

Networking as an information behaviour during job search: an study of active jobseekers in the Scottish youth labour market

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Abstract

Purpose - Although social networks are considered influential to employment outcomes, little is known about the behavioural manifestation of networking during job search. To address this, the study presented here examined the role of networking amongst 16-24 year old active jobseekers living in Scotland.

Design/methodology/approach - A sequential, mixed methods approach was applied to gather data, including interviews (no. of participants =7), a focus group (no. of participants = 6), and a survey questionnaire (no. of participants =558). The study design was underpinned by a prominent model from the field of Information Science. As such, job search networking has been treated as an information behaviour.

Findings - The findings show that young people acquire different types of information from network contacts throughout job search, and that frequent networking is associated with positive outcomes. This is especially true of engaging with family members, acquaintances, and employers. However, barriers such as a lack of confidence or awareness mean that few young people make the most of their social contacts when seeking work.

Practical implications - Careers professionals can use this knowledge to advise clients on maximising the potential of social networks as sources of job search information.

Originality/value - A key contribution of this work is that it provides a detailed insight into a topic that has been neglected in previous studies: that of the process of job search networking as an information behaviour.

Keywords Job search, career information, networking behaviours, social networks.

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sustained periods of unemployment at a young age negatively impact psychological wellbeing and earning potential in later life (Mousteri *et al.*, 2018; Strandh *et al.*, 2014). This is a significant issue: youth unemployment in Scotland, for example, resides at double the rate of the general working age population (Scottish Government, 2019). One means of addressing the problem is to improve the personal agency of young people looking for jobs, by developing skills and competencies. Amongst these, and considered a key facet of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), is the ability to use networks effectively when seeking employment.

The research presented in this paper was conceived as a means to develop job search networking as a concept, whilst focusing on the youth labour market (i.e. 16-24 year olds) in Scotland. To this end, networking is explored in terms of its capacity to beget information for individuals, and is underpinned by Wilson's (1999) information seeking behaviour model.

Applying an information perspective to study job search networking has two main advantages. Firstly, it provides a theoretical grounding to the subject which is lacking in previous studies of job search networking. Secondly, by applying both qualitative and quantitative methods, it elucidates the informational role of networks in relation to labour market outcomes. In doing so, the research presented here addresses calls from the job search literature to develop a better understanding of how social networks assist jobseekers to find work (Van Hove *et al.*, 2013, p.15; Wanberg, 2012, p.389).

Literature Review

Network contacts as sources of job search information

The study of the information sources consulted by jobseekers - including social networks - has been an integral theme of job search studies (Saks, 2005; Wanberg, 2012). Informal contacts such as family members and co-workers are considered to be key sources of networked information, and the prolificacy of these sources at relaying information that leads to employment has been demonstrated by studies of labour markets throughout the world. For example, Granovetter (1995, p.140) compiled a list of surveys from countries such as Japan, the Netherlands, the USA, and the UK. Such work shows that between 25 and 75% of workers in these labour markets had initially been told about the availability of their jobs via a social contact. Franzen and Hangartner (2006, p.357) found a similar variation in a study of 27 different countries, with a UK figure of 31%. Notably, the focus of attention in these studies is

the intersection where jobseekers are made aware of a vacancy that leads directly to employment. As such, the wider role of network contacts during job search is not considered.

Networked jobs and the properties of social networks

The context of ‘networked’ jobs (i.e. jobs sourced via a social contact) has received significant attention in social network research. A prominent strand of this work focuses on relational structure and its impact on the diffusion of information throughout the social system. In his seminal work, Granovetter (1973) argued that tie ‘strength’ is crucial to such information diffusion, and highlighted the differing properties of strong (e.g. family and close friends) and weak (e.g. acquaintances) ties. Whilst strong ties are said to wield greater influence on behalf of individuals due to their heightened interest in providing assistance (Bian, 1997), they are less likely to extend into different social groupings. As such, individuals with fewer weak ties receive less ‘novel’ information from distant parts of the social system, and are less likely to hear about new job opportunities.

There has been some empirical support for Granovetter’s theory. For example, studies have shown that networked jobs are more likely to be sourced via weaker ties (Gee *et al.*, 2017; Granovetter, 1995; Yakubovich, 2005). Others have found that weak ties are related to positive employment outcomes, but only for individuals with higher education levels or those who have previously been employed in high status jobs (Ericksen and Yancey, 1980; Wegener, 1991). However, it has also been found that strong ties are used more often for networked jobs (Franzen and Hangartner, 2006), and are more influential for those with lower levels of education (Ericksen and Yancey, 1980; Wegener, 1991).

Equally important to structure is the concept of social capital, which is linked to the quality of the resources (e.g. information) contained within networks (Lin, 1999). There are many potential indicators of social capital, such as the occupational status of social contacts. For example, having access to more contacts with high occupational status has been linked with job success amongst graduates (Behtoui, 2015) and re-employment rates amongst redundant workers (Moerbeek, 2001). Conversely, individuals with a higher proportion of unemployed people or fewer prestigious contacts in their networks face negative employment outcomes (Gayen *et al.*, 2010; Verhaeghe *et al.*, 2015).

Predictors and outcomes of job search networking

The studies outlined above focus on the association between network properties and job search outcomes. However, only three extant studies focus explicitly on job search networking as an operational concept (Lambert *et al.*, 2006; Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009; Wanberg *et al.*, 2000). Their findings show that demographic factors such as gender and race have no effect on networking intensity during job search (Lambert *et al.*, 2006). However, intrapersonal factors such as conscientiousness, extraversion, and networking comfort are significantly associated with increased networking efforts (Lambert *et al.*, 2006; Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009; Wanberg *et al.*, 2000). In terms of behavioural outcomes, the effects of frequent networking during job search seem to be incremental. For example, it was found to be positively - but not significantly - associated with re-employment (Wanberg *et al.*, 2000), and the receipt of an increased number of job offers (Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009).

These prior studies of job search have in common a reliance on purely quantitative methods. In addition, the indicators used to measure networking in such work are limited. For example, they are either derived from evidence sourced in non-academic literature sources (Wanberg *et al.*, 2000), or rely on only two distinct measures (Lambert *et al.*, 2006; Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009).

To address the gaps in the literature relating to job search networking, as identified above, the current study posed the following research question: *What are the key networking behaviours of young jobseekers living in Scotland?* By answering this, it has been possible to determine the behavioural manifestation of networking and the wider informational role of network contacts during job search.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

Wilson's information seeking behaviour model (see Figure 1) was used to inform the structure and design of the empirical research presented in this paper. Along with previous iterations of the model (Wilson 1994; 1997) it is derived from extensive information science research, and is among the most prominent in the field (Bawden and Robinson, 2012; Case, 2012; Ford, 2015). Its emphasises user behaviour over the systems people use to obtain information (e.g. databases, books etc.), reflecting a general trend in information science research in recent decades (Case, 2012; Wilson, 2000). To this end, it focuses primarily on the factors which influence the information seeking process, and also the environmental factors which act as

moderators between information need and actual engagement in information seeking (Ford, 2015, p.101).

Wilson’s model was selected as a framework to develop the concept of job search networking due to its individual-level focus and utility to stimulate thinking “about the kinds of elements that a more complete model ought to include” (Wilson, 1999, p.253). Indeed, in an earlier

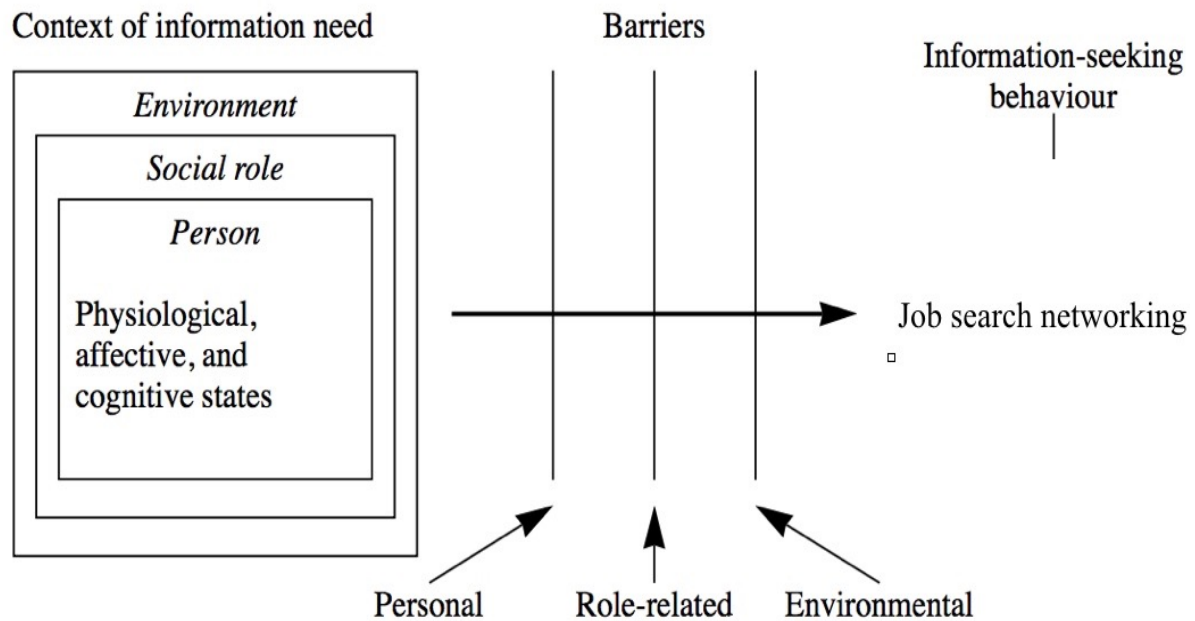


Figure 1 Wilson's information-seeking behaviour model (adapted by the authors) Wilson (1999) iteration (Wilson, 1994), Wilson illustrated what a more complete model might look like by incorporating Ellis’s (1989) information-seeking framework (i.e. in the place of ‘job search networking’ in Figure 1). However, with no foundational knowledge on job search networking, a less prescriptive version of the model was deemed more suitable for the current study. Data were collected and analysed in accordance with its core components, as shown in Figure 1: 1) context of information need; 2) barriers; and, 3) information-seeking behaviour.

Study design

A two-stage iterative design was applied to the study. This included the sequential collection of qualitative and quantitative data. A primary function of this approach was to explore actual cases of networking from the perspective of young people, and then use this data to “identify important variables to study quantitatively” (Creswell and Clark, 2006, p.75). This was an

important step, as previous studies in this area are purely quantitative in design, and therefore presuppose the nature of job search networking.

Qualitative stage

The qualitative phase of the research took place between January and March 2016. Data were collected via participant interviews and a focus group with 16-24 year old jobseekers. Both methods were considered appropriate to develop knowledge on a largely unexplored phenomenon. The interviews were used to glean rich, structured, in-depth responses from individual jobseekers. However, it was felt that the conversational dynamic of a focus group may yield important insights about job search networking over and above the interviews. For example, networking is a complex behaviour that may not be consciously acknowledged by everyone. Therefore, by hearing other jobseekers discuss the subject (as opposed to the researcher), some individuals may then be able to identify with networking and better relate their own experiences (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p12).

Participants were sought to cover the spectrum of the Scottish youth labour market (16-24 year olds), in terms of job search experiences. This was achieved by sourcing individuals from different areas of Scotland, with different employment statuses, and varying education levels. A number of channels were used to recruit the participants. Employed interviewees responded to a call for participants placed on various social media channels (e.g. university alumni social media pages). Students were sourced indirectly by contacting staff members at further education institutions and asking them to source willing participants. Similarly, unemployed participants were recruited via third sector workers involved in running employability workshops, and careers professionals working for the national skills agency (Skills Development Scotland, 2019). Seven job seekers took part in the interviews. Six job seekers joined the focus group. Thus a total of thirteen job seekers contributed data for analysis in the qualitative stage of the study. All participants were assured that their contributions to the study would be anonymised and that they would not be identifiable from any report of the work. Thus the names used in the findings section below are all pseudonyms.

Questions were posed on context (e.g. ‘What motivates you to look for employment?’), and potential barriers (e.g. ‘How do you feel about asking people for help during job search?’). With regards to information seeking, an egocentric network approach (i.e. the name-generator method) was used to gather data specifically about job search networking (Robins, 2014, pp.103-107). In essence, this involved asking the participants to list the people and

organisations from whom they had acquired information throughout the job search process, and then asking questions about each named contact individually so that the nature of the relationship, and the type of information acquired from the contact, were determined.

For analysis, the interview data were subjected to a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, pp.1281), with transcripts coded in a hierarchy of themes. The top layer of the hierarchy was based upon the three components of Wilson's model. A more granular coding structure was developed by analysing the transcripts on a line-by-line basis and identifying sub-themes within the main categories. All relevant participant quotations were matched to these sub-themes using NVivo software. Having developed a suitable framework from the interview data, the focus group data were then analysed line-by-line to match further examples to sub-themes, and to augment the hierarchy of codes where necessary.

Quantitative stage

Sample

The second stage of data collection involved the gathering of quantitative data via an online survey questionnaire that was live between August and December 2016. Although a total of 909 jobseekers aged 16-24 completed the survey, only those who agreed or strongly agreed that they put effort into job search were included in the analysis for this paper (n=558). This was done to mitigate for substantial behavioural differences created by respondents who were only engaged in very casual job searches (e.g. browsing online job listings with no real intent), and to therefore provide a suitable basis to draw inferences about the effects of networking on job search outcomes. Again, maximum variation sampling was used to recruit participants. This was to ensure that a wide range of 16-24 year olds were included in the survey. To this end, participants were sought from a range of sources e.g. the public careers service, job-related social media feeds, colleges, universities, and via a Youth Site survey panel (Youth Site, 2017).

Using the above approach, a diverse sample was attained. In terms of demographics, residents of 27 out of the 32 Scottish local authorities are represented in the findings. The age, gender, and employment status of participants are shown in Table 1 and compared with the figures for the entire Scottish population. Another key demographic measured in the survey was education level: 83.3% (n=465) were educated to university level (or working towards university qualifications), and 16.7% (n=83) to non university-level. The respondents were also asked to list the type of job(s) that they were seeking, and these were broken into three categories using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) framework (Office for National Statistics,

2010). This showed that 36.6% (n=199) sought jobs of high occupational status, 13.2% (n=72) of medium occupational status, and 50.2% (n=273) of low occupational status.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Survey questions and measures

Various other measures are included in the analysis, most of which were identified as important factors from the analysis of the qualitative data. The survey questions to gather data for these measures are summarised in Table 2.

[INSERT TABLE 2]

Survey analysis

The data gathered in the survey questionnaire were analysed using the SPSS v23 software package. Frequencies of each variable were used to gain a basic insight into the demographics of the sample, and proportional responses to behavioural and attitudinal questions. Following this, a cross-tabulation analysis was undertaken to determine the relationship between contextual factors and networking behaviours, intervening variables and networking behaviours, and networking behaviours and job search outcomes. Inferential statistics were then used to gain in-depth knowledge of the results, particularly to understand the associations which created statistically significance differences. The Chi-square test was used to test relationships between categorical variables. The Independent t-test and one-way ANOVA were applied to test the effects of categorical (e.g. ethnicity, sex) or ordinal (e.g. networking frequency) variables on the mean scores of interval data (no. of interviews received).

Findings

Types of networked job search information

The analysis of the qualitative data shows that jobseekers acquire a range of information from network contacts when they are looking for a job. These can be broken down into five distinct categories (see Table 3), and relate to different stages of job search. For example, Ashley spoke of an exercise conducted by her employability support worker where she was assisted to “make a big ‘mind map’ of past and present”. This *personal development* information helped her to create a goal at the formative stage of the job search process, which was based upon her experience, skills, and personal interests.

[INSERT TABLE 3]

In Michael's case, the *practical skills* and *job opportunities* information he received from his careers adviser helped him at the latter stage of the job search process. He said of the careers service:

“They’ll always show you job opportunities to go for. But they’ll also help you if you’re not too sure about skills to help you get a job, interview skills and that type of thing. They go quite into depth”.

Modes of job search networking

The interview and focus group participants described networking behaviours that manifest in three ways: (1) active, (2) harvest, and (3) passive. Active networking occurs when the job seeker directly seeks and receives information from a new or existing contact. For example, Ross gleaned direct responses to job search queries on an online forum for student video game designers. He said: “I just fire them out there when I need help with something”. Harvest networking related to occasions when job seekers speak to people about job search, and then these interactions lead to further contact with information at a later date. For example, Michael described that his friends’ parents contacted him with relevant information following prior conversations about his job search activities,:

“They had brought it to my attention that they’d maybe be going through Facebook and seen a local business looking for someone. Like an apprentice or anything, they’ve mentioned it to me (...) or they’ll message me”.

Passive networking occurs when job seekers receive unsolicited information. For example, Steve’s mother attempted to accelerate his efforts to get a job. He said: “My mum looks at some jobs for me, and she sometimes points me in certain directions on jobs. I think she uses a job search engine”.

Job search networking with different contact types

The survey findings show that networking with friends and family members are common job search behaviours, as can be seen in Table 4. However, the respondents were far less likely to have contacted someone that they had not spoken to for more than two weeks to ask about job. This finding suggests that the use of weaker network contacts (i.e. acquaintances) is uncommon during job search. With regards to formal contacts, the findings from the analysis of the quantitative data show that the majority of respondents had contacted

employers directly (67.0%; n=374) to ask about job opportunities, or had spoken to a professional (60.8%; n=339) about their job search activities at least once.

[INSERT TABLE 4]

Family members and friends

In line with the survey findings, the majority of the interview and focus group participants reported the acquisition of job search information from at least one family member. In some cases, parents and siblings provided general advice e.g. assistance with wording in application forms and emails to employers. In others, they were able to provide specialist knowledge about industries or job search processes. For example, Mhairi spoke of her mother's input when she created a CV:

“My mum put it together for me. Her type of job's in an office, and she recruits people like me. So she basically typed up something for me that she would be looking for”.

In contrast to the survey findings, only four participants spoke of friends as a source of job. This suggests that young people talk regularly to their friends about job search activities, but that this does not necessarily lead to information acquisition. In accordance with the survey findings, the interview and focus group members gave few clear examples of the receipt of job search information from acquaintances. However, Simon - who was seeking a graduate position as an electronic engineer - described the input of his father's friend who worked for a related industry body:

“He'd...read through the CV, sent it on, and gave me advice when I had a couple of offers... I could say 'I've been asked [to interview] by these two companies', and he was able to ... say what he thought of both the companies and stuff like that”.

Professionals and employers

The majority of interview and focus group participants had spoken to at least one professional about job search. For those speaking to a college teacher or university lecturer, the nature of the exchange – although often resulting in valuable information - was mostly infrequent or fleeting. However, the job seekers who spoke to support workers and careers advisers tended to have more involved relationships. For example, Ashley saw her employability support worker twice a week at a group session. She described the nature of their relationship:

“She’s just, like, so supportive to all of us, individually. And really, not just about jobs and stuff. I mean, she’s so helpful with jobs and stuff, and helps us with interviews, giving us practice. It’s really good”.

Direct contact with employers was also mentioned by a number of the participants. To this end, Michael said:

“I’ve noticed a... lot of local firms - especially on the mechanical side - they won’t put out an ad. I mean I’ve [been] into establishments before and asked about it. I’ve heard them say, ‘Well we actually *are* looking for someone’. So yeah, another thing that I find quite useful is going up and asking”.

Networking and job search outcomes

Independent t-tests conducted on the quantitative data set were used to test the relationship between networking with different contact types, and invitation to job interviews. To moderate the impact of job search length on the findings, only the respondents who had been searching for more than four months (n=141) were included in the analysis. As shown in Table 5, networking with each type of contact is positively associated with more face-to-face interview invitations. However, a significant difference was found between those who had networked at least three times with family members, acquaintances, and employers, and those who had done so fewer than three times.

[INSERT TABLE 5]

Context of job search networking

The analysis for this study reveals that contextual factors impact the nature of job search networking behaviours. For example, those survey respondents who ‘strongly agreed’ that they put effort into job search (23.7%, n=132) networked more frequently with all contact types than those who ‘agreed’ (76.3%, n=426). Using Independent t-tests, job search effort was found to create statistically significant differences for networking with family ($p<.001$), friends ($p<.010$), and acquaintances ($p<.010$). The length of job search had a similar impact. To this end, the respondents who had searched for more than four months (25.5%, n=141) had networked with each type of contact more often than those who had been searching for fewer than four months (74.5%, n=413). The difference in means are statistically significant in relation to networking with family members ($p<.001$) and friends ($p<.010$). The qualitative

data also revealed the potential impact of a long job search on networking behaviours. For example, Stephanie said:

“I got to the stage where anybody I spoke to I just asked them where they worked and if they were looking for anybody”.

The nature of the job being sought has a bearing with specific contact types. Using the one-way ANOVA test ($F(2,538) = 14.21, p < .001$), occupational level was found to have an impact on face-to-face contact with employers. The Scheffe post hoc test shows that the difference is between those seeking low and medium level jobs, and those who seek high level jobs ($p < .001$, and $p < .050$, respectively) – with the respondents seeking low or medium level jobs networking with employers face-to-face more often. David, who at the time of his interview sought a job in a medium level occupation as a tradesman, had directly contacted employers during job search. David’s account of his job search highlights the informal nature of recruitment in his industry:

“I’ve never had a CV. I’ve looked for jobs and no one’s ever asked for a CV. They just ask: ‘How long have you been working there? How long have you worked for the previous company you worked for?’ And they’ll phone them and ask”.

Conversely, seeking jobs of higher occupational status is positively associated with networking with acquaintances. The findings from this study show that those who were seeking high (16.6%; $n=33$) and medium (18.1%; $n=13$) level jobs were more likely than those seeking low level jobs (11.7%; $n=32$) to have contacted acquaintances for job search information at least three times. Using the one-way ANOVA, the effect of occupational level was found to be statistically significant $F(2,541) = 3.68, p.05$. The variance was between those seeking high and low level occupations ($p < .050$). Notably, willingness to relocate within the UK for work – a variable which is strongly correlated with seeking jobs of higher occupational level – is also a predictor of networking with acquaintances. To this end, 22.2% ($n=37$) of those who agreed that they would relocate within the UK had contacted an acquaintance at least three times to ask for information, compared with 9.9% ($n=33$) of those who disagreed.

Barriers and enablers

The findings show that intervening variables can inhibit or enable frequent networking behaviours during job search. At a basic level, some of the interview and focus group participants conveyed an understanding of the informational value of networking, and made

conscious efforts to gain advice from contacts when completing tasks. However, others did not make a conscious decision to network for information, and instead used people in close proximity to solve immediate problems. In some cases, networking was perceived purely as a means of gaining access to influence. Lyndsey felt this was a negative thing, saying: “I know this isn’t how it should be (...) but it’s a lot to do with luck and with who you know to be honest”. Lauren also felt that luck was a factor, and scorned the idea of speaking to peers for assistance:

“No way you’d find a person with enough influence without knowing them in the first place. I mean I could speak to a graduate but they’re not going to have any say in who gets a job and who doesn’t”.

Confidence emerged as another prominent intervening variable in this study. The survey findings show that those who agreed that they would be comfortable asking people that they did not know very well for job information (n=235) had networked with acquaintances more often than those who disagreed (n=168). The difference in means was found to be statistically significant using an Independent t-test ($p < .001$). The role of confidence in speaking to weaker network contacts is also reflected in the qualitative data set. For example, when asked if he would be happy to approach people to ask for information, Simon said:

“I don’t know to be honest. I’m quite a quiet guy. I’m probably not the most outgoing of people. I would probably force myself to, I guess. I would certainly try to open a dialogue with somebody, if I knew they were in a position to help. I would definitely try and speak to them about it”.

Conversely, those who agreed (n=120) that they did not like to ask people for help with job search had networked with family members ($p < .050$) less often than those who disagreed (n=280). However, these respondents networked just as frequently with acquaintances and professionals as the remainder of the sample. Evidence of this trend emerged in the interviews. For example, Steve conveyed a reluctance to ask such strong ties for help with job search. He said: “I feel quite confident enough to have a go at it myself without needing any help”.

Using social media frequently for job search is also positively associated with networking behaviours. For example, those who occasionally (i.e. at least three times during the current job search) used Facebook (n=154) to actively search for jobs had networked with acquaintances more often than those who had not (n=385). This was found to be statistically significant using an Independent t-test ($p < .001$).

Discussion

Characteristics of job search networking

Networked information is considered one of the main social capital resources, and is believed to contribute towards the ‘outcomes of actions’ such as job search (Lin, 1999, p.31). However, its utility to jobseekers has not previously been fully explained. The findings presented above illustrate the means by which networked information contributes towards the job search outcomes of active jobseekers. The qualitative data show that young people in Scotland engage in networking to acquire multiple types of job search information, and this relates to activities at both the ‘preparatory’ and ‘active’ phases of job search (delineated by Blau, 1993; 1994). Also, the survey results demonstrate that frequent networking is associated with receiving a higher number of job interviews. Therefore, networking can be considered an means of improving the quality of products and tasks associated with getting a job, such as CVs, applications, and interview skills¹.

The qualitative findings also give some insight into the nature of networking behaviours. They show that networking is not only characterised by active behaviours and the immediate transfer of information about job vacancies. Indeed, contacts often mobilise on the behalf of jobseekers. This assistance can be unsolicited (i.e. passive networking), but it can also be the result of the jobseekers’ earlier proactive behaviour (i.e. harvest networking). To some extent, the apparent diversity of job search networking reflects Wilson’s (1997) four categories of information behaviour: active search, ongoing search, passive attention, and passive search (p.562).

Another focus of the research presented in this paper is the nature of the contacts with whom young jobseekers engage. Previously, studies of networking have measured the influence of family and friend contacts in combination (Van Hoye *et al.*, 2009; Wanberg *et al.*, 2000). The findings in this paper show that, in isolation, family members can be sources of diverse and sometimes specialist information, and often become actively engaged in the search process on behalf of young jobseekers. Frequent networking with family is linked to more interviews invitations. This indicates that ‘doubling up’ of effort and knowledge has an impacts upon job search outcomes. Although the relationship between family social capital and the employment outcomes of young people has already been established in previous studies (Caspi *et al.*, 1998;

¹ Notably, although not covered extensively in the current paper due to its primary focus on active jobseekers, the wider research findings show that less active jobseekers engage in networking, albeit less intensively (Mowbray *et al.*, 2018).

Hook and Courtney, 2011), this study provides greater clarity of their specific informational roles as network contacts.

The survey findings related above show that young people speak frequently to friends about their job searches. However, these exchanges have no bearing on the number of the interview invitations that they receive. Perhaps tellingly, the accounts provided in the qualitative data indicate that young people seldom gain job *information* from friends. Therefore, it is likely that they talk to friends frequently about searching for work, but not necessarily to ask for help in this activity. The survey results also show that a clear majority does not contact acquaintances for information during job search. However, frequent networking with weak ties is associated with receiving a higher number interview invitations than is the case with other contact types measured. This provides a new insight into the utility of weak ties, beyond that as gatekeepers to ‘new’ job opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Franzen and Hangartner, 2006). Indeed, the findings here show that framing the utility of weak ties in this way could mask their true worth throughout job search, irrespective of whether or not they pass on vacancy information that leads directly to employment.

The specific role of professionals (e.g. careers services, schools, and universities) and employers as sources of networked information has not been addressed in previous job search networking studies. Here its shown that professionals are used by job seekers to access vital industry, role, or recruitment knowledge. They also facilitate access to industry figures. For young people who face multiple barriers to the labour market, professionals can also be proxies for limited family capital. Whilst not creating a significant difference, speaking to a professional at least once during job search has a positive association with winning interviews. Additionally, speaking to a professional ranks behind only acquaintances in terms of its association with the number of interviews received. Networking with employers is also positively associated with receiving more job interviews. However, only frequent face-to-face contact makes a statistically significant difference in this regard. As indicated in the analysis of the qualitative data, this could reflect the efficacy of this method when seeking employment in sectors with informal recruitment processes and lower entry requirements.

Context of job search networking

It is clear from the findings that contextual factors – both personal, social, and situational (see Wilson’s model, Figure 1) - impact individuals’ behaviours. By examining these trends it is possible to build up a detailed understanding of job search networking. For example, putting

effort into job search (i.e. personal) and longer job searches (i.e. situational) are both linked with frequent networking behaviours. These have been identified as influential dimensions of job search in previous research. To this end, effort has been found to be strongly associated with positive employment outcomes (Saks, 2005; Wanberg, 2012) and mobilising a higher number of contacts during job search (Mowbray *et al.*, 2018). Meanwhile temporal dynamics have been linked to changes in the nature and direction of job search activities (Kanfer *et al.*, 2001).

The occupational level being sought (i.e. role related) is shown to have a particular influence on networking. For example, seeking jobs of lower occupational status is linked to contacting employers face-to-face. This result gives further credence to the contention - noted above - that contacting employers is related to interview invitations because it reflects informal recruitment practices within industries where qualifications may be less of a priority than elsewhere. Conversely, the association between higher occupational jobs and networking with acquaintances and professionals indicates that the demands of seeking such roles creates an impetus to reach out to weak ties for tailored advice. Indeed, previous studies have shown that jobseekers with higher education levels secure better jobs by contacting people with superior knowledge and experience (Ericksen and Yancey, 1980; Wegener, 1991).

Barriers and enablers

Intervening variables inhibit or enable job search networking behaviours. For example, many jobseekers consulted at interview and in the focus group for this study did not seem to be aware of networking as a means of accessing information. Instead they make limited use of contacts in close physical proximity. This finding is reflected in the survey data: only a minority of respondents mobilise acquaintances even once when looking for a job. However, confidence is also a crucial variable in this regard. The survey reveals that young people who are comfortable asking people they do not know very well for information are more likely to network with acquaintances and employers. This aligns with findings from previous studies where it is shown that networking comfort is an antecedent of job search networking (Wanberg *et al.*, 2000), in addition to extraversion (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Van Hove *et al.*, 2009; Wanberg *et al.*, 2000).

Intervening variables also impact networking with close contacts. To this end, young people who indicate that they do not like to ask for help with job search network less frequently with family members. This is despite the same young people being just as likely to network with

weaker contacts (i.e. acquaintances and professionals) as those who indicate that they do not mind asking people for help with job search. Although there is no clear evidence of the reasons for this, it could simply be an assertion of independence from family members.

Conclusion

Being able to effectively use social networks is considered an integral facet of employability in modern labour markets. Indeed, decades of research have revealed links between the properties of social networks and the employment outcomes of individuals. Despite this, the means by which jobseekers network has remained nebulous during this time. Therefore, the basis for interventions to assist people looking for work are founded on a lack of basic knowledge on what people do when they seek help from others during job search.

By treating networking as an information behaviour, this study sought to furnish new knowledge on networking amongst a sample of 16-24 year olds living in Scotland. To this end, an iterative mixed methods approach was applied to gain an holistic view of the phenomenon. To provide theoretical grounding, this was combined with a prominent model from the domain of information science, which - in addition to behaviours themselves - emphasises important contextual factors and other intervening variables that influence behaviours (Wilson, 1999).

The findings show that young jobseekers acquire a range of networked information throughout the process of job search. This can help them to devise a search goal, tailor job search products such as CVs and job applications, and source more job vacancies. Active networking can lead to a greater quantity of information being received, and increases the chances that people will mobilise on the behalf of jobseekers at a later date to provide information. Some contacts will provide tailored advice, and some - especially close contacts - help to 'double up' efforts by becoming active participants in job search. The positive relationship between frequent networking and interview invitations suggests that engaging with people regularly can provide young people with an advantage when completing job search tasks. However, the propensity for jobseekers to network is contingent on a host of factors. These include the occupational level of the role they are seeking, motivation to find a job, and an awareness of the utility of networking as an information behaviour.

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| | | Survey | | | Scottish Population | | |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------|
| | | Males | Females | All | Males | Females | All |
| Age | 16-18 | 33.0% | 28.5% | 29.9% | 29.6% | 28.6% | 29.1% |
| | 19-21 | 39.0% | 44.9% | 43.0% | 33.8% | 33.7% | 33.8% |
| | 22-24 | 28.0% | 26.6% | 27.1% | 36.5% | 37.7% | 37.1% |
| | Total | 32.6% | 67.4% | 558 | 50.0% | 50.0% | 607,188 |
| Employment status | Student | 73.6% | 80.6% | 78.3% | 41.8% | 47.5% | 44.6% |
| | Unemployed | 13.7% | 6.1% | 8.6% | 13.7% | 17.3% | 15.5% |
| | Employed | 12.6% | 13.3% | 13.1% | 44.5% | 35.2% | 39.9% |

Table 1. Age and employment status of the sample by gender, in comparison with the general Scottish population of 16-24 year olds (National Records of Scotland, 2016; Scottish Household Survey 2017)

| Question group | Questions asked (Type of measure) |
|------------------------------|--|
| Networking behaviours | <p>1. How often during job search have you (Rank order):</p> <p><i>a) Spoken with your family members about job search activities?</i></p> <p><i>b) Spoken with your friends about job search activities?</i></p> <p><i>c) Spoken with a lecturer/teacher about job search activities?</i></p> <p><i>d) Spoken with a careers adviser about job search activities?</i></p> <p><i>e) Spoken with a support worker about job search activities?</i></p> <p><i>f) Contacted a person you haven't spoken to for more than two weeks to ask for job leads or advice?</i></p> <p><i>g) Contacted employers (face-to-face) to ask about jobs?</i></p> |
| Contextual factors | <p>1. How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements (Likert Scale):</p> <p><i>a) I put a lot of effort into job search</i></p> <p><i>b) I am looking for a job with longer-term career prospects</i></p> <p><i>c) I would be open to most jobs in order to earn some money</i></p> <p><i>d) I would be happy to move to a new area in the UK for a job</i></p> <p>2. How long have you been searching for a job? (Rank order)</p> |
| Networking barriers/enablers | <p>1. How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements (Likert scale):</p> <p><i>a) I would be comfortable asking people I don't know very well for job search information (e.g. job leads, CV help etc.)</i></p> <p><i>b) I don't like to ask people for help with my job search</i></p> <p>2. How often do you use Facebook?</p> |
| Job search outcomes | <p>1. How many face-to-face interviews have you had since you started this job search (Rank order)?</p> <p>2. How often during job search have you been contacted by somebody you know with information about a job (Rank order)?</p> |

Table 2. Summary of survey questions and measures

| Information type | Description |
|-------------------------|---|
| Personal development | Information that helps the job seeker to create a job search goal |
| Industry & role related | Information that helps the job seeker to research companies, sectors, and job roles |
| Practical skills | Information that helps the job seeker during the application form e.g. to create a CV, complete an application form, or successfully navigate a job interview |
| Contacts & leads | Information that leads the job seeker to other sources, people, or organisations that can assist with job search |
| Job opportunities | Information that makes the job seeker aware of a job vacancy |

Table 3. Types of networked information received by jobseekers

| | n | Never (0 times) | Rarely (1 or 2 times) | Occasionally (3 to 5 times) | Frequently (at least 6 times) |
|----------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Family members | 558 | 3.1% | 16.0% | 31.7% | 49.3% |
| Friends | 558 | 2.2% | 18.1% | 37.0% | 42.8% |
| Acquaintances | 558 | 62.2% | 23.3% | 9.0% | 5.6% |
| Employers | 558 | 33.0% | 29.5% | 20.7% | 16.7% |
| | n | Never (0 times) | At least 1 time | | |
| Professionals | 558 | 39.2% | 60.8% | | |

Table 4. Job search networking with different contact types

| | | Mean no. job interviews | n | <i>p</i> |
|---------------|------|-------------------------|-----|----------|
| Family | ≥ 3x | 1.79 | 121 | <.050 |
| | < 3x | 1.20 | 20 | |
| Friends | ≥ 3x | 1.71 | 115 | .930 |
| | < 3x | 1.69 | 26 | |
| Acquaintances | ≥ 3x | 2.08 | 25 | <.050 |
| | < 3x | 1.63 | 116 | |
| Employers | ≥ 3x | 1.94 | 69 | <.010 |
| | < 3x | 1.49 | 72 | |
| Professionals | ≥ x1 | 1.80 | 97 | .110 |
| | < x1 | 1.50 | 44 | |

Table 5. Mean number of job interviews per contact type