search

Variable	Active	Preparatory
New position/same line of work	.44**	.40**
Career change	.16**	.17**
Network/expand relationships	.04	.11**
Obtain leverage	-.02	.00
New vocation (e.g., charity)	-.06*	-.03
Start new company	.07**	.08**
Stay aware of alternatives	-.01	.05
Prepared for job loss	.08**	.16**
Prepared for company falter	-.03	.00
R^2	.27	.35
F	59.74**	88.59**

Note. Standardized betas are shown. **p<.01; *p<.05

Discussion

Results from this study provided mixed support for the hypotheses. As expected, searching with the objective to find a new job was more strongly correlated with active search than the other search objectives investigated in this study. Also as expected, the search objectives to start volunteer work or a new company, to stay aware of alternative opportunities, or searching in case of job loss or the company falters were more strongly associated with preparatory search than active search. Interestingly, the search objectives to network/expand professional relations or to obtain leverage were also more strongly associated with preparatory than active search, suggesting that the search objectives investigated here were generally more predictive of preparatory than active types of search behavior. Indeed, active search was most strongly related to searching to find a new position, which is consistent with prior work showing a strong relationship between active search and actual turnover (Blau, 1993, 1994; Sommers, 2000).

Future Research

Our results demonstrate the value of an expanded concept of search objectives, particularly in explaining the purposes of preparatory search. The finding that search activity varies with search objectives suggests that future research might also examine whether search outcomes vary with search objectives. For example, employees who search to network may be less likely to actually leave an organization and/or experience a change in satisfaction level if they stay. However, employees that search with the intent to turnover should be more likely to leave, and if not, be less satisfied with the job in which they remain.

We focused on active and preparatory job search dimensions due to existing research supporting the distinction between and validity of the dimensions. Future research might find it useful to adopt finer distinctions among behaviors. For example, there may be a significant difference between how searching “to network” relates to “sending out resumes to potential employers” behavior versus how it relates to “interviewing for a job,” both considered active search behaviors.

Finally, this research explored the relation between job search objectives and search behavior yet it is also important to understand why search objectives vary. Individual differences and situational characteristics may help explain why some employees engage in job search with the intent to find a new job while others search with alternative objectives as well as why some employees who desire to leave actually leave, but others stay and perhaps remain dissatisfied.

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