



JOB SEARCH AND JOB CHOICE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED EMPLOYEES

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JOB SEARCH AND JOB CHOICE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
COLLEGE-EDUCATED EMPLOYEES

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JOB SEARCH AND JOB CHOICE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COLLEGE-
EDUCATED EMPLOYEES

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How do employed persons think about job searching? This dissertation draws on an analysis of decision process research and two qualitative studies to answer this question. The study explores the factors that lead employees to begin their job search and the way employees represent their job searches.

Previous literature on job search and job choice has been developed in the context of unemployed job losers and unemployed new labor market entrants. In addition, turnover research has focused mostly on factors that cause employees to leave their current position, giving little attention to employees who do not leave but still search. This study argues that employees face a unique decision situation and their job searches. Employees' situations are unique because they do not have a set starting point for job searching, they may not dislike their current position.

This dissertation is a contribution to the literature on job search and voluntary turnover. The dissertation inductively explored the factors that prompt employees to search for new employment, the way employees structure the employment decision problem, and their motivations driving their decisions and behaviors.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Adam Michael Kanar grew up in Broadview Heights, Ohio in the United States. He studied at Bowling Green State University where he received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Economics in 2002. Adam has been a doctoral student at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University since June 2004. He defended his dissertation on July 6th, 2010. After leaving Cornell in August of 2010, he has worked as an Assistant Professor of Human Resources at Brock University in Canada.

To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I regard myself as very fortunate to have had the opportunity to have studied at such a great university and worked alongside very gifted people and researchers. I am grateful for the support that I received from my colleagues, friends and family – without whom I would have never completed my dissertation. I would like to thank them in this acknowledgement. I thank Chris Collins and the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) for their financial support of this study. The work contained herein is my own and neither CAHRS nor Chris Collins is responsible for the study design, the results, or my interpretation of the results of this study.

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CHAPTER 1

THE JOB CHOICE CONSTRUCT

Employees' decisions of where and when to work are fundamental to human resource management research. All employees go through some process of finding and accepting employment and hence job choice decisions the gateway between people and their workplaces. The topics of job search and job choice have generated substantial research attention from multiple disciplines—especially labor economics (Lippman & McCall, 1976), psychology (Rynes, Schwab, & Aldag, 1987), and sociology (Granovetter, 1995). Each discipline has greatly advanced our understanding of job search behavior.

Unfortunately, the major job choice models in each discipline face serious threats to internal and external validity. Most macro-level models take the perspective of hiring organizations and conceptualize job search as a static process, while ignoring the job searcher's perspective and the often dynamic and unfolding nature of job choice (Rynes & Barber, 1990). Job search models at the individual level of analysis have been developed almost exclusively using college-educated new labor market entrants (Chapman et al., 2005; Kanfer et al., 2001), a population that often faces different decision situations than employed job searchers and labor market re-entrants. These problems have led to several problems, such as 1) job choice decisions have been studied as if they are separate from the often identical constructs (e.g., voluntary turnover decisions, career decisions), 2) job choice is studied as if it were a static process, 3) most theoretical models assume that a person is already searching and ignore factors that may prompt a person to begin searching (Steele, 2002).

Researchers in other disciplines have advanced decision process models (e.g., Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998: consumer choice). However, job choice needs its own decision framework because it is a unique type of decision. First, accepting a job offer

represents the beginning of a relationship and often ends another relationship. Second, job choice decisions are dependent on a person's career trajectory. Third, job choice is a high-stakes, unstructured decision that overlaps with other major life decisions and often involves multiple parties. In this paper I make an initial step toward a more general and parsimonious model of job choice by clarifying fundamental constructs in job search and job choice theory. Then, starting from the conceptual definition, I elaborate critical pieces of a decision process model.

Job choice decisions

Job choice decisions have been defined as accepting or rejecting a job offer from an organization (Breugh & Starke, 2000; Chapman et al., 2005; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001). This is an important outcome in human resource management research because it represents the necessary first step that a person takes to become an employee at an organization. Therefore, the job choice construct is in a prime position in human resource management research because it comes before all subsequent the interactions between employees and their employers. Indeed, scholars have argued that recruitment is the sole human resource management function that can lead to organizations' sustained competitive advantage by influencing the job choice decisions of top talent (Taylor & Collins, 1999).

Despite its importance, empirical studies seldom measure applicants' actual job choice decisions. A meta-analysis of 73 of empirical applicant attraction studies found that only 17 out of the 73 eligible studies had measured applicants' job choice decisions (i.e., decisions to accept a job offer; Chapman et al., 2005). Researchers usually respond by calling for future studies to assess applicants' actual job choice decisions (Breugh & Starke, 2000; Chapman et al., 2005; Rynes, 1991). Despite the restricted population represented in the meta analysis (i.e., most college student samples), Chapman and colleagues (2005) found few statistically significant

predictors of job choice decisions. For example, of the predictors tested in their meta-analysis, hiring expectancy, was the most strongly predictor of applicants' job choice decisions but only explained three percent of the variance in job choice (Chapman et al., 2005). Their meta-analysis also showed that the characteristics of the job (e.g., advancement opportunities) and the hiring organization explained less than three percent of the variance in job searchers' actual job choice decisions. This is important because scholars have given job and organizational attributes substantial attention over the past few decades (Barber, 1998) and practitioners prescribe that organizations emphasize the job and company attributes that applicants find most desirable (e.g., Towers Perrin, 2006). Chapman and colleagues' results show that researchers and practitioners have limited knowledge of antecedents of job choice, even in the population of college students.

The weak statistical relationships suggest the need for a vastly reworked model. For example, job seekers' attitudes towards companies as potential employers (i.e., organizational attraction) explained only three percent of the variance in job choice decisions. This effect size is meaningful because similar meta-analytic relationships between attitudes (i.e., satisfaction) and employment outcomes in the context of voluntary employee turnover (Hom & Griffeth, 1995) led to a paradigm change in turnover research (Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

Chapman and colleagues (2005) suggested that the weak relationships between predictors and job choice decisions resulted from both statistical and methodological issues inherent in applicant attraction research. First, job choice is usually measured as a dichotomous variable, and the distributions of continuous and dichotomous variables limit point-biserial correlations to a ceiling of around .80. This suggests that operationalizing job choice as a dichotomous acceptance decisions may present statistical limitations to advances in job choice research. I return to this issue in the

next section. Second, job choice decisions are the result of decisions made by both applicants and organizations. Therefore, job seekers may reject a company because they may not expect to receive a job offer, despite being attracted towards the company (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996). This would reduce the observed relationship between attraction and choice (Chapman et al., 2005). Third, applicants may self-select out of the recruitment process prior to receiving a job offer, leading to range restriction for the predictors of job choice (Chapman et al., 2005). The second and third limitations directly concern the process of job choice decision making. In the next section I suggest that defining job choice decisions in a way that is consistent with the process of job choice may overcome each of these problems, clarify the concept of job choice decisions, and also lead to interesting new research directions.

Job choice in a process perspective

Recruitment, job search, and job choice decisions inherently unfold over time and have consequences over time. For example, empirical research has shown that, in certain circumstances, a job seeker may 1) accept a job offer with an organization but renege a few days later (e.g., Ivancevich & Donnely, 1971), 2) implicitly choose to accept a job offer but may continue to actively search for employment (Soelberg, 1967), and 3) change the way that he or she searches over time (Barber et al., 1994). Job choice decisions are tied to the decision process that occurs before and after job offer acceptances. A job choice construct that is incompatible with a decision process is therefore mis-specified. Job choice models must therefore explicitly incorporate time (i.e., it must be a process model).

Unfortunately, the process of job choice decision making has received surprisingly limited research attention (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001). The most comprehensive and widely cited job choice decision process model is Soelberg's (1967) generalized decision process (GDP) model. Soelberg developed the GDP

model through in-depth interviews with graduate-level job seekers at an elite university in the mid 1960s. Unfortunately, only a small part of Soelberg's full theoretical model was tested and published (Powers & Aldag, 1985). The last major review of conceptual and empirical research related to Soelberg's GDP model was overwhelmingly negative, referring to portions of the GDP model as contradictory and uninterpretable (Powers & Aldag, 1985). The major implication of Powers and Aldag's (1985) critique was that the portions of the GDP model that have been tested have received mixed support and empirical tests of the full model may be difficult or impossible.

Researchers have also proposed and tested other job search and job choice process models (Barber, Daly, Giantonno, & Phillips, 1994; Chapman et al., 2005; Kanfer et al., 2001; Sauerman, 2005; Vroom, 1966). Unfortunately these models rarely focus on the conceptual underpinning of the job choice construct and either operationalize decisions as dichotomous job offer acceptances, use a proxy such as intentions to accept an offer, or use dichotomous employment status outcomes (i.e., employed or not employed). Further, only a few of these models were longitudinal (i.e., assess outcomes at three or more occasions), were tested in populations other than college business majors, or have conceptually or incorporated important constructs such as events and related event sequences—hallmarks of process theory and methods. Clarifying the role of time in job choice by grounding the job choice construct in a decision process model could further advance the contribution of earlier models.

Decision process models have been conceptualized in the judgment and decision making, strategic management, and consumer behavior research streams (e.g., Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993). Almost all major decision process models consist of multiple decision-making phases (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1999;

Mintzberg, 1975; Simon, 1957; Soelberg, 1967; Svenson, 1996), yet few scholars agree on the precise number of decision making phases to include in the models. Most scholars recognize phases for 1) recognizing or defining the decision problem and goals, 2) generating alternatives, 3) evaluating alternatives, and 4) making a decision by committing to one alternative (Russo & Carlson, 2001). The first two phases—goals and problem representation and alternative generation—are characteristic of problem solving, and the last two phases—alternative evaluation and decision making—are typically thought of as decision making (Russo & Carlson, 2001). Decision process models vary by whether they include intermediate phases between these phases, transitions between the phases, or post-decision processes. Important to all of these phase-based models is that the phases are interrelated and recursive. For example, as a decision maker learns from experience and changes his goals and the way he or she thinks about the decision problem.

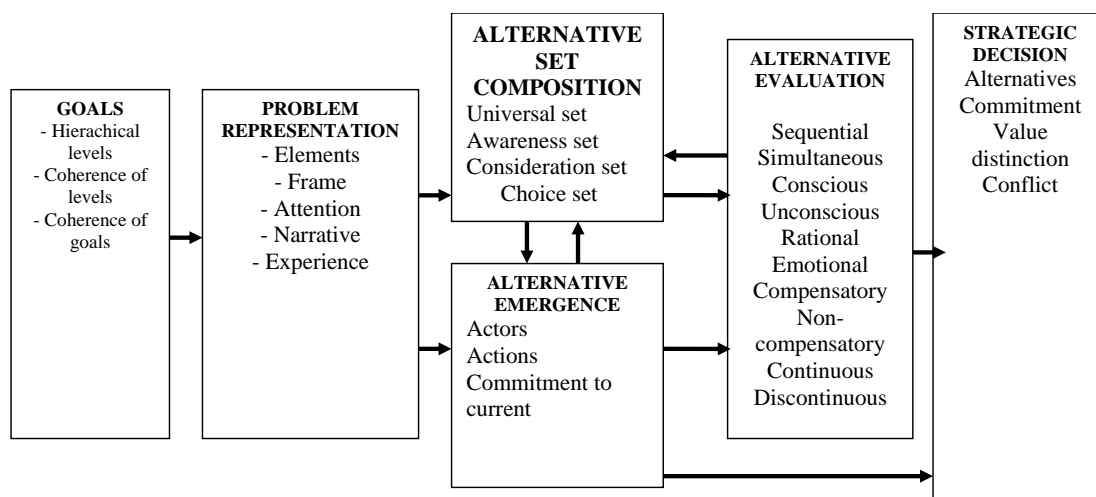


FIGURE 1. JOB CHOICE DECISION PROCESS MODEL

Figure 1 shows a very broad decision process model that I have adapted to capture the process of job search and job choice. Note that I have substituted a phase called “emerging alternatives” in place of “generating alternatives” because studies using representative samples of U.S. citizens have found that at least one third of job finding occurs without volitional job search (for a review see Granovetter, 1995; Lee et al., 2009). This model is simple yet expands our understanding of job choice research in several noticeable ways. First, the relationship between job search and job choice is explicit and clear. Earlier research has focused on either job search or job choice or has treated them as part of a linear process of generating alternatives and then choosing the best alternative. Second, the model does not assume that a person is actively looking for a job. For this reason, the model applies to employment situations in general rather than only unemployed people and explicitly highlights that a person’s search depends in part on his or her goals and representation of the employment situation. Third, the model is recursive and highlights the dynamic and unfolding nature of job choice. For example, a job seeker may adjust his or her goals depending on the alternatives that he or she generates.

In addition to defining job choice as inseparable from a larger employment decision process, a job choice decision must meet several other conditions. Reviews of the judgment and decision making literature suggest that a choice or a decision is made when 1) there are multiple alternatives, 2) there is competition among the alternatives, 3) a person is able to make some distinction between alternatives based on overall value, and 4) he or she reduces the conflict by committing to an alternative and terminating further deliberation (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981; Mintzberg, 1975; Russo & Carlson, 2001; Svenson, 1996). Because a job seeker can choose a non-employment alternative over employment (e.g., attending graduate school), I do not restrict the construct definition to only employment opportunities.

A person makes a job choice decision when he or she chooses an employment alternative over another competing alternative (i.e., employment or non-employment alternative) based on a distinction of overall value, ceases further deliberation between the alternatives, and commits resources to the employment alternative over time.

In the next section I elaborate on two key elements of this conceptual definition that have received inadequate research attention—employment alternatives and commitment to an alternative.

Alternatives to a job choice

Conceptual reviews defined “choice” as choosing the best alternative among a set of multiple alternatives (e.g., Russo & Carlson, 2001). On the other hand, most reviewers of recruitment research have conceptually or operationally defined job choice decisions as accepting or not accepting (i.e., rejecting) a single job offer from an organization (Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Chapman et al., 2005; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Sauerman, 2005). Earlier I noted important statistical issues, yet conceptual issues may be more important. By choosing not to accept a job offer, an individual implicitly decides in favor of the alternative to the job offer. Example alternatives to a job offer may include deferring the job offer, starting a business, leaving the labor force (e.g., going back to school), or accepting a job at an organization’s direct competitor. However, by not explicitly defining alternatives to a job offer, prior research studies have implicitly defined the alternative as: *not the job offer*. This alternative has a negative definition and the existence of this alternative is a logical fallacy because it has infinite identities (Mill, 1892). The job choice decision construct is deficient by not specifying alternatives.

This is in contrast to Mintzberg (1975) and Fischhoff (1996) who found that people make real-life decisions often as whether or not to choose a single option. In

their studies they focused on decision situations such as teens deciding whether or not to smoke. In such cases, the reader can infer the status quo alternative from the context. However, in employment decisions the alternatives often cannot be inferred but are often very meaningful, such as remaining unemployed, delaying a decision, choosing a competitor, going to graduate school, or leaving the workforce.

A consequence of this mis-specification is evident in one of the most heavily cited papers of job search and job choice by Kanfer and colleagues (2001; cited 67 times as of June, 2009; ISI Web of Knowledge). The authors meta-analyzed 73 studies looking at the relationship between job search and employment outcomes—the most notable outcome was employment status (i.e., whether a person was employed or not employed at the end of a research study). However, the authors did not distinguish employment status from new job acceptance decisions either conceptually or empirically. The authors drew several conclusions about the relationship between job search and employment status for both employed and unemployed job seekers. This is a problem because the employment status variable is uninterpretable for employed job seekers—any job search should have been related to the binary outcome “employment status” for employed individuals, unless search was somehow related to voluntary or involuntary turnover and unemployment. Further, it is unclear whether individuals who were employed at the end of the study remained at the same organization or accepted employment at a different organization. However, statistically significant differences in the relationship between job search and employment status across the employed and unemployed populations was emphasized as a key finding from the meta-analysis. Incorrectly specifying alternatives led to uninterpretable and potentially misleading findings.

Failing to specify job choice alternatives may hinder the parsimony and coherence of the science of human resources management. Most empirical job choice

research is conducted with unemployed job losers or college-educated new labor market entrants (Chapman et al., 2005; Kanfer et al., 2001). In the year 2000 this population represented fewer than 10 percent of all job seekers in the United States labor market each year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). Most job offer acceptances occur in other labor-market populations such as labor-market re-entrants and employed individuals (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). In these populations, job choice decisions are inseparable from decisions to re-enter the labor force and voluntarily turnover decisions, respectively. By not including the alternatives to an employment offer, most decision situations studied in job choice research have been mis-specified.

Job choice, voluntary turnover, and labor market decisions may be more appropriately thought of as part of a more general employment decision making problem. A general way to merge job choice in recruitment and voluntary turnover contexts is by thinking of a recruit as having a set of alternatives that includes 1) non-employment alternatives (e.g., leaving a company to become unemployed), 2) the status quo alternative (e.g., remaining with the same employer), and 3) other employment alternatives. Conceptualizing job choice and voluntary turnover decisions in this way encourages researchers to focus on the decisions in the context of important major life decision making.

Besides statistical and conceptual issues, failing to correctly specify the choice alternatives also carries methodological implications that impact the validity of empirical job choice studies. Specifically, a large body of empirical evidence suggests that people construct preferences during preference elicitation (Bettman et al., 1998; Feldman & Lynch, 1988). For example, adding an extra alternative to a person's set of choice alternatives will change the values that he or she assigns to previously evaluated alternatives, even if the new alternative is unlikely to be chosen (Payne et

al., 1993). Schwab and colleagues (1987) pointed out that if people make decisions about organizations sequentially (i.e., one at a time), then asking job seekers to report preferences from a set of multiple companies confounds job choice process with the research design. The number and nature of the alternatives can have an important impact on a recruits' judgment and decision making processes. For statistical, conceptual, and methodological reasons, researchers must identify the alternatives that are part of job choice decisions.

Another consequence is that researchers have given little attention to decision avoidance, where a recruit implicitly accept the status quo. Einhorn and Hogarth (1981) noted that a non-choice may take the form of a refusal, inattention, or delay. However, the recruit is avoiding resolving conflict among alternatives. Therefore, a non-decision is not an explicit decision because it does not involve committing to an alternative, but instead may involve avoiding a decision object. This suggests that recruits may choose the status quo implicitly through avoiding a decision. Thus, the status quo may be chosen or it may be the default outcome of a non-choice. However, given that norms and habits drive much of human behavior (Beach, 1990), non-evaluation may explain a large portion of employment outcomes and non-choice and non-evaluation are important outcomes in recruitment from the perspective of the recruit as well as organizations. This may be an important issue for employed job seekers because they face costs associated with searching and may face low costs of not searching. To my knowledge, no research has addressed the issue of non-evaluation or incorporated it formally into a model of job choice decision making.

Commitment to a course of action.

In studies of important real life decisions, unstructured decisions, and studies of decision processes, researchers typically include “commitment to a course of action” as part of their definition of a decision (Festinger, 1954; Hastie, 2001;

Mintzberg et al., 1976; Russo & Carlson, 2002; Staw & Ross, 1979; Svenson, 1992, 1996). For example, Russo and Carlson (2001) defined a decision as “the identification and commitment to a course of action, where one alternative is deemed superior in overall value” (p. 271). The existence of more than one alternative implies freedom to choose—one needs to devote resources and commit and cut off other alternatives for a behavior to be correctly called a decision (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981). Commitment is a necessary part of a job choice decision construct.

Commitment to an organization as an employer is an important component of job acceptance decisions and represents the beginning of an employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Realistic job preview (RJP) studies have included commitment measures but with mixed results. Commitment was usually studied as a distal (i.e., post-hire) outcome rather than as part of the decision making process (Breugh & Starke, 2000). Conceptualizing an acceptance decision in a way that includes commitment is important because 1) people make “implicit” commitments, sometimes well before accepting a job offer (Soelberg, 1967), 2) people back out of formal job acceptance decisions (Ivancevich & Donnely, 1971; Gilliland et al., 2001), and 3) a decision to accept employment and remain employed is not a one-time decision, but consists of a series of smaller decisions (Schwab, 1982). First, Soelberg (1967) found that many MIT graduate student job seekers had commit to one job alternative before formally accepting a job offer. These job seekers continued their job searches in order to seek addition job offers, but Soelberg found that they were only trying to justify their earlier choices. A body of empirical research in recruitment (e.g., Stevens, 1997), marketing (Ahluwalia, 2000; Saju & Unnava, 2005), organizational socialization (Cappelli, 1999; Rousseau, 1995), and decision making (Svenson, 1996) supports the idea that people generally start to commit to an alternative prior making a formal job offer decisions. This is important because organizations attempting to recruit an

applicant who has implicitly committed to another company would misspend resources.

Second, Ivancevich and Donnely (1971) reported that over ten percent of college seniors backed out of job offers in the companies they used in their study. This suggests that these people engaged in the behavior of accepting a job offer but they were not committed to their acceptance. The context of their study may have been idiosyncratic. However, Capelli (1999) and others have emphasized the importance of commitment in terms of the labor market. Practically, organizations are trying to gain applicants' commitment by using recruitment practices. Third, accepting a job involves a series of decisions rather than a single decision (Schwab 1982). This is consistent with conceptualizations of real life decision making (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981), which state that the idea of thinking of real-life decisions as a person at a fork in the road is inaccurate. A more accurate conceptualization is that a decision involves a series of smaller actions or decisions that are aimed at moving a person toward some goal (Einhorn & Hogarth, 1981). For example, a person may decide to attend an interview rather than spend time with the family on a given day. Job acceptance decisions could be better understood under the lens of commitment to an ongoing course of action.

Commitment is also important because employment relationships are defined in terms of contracts, and commitment is the essence of any contract—the “glue that binds people to contracts” (Rousseau, 1995). Consistent with the definition of a decision, a job acceptance decision may be appropriately thought of as acceptance and commitment to employment at an organization, where the job seeker devotes resources to the employer at the expense of devoting resources to other alternatives.

Organizational scholars have conceptualized commitment in wide variety of ways. Meyer and Hercovitch (2001) synthesized the different conceptualizations. They

suggested that the essence of commitment is a force that binds individuals to a course of action or a specific target. Meyer and Hercovich (2001) also noted important properties of a commitment construct that I use to extend the job choice decision construct. In particular, they conceptualized commitment as a multi-dimensional construct composed of three different dimensions—*affective*, *normative*, and *calculative*. I describe each of these dimensions and related job choice research next, and propose that bringing a multidimensional commitment construct into job choice research can contribute conceptually to future job search and job choice research.

Affective commitment is one dimension of organizational commitment and refers to a person's desire to associate with an entity or a course of action (Meyer & Hercovich, 2001). Researchers have studied job seekers' attitudes, or affect, towards an organization as a potential employer, mostly as a determinant of job application behaviors (Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003). Leading attitude-behavior theorists suggest that attitudes towards a behavior can influence the behavior by influencing peoples' intentions towards the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1985). Thus, researchers have overcome difficulties measuring job search and choice behaviors by studying organizational attraction as a proxy (Barber, 1998; Chapman et al., 2005). While attraction is mostly studied to understand applicants' initial interest in an organization (Cable & Turban, 2001), researchers have also studied attraction as an outcome through later stages of recruitment (e.g., post-interview attraction; Stevens, 1997). For example, Barber (1998) proposed that job applicants withdraw from companies' recruitment processes because of the presence of more attractive alternatives. However, a recruit may have a favorable attitude towards an employer that would not hire him or her, suggesting a more complex role of attitudes. In contrast, a richer definition of job choice incorporating other dimensions of organizational commitment

such as hiring expectancies may lead to a better explanation of applicants' decision making processes.

Meyer and Hercovich (2001) suggested that organizational commitment also has a normative dimension—a person's internalization of norms and obligations such as a perceived psychological contract (Meyer & Hercovich, 2001). Generally, norms are strong in contexts where social interaction is salient. Given the strong social component to job finding (e.g., Granovetter, 1995), norms should play a strong role. In addition, because employment often involves fulfilling obligations (e.g., financial obligations), norms should be salient in job choice. Rynes and Barber (1990) lamented the little attention paid to norms in job choice research.

The third dimension of organizational commitment is calculative and refers to a person's investment of resources and their alternatives to the decision (Meyer & Hercovich, 2001). Expectancy theory is the dominant theory of job choice (Barber, 1998). It asserts that people make choices based on the perceived instrumentality of a behavior, the value of the outcome, and the expectancy that the behavior would lead to the valued outcome (Vroom, 1966). Expectancy theory assumes that people make rational calculations to come to decisions. However, judgment and decision making research shows the limited role of rational decision making processes (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Incorporating the calculative component of commitment as part of a multi-dimensional commitment construct may enhance our understanding of rational calculations in job choice.

The broader job choice decision process

The second part of this manuscript considers the implications of clarifying the job choice construct. This section draws on the construct definition and traces the decision process backwards (i.e., from right to left in Figure 1), moving from 1) from the decision, to 2) evaluation that occurs prior to the decision, to 3) the alternatives

that are evaluated, to 4) generating alternatives, to 5) the decision problem and highlight specific ways through which a person may arrive at a job choice and generate new insights for future empirical and theoretical job choice research.

From evaluation to a hierarchy of alternatives

In the last section I discussed key parts of an employment decision. I assumed that people had more than one alternative and came to commit to an alternative based on an assessment of value. Recruits may know about, generate, and consider any myriad number and quality of employment and non-employment alternatives at a given time. How many alternatives were recruits considering before they commit to one employment alternative? Categorizing the alternatives in a meaningful way is important because decision theory suggests that people rely on different decision processes depending on the number and quality of perceived alternatives (Payne et al., 1993).

Leading theories of job choice and turnover make assumptions about the number of alternatives that job seekers evaluate prior to employment decision. For example, the dominant theory of job choice—expectancy theory—assumes recruits are evaluating multiple alternatives simultaneously (Barber, 1998). In contrast, one of the leading theories in the area of employee turnover—i.e., Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model—assumes employees evaluate a single employment alternative against the status quo. Further, expectancy theory does not predict choice well when a person has two attractive alternatives (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001), suggesting that the number of alternatives may present a boundary condition to job choice theories. A more unifying approach to employment decision alternatives is needed.

In the marketing literature, Shocker and colleagues (1991) conceptualized alternative sets as hierarchical sets of nested decision alternatives. Although researchers have used different hierarchical specifications, Shocker and colleagues

(1991) suggested that a model with four levels of nested alternatives has received consistent empirical support. The hierarchical sets move from broad to narrow as 1) all existing alternatives (universal set), 2) alternatives that a person is aware of (awareness set), 3) alternatives that a person considers (consideration set), and alternatives that are involved immediately prior to a choice (choice set).

The alternatives that a recruit considers directly prior to making a decision are called his or her *choice set* (Shocker et al., 1991). Most people cannot give careful consideration to more than three or four options simultaneously because of limited cognitive resources (Payne et al., 1993). Therefore, information processing limitations naturally restrict the number of options a job seeker considers directly before making a decision. If the number of options becomes larger, people usually use a different decision strategy to reduce the number of options to a more manageable number (Shocker et al., 1991). If decision makers arrive at choice through a choice set, all employment decisions take one of the following forms: recruits make employment decisions by evaluating 1) two alternatives, 2) more than two alternatives, or 3) by avoiding evaluation.

With varying level of conflict between the alternatives, recruits likely face only a limited number of choice situations. In addition, the type of choice sets applicants frequently encounter is also influenced by a number of forces. For example, recruiters usually give time frames for accepting offers, different organizations make offers to the same candidate at different points in time, situations where a job seeker does not have a clear preference between two offers likely occurs in only a fraction of all job choice decisions, and applicants may face high costs if they delay decisions (e.g., miss an opportunity, remain in unsatisfactory employment situation). Most job choice research involving the choice set should focus on comparing a single alternative

against the status quo or the effects of adding an additional alternative to an existing choice set.

A *consideration set* is composed of alternatives that are being considered; i.e., those alternatives that have the potential to satisfy a job seeker's goals and are accessible at a specific point in time. The consideration set has important theoretical implications. First, a person that will allow an employment option in his or her consideration set is a potential recruit. For example, a retiree that would consider working part-time is a potential recruit, even though he or she may be presently out of the labor force. Second, because employment alternatives can satisfy a job seeker's goals, these options have passed the screening phase of decision making. Employment alternatives that are part of the consideration set have passed image theory's compatibility test. Multiple studies of real-life decision making across multiple domains (Galotti, 2007; Fishhoff, 1996), including job choice studies with college student samples (Beach, 1990; Soelberg, 1967), suggest that people develop a set of about four or five alternatives to consider. Although the context likely determines the size of consideration sets in job choice, an important consideration is whether and when people no longer admit additional alternatives to their consideration sets, or if they judge new alternatives differently.

An *awareness set* refers to alternatives that people are aware of and have some knowledge for and also includes alternatives that are present for "online" decision-making (i.e., the alternatives are in front of the person at the time of choice).

Awareness and familiarity are often studied as predictors of applicant attraction and behaviors towards companies (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins, 2007). Awareness sets exist by definition and are useful conceptually because recruits cannot apply to an organization and accept a job if he or she is not aware of the company. Collins (2007) found that college students' awareness of a company's products influenced the

effectiveness of various recruitment practices. Alternatives that a person is aware of but does not consider are called inept (i.e., they are judged to be unfavorable either absolutely or relatively) or inert (i.e., they have not been judged at all). Therefore, inept and inert alternatives are those from the awareness set that do not make it to the consideration set (Shocker et al., 1991).

A *universal set* includes all potential alternatives. Labor market studies in economics often assume that individuals are making decisions from a set of all alternatives in either a local or national labor market for a given occupation (Steele, 2002). Given limited time, cognitive processing capacity, access to information (Simon, 1957), and the potential for individuals to change careers and physical locations, recruits almost certainly do not choose from a set of given alternatives in a given labor market. However, job choice decision making models that critique economic models do not describe the way that alternatives enter a recruit's awareness set either (e.g., Stevens, 1996). Therefore, although the universal set is untenable it is the default alternative set implied by much job choice theory.

Recruits may either add or remove companies from an awareness set, consideration set, or choice set singly or in groups according to the evaluation processes discussed earlier. An important process issue here is whether recruits use different decision processes depending on the alternatives that are currently within a set. For example, recruits may initially generate a pool of potential employment alternatives for their consideration set. However, do recruits "close" their consideration sets by not admitting new alternatives (e.g., Stevens, 1997)? This is important because it suggests that the order in which companies enter a consideration set and the number of companies in the consideration set is important. In the next section I discuss ways that a recruit may add companies to his or her consideration sets. Given different decision processes are involved in the different alternative sets, I

suggest that admitting or removing an alternative from a level depends on the decision processes associated with that level, and the alternatives already present at that level.

Emergence of alternatives

Commitment. A key part of the model is the movement of alternatives to and from different parts of the hierarchy. A person's commitment to alternatives that are present in his or her set will influence whether or how additional alternatives emerge. First, a recruit who is more committed to a specific alternative will likely develop a smaller consideration set than a person who less committed to an alternative. For example, Raja and Unnava (2005) found that consumers who favored a specific brand were more likely to develop small consideration sets, and uncommitted consumers developed larger consideration sets. Second, Commitment may also influence the type of information that a recruit attends to about alternatives, and the way that the recruit processes the information. For example, Ahluwalia and colleagues (2000) found that commitment to an attitude object influences a person's motivated reasoning (Ahluwalia, 2000; Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Soelberg (1967) noticed that graduate-level job seekers tended to develop an implicit favorite and seek information to confirm their choice. Therefore, commitment to an alternative already in the set of alternatives will influence the number and type of alternatives that emerge in the set.

Actors. An employment alternative may move between levels a recruit's hierarchy of alternatives through the effort of any of four different types of actors or the interactions among them. Specifically, employment alternatives may move between levels of consideration sets as a result of action initiated by 1) the actor who may potentially accept employment (i.e., the recruit), 2) the actor directly offering an employment opportunity (e.g., recruiter), 3) an organization (Rynes & Barber, 1990), 4) some intermediary (e.g., a weak tie; Granovetter, 1995), or 5) some combination of actions by these actors. Note that while it is widely assumed that job choice begins

with the job seeker actively looking for employment, only one of the paths that I described consists of action by a potential recruit. This is important because it suggests alternatives may move through a person's decision hierarchy as a result of the actions of employment agents or intermediaries, which is an important assumption of recruitment theory and practice. However, the relevance of these different actors is not taken for granted in the recruitment literature. For example, Barber (1998) categorized the relevant actors as the individual/applicant, organization, organizational agents, and outsiders. However outsiders were defined only as the recipient of spillover effects of recruitment rather than as intermediaries between organizations and recruits, ignoring intermediaries such as headhunters, friends and relatives, and the news media. Given the importance of network and word-of-mouth effects in the job finding process (Granovetter, 1995), intermediaries must be present in a model of job choice.

In the present model of job choice, actors' actions are important if they move alternatives around the different levels of an alternative hierarchy. A full discussion of different actors and their actions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the present lens can shed light on frequently studied criteria.

Because job choice decisions depend on the actions of both organizations and recruits, recruits must somehow communicate to an organizational actor that the organization is part of the recruit's consideration set or a consensual employment relationship cannot ultimately occur. Most often, recruitment scholars focus on job applications as indicators that a recruit is considering an organization. However, informal discussions with peers can lead to jobs just as readily as job applications, and a job seeker can apply to an organization despite knowing whether the company would satisfy his or her employment goals. The extensive focus on job applications as a critical outcome may be related to the theoretical development in college grad samples. However, job applications are rarely used for high-level positions such as

executives (Capelli & Hamori, 2005). For other positions where head-hunters or scouts actively recruit individuals, the recruit may only need to indicate he or she is interested in employment through an informal conversation. Job applications likely become less important as the position becomes more important to the organization. Alternatively, job applications may not be important if an organization actively recruits candidates by searching resumes that are posted online or that the organization received for other positions. As online resume posting becomes increasingly popular, the importance of job applications will become less relevant as an important recruitment outcome. Word-of-mouth recruitment and filling unadvertised positions also shows that a job application is a measure not a construct.

From alternative emergence to problem representation

The reason that a person considers any employment alternative is because it can satisfy some goal(s) and provide a solution to some problem(s). Generally there are two types of decision problems—well-defined and undefined. Well-defined problems have goals, paths to the solution, obstacles to the solution are clear, and the information is given (Davidson & Sternberg, 2003). In contrast to laboratory research on decision making, people rarely enter decision situations that have been pre-defined for the decision-maker, but instead job seekers must define the decision problem and make choices based on their own goals and values (Lowenstein, 2001). Recognizing that the job searcher plays a role is critical because decision researchers have long recognized that slight changes in decision problems or frames and goals have consequences throughout the entire decision making process, influencing perceived alternatives and ultimately decision outcomes (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Recruits representing their job searches differently face different decision problems and likely use different decision processes and arrive at different decision outcomes.

In this section I discuss the characteristics of decision problem structures and decision goals. I suggest that recruits differ in their problem representations and goals and that goals and problem structures are related to decisions and all other phases of the job choice decision making process (i.e., alternatives sets, alternative emergence, commitment, and evaluation-processes).

Job choice problem representation. By admitting a specific employment alternative to his or her consideration set, a person is in essence assuming that the alternative is a potential solution to some problem. For example, Soelberg's (1967) in-depth interviews suggested that recruits were attempting to find an ideal solution to their "career problem."

Given limited information processing capabilities, decision makers must focus on certain elements of a task and exclude others (Simon, 1957). People therefore form a mental representation of a problem. Russo and Carlson (2001) called a mental representation of a decision task a "stable, coherent, cognitive structure that resides in memory, can be invoked automatically, and focuses the decision maker's attention on certain aspects of the problem while occluding others" (p.373)., especially with experience; however, for simplicity here I will assume that a recruit's mental representation of a job choice problem will be somewhat stable at least in the short term. Mental representations will vary across individuals based on experience and goals. For example, the literature on expertise shows that individuals' knowledge structures become more elegant as he or she becomes more expert in a given domain. Novices will focus on too much information. Understanding how problem structures vary across individuals situations and within individuals and time is important because the problem structure will influence all other phases of the decision making process. Mental representations will also vary within individuals. For example, peoples' representations of tasks change over time (Russo & Carlson, 2001). Over time and

experience the representations become more ingrained and difficult to change.

Experienced job searchers should have a more resilient mental representation of job search than new labor market entrants. Future research is needed here.

From problem representation to goals

Goals are explicitly fundamental to most models of decision models (Beach, 1990; Bettman et al., 1999; Russo & Carlson, 2002; Svenson, 1996). For example, Svenson (1996) suggested that a person's goals and values in a particular situation govern most of the decision process. For example, a recruit's goals determine the value that he or she will use to make decisions about alternatives, resolve conflict between alternatives, admit alternatives to his or her consideration set, and whether he or she commits to an alternative. Goals are important to a model of job choice decision making because they can bridge conscious and unconscious decisions (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004), and emotional and cognitive elements of decisions (Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004).

In the present decision process mode, goals have important impacts on all of the other phases of the model. First, the marketing literature provides some evidence that consideration sets are goal driven (Chakravarti & Janiszewski, 2003; Hulland, 1992; Ratneshwar, & Shocker, 1991; Shocker et al., 1991). For example, Chakravarti and Janiszewski (2003) showed that priming different goals can lead to different screening processes and hence different alternatives that are included in a person's consideration sets. Because goals are a measure of value and related to the three components of commitment—calculative, emotional, and normative (Beach, 1990; Hsee & Rottenstreich, 2004)—goals should impact the degree that a recruit commits to an alternative. Goals also influence attentional processes and information evaluation (Bettman et al., 1998). Therefore, goals influence problem structure directly. Goals

also determine the criteria for evaluating options and will determine the alternatives that move through the levels.

Scholars have acknowledged the importance of goals in job choice and have advanced mid-range theory. Some goals are related to human needs. For example, Highhouse et al (2007) validated a measure of social presentation goals in job search based on social identity theory. People want to associate with an organization to enhance social identity by expressing values or raising their self esteem. The idea of person-organization fit (PO fit) has been applied in the area of job search and choice (Cable & Judge, 1996) and is based on the idea that when a person's goals or values fit with an organization's goals, a person is more likely to accept a job offer at the firm. Some goals are more practical in nature. Van Hove and Saks (2008) found evidence that recruits search for jobs to satisfy several different employment goals (finding a new job, staying aware of job alternatives, networking, and obtaining employment leverage), and each goal has different relations to different job search methods. These get at some goals but do not address reasons people want to find a new job. For example, one person may want a raise and another person may want to volunteer and contribute to society. Besides these, job choice researchers have only empirically studied goals of financial need and commitment to re-employment (Kanfer et al., 2001). Employed job searchers motivations to leave an organization are likely strongly related to their job search goals. Given the eight major categories on the goals and motivations, it is likely we left some out.

Saurerman (2005) attempted to apply a process-goal theory from the marketing literature (i.e., Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998) to explain job choice decisions. For example, a job searcher applies to a company X instead of company Y because company X had an easier online application process than company Y. Process goals suggest that people gain value from the process rather than achieving some outcome.

Saureman's (2005) model predicts that job searchers may be driven by four goals during their job searches—minimizing effort, improving accuracy, minimizing negative emotion, and maximizing justifiability. However, job choice may be less driven by process than consumer choice and Bettman et al's goal model was driven by research on goals in consumer choice and not in job choice.

Each of the above authors conceptualizes goals in a different way and the literature lacks a unifying structure to understanding recruits' decision making goals. A unifying structure is important in this context because it would highlight major issues such as whether job seekers simultaneously pursue multiple goals, and the way that job seekers resolve conflicts between goals.

Goal hierarchies. Most theories of goals and values suggest that an individual's goals are organized hierarchically (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999; Beach, 1990; Carver & Schier, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000; DeShon & Gillespie, 2006; Elliot et al, 2002; Reynolds & Guttman, 1988; Wansink, 2000). The highest level goals represent goals related to the self such as social esteem (DeShon & Gillespie, 2006). Mid-level goals are goals that people try to accomplish in their everyday behavior. Lower level goals are the most immediate goals related to specific observable characteristics related to preference or behaviors (DeShon & Gillespie, 2006). High level goals have greater explanatory power because they represent the ultimate reasons for a behavior or the desired end-state of existence. Therefore, low level goals are only important as means to achieve high level goals. Conceptualizing job search goals hierarchically can provide a unifying structure to the myriad conceptualizations by prior research. For example, goal hierarchies can connect the lower level goals such as job attributes that recruits pursue (e.g., pay) to the more abstract values and concepts driving their pursuit of pay (e.g., social approval).

Summary

Understanding peoples' employment decisions is a fundamental issue in human resource management research. However, the construct of job choice has received only limited attention. This paper advanced a definition of the job choice decision construct that is based in the context of a decision process model. The model showed that goals and the decision problem structure drive the employment decision-making process. Unfortunately, these issues have received limited research attention. Therefore, descriptive research is needed to understand job seekers' motives and the way they define the employment decision problems.

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CHAPTER 2

A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO EMPLOYEES' SEARCHES

The job search process of currently employed people has received limited research attention. The most suitable research method when important concepts have not been fully identified, are not fully developed, or are poorly understood are descriptive and theory-generating qualitative research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this paper I describe two exploratory research studies with samples of employed job searchers. In my first study I aimed to generate broad insights into employees' job search processes through use of an unstructured interview methodology. I then explored and developed the themes that emerged from Study 1 with additional qualitative studies that were more targeted than Study 1. In particular, in Study 2 I substantially modified the interview protocol to target key issues raised by my analysis of data from Study 1.

Study One

The purpose of Study 1 was to identify the key limitations in the current state of the literature regarding employees' job searches. I used a theory-generating, qualitative, in-depth interview methodology with employed job searchers. Because most existing theories were developed with college student samples, I conducted in-depth interviews with a comparison sample of job searchers enrolled in a professional master's program.

Sample

Pilot interviews. I first conducted pilot interviews to refine the interview guide, become comfortable with the questions, and anticipate problems. I recruited a convenience sample of five full-time Masters of Industrial and Labor Relations (MILR) students at a large Northeastern university through an email sent to a student list-serve. I offered students \$20 incentive to participate in interviews that lasted

between 45 and 60 minutes. I did not record the audio or transcribe these interviews. However, I took detailed notes during these interviews that supplemented my later analyses.

Student comparison sample. After the pilot interviews, I recruited five full-time MILR students through an email advertisement sent to a student list-serve. The MILR students were full-time students and therefore unemployed job searchers. Four of the five students (80%) were seeking full-time work and one was seeking a summer internship. The MILR program prepares the students for careers as human resource management or labor relations practitioners in major corporations. The degree is a business degree and in this regard the students were similar to participants in most empirical recruitment studies that used samples of undergraduate business majors. However, interviewees in the present study were graduate students and were generally older ($M = 25.3$ years, $SD = 2.52$) and are therefore more likely to have full-time work experience ($M = 1.6$ years, $SD = 2.31$) than undergraduate business students. I expected that contrasting the employed job seeker sample to the MILR student sample instead of undergraduate business sample would lead to more meaningful and less surface-level differences.

Employee sample. Next, I recruited seven employed job seekers (57% female; average age = 43, $SD = 12.1$) through 1) a list-serve for a large Midwestern university's local alumni chapter in a large city in the Western United States or 2) a list-serve for alumni of a Western university's nursing program. All of the employed job searchers had completed bachelor's degrees, two were working on their masters degrees part-time, two had previously obtained master's degrees, and one had recently obtained a doctorate. One of the seven interviewees was underemployed and working part-time while trying to find a full time job. The employed participants averaged 20 years of work experience ($SD = 13.1$) and were employed in a variety of industries

(healthcare, manufacturing, retail, biological research) and roles including business-to-business sales (3/7), healthcare practitioners (2/7), retail management (1/7), and research scientist (1/7). In addition, one interviewee was contemplating a change from a job in retail management to a non-profit healthcare position. Six interviewees had actively searched for jobs and one was preparing to search.

Study One Procedure

All participants read and signed an informed consent form and agreed to provide their resumes so I could look at their work experience. I conducted all interviews in person except in one case where it was not possible. The interviews averaged one-hour in length.

The structure of the interviews was consistent across all student and employee job searchers. I began the interviews in an informal and unstructured way that was consistent with the exploratory goals of the study. Specifically, I began the interview by asking interviewees to explain their searches in their own words. I did not know how the dialogue would unfold—I adapted the method in naturalistic inquiry to the phenomenon rather than vice versa. The informal and unstructured part of the interview took most of the interview time.

After I had obtained an understanding of interviewees' job searches in their own words, I then asked semi-structured questions related to specific topics of interest. Here I asked questions about external factors that influenced their job searches and their judgment and decision making during their searches. For example, I asked interviewees to describe some of the most difficult decisions they had faced during their job searches. I discuss the specific questions and topics I addressed in the interviews along with the analysis and results section. Finally, during the last part of the interview, all job seekers took part in laddering interviews that were part of Study 3.

Study One Analysis

Because little prior research has studied employee job searchers, the most appropriate analysis would identify the salient differences between the student and employee samples in order to lay the groundwork for more focused follow-up studies. Therefore, the goal of my analysis was to simplify the data to the most important themes and find the salient differences across samples. The Study 1 analysis only explores the broad themes. However, I could further investigate the more detailed information from the overall interviews in conjunction with interview data from the follow-up studies as part of the theory development process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

I analyzed the interview transcripts by looking for themes using a multistep content-analytic procedure (e.g., Rynes et al., 1991). First, I read the unstructured portions of each interview and made notes regarding the main themes. I developed themes by analyzing the topics where job seekers focused their attention and suggested were important issues. Given the broad scope of the codes, the unit of analysis for each theme was several lines of text in a transcript. As an example theme that I coded, one student job searcher thoroughly discussed all of the important job and company attributes that were important to him when searching for job opportunities. I labeled this theme *Attributes*. After I had assigned themes for each interview, I looked for themes that were redundant within and between interviews and collapsed them where appropriate. I was most interested in the themes were mentioned by more than one job searcher. I eliminated all themes that were addressed by a single interviewee.

Next, I compared the themes across the student and employee samples. Comparing across the samples often highlighted themes that were discussed in detail by the one sample but that received only little attention by the other sample. For such themes I returned to the transcripts and develop and explore the way that interviewees in the other sample had addressed the same issue. Finally, I returned to my notes from

the first five pilot interviews with students to look for other potentially important themes.

This process revealed twelve broad themes that were different across the two samples. In no particular order, the broad themes were 1) interaction with company representative, 2) important job and organizational characteristics, 3) important experiences at the current job (i.e., supervisor, politics, organizational change), 4) important past work experience, 5) future career and life goals, 6) job finding methods (online search, career services, peers in the industry), 7) location, 8) career decisions, 9) companies in the industry, 10) constraints, 11) dissatisfaction with current job, and 12) the job market.

Study One Findings

In this section I discuss the salient themes that were different across the interviews with employee and student job searchers. The first salient difference between the samples was the context. The themes that I found during the interviews with students were heavily tied to the unique college recruitment process and the cohort approach of being a college student. Almost all students began to describe their job search process by talking about career services, the companies that were recruiting on campus, the key characteristics of these companies, and the companies' specific recruitment activities. In contrast, interviews with employed job searchers did revealed more diverse discussions of the context. Unlike the student job searchers, employees discussed themes related to the context that was more unique to their life and employment situation. For example, almost all interviews with employed job searchers began by discussing their current jobs and their career paths. I next discuss themes related to context differences and then discuss themes related to personal differences.

Context differences.

Timing of job search. MILR students reported searching for jobs with respect to the timing of career fairs and recruiting organizations' interview schedules. In contrast, few employed job searchers were influenced by specific recruitment deadlines. Instead, employees searches were often influenced by political events, life changes (e.g., relocation), and industry or organizational cycles and changes (end of quarter, upcoming organizational restructuring and growth). In contrast to job searchers in a degree program with a specified end date, employed job searchers have little cost to not searching and not making decisions.

Finding jobs. MILR students applied for most of their interviews through the university's career services website. They said that going through career services gave them credibility and was easier than searching on their own. The most comparable approach discussed by two employed job searchers involved posting a resume online or searching through major career web-sites. However, both of these employed searchers stated disgust and little faith with the online search approach.

Employed job searchers networked in order to find jobs and students networked but more often to gather information rather than find jobs. Most employed searchers found potential job openings by networking with their friends, peers, and more often, people they come into contact with while working on in their current position. Employed searchers expected that networking would ultimately lead them to a new job.

Employees used several different methods to network. All employed job searchers I interviewed had learned about most of their opportunities through face to face networking. In addition, about half of the employed searchers sent their resumes to specific contacts they knew through their current or former jobs. A few employed job searchers found job opportunities through industry associations or headhunters. A

few employed searchers did not search for a job but were presented jobs from industry contacts.

Employees and MILR students also differed in the number of openings to which they had applied. For the most part students applied broadly to several companies at a time while employed job searchers applied to only one or two jobs at a time. For example, one student reported that he greatly narrowed down his search to focus only on 13 companies. In contrast, one employed searcher was only considering employment with one organization. Most employed searchers applied to only one job at a time or only a few over the course of several months.

Cohort approach. Students searched for employment as part of a cohort of their peers and applied to job openings at companies that were part of a cohort of companies selected to recruit on campus by the university's Career Services Department. Interviews with student job searchers revealed that both cohorts influenced their approach to job searching. A few students mentioned that the number of recruiting organizations was a shock. Students made comparisons between the large numbers of on-campus recruiting organizations to judge the desirability of jobs with particular companies. For example, they compared a company's recruitment practices based on other companies' practices. Echoing a finding by Rynes et al., (1991), students often change their minds about companies for reasons that seemed superfluous. For example, one student states:

[Company] came here last year twice to recruit people and they didn't recruit anyone. So we are thinking that they don't really want to recruit students they just want to maintain a relationship with Cornell. So now I won't apply to Eden.

This may have been a result of organizations recruiting for similar positions, making differences between companies' recruitment practices salient. Peer and company

cohorts seemed to influence students' perceptions and actions related to their job searches.

Important events. All of the MILR students reported changing their perceptions of the recruitment process, companies, and their ongoing job searches based on some salient events. For example, several students changed their perceptions of their job searches after a career fair or after receiving a job offer. Employed job searchers rarely cited a specific event that changed their perceptions of their job search. Instead, events influenced whether employees searched. The impact of these events might suggest that the students' perceptions of their job searches were more malleable than employees' perceptions, and events played an important role in employees' motivation to search.

Individual differences

Work experience. The employed searchers had substantially more extensive and richer work experience than the student job searchers. Employees discussed their prior and current positions and organizations at great length. I noticed three major ways that this played a role in employees' searches. First, events at work influenced whether a person was searching and how much effort they put into their search. Second, employees' work experience influenced their understanding of an industry and their personal network. Third, their work experience had an impact on their assessment of their skills and the demand for these skills. For example, a few employees noted that they were confident at their skills and abilities to do their present job but they were unsure of the skills that would capture the interest of a new employer. Spending several years in the same job prevented some employees from being able to assess the skills set and demand for their skill set.

Motives. Employees and students differed with respect to job search motives. Students were most concerned with obtaining a job offer. Students who had received employment offers stated that their search had changed substantially after receiving an

offer. They became more selective and some reported that they began to assess companies based on personal preferences and fit rather than whether or not they could get the job. Most employed job searchers stated they began their searches by focusing on fit rather than obtaining a job.

During the interviews across all job seekers I found general motives that were either 1) proximal to their day to day life, 2) mid-range goals such as gaining a new skill or advancing in an organization, and 3) longer-range goals such as saving for retirement. MILR students were heavily motivated by mid-range goals such as the next steps in their career paths, building their resume by working for a company with a good reputation, and finding a job in a particular industry. Students' long term goals focused on long-term career goals and goals related to starting a family. Employed searchers were more heavily motivated by both proximal goals such as a pleasant daily work schedule or commute and also more distal goals such as financial stability, contributing to society, or a job they could occupy until retirement. Employees often discussed political events involving a supervisor, organizational change.

Constraints. Employed job searchers faced more constraints to their job searches than the students. All employees mentioned that they were constrained by their current location resulting from strong preferences or family obligations. Employees were more constrained by family obligations in general. Third, several employees were constrained by their current jobs. This was mostly related to their relationship with a boss or company.

Study One Discussion

I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with college-educated, employed job searchers and students enrolled in a full-time graduate program who were looking for jobs. I began all interviews in an open-ended and unobtrusive manner to understand job search through the eyes of the job searcher. I explored the most salient

differences between the samples by coding and comparing the main themes that job searchers discussed in the open portion of the interviews and compared the major themes across the two samples. I next discuss and interpret the broad themes that emerged from my interviews with the two samples of job searchers.

Context and situation strength.

My interviews with both samples suggested that the external job search context played a more consistent and more important role in students' job searches than employees' searches. Employees were influenced by a context that depended more on their own life and job situations. Students searched in a university context with important characteristics such as a cohort of peers, recruitment timing, a pool of recruiting organizations, professors and career counselors, and job fairs. Employee searched for jobs in organizational contexts where the main defining characteristics were an employee's industry, network of contacts, and relationships at work. Importantly, most of the important contextual characteristics were identical for the student job searchers but varied widely for employee job searchers.

Interviews with student job searchers suggested that they viewed the job search process in similar ways and looked for jobs in very similar ways. The strong and consistent influence of the context on students' searches suggests the university setting was a "strong" situation. Situation strength refers to the extent that individuals perceive similar situations in the same way (Mischel, 1973). Strong situations encourage conformity because they encourage individuals to perceive the same situation in the same way and induce behavioral expectations (Mischel, 1973). In strong situations, individual difference factors such as personality are less important than situational factors.

Situation strength is determined by factors such as the visibility of key parts of the situation, the ambiguity of the messages in the situation, relevance of the situation

to achieving important goals, and consistency with which key elements are communicated across people. The context in which the MILR students looked for employment has many characteristics of a strong situation. For example, MILRs search for jobs in a context where career services representatives send emails to all students, manages relationships with recruiting organizations, and puts on clinics about job searching. MILRs also face the time pressure associated with finding a job before the end of the recruitment cycle and graduation.

Weak situations are ambiguous and face various interpretations. The context of job search faced by employed job seekers was weak for several reasons. Employed job searchers rarely publicize their job searches because it can hurt their relationship with their employer. This limits the influence of the job search context. Further, employees faced ambiguous decisions, such as 1) whether and when to search for new employment, 2) the demand for their skills, and 3) effective search methods. For employees, the cost of not finding another job is that the status quo continues. None of the employees I spoke with were concerned about becoming unemployed, implying that the worst alternative was that nothing changes. This is important because the job search process itself carries costs such as time and frustration. In contrast to the MILRs who face a high cost if they do not find employment by the end of a specified time period, employed job searchers can more easily avoid taking action and avoid looking for a job. This suggests that the factors that prompt employees to search and those factors that speed up and slow down their searches are critical differences between the two populations of job searchers. The impact of the situation may be amplified by individual differences. Employees had greater experience, more personal constraints, and seemed to have a stable view of the job search process.

Conclusion

Students had less salient individual differences related to constraints or experience and the university recruitment context applies pressure toward conformity. On the other hand, employees possess individual characteristics that likely have a greater impact on job search and face more ambiguous situations. Future research needs to address the ways that employees structure their decision problems, their motives, and the factors that impact the intensity of their job searches.

My first 12 interviews suggest that the ways that employees recognize and represent employment problem is central to understanding their job searches. Organizational scholars have studied job choice in a manner suggestive that job seekers face a problem that has already been recognized and defined (Steele, 2002). Thus, the aim of student 2 was to develop an understanding of the way employees recognize and represent employment decisions.

In naturalistic decision making theories, the structure of the decision is the most important part of the decision. Because employees must determine when to begin their job searches and the effort and strategies they will use to find jobs, understanding the factors that motivate employees to begin searching and speed up and slow down their searches are critical. Problem recognition and definition are key phases of problem solving frameworks and highlight key differences between student and employee job searchers. Therefore, a problem solving framework naturally suits theory development in this area.

Study Two

The first interviews suggested that two critical issues to employees' job searches include 1) understanding the factors that prompt employees to search and 2) the way they represent their searches. A problem-solving framework is a useful way to conceptualize and study these issues. My goal in Study 2 was to understand the factors

that lead employees to begin their search, the important elements of their job searches and the relationship between these elements and potential new employment alternatives. I next discuss the importance of the start of employees' job searches and the way employees represent employment decisions.

Start of job search. Factors prompting employees' job searches are important because they determine whether a person begins to search. The turnover literature shows that shocks such as a fight with a boss can prompt an employee to begin a job search (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). A person first recognizes that he or she is interested in finding new employment opportunities before taking action that can be regarded as job search. Yale et al. (2003) classified three ways that people may recognize problems; people may 1) be given a problem, 2) create a problem, or 3) discover an existing problem (Yale et al., 2003). Employed job searchers may fall into any of these categories. They be given a problem of finding new employment opportunities (e.g., they were laid off), they may create a problem (e.g., they may come up with an idea for a better job), or they may discover an existing problem (e.g., they realize they will not meet some career goal if they stay with their current organization). Distinguishing between these three in the context of employed job searchers may be difficult because they may overlap. However, these three highlight critical differences between the study of unemployed job searchers and employed job searchers. For unemployed persons (i.e., those who are not currently employed but are seeking work) such as new labor market entrants and job losers, the problem of finding employment exists by the definition of the population of interest. Studies of unemployed people can safely assume the presence of a decision-making situation. In contrast, labor market re-entrants and employed job searchers may recognize a problem in any of the three ways or in some combination. Therefore, problem recognition is central to job choice decision making models for employed persons and re-entrants.

Problem representation. The way that a person mentally represents a decision problem impacts the method that he or she uses to find a solution and also the quality and number of perceived solutions to the problem (Beach, 1998). Indeed, understanding decision-makers' frames is perhaps the most important part of understanding a decision process (Russo & Shoemaker, 2001). For example, a job searcher who only considers opportunities within a 20 mile radius of his or her house limits his or her job search methods and possible employment opportunities that he or she will consider. Problem representation is a broad concept that spans multiple literatures and is related to the concepts of schemata, knowledge structures, and mental models. I limit my discussion to focus on operational definitions closely aligned with the problem solving and decision making literatures.

In the problem solving literature, researchers define problem representation as 1) an assessment of the current state, 2) a description of the goal state, 3) constraints, and 4) allowable operators (Yale et al., 2003). Reviewers of the judgment and decision making literature describe decision problems as including 1) alternative courses of action, 2) some way to assess value and thus the goodness or badness of a decision, and 3) beliefs and expectations (Hastie, 2001). Beach (1998) called decision frames the relationship between different concepts. Fischhoff (1996) discussed decision structure in terms of the major components of decisions based on his review of the judgment and decision making literature.

I define and operationalized decision problem representation in a way similar to Fischhoff (1996). In particular, I considered a definition that was meaningful based on: 1) the themes from the first round of interviews, 2) my level of analysis, 3) the nature of the decision (i.e., employment decisions), and 4) potential practical meaningful in the context of employed job searchers. For example, scholars have operationalized and studied knowledge structures by having research participants

make hundreds of comparisons between concepts within a particular domain of knowledge. This was not consistent with my research goals.

I was broadly interested in understanding the scope of the problem (e.g., constraints), the salient issues related to an employee's job search, value associated with the search process and outcomes, the discrepancy between the current state and a goal state (i.e., a new and different job or employer), beliefs and expectations about the consequences of different actions, and places of uncertainty. Addressing these key areas would provide a good general understanding of the way that employed persons think about job search as a real life important decision problem. For clarity I provide more detail about each area in the Analysis and Results section.

Study Two Method

Sample

The goal of my sampling approach for Study 2 was to obtain a broad sample of participants in my target population (i.e., employed college-educated job searchers). I achieved this by sampling from multiple different sources that could give me a diverse set of participants. I was interested in diversity with respect to job search activity level (i.e., active and passive), industry, years of work experience, degree obtained, the way they began their searches, constraints, and whether other actors were involved in the search. I also altered my sampling approach as I progressed.

As in Study 1, I offered participants ($n = 20$) \$20 to participate in the interviews. My approach was to recruit participants from the same places they were likely looking for employment. I recruited participants from two web-sites that are heavily used by passive job searchers. I recruited 14 participants through LinkedIn.com—a business-oriented social networking website. DeKay (2009) surveyed a random sample of 200 LinkedIn users and found that 94% stated an interest in unsolicited career opportunities, consulting offers, job inquiries, and business deals.

This suggests that most LinkedIn users who are not actively searching for jobs are likely passive job searchers. I attempted to achieve breadth in respondents through using targeted recruitment advertisements. I recruited participants through several LinkedIn groups—Ivy League Jobs, Industrial-Organizational Psychologist Career Network, Jobs.com, Cornell University Alumni Network, and BGSU Alumni Network. Second, I recruited three participants through Craigslist.org—the second largest job search web-site in the United States. Third, I recruited three participants through a newsletter targeting employed human resource professionals (Tompkins county SHRM newsletter). I chose this source because of convenience and difficulties obtaining contact to professional nursing and financial associations. The interview for one participant from the LinkedIn could not be transcribed due to recording problems and this interview was dropped from analyses.

I included transcripts from interviews with 20 transcripts in the analysis (% female: 14 female, 6 male). The sample was well-educated—twelve had bachelor's degrees, seven had master's degrees, and one had a PhD. The average age was 32.89 years ($SD = 11.7$). Thirty-seven percent (7/19) were married. Of the twelve employees who reported being single, one was engaged, and two were single but divorced. Interviewees averaged 7.8 years ($SD = XXX$) of full-time work experience. Seventy-four percent (14/19) of the participants were employed full time with no foreseeable end. Two employees at different organizations were on employment contracts that would expire within a year but both had the chance to renew. I classified three participants (16%) as under-employed. One participant was in sales training but had not generated income since starting, and stated interest in part-time jobs to make ends meet. Two participants held two part-time jobs and were underemployed because their hours were cut. A fourth participant held three part-time jobs and also attended school part-time, but this employment arrangement was consistent with the interviewee's

long-term career goals and therefore I classified as the interviewee as full-time employed.

Procedure

In the recruitment advertisements, I encouraged potential interviewees to visit a web-site that provided an overview of the study and showed the informed consent form. I asked all participants for a copy of their resumes so that I could look at their work experience, industry, and education. One participant refused. Prior to all interviews, I assured job seekers confidentiality and anonymity and asked them to sign an informed consent form. All participants agreed. I conducted all of the interviews—four in person and 16 over the telephone. I tape-recorded all interviews for transcription. The interviews lasted between forty minutes to one-hour in length.

Table 1 provides an overview of the interview guide for Study 2. It is important to note that I began each content area with a general question and asked more specific questions based on the employees' response. Therefore, I did not ask all questions listed in the interview guide for each interview but tailored the questions based on the ongoing dialogue. Consistent with grounded theory methodology, I altered the interview guide a few times throughout the study by dropping several questions related to themes that provided no new information and adding new questions for emerging themes. I discuss these changes where appropriate.

I began all interviews by asking employees background questions. Because I recruited participants through different sources, I asked them where they heard about the study. In addition, I asked about their motivations for participating in the study and demographic information (e.g., age). I then asked participants about their current employment situations (e.g., job duties, years with the current company) and how difficult it would be to leave their current jobs both emotionally and logistically.

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF STUDY TWO INTERVIEW GUIDE

Problem recognition

When did you first start thinking about trying to find a new job?

- Questions regarding attention, thoughts, and emotions
- Questions regarding actions, effort and time, relation between thoughts and actions
- Questions regarding the influence of people and events

Current state of problem

What is the essence of your job search right now?

- Questions regarding attention, thoughts, and emotions
- Questions regarding actions, effort and time, relation between thoughts and actions
- Questions regarding the influence of people and events

Expected future state

How do you expect your job search will unfold in the future?

After initial background questions, I asked participants questions that progressively addressed the broad topics of their perceptions of 1) the way their current job search began, 2) the current state of their job search, and 3) the way they expected their search would unfold in the future. For each of these three broad topics, I asked questions about thoughts (i.e., attention, beliefs, meaning, and knowledge), emotions, and behaviors (i.e., timing, sequence, and changes; Table 1). I provide greater detail for the specific questions along with the analysis and results below.

Study Two Analysis and Results

As suggested by (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I analyzed the data by first simplifying and reducing the data and then by expanding the meaning of the data through focused questioning. First I discuss the way I simplified the data using content analysis and then discuss each content area in order they were addressed in the interview.

Content Analysis.

I first simplified and reduced the transcript data using the predetermined categories that were driven by the structured nature of the interview. Thus, the initial unit of analysis was an interviewees' response to a question. After reading through all transcripts, I reviewed all comments and grouped those that were similar in meaning and called them a theme. I adjusted the unit of analysis according to the number of important themes and the size of the themes for responses to certain questions. After I had developed the codes, an assistant professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology tried to match interviewees' comments with the respective codes. When we disagreed on a categorization, we discussed their reasons for categorization and reached agreement whether to move the comment into another theme, create a new theme, or collapse themes for the sake of parsimony. I calculated Cohen's kappa as an index of agreement (Cohen, 1960).

Beginning the job search

Factors prompting job search. First, I asked questions about the factors that led the employees to start searching. I asked what they were thinking about, whether it was expected, their emotions, whether other people had helped them recognize that it was time to pursue other employment opportunities. My interview questions referred to their current job search, and assumed that their current job search may have had breaks even over several weeks but still were the same overall employment problem unless the interviewee had noted otherwise. After several interviews I noticed discrepancies between the time when someone first thought about searching and when they actually began searching. I adjusted the interviews to explicitly inquire about delays between when they first had the idea that they should search and when they actually took action.

In most cases I need to ask a series of questions to understand the beginning of employees' job searches. Therefore, the unit of analysis consists of employees' responses to an initial question as well as several follow-up questions. I initially categorized the series of responses according to the process that appeared associated with the start of their job search. I found that six employees (30%) had always searched for new employment while in their current job, eight employees (40%) were prompted by some event, and six employees (30%) were prompted by a gradual build up of motivations. I next looked for themes within each of these categories.

I classified the six of the twenty employees who always searched employees into two groups. Three of the six employees stated that they always were looking for new employment regardless of their job. These interviewees were motivated to advance their career and either networked or were in positions where they could always see new opportunities. I asked additional questions and found that these employees could not foresee anything stopping them from considering new

employment opportunities. However, they stated that their search could experience temporary lulls if they were too busy (at work or at home) or if they were adjusting to a new job.

A second group of employees reported that they always searched for new opportunities since working for their current employer because they had accepted an unsatisfactory job. These employees knew at the time of hire that the position would last until they found something better.

The difference between these groups appears to be that employees in one group had a disposition towards finding new employment while employees in the other group were searching because of a particular situation. The constant job searchers driven by a dissatisfying job acceptance seem to be different from other dissatisfied job searchers because of the continuity of the job search. However, they are similar to other employees that I interviewed because they are also driven by an overall situation, rather than a disposition.

The other employees I interviewed reported that at some point in time they had recognized they would consider other employment alternatives. These employees either started thinking about as a result of some event, accumulating motives, or a combination of events and motives. First, six employees reported that they had been thinking about beginning their job searches for a long period of time as a result of accumulating motives. The accumulating motives gradually made employees aware that they should find new employment. Broadly, the most common accumulating motive involved feelings of boredom and dissatisfaction. Common reasons include a career plateau either as a result of a lack of signs of progression, a sense of boredom on the job, and knowledge of the mobility limitations in their current job. Other employees reported they were not satisfied with their day to day work and wanted a change. Employees who began their search because of accumulating motives reported

these factors were both expected and unexpected. In addition, two employees mentioned multiple small events were involved in accumulating motives. However, they could not mention one specific event, but suggested that the events highlighted their pre-existing boredom or dissatisfaction. This suggests an interaction between accumulating motives and events.

Eight employees reported that an event had prompted them to think about looking for a new job. For example, employees were motivated by events related to the work environment such as a political event (e.g., a new supervisor, a disagreeable company action). In addition, several events that impacted employees' personal lives prompted job search. For example, one interviewee reported that she found out a spouse had an employment opportunity in a new location. This event is associated with a joint decision-making process. Other events involved mobility. One employee was promoted and could no longer move up in the organization. Another employee was denied a promotion. Two events were preceded by job dissatisfaction.

Delays between initial recognition and action. Employees varied widely in the amount of time between when they first thought about looking for alternatives and when they took action. Of the fourteen employees who were not constantly searching, six took action immediately after the prompt (43% of non-constant searchers), three gradually took action after the prompt (21% of non-constant searchers), and five took delayed action after the prompt (36% of non-constant searchers). I explored the relationship between type of prompt and the way the employee started his or her search. Four of the six employees who took immediate action had experienced an event and one had experienced multiple small events close together. One of the six who took immediate action had experienced accumulating motives but also revealed starting by testing the waters. A non-shocking event or a gradual accumulation of motives led three employees to gradually take action in their job search.

Of the five employees who reported experiencing significant delays between realizing they needed to search and taking action—three had experienced some event and two had a gradual build up of motives. Interestingly, two of the three employees who delayed their search after an event had been in their job for less than a year before experiencing some employment shock (e.g., hours cut, layoffs). These employees said that the delay resulted from intentionally avoiding another draining job search. The third event was an unexpected positive promotion that limited upward mobility.

Five employees reported delaying their search either intentionally (three employees) or because they had limited time or energy to search (two employees). Employees intentionally delayed their search because 1) it might look bad to leave the current job too soon, 2) waiting to find out what would happen with organizational change, or 3) heard market was slow and did not see a reason to rush. Two resource-constrained delayed searchers had limited time to search and therefore delayed their action because of working long hours. Resource related reasons for delays were sometimes emotional related to a family tragedy, a stressful job, or the last job search had been draining and the present job search was unwelcome (two comments).

I was really bummed out because I had really just found this job for the most part. I hadn't been employed very long and I wasn't ready to start looking again – because looking for a job is such a hassle.

Emotions at beginning of search. I asked several employees about the emotions that were specifically associated with the beginning of their job searches. Eleven employees discussed emotions associated with the beginning of their job search and made twelve comments. Nine employees (82%) discussed only negative emotions, one employee (9%) discussed both positive and negative emotions and one discussed only positive emotions (9%). The one employee discussing only positive emotions talked about gratitude that she had a job and therefore was in a favorable

position to find another job. The employee discussing both positive and negative emotions was trying to start a business on the side while she was employed full-time and said she experienced fear and excitement. Both employees talking about positive emotions were in good positions—they liked their jobs.

Employees experiencing negative emotions mentioned either passive negative emotions such as “being bummed” and frustration or they mentioned active negative emotions such as “being anxious.” Three of the six employees (50%) experienced both passive and active negative emotions at the beginning of their searches. Seven of the 11 employees mentioned passive negative emotions and six mentioned active negative emotions. Two employees mentioned active positive emotions.

I looked at the association between emotions at the beginning of search and the way the search began. The employees who took action immediately after a prompt reported that they experienced panic, nervousness, anxiety, and anger at the start of their searches. All three of the employees who reported feeling frustration began searching gradually with preparatory search behavior or made some sort of plan. The two employees who stated they were bored with their jobs and one who was bummed all avoided their searches. It appeared that passive negative emotions were associated with delay and avoidance and active negative emotions were associated with immediate search. One employee who had experienced boredom for several months before the interview that had recently turned into anxiety stated she had casually searched in the past but picked up the intensity recently.

Problem representation.

I asked employees a variety of questions to attempt to understand the way they structured the employment decision problem. First, I asked several general questions about the most important issues in their searches to understand the key components of the problem. Second, I asked employees to compare their current job searches to their

previous job searches. This would help uncover the important elements of the problem with regard to a meaningful reference point. Third, I asked questions to understand how they allocated their attention while actively searching or networking. Fourth, I also asked about constraints to their searches in order to understand boundary conditions around their employment problem. I asked general questions (e.g., “what are some constraints to your job search”) and specific questions such as whether it would be easy or difficult to leave their current organization.

Major issues, essence, aim/goals. I asked interviewees to talk about the “most important issues” in their job searches and describe the “essence” of their job search. In a few cases I needed to acknowledge that the question was vague and I asked them to do their best to summarize their search in a few sentences. These questions target the primary reasons that an employee is searching. They also provide a way to summarize the key elements of the job search problem. I obtained thirty usable comments from all twenty employed searchers. I categorized employees’ comments into five themes.

I labeled the first theme *selectivity*. Nine of the twenty employees (45%) made ten comments about their lack of ability to get a job (five employees, five comments, 20%) or conversely, their ability to be selective (four employees, five comments, 20%). The employees who highlighted their ability to be selective liked their jobs but were searching to find the next stage of their careers. The other half of the comments referred to lack of opportunities, frustration, and doubts about whether he or she was qualified for positions. Two job searchers that focused on lack suggested that changing locations would allow them to begin anew in a better network or a city with greater opportunities.

I labeled the second theme *job and company attributes*. Eight employees of the twenty (40%) made nine comments that referred to searching for very specific type of

job (3 comments, 33%) or searching based on a single company or job attribute (6 comments, 67%). Two comments suggested that the most important issue in their job search was the location of the company. Other comments suggested that the main issue of the employees' searches related to company size, the work environment, compensation, or the commute (one comment each).

The third key theme related to the *process* of job searching. Five employees made seven comments that suggested essence of their job search could be captured with regard to the process of their job search. Four employees emphasized that the essence of their search was that they were passively searching. Two employees made comments that suggested some aspect of networking (e.g., networking differently) was a key component of their search. One employee characterized her search in terms of time limitations.

Two themes suggested that the essence of employees' searches involved the bigger goals they were pursuing. The fourth most mentioned key issue or essence of employees' searches was related to *development opportunities* and *career advancement*. Employees made six comments suggesting this was a key issue in their searches. The issues of long term career prospects is unique because it shows these employees were focused on a larger decision policy tied to their careers rather than a one-time decision involving specific jobs and organizations. As the second theme related to an important goal, five employees made five comments suggesting that the essence of their job search was characterized by a need to obtain *financial stability*. Specifically, employees were focused on company financials (two comments), the stability of their spouse's business (one comment), financial stability during retirement (one comment), and financial shock (one comment).

Differences between present search and previous searches. Understanding job seekers' reported differences between their present job searches and past job searches

may also be useful for understanding salient components of the problem representation with reference to previous searches. This topic was important because, if an employee could not elucidate key elements of the present job search because of taken for granted assumptions, comparing personal job searches may overcome this limitation.

Nineteen employees gave usable responses to this question and a total of seventeen reasons their present searches were different from earlier job searches. The most consistent reason suggested by four employees was that they had become pickier in the present search because of greater knowledge and experience and marketability.

It's different. In previous situations I didn't have as much experience, I wasn't as marketable. But now it's completely different. It's – I think that I now have the ability to find an opportunity and develop it into a, you know, a pretty strong position.

Three employees noted that the intensity of the current search was different—either passive as opposed to a previous search that was more active (two employees) or the present search was more active as opposed to a previous search that was more passive (one employee). One employee states:

[This job search] is not similar really because I'm not actively searching. It's not that I hate the job but I'm hoping that there's a change in my management so that I don't have to leave because I really do like my job. It's just a boss situation whereas my prior job I left because of people being in the position and then the people moved on. So I was kind of kicking myself because I should have stayed.

This employee had changed her search because she likes her current job. Note that she also mentioned that she had learned from a past employment decision.

Four employees had changed what they were looking for or where they were looking. Two of the four employees stated their searches were unique because they

had expanded where they were looking—either no they were longer constrained by a particular location or were no longer only looking within the same company. Two of the four employees stated their current searches were different because they were looking for a different type of work or work arrangement—either full-time when they previously had searched for multiple part time or working in a different area of the same field.

Six searchers stated that they were facing a more unfavorable job search than in the past. Of the six, one employee was forced to make a compromise regarding her career for the first time in her life because of a joint career decision. Two employees said the job search was unique because they did not want to be looking for a job—it was the result of an unfavorable event at work. One employee was searching for the first time in 25 years. Two mentioned that the economy had made the search different because of limited opportunities. For example, one searcher stated that the economy had made him look for work in a different field.

Attention. I asked employees some questions to understand the way they were thinking while they were actively searching for new employment. I asked employees about actual and hypothetical situations where they had to use some search method. I asked participants to recall specific situations several times to try to guide them think about the context when they were making some decisions. I referred to past instances as they arose during the interview (e.g., one employee discussed a meaningful networking event) and I also posed some hypothetical situations (e.g., if you were to go online and search tonight, where would you look and what would you look for specifically?). Nineteen participants responded to the question.

Sixteen of the nineteen employees who were asked this question stated that they were searching for organizations, positions, or both. Only one employee talked about giving attention to both the organization and position, but revealed a greater

concern for finding the right organization. Of the other fifteen employees—seven searched specifically for organizations and eight searched specifically for positions. Of the seven employees that looked for organizations, two stated that they began by looking for the more well-known, larger organizations. For example, one HR professional describes directing her attention to large organizations when she first began her job search:

[At the beginning of my search I directed my attention toward] A lot of consulting firms that many of my peers from graduate school are working but they are mostly on the east coast and I don't really want to move. So I have been looking at the assessment offices of a lot of the bigger universities.

The eight job searchers that gave their attention to positions more than the organization had a few different approaches such as looking for specific titles or words that reflected specific skills (e.g., process management, project management). One job searcher describes her search for a specific type of position and how her search for a position supersedes her search for an organization.

...I have a lot of staff accounting experience. I have done accounting jobs before this job I was actually a senior accountant. So I can kind of apply for hybrid roles. So I usually look for hybrid accounting slash analysis roles, which sometimes means smaller companies. So I am applying towards accounting and finance roles and I even have some treasury experience so I apply for those too.

Ten participants focused on specific attributes instead of organizations when searching. The most common attribute mentioned in seven of the nineteen interviews was location. Three job searchers stated that location was the primary focus of their attention:

Usually the first thing is location. Second thing is what are the titles and responsibilities...

Interestingly, several job searchers mentioned location as a key issue or constraint in their search but did not say they gave their attention to location while looking for a job. This may suggest that location is a mindless or taken for granted part of their search. Besides location, three participants stated they focused their search attention on one or more other job attributes, including compensation, variety, flexibility, and work-life balance. One employee says that when she's looking for a job she focuses her attention on:

Whether it's going to be as flexible as my company is now and whether the hours are going to be 9 to 5, and I like to separate work from social life and not have it take over. So I guess company culture, hours, level of stress, and obviously pay and location.

Two searchers said they were focused on their qualifications while searching.

As I'm looking through, I wonder what kind of experience these people are looking for, are they even going to interview me.

Three employees stated that they made part of their search automatic and gave little thought to their search. They have a set list of career sites or specific company sites they look at regularly.

It's a little less emotional now than it was at the beginning. It's a little bit more factual, a bit more robotic. Pretty much every week or every other week I have a whole list of companies' sites that I check.

Another job searcher talked about setting up an automatic e-mail feed that he read regularly but did not think too hard about:

I subscribe to these job postings. I read them—about an hour a week. I don't know if I'm pretty clear, but I think I have a good sense of what I would go for once I see it.

These job searchers either had searched based on habit or set up a system that would automatically search on their behalf.

Constraints. Constraints to employees' job searches are important because they help to show the scope and boundaries within which people look for employment alternatives. Eleven employees mentioned 21 constraints. The most common constraints that job searchers reported were resource constraints (11 comments). Resource constraints referred to either 1) time and energy constraints (four comments), 2) financial constraints (five comments) or 3) recruitment constraints (two comments: underdeveloped network of contact, inadequate information about jobs). The second most common constraint was related to location (8 comments). Many of the constraints overlap. For example, one employee was constrained by time, money, and location through her lease:

Depending on where I go I have a lease here that I have to pay out and at my current job I can't leave until the end of April. So timing will be an issue.

Lack of time or energy to search were often mentioned as constraints for employed job searchers:

I find I'm exhausted a lot after work and that prevents me from job searching as much as I'd like to.

The eight location constraints were either related to relationships (three comments), limited opportunities or access to markets (three comments), or strong preferences for a location (two comments). Locations constraints that were relational had to do with a spouse or family member in a certain location. Limited opportunities could be a labor market in a small town or access to a labor market in a city a few hours away:

I'm at least a three hour drive to the market I need to be in. There's not going to be any other place that has an opportunity like the one I'm currently in this area, so I guess it would be just fighting against the stigma of not being a local candidate.

Two location constraints related to strong preferences:

There was a really good job in Pittsburg and they were pursuing me but when it came down to it I just couldn't go back to living in the cold again.

Two constraints that I had categorized as financial resource constraints overlapped with location constraints, but appeared to be driven by financial resources.

We own a house that is worth 30% less than when we bought it so the real estate market is also influencing the search. If we could pick up and move and get what we paid for our house we'd be more mobile. So now we are not as mobile as we once were...

Three comments suggested relationship constraints—joint career decisions, being embedded in relationships at one's current job, or refusing to work in a particular industry because of the people.

Discrepancy. Most participants who were not under-employed were satisfied with their jobs and companies. The theoretical underpinnings of problem solving approach and self-regulation theories suggest that employees are motivated to reduce the gap between the present state or problem and a goal state or solution (Kanfer et al., 2001). Employed job searchers are presumably motivated to resolve some discrepancy between their present state and a goal state by searching for and obtaining new employment. For example, one employed job seeker's current job may not match up with his or her career aspirations and therefore he or she searches for a job that is more in line with these aspirations. To understand the discrepancy that was driving their job

searches, I asked employees: “what would be different if you had found a new job that you would accept?” I also asked: “how important it is to find a different job?”

Eighteen employees provided responses. I first categorized the discrepancies as small, medium, and large discrepancies for descriptive purposes. Seven of the eighteen (39%) employees stated that they were in situations that were very close to ideal or that finding a new job was not a priority. Three of the eighteen employees (17%) said their new position would be moderately different and that finding a new job was somewhat important. For example, one employee said that a different employment acceptance would have many of the same elements but would be at a larger company and would have less administrative tasks and more strategic tasks. Eight of the eighteen employees (44%) stated that their current situation is very different from a situation they would be in if they had found a job they would accept.

I next categorized the reasons for the discrepancies. Six employees said that the reason their situation would be different if they found a job they would accept is because they had prioritized other goals ahead of employment. For example, two employees stated that family goals were the motivating force rather than an employment discrepancy. One said the discrepancy was huge because she needed to achieve career goals so that she could reach her family goals in the next few years. In contrast, another employee said that an employment change would not make things very different because he prioritizes family over work at this stage in his life. Another employee said that she would be near family and friends, but then stated that it would be more important to satisfy the social concerns and she would just take a job even if it was less than what she wanted.

I would probably accept a job that was in Denver even if it wasn't ideal. It is like, I think it would be easier to take a job and then be out there and then keep

on looking around within that year or so. One of the reasons I like Denver is because I have friends in that town so that could make a big difference.

Employees also said that their current situations were different than their desired situation because of the social environment, financial goals, and location goals. These examples illustrate that discrepancies unrelated to their current job often motivated the goal of new employment. Employees were motivated to solve larger life decisions and that employment motives were a means to an end.

I also categorized discrepancies according to the point in time they referenced. I found that employees either focused on the discrepancy between their current state and a state either in the past (two comments), the present (10 comments), or in the future (9 comments). Of the 18 employees, fifteen focused solely on the past, present or future. In particular, seven employees (39%) referred to a discrepancy in the present only, six focused on the future only, and two focused on the past only. As an example of a past-focused discrepancy, one job seeker stated compared his current job to his past jobs and stated that his jobs were progressively becoming lower paying and with decreasing responsibilities. Three employees focused on both a discrepancy with a desired present state and a discrepancy with a future desired state.

Difficult decisions. Understanding the difficult decisions that employees face in their job searches can help understand the way they employees represent their job searches by highlighting value conflicts. I asked generally about the most difficult decisions they had faced. Eighteen employees made eighteen comments.

Most of the difficult decisions were major life decisions. The most commonly mentioned difficult decisions mentioned by employees were tradeoffs involving their family (six of the seventeen employees). Half of the difficult decisions involving family implied a tradeoff between their career goals and family (three employees) and half involved a tradeoff between relocating for a job and family (three employees).

I'd say, you know, one of the two offers that I turned down – it was, you know, very lucrative and it would be – it would put me in a very good position, but, you know, professionally, but you know, the level of travel and everything that would be required – it was not – it wasn't conducive to my main priority, which again is our four month old. So, declining or turning down that opportunity based on my priorities to my family.

Five employees also mentioned difficult decisions related to their careers. Two employees mentioned making a decision of whether to switch careers. Three employees mentioned decisions about following heart or minimizing risk.

Two employees said the most difficult decision involved where to allocate limited time during search.

I guess time. I just really wish that I had a lot more time. I mean it's not really a decision, but uh... well actually like yeah like what to give up and what to apply and what to do instead of just applying. Should I go networking instead, or should I actually just stay at home and apply alone? I guess that's a difficult decision I have to make when it comes to job search.

Five job seekers made decisions that are more commonly discussed in the recruitment literature. First, two employees mentioned difficult decisions that dealt with compensation. One employee faced a decision whether to take a pay cut and another was to relocate to an undesirable city for higher pay:

I mean, the only offer I've had so far is that one in Denver, so whether I take the huge pay increase and live in a city that I don't want to live in or I stay where I'm at and live closer to home. I guess location and salary.

Second, three employees had to make decisions between competing positions, employers, or shifts. Only one employed searcher mentioned making a difficult decision between two competing organizations. Another said difficult decision was

whether the grass would have been greener in another department. One employee made a difficult decision between two different shifts at her current job.

Other actors. Social contacts play a large role in determining the ways that employed people find jobs (e.g., Granovetter, 1973). However, less clear is whether other people influence the way that employees think about their employment situations and job searches. I explored the extent to which employees believed that other people had influenced the way that they thought about their job searches by asking whether anyone else played a role in shaping their job searches. I was not interested in whether others had helped them to *find* a position but whether other actors had shaped the way their current understanding of their job search in a major way. For example, did employees seek career advice from others?

I found that other people had impacted employees' perceptions of their job searches by playing a joint decision-making role during relocation, influencing an employee to begin his or her search, providing support, and providing advice. Perhaps the largest role that another person could play in employees' job searches is a joint role in the decision making process. Spouses and partners played an important role in relocation decisions. Eight of the twenty (40%) employees mentioned their spouse or partner was involved in a decision to relocate. Children (one comment) and friends (one comment) were also involved in relocation decisions.

Seven employees (35%) were prompted by others to begin their searches. Four employees were prompted to begin their searches in a direct way by others. One employee stated that whenever her colleague was unhappy with work the colleague encouraged her to search for other jobs. Friends and family members also directly led another employee to realize the position was not permanent. Unfavorable interactions with supervisors also prompted two employees' searches. Three employees had the initial idea to switch jobs by comparing themselves to peers (two comments) and

witnessing a peer make a career move that the employee did not think was possible (one comment).

Five employees had received support from others. Four employees (20%) mentioned receiving emotional support related to their job search from their spouse (two employees), family members (one employee), or friends (one employee). One employee stated that she had interpreted a conversation with her boss's boss as an indication that the company wanted her to stick around despite turmoil at the company. One employee had received financial support from his parents while he was underemployed. Four employees turned to others for advice. Employees stated they sought advice from mentors (one comment), career counselors (one comment), bosses (one comment) and parents (one comment).

Value of past decisions. Value assessments are a fundamental component of decision making processes and are necessary to understand when a person reaches a “solution” to a problem. One way to ascertain the value that job seekers associated with different decisions is to ask them to recall some past job search decisions that they viewed favorably or unfavorably. This can shed some light on the value that they assigned to past decisions. I asked employed job searchers two questions: 1) whether they could recall: 1) any good job search decisions they had made in the past—decisions that made them proud, and 2) any bad job search decisions they had made in the past—decisions that they regretted. Unfortunately many employees had difficulty with this question and attributed the goodness or badness of a decision based on the unforeseeable outcome of the decision. Employees made a total of sixteen usable comments—eight regarding good decisions and eight regarding bad decisions.

Employees made eight comments regarding decisions they believed were “good” or that inspired pride. These most often referred to a clarifying or adhering to one's personal motives. Two employees reported making good decisions by not

settling for less than they want. For example, employees mentioned quitting a part-time job that was taking away from other parts of life or being honest with employers that a job was below personal standards based on skill, experience, and past accomplishments. Three employees mentioned good decisions related to clarifying the type of job or career they wanted. For example, two employees recalled good decisions when they had applied broadly to positions when they were not sure what kind of job they wanted. Another employee recalled carefully mapping out desired career goals before beginning her job search. Three comments suggested that employees viewed taking steps to build or maintain their network as a good decision.

Eight employees reported making “bad” decisions or decisions they regretted. Broadly, all bad decisions had to do with failing to choose a course of action that would have led to development opportunities or greater leverage and ultimately lead to career success. Two comments had to do with making hasty decisions. Specifically, two employees mentioned taking the first job offer instead of waiting was a mistake. Four comments had to do with not choosing an option with a more desirable career path. For example, two employees regretted choosing an opportunity that is more interesting in the short term such as going abroad or pursuing a research track position at the expense of their career. In addition, employees regretted not putting in the effort to obtain an internship in graduate school that would have been a stepping-stone to a better first job. Another employee regretted working for a smaller company with fewer advancement opportunities. Two comments had to do with relying on superficial reasons to choose a job, including choosing a big name company over a better experience and making a choice by listening to others and not self.

Expectations. Towards the end of the interviews I asked employees the general question of how they expected their job searches would unfold in the future. Twenty employees made comments. Only four employees were confident that they would

switch employers in the next few months. Sixteen (80%) suggested they did not expect to make progress over the next few months—ten expected delays and six were uncertain about either the labor market or their search strategies.

I feel like I am at a standstill, and until something opens up there is not anything I can do to make an opening happen. But if there is no need for it? Then I can't make an opening.

Ten employees (50%) reported that they would experience delays in their job searches over the next few months. Three comments referred to interviewees were looking to gain more experience before they could make their desired move. Three comments regarded waiting to see how their current career or job search strategy played out, either involving starting their own business or a particular job search strategy. Two comments suggested that employees' job search efforts would pick up after they had received a degree. Three comments referred to waiting for other people before committing to the job search. In particular, employees were waiting to learn whether a boss would be fired, to learn whether a spouse would receive a job offer, or waiting for family obligations to calm down.

Six interviewees (30%) either were uncertain or pessimistic about the way their job searches would unfold. Four cited difficulties relating to the general labor market—three regarding their ability to get an offer in a down economy and one regarding difficulties finding preferred employing organizations (i.e., successful startup companies). Two employees made comments about being uncertain whether their current search strategy would lead them to a job. Of the six uncertain job searchers, five reported being hopeful and one expected to be disappointed based on prior search efforts. Three of the six (50%) also said they while they were uncertain whether they would experience success in their search, they expected they would

make progress by gaining experience and learning effective and ineffective job search methods.

Four employees (20%) were confident that they would move to a different employer in the near future. However, one had already received an offer and was negotiating a higher salary. The other employees were certain they would move in the next few months. One employee was confident about getting a new job in the next few months and also planned to work for the next organization for only a few years before pursuing graduate school.

Factors influencing search progress. Nineteen employees made comments regarding the factors that influenced their progress. I found common themes with regard to locus of control and job search methods. Seven employees referred only to factors that were in their control, five referred only to factors that were outside of their control, and seven referred to either both or it was not clear whether it was in their control. Employees made a total of 26 comments.

Eight employees stated that the most important factors that influenced their progress in their job search were their own effort, persistence, motivation, and commitment to finding employment. For six of these eight employees this was the only factor they mentioned, suggesting they believed they had control over their job search successes. On the other hand, seven employees suggested their progress and success was out of their hands. In particular, four stated the market or if an employer lowered the job requirements would determine their progress and success. Two comments referred to time constraints related to their family and current job. One employee made a comment that directly referred to lack of relationship between effort or motivation and progress, stating job search success depended on “being at the right place at the right time.”

Ten comments suggested that the employees believed their job search methods will influence their progress. First, seven employees stated that networking will influence their progress and success in job search. Four employees implied they were in direct control of the success of their networking—their networking effort would lead to success. For example, these employees said they needed to reach out to a greater number of people, or tell people specifically their employment aims. Three employees stated that networking will be the means to their success but were vague or pessimistic about their role in actively networking. These three employees said they expected to would hear about an opportunity through a friend, they needed to network better, or implied that networking led to progress unpredictably and they always networked. Second, three employees referred to specific job search techniques—finding a better point of contact, their confidence during interviews, and responding to job postings quickly—that they believed would influence their progress the most.

Factors influencing search effort. Because employees' job searches are mostly self-started, understanding factors that speed up or slow down their searches is critical to understanding the employees' search processes. I asked employees whether anything had increased or decreased the amount of effort they spend on their job searches. I also asked what might increase or decrease the amount of effort they invested in their job searches in the future. Seventeen employees made comments here.

The most common reasons for increasing search effort were related to having a bad workday (six comments). For example, one employee states:

If I have a bad week at work, I definitely kick up the searching.

Thinking about the goals of the job search sped up four employees' searches. For employees increased their effort or maintained high effort in their job searches because of characteristics of the job search process—receiving feedback from an

employer, getting momentum from preparing to apply to one company, getting a resume ready, and realizing that to find a job in the down economy requires greater effort. One employee comments about motivation from seeing a potentially good fit and the subsequent momentum:

You know, every once in a while something will come across that just looks like it would be a great fit and so when I see that, you know, I get everything prepared, I do all of my research and, you know, when I do that research I'm ready to look into the next one, and so if something comes across as a solid lead it gets me pumped up looking for the next one.

Several factors also led employees to decrease the amount of time and energy they invested in their searches. The most common reason for decreasing effort was greater perceptions of security—either financial or job security (five comments). For example, one employee talks about his job search:

I think it's a lot more passive this time. It's not as active as I used to. You know, my job is pretty secure, and it pays decent and everything else considered, they are decent. I'm not like and it puts food on the table so as long as that's happening, I'm pretty satisfied. I don't think I need to actively pursue, you know, actively pursue other opportunities?

Another common reason was lack of time to devote to the search (four comments).

Note that lack of time was also mentioned as an important constraint earlier.

Between January and beginning of march, I usually work really long days nights on weekends so I haven't searched at all in two months or maybe a couple hours a week looking for something that really interests me as far as the job descriptions that are out there available.

Characteristics of the job search process also had a negative impact on four employees' job searches. Employees slowed down their searches after getting burned

out from searching or interviewing (two comments) or absence of positive signs or feedback from companies (two comments). One employee talks about being drained from too many interviews:

Sometimes I'm jaded from it like if I like yesterday I had a phone interview, today I have two phone interviews. Then I'm just like you know, It's hard to just constantly do these phone interviews and I'm like so I feel like I need a break sometimes, get out. It's tiring and especially in person interviews, getting dressed up, I study the company.

Current job search emotions. I also asked employees about their current emotions involved in their job searches. Twelve employees made useable comments. Nine out of the 12 (75%) employees named only negative emotions and three of the 12 (25%) named both positive and negative emotions. However, the three employees who made both negative and positive comments either emphasized the negative or disqualified their positive comment, suggesting that all employees that responded to this question were mostly experiencing negative emotions related to their current job search. This is consistent with the negative emotions employees stated they experienced at the start of their job searches.

Study 2 Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to generate new insights about employees' job searches. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 employed and college-educated job searchers. The interview topics addressed the beginnings of their job searches, the key elements of their job searches, constraints, and their expectations. The present study extends research related to employees' job searches by developing a wide base of information relating to the way that employees' think about their employment decisions. The present study was exploratory and I found a number

of common themes that should be helpful in designing future quantitative research studies. I highlight a few key themes below.

Beginning their job searches. At some point employees must determine that they are in the market for new employment. I looked at the factors that initially led employees to *think* about new employment and the way they took initial action. I found that employees initially realized they would look for new employment in four main ways. First, several employees reported they always looked for jobs as a result of ambitions or because they had accepted a dissatisfying position. Therefore, these job seekers had no clear start to their search. Employees who did not constantly search for new employment either started as the result of a gradual build up of motivations (e.g., dissatisfaction), some specific event, or a combination of events and accumulating motives.

After they had recognized they would look for new employment, I found that employees began their active searches by 1) first a delay and then action, 2) action that started slow and then gradually increased, or 3) through taking immediate action. I found that the way employees started their search depended on the way they came to initially thought about looking for a new job and the associated emotions.

Problem representation. Most employees (85%) characterized the essence of their searches in terms of 1) whether their searches were characterized by desperation or selectivity and 2) a search for a company or job with a specific characteristic. Job searchers also characterized the essence of their searches as the way they were searching (e.g., passive), and goals related to developmental opportunities, career advancement, and financial stability. Despite being mostly happy with their current jobs, most employees I interviewed gave little attention to their current positions. This suggests that employees' job searches cannot be understood through a turnover lens.

In addition, employees were motivated to solve larger life decisions and that employment motives were a means to an end.

Employees faced difficult decisions related to searching for new employment. Most commonly, employees mentioned difficult decision related to tradeoffs involving their career, family, and locations. Only one employee faced a difficult decision of choosing between two organizations.

Attention. I asked participants questions about where they directed their attention while actively searching for new jobs. I found that half of the employees searched for positions and half had searched for organizations. In addition, I found the several searchers devoted little attention to their searches, suggesting that their searches were habitual.

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CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING EMPLOYEES' JOB SEARCH MOTIVES

Job choice involves a person choosing between alternative courses of action with regard to pursuing and accepting employing opportunities. Job seekers choose between different recruiting organizations as well as whether and when to search for a new place to work. Choosing one course of action over another requires the job searcher to distinguish one as superior based on an assessment of overall value—i.e., the reasons that something is important to the decision maker (Russo & Carlson, 2002). In contrast to laboratory research on decision making, people rarely enter real-life decision situations that have been pre-defined, but instead people must define the decision problem and make choices based on their own goals and values (Lowenstein, 2001). In most decision process models (e.g., Svenson, 1996), goals and values govern the entire decision making process. Understanding job seekers' goals and values is critical to understanding job search decisions.

Scholars have studied job seekers' goals and value assessments in two main ways. First, some scholars have acknowledged the importance of goals in job choice and have advanced theories relating goals and job search. As reviewed earlier, researchers have conceptualizes job search goals in myriad different ways and the literature needs a unifying structure to understanding job seekers' goals. A unifying structure is important in this context because it would highlight major issues such as whether job seekers simultaneously pursue multiple goals, and the way that job seekers resolve conflicts between goals. Second, scholars have devoted substantial research attention to the characteristics of jobs and organizations that are important to recruits (Breugh, 1992). Unfortunately, assessing value through attribute-weighting is limited because attributes capture only the surface features behind peoples' preferences. For example, Wansink (2003) suggests that the attributes are often “knee-

“jerk” ways that may sound right, but may be driven by demand characteristics, therefore, revealing little about the deeper motives and reasons behind the behavior. Further, Highhouse and colleagues (1999) note that attributes are limited because they tend to be context specific.

Most general theories of goals and values suggest that an individual’s goals are organized hierarchically (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999; Beach, 1998; Carver & Schier, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2000; DeShon & Gillespie, 2006; Elliot et al, 2002; Higgins, 2000; Reynolds & Guttman, 1988; Wansink, 2000). The highest level goals represent goals related to the self such as social esteem (DeShon & Gillespie, 2006). Mid-level goals are goals that people try to accomplish in their everyday behavior. Lower level goals are the most immediate goals related to specific observable characteristics related to preference or behaviors (DeShon & Gillespie, 2006). High level goals have greater explanatory power because they represent the ultimate reasons for a behavior or the desired end-state of existence. Therefore, low level goals are only important as means to achieve high level goals. Conceptualizing job search goals hierarchically can provide a unifying structure to the myriad conceptualizations by prior research. For example, goal hierarchies can connect the lower level goals such as job attributes that recruits pursue (e.g., pay) to the more abstract values and concepts driving their pursuit of pay (e.g., social approval).

Laddering interviews

A widely accepted method to study goals and goal hierarchies is “laddering” (Wansink, 2003) or “means-end chain analysis” (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) interviews. Laddering seeks to understand how individuals translate attributes of some decision object into meaningful associations relevant to their selves by asking a series of progressive questions (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Laddering provides in-depth information regarding a person’s motivations with respect to a given set of objects. It

is an appropriate method in the present context because it explicitly takes the perspective of the decision-maker. Laddering is necessary because people are sometimes not aware of the core reasons or values driving their preferences (Rokeach, 1973). For example, a consumer may purchase a particular type of beer because it fulfills a sense of belonging need. Ladders have been used in previous research to provide useful descriptions of hierarchical goal structures believed to motivate consumer choices (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 1999; Russo & Carlson, 2002; Wansink, 2000) and to elicit managers' values (Bourne & Jenkins, 2005). In addition, the motives elicited by laddering methods have been found to have predictive power beyond Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) elicitation method (Grunert & Grunert, 2005).

The first step involves eliciting the attribute that a person states is important for choosing one option over another. The attributes represent the means—the perceived and observed characteristics—used to achieve deeper goals and values. Researchers can uncover attributes in two ways—1) forced choice elicitation or 2) elicitation during a conversational interview. In a forced-choice procedure a researcher presents the interviewee with choice alternatives and asks the interviewee to describe the attributes that differentiate the alternatives. Next, the interviewee states a preference based on the elicited attributes. Second, attributes can be uncovered during the course of a conversational interview. For example, Wansink (2003) suggested specific questions regarding their consumers' general thoughts about the brand and the relationship of the brand to competing brands (e.g., what would it take for you to switch brands?).

The highest level of abstraction represents the value level of the ladder and has to do with motivations related to the self (e.g., social approval). Personal values are enduring end-states of existence. Thus, laddering ultimately can link attributes with

elements of a job seeker's preferred self. Rokeach's (1973) definition of a value is a "mode or conduct or end-state of existence that is personally preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence (p.5). Given that all human behavior is driven by approach or avoid values (Elliot, 2008), understanding values related to avoidance are important as well. A technique to address this issue is called negative laddering. Given that I discussed different decision-making processes for different levels of consideration sets, negative laddering may permit greater understanding of reasons that recruits eliminate undesirable companies from consideration, while positive laddering may provide understanding of the reasons that recruits choose between alternatives in their consideration sets

Values may surface after asking the interviewee a few questions or many questions. The number of questions needed depend on the questions asked, the person's involvement with the product or job. Based on extensive personal experience with the laddering technique, Wansink (2003) suggests that 30-40 minutes are needed for each laddering interview to reveal meaningful results. Wansink (2003) suggests that 2.2 ladders can reach saturation while Bourne and Jenkins (2005) suggest roughly 3 ladders will uncover reasons for a decision. Laddering in other areas of research (e.g., consumer behavior) reveals only a limited number of higher-level values. However, higher-level needs in consumer contexts may not generalize to the context of job choice decisions. Unlike most consumer choice contexts, job choice decisions are inherently high-involvement, unstructured, involve multiple parties, and high-stakes. Therefore, laddering may reveal different higher-level needs than in consumer contexts. Second, it important to uncover potentially unique patterns linking attributes to higher-level needs may emerge in job choice contexts.

Laddering studies in consumer choice contexts have almost exclusively studied the attributes that differentiate a preferred product from its competitors. However,

laddering more generally seeks to explain how a person's decision to choose an activity facilitates the achievement of some desired end-state and does not need to be a preference between two objects. This is an important distinction because in Study 1 and Study 2 I found that employed job searchers do not always face decision situations where they compare multiple employment alternatives. I found that employed job seekers more commonly face decisions regarding courses of action such as a whether to pursue a single organization or whether to begin their job search after a particular event. Therefore, in addition to eliciting attributes that differentiate between employment alternatives, I also elicit the important characteristics that lead to a range of job search behaviors.

Study 3 Method

Sample

My sampling approach was driven by the results of Study 2 and is closely tied to the interview protocol for Study 3. In particular, I had established important categories that were important based on Study 2. I interviewed additional participants until I 1) had covered each of the categories and 2) had reached saturation. I offered participants \$20 to participate in the interviews. Job searchers in my sample came from three different sources. First, I recruited five full-time students who were in a professional human resource management master's program at a large Northeastern university through an email advertisement sent to a student list-serve. The MILR students were full-time students and therefore unemployed job searchers. Four of the five students (80%) were seeking full-time work and one was seeking a summer internship. Second, I recruited six employed job seekers through 1) a list-serve for a large Midwestern university's local alumni chapter in a large city in the Western United States or 2) a list-serve for alumni of a Western university's nursing program. Third, I recruited participants through networking groups for a large Northeastern

university. I obtained permission through the university's director of career services and was informed by directors and assistant directors of alumni affairs that the best way for getting in touch with alumni for my purposes was to go through two email networking groups. In particular, I recruited participants through emails sent through Cornell University networking groups based in New York City (i.e., Big Red Bulletin Board) and San Francisco (Cornell Alumni Association of Northern-California). Posting to these networking groups is limited to alumni only and is regulated by an administrator. The participants recruited through Cornell University networking groups reported less financial incentive to participate, and reported that they were more often motivated by a common bond to the university.

My sample included 24 job searchers and follows Reynolds, Dethloff, and Westberg's (2001) recommendation that a minimum of 20 respondents should be interviewed in studies using laddering methods. Half of the participants were married or engaged. Participants (62% female) averaged 11.5 years of work experience ($SD = 10.22$). The sample was well-educated. Nine participants (38%) had obtained a master's degree, two had obtained their doctorates (8%), six were completing their master's degree (25%), and eight (33%) had obtained bachelor's degrees. Participants were white (66%), Asian (25%), and Hispanic (8%).

Procedure.

At the outset of the interviews, I assured job seekers confidentiality and anonymity and asked them to sign an informed consent form. All participants agreed. I conducted all of the interviews over the phone. I asked all participants for a copy of their resumes so that I could look at their work experience, industry, and education. I tape-recorded all interviews for transcription. The interviews lasted between forty minutes to one-hour in length.

Interviews

Table 2 provides an overview of the interview guide. I began with background questions. Because I recruited participants through different sources, I asked participants where they heard about the study. In addition, I asked about their motivations for participating in the study. I then asked participants about their current employment situation (e.g., job duties, years with the current company). I asked participants to briefly describe their current job and how difficult it was to leave.

TABLE 2. SUMMARY OF STUDY THREE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Topic

- Background
- When did you start searching?
- Discrepancy between job would accept and current job
- Constraints to job search
- Standards changed
- Satisficing
- Important events
- Last time searched
- Differences between companies

Prompts

- Can you think of a situation where
- Compare a time when
- What are the differences
- How do you know
- Where tipping point
- Why not X
- How much does X vary

Next, I asked them to give me a brief summary of their job search (e.g., length of time, goals, methods they used to find a new job). I used this summary to inform my choice of themes to probe during the course of the interview. I used this approach based on the belief that the previous 42 interviews had given me a level of theoretical sensitivity and I was able to determine the best way to proceed.

I elicited attributes during the interviews in one of two ways. First, I had several job seekers intentionally compare three companies they had discussed during the course of the interview. If they had not discussed three options I asked them to name an additional company they would consider, a competitor, their current position, or a previous position. Forced comparisons between these employment alternatives kept the laddering interviews highly contextualized. Second, I used a conversational interview to elicit characteristics of some situation related to their job search. During the conversational interviews, I probed something about that seemed to be important to them about their job search and job search process. Specifically, I probed things that prompted their searches, constraints, hypothetical circumstances, changing standards, speed, and important events. If I ran out of topics I also had participants make comparisons between companies that they were considering. Starting with the attribute, I then asked a series of probing “why” questions to progressively develop a value or goal hierarchy. I continued probing the reasons for each subsequent motive until reaching the underlying reason that the consequence is important to the person and no new motives emerge.

Analysis and results

I conducted a total of 50 ladders with 24 employees for an average of 2.1 ladders per person. All interviews were transcribed. In the first step of the analysis I read through all of the laddering interviews. I identified the attributes that job searchers used to differentiate between alternative courses of action. Because all

ladders initially elicited an important attribute that I would later probe with additional questions, the interviews produced 50 attributes. Attributes generally referred to characteristics of organizations, industries, or jobs.

Next I highlighted the places where the interviewee had discussed the reasons that the attribute was important—the motives. I also highlighted the sequence of motives for each laddering interview. I created codes to capture the similar motives across interviewees. As suggested by Reynolds and Guttman (1988), I assigned codes that were broad enough so that other researchers would consistently identify the same theme and also narrow enough so that I still retained the meaning.

Job searchers mentioned a total of 159 motives. Coding the common motives reduced the motives into a total of 23 distinct motives. Table 3 lists the motives and the frequencies that interviewees mentioned the motives. The frequencies of the particular motives suggest the extent that motives were common parts of the interviewees' job search schemas. The most frequently discussed motives were related to engagement (19 citations), social environment (12 citations), developmental opportunities (12 citations), and upward mobility (11 citations).

Consistent with other studies that have employed laddering interviews, the number of motives differed across the laddering interviews. Each motive represents one level in a chain of motives. Eight laddering interviews revealed only one level of motive. Because a means-end chain looks at paths between motives, it requires at least two motives—one as a means and one as an ends. Therefore, those eight interviews were not part of the analysis of the relationships between motive paths. Twenty-two laddering interviews had reached two levels of motives. Twenty laddering interview had greater than two levels of motives—two had five levels, four had four levels, and 14 had reached three levels of motives.

TABLE 3. MOTIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MOTIVES

	Motive name	Number	Value	Central	Abstract	Prestige
1	Ability to get job	2	0	0.05	0.60	0.03
2	Access to resources	2	0	0.03	0.00	0.00
3	Accomplishment	5	2	0.04	0.75	0.03
4	Company direction	2	0	0.01	0.00	0.00
5	Compensation	9	0	0.12	0.45	0.05
6	Contribute to success enterprise	6	3	0.08	0.71	0.05
7	Control over job and time	6	0	0.07	0.17	0.01
8	Developmental opportunities	12	0	0.16	0.33	0.05
9	Engagement	19	9	0.24	0.73	0.18
10	Familiar with work	8	0	0.08	0.14	0.01
11	Job security	3	2	0.04	1.00	0.04
12	Location	3	0	0.07	0.00	0.00
13	Minimize negative emotion	9	6	0.11	0.80	0.09
14	Pride and respect	5	3	0.07	0.83	0.05
15	Productive	10	6	0.10	0.78	0.08
16	Provide people with better quality of life	9	3	0.11	0.60	0.07
17	Relatedness	3	1	0.02	0.50	0.01
18	Security	3	2	0.02	1.00	0.02
19	Social environment	12	1	0.15	0.14	0.02
20	Upward mobility	11	0	0.14	0.46	0.07
21	Utilize competence	9	0	0.14	0.46	0.07
22	Variety of work	6	0	0.09	0.13	0.01
23	Work -family	5	2	0.04	1.00	0.04

Value motives.

Table 3 lists the number of times each motive was categorized as a value. Several employed job searchers were reluctant to continue revealing motives beyond those that may have appeared obvious, and I made judgments regarding whether a motive was a value or a consequence in the context of the specific laddering interview. Specifically, I coded a motive as a value if 1) multiple ladders converged on a single motive, 2) I had attempted to find additional motives and could not (e.g., an interviewee said the same thing in different words), 3) the motive was abstract (e.g., I did not categorize getting a promotion as a value), 4) the interviewee was generally open to explain their reasoning, and 5) the interviewee had directly stated that a motive was the ultimate driving force beyond his or her job search.

Not all 50 laddering interviews had reached the value level. During the 50 interviews the job seeker had revealed motives that I categorized as values 40 times and represented 12 motive categories. The values that were most frequently cited in my interviews were particularly relevant to the workplace and provide an interesting portrait of the important drivers behind employees' job searches. The most frequently cited value—engagement—appeared nine of the 40 times. This suggests that employees ultimately wanted to be more engaged, satisfied, or interested with their work. Productivity and minimizing negative emotion each appeared six times. Employees often reported wanting to see the outcome of their work and avoid negative emotions such as stress. Minimizing negative emotions is an interesting motive that suggests employees' job searches may be driven by finding work they do not dislike. Two goals had other people or organizations as the focal point—contributing to the success of a valued enterprise and providing people with a better quality of life. Both appeared three times. In addition, two motives related to security—financial stability and job security—each appeared twice each.

It is useful to informative to look at the values that did not appear or appeared rarely. Given the large number of married employees I interview, it is surprising that the values of providing for other people, work family, life stability, and job security together accounted for only nine values. In addition, accomplishment appeared twice and pride and respect appeared three times. These motives were usually mentioned by younger job searchers.

Paths between motives

Reynolds and Guttman (1988) suggest that specific motives are somewhat less important than the associations between motives. I used several measures suggested by Pieters and colleagues (1995) to assess the relationships between motives within laddering interviews and thereby provide insight into job searchers' cognitive structures (Pieters, Baumgartner, & Allen, 1995). One way to use the relationships between motives to understand job seekers' schemas is to look at the *centrality* of the motive in their schemas. A measure of centrality captures the frequency that a motive is involved with other motives and is calculated by dividing the number of paths leading to and from a motive by all motive paths. Table 3 lists the centrality measures associated with each motive. I looked at the most central motives based on an arbitrary cutoff that were involved in at least 5% of all motive paths (i.e., centrality score of .10 or greater). I found that the nine motives—engagement, developmental opportunities, social environment, utilizing competence, compensation, providing people with a better quality of life, minimizing negative emotion, and being productive were involved with 65% of all connections.

Next I assessed how often a motive was a target of other motives. Pieters and colleagues (1996) call this *prestige* and it captures the percentage of all ends that could be captured by a single motive. Engagement was the motive that was most commonly an end that was achieved by other motives. Job seekers pursued motives that would

lead them to work that was interesting and engaging. Engagement represented 18% of all ends—twice as many as the next most often mentioned end—minimizing negative emotion (9%). I found that the six motives—engagement, providing people with a better quality of life, upward mobility, utilizing competence, productivity, minimizing negative emotions—represented 54% of the all ends.

Abstractness assesses the proportion of times a motive served as an end as opposed to a mean. I assessed this by assessing the number of times a motive was an end divided by the number of times it was a mean or an end. Thus, higher levels of abstractness suggest that a motive is more likely to be an end rather than a mean. However, this measure is limited because some motives only appeared once and appeared as ends and therefore the abstractness value needs to be interpreted with the overall frequency of the motive. Minimizing negative emotion had a high abstractness value and appeared very frequently, suggesting it was more often an end than a mean. Low abstractness scores suggest that a motive was more likely a means to achieve another motive. Several motives had low abstractness scores—access to resources, company direction, location, variety of work, and familiarity with work were the five least abstract motives, suggesting they were most often the means that were used to reach some end. Motives such as relatedness had scores around .50 and appeared as means and ends in equal proportion.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to generate new insights about employees' job search motives. I used an intensive inductive methodology to probe interviewees' motivations across a range of job search contexts. In this section I discuss the major insights from this study.

The laddering elicitation method revealed a number of important motives that drove job search behaviors. The most frequently mentioned motives were related to

work. Interestingly, the two motives that appeared most often as important values and played important roles in relationships with other motives were process motives—engagement (e.g., interest in work and engaging work) and minimizing negative emotions (e.g., avoiding stress, making work tolerable). Process motives are interesting because they suggest that the job searchers were motivated to achieve some ongoing experience related to their work rather than goals that are end-states such as financial security.

Most of the motives were not the motives that job search theories suggest drive the job search and job choice process. For example, researchers have applied social identity theory to explaining job search behaviors and suggest that individuals search for prestigious organizations that, by association, can lead to social approval and raise self esteem (e.g., Highhouse et al., 2007). I have some evidence that the results are not idiosyncratic to my sample or methodology. In particular, I included several students in my sample and found the values driving their searches could be explained in terms of motives commonly described in the job search literature (e.g., accomplishment, pride). This lends credibility to the motives that I found using the laddering technique.

The motives elicited in the present study are also important because they are different from laddering studies in consumer contexts. For example, Wansink (2003) reports that 1,200 laddering interviews revealed seven basic values in a consumer behavior context—accomplishment, belonging, self-fulfillment, self-esteem, family, satisfaction, and security. Most of these values can be associated with the social and self-actualization levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The laddering technique was useful because it yielded insights into non-obvious motives through continued questioning. Extending motives that appear in one research literature or using research methods focusing on the most important attributes of organizations or jobs could most likely not have yielded similar insights. The

present study also shed insight on employees' schemas related to job searching by looking at the pattern of associations between motives.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. The study was explicitly exploratory. With any qualitative design, it raises questions of generalizability of the findings. Future research can address this possibility using a cross sectional survey. However, most of the job searchers I interviewed (76%) were obtained through alumni list serves that represented three universities and locations across the United States. The higher level motives derived from the laddering studies are intended to yield broad explanatory power. Given that I found a consistent pattern of results for several motives, in some cases the results may generalize to similar populations of university-educated employed job searchers. However, future research is needed. In addition, future research needs to assess whether these motives are stable over time and across situations.

Second, another researcher needs to assess my coding to determine whether we agree on the categorizations. However, even if the codes are changed, the associations between different motives still provide useful insights (Reynolds & Guttman, 1998).

Third, it is possible that employed job searchers were less willing to discuss reasons such as self-esteem or social approval that are often found as key motives driving consumer purchasing decisions. Given that a small portion of the laddering interviews (18%) yielded a single motive rather than a chain of motives, this is a possibility that should be explored in future research. However, the goal of laddering is not to reach the value level motives (Reynolds & Guttman, 1988). In fact, the most practical applications resulting from laddering involve motives below the value level (Wansink, 2003). In addition, the single motives that these employees were still useful for descriptive purposes and did not confound the key analyses that looked at the

patterns of relationships between motives. Further, such laddering interviews also provided motives with greater explanatory power than attributes.

Fourth, it is possible that the different attribute elicitation methods that I employed produced different motives. For example, I conducted half of the laddering interviews during an ongoing interview so that I could explore motives driving a broad range of job search behaviors and situations and the other half at the end of interviews and had job searchers simply compare potential employers. Preliminary analyses suggest that this was not the case.

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