

# **An Empirical Investigation of the Links between Job Search Behavior, Career Strategies, and Perceived Employability**

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*This study investigates the relationship between job search activities, career strategies, and employability. Recent evidence collected from 60 students enrolled in graduate programs of major universities in Turkey showed that there is a significant relationship between job search activity and use of career strategies. Also, a significant interaction was found between career strategies and employability. Nevertheless, no significant relationship was found between job search activities and perceived employability. Implications of findings for theory and future research are discussed. The study contributes to literature by providing empirical evidence for the links between individuals' job search behaviors, career strategies, and perceived employability.*

**Field of Research:** Organizational behavior, Career management

## **1. Introduction**

Given the volatility of today's labor market, individuals are in a perpetual job search mode (Steel 2002). In literature, it is proposed that job search activities lead to the enactment of several career strategy behaviors through a process in which individuals compare their current and desired employability levels (Direnzo & Greenhaus 2011). Although this relationship has been proposed in recent literature, it has never been empirically tested before. It is important to investigate the reasons for the development of career strategies since these are supposed to lead to the development of career competencies and relate to the employability and voluntary turnover of employees. The problem is critical for those employees who attempt to develop career strategies and increase their employability, as well as for companies that are interested in reducing voluntary turnover of their superkeepers.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between job search behaviors, career strategies and perceived employability of individuals. Job search activities can range from passive scanning which involves a casual monitoring of labor market information to more focused search activities such as identification of concrete job leads or contacting prospective employers (Steel 2002).

These activities enable individuals to gauge their employability in the labor market and evaluate the gap between their desired and current employability levels (Direnzo & Greenhaus 2011). In order to reduce this gap, individuals may engage in adaptive behaviors to increase their career competencies and employ several career strategies such as networking, seeking advice and support, self-nominating, building one's reputation, creating opportunities, and developing expertise. These career strategies, in turn, may lead to higher perceived employability of individuals. This paper aims to answer the research question whether and how job search behaviors are related to the development of career strategies and to perceived employability.

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The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, a brief literature review of the variables job search behavior, career strategies, and employability is provided. Then, the research model is introduced and methodology of the study is described. In the last section, findings and implications of the study are discussed.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Job Search Behavior**

Job search has been investigated in organizational studies through two streams of research. One stream of research investigating job search adopts a macro approach. In line with the macro approach, Stigler (1961) introduced the theory of search and developed a model for costs and benefits of search in a goods market. Later, Phelps et al. (1970) made the search theory applicable to the labor market and developed a model aimed at analyzing macroeconomic aspects of the labor market. On the macro side, researchers investigated how market forces such as unemployment rates or job supply and demand affect the frequency with which people leave their jobs (Felps et al. 2009).

Another stream of research investigating job search adopts a micro approach. On the micro side, the job search behavior literature has primarily examined job search intensity. Job search intensity has been linked to financial need, unemployment compensation, and individual difference variables such as self-esteem, Type A behavior, sex, school performance and age (Quint & Kopelman 1995). Micro researchers were also interested in different job search methods. In literature, job search methods have been broadly classified as either formal or informal. Registering for employment with the state employment service; answering advertisements for specific jobs; or using trade-union job-finding networks or private employment agencies fall into the category of formal job search methods (Reid 1972). On the other hand, job search methods such as asking friends and relatives about possible job opportunities, applying to firms on the chance that vacancies exist, or checking gate notices at factories fall into the category of informal job search methods (Reid 1972). In a similar vein, researchers have also distinguished between passive scanning which is the first step of job search involving the casual, acquisitive monitoring of labor market information; focused search which is the second step concerning identification of concrete job leads; and contacting prospective employers which is the third and last step of job search (Steel 2002). The efficacy of different job search methods has also captured research interest. Reid (1972), for instance, examined the view that informal methods of job finding are less efficient than formal methods and found evidence on the contrary.

### **2.2 Career Strategies**

A career strategy is an activity or behavior that increases the likelihood of career goal attainment (Noe 1996). There is a variety of career-related strategies identified in the literature such as networking, creating opportunities, self-nomination, and seeking career guidance (Gould & Penley 1984). Some career strategies are intended specifically to develop experience, skills, and expertise that enhances an individual's human capital (Direnzo & Greenhaus 2011). These are investigated under the label of intrapersonal career strategies. An example for intrapersonal career strategies is developing skills and competencies critical to the success of the work unit (expertise

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development) (Noe 1996). Other career strategies which are networking-oriented lead to the development of social capital (Direnzo & Greenhaus 2011). These are called interpersonal career strategies which include communicating a desire to assume increased responsibility (self-nomination), and developing contacts inside the company who provide one's boss with access to information and resources (networking) (Noe 1996).

There is substantial evidence that career strategies can facilitate career growth and enhancement. For instance, Gould and Penley (1984) found that the use of networking and self-nomination was related to managers' salary progression. They suggested that the use of career strategies results in more favorable performance evaluations because these strategies cause managers to develop positive affect toward employees. King (2004) proposed that attainment of desired career outcomes might result in greater career and life satisfaction, and maladjustment in psychological disengagement, learned helplessness or alienation. Moreover, Park and Rothwell (2009) found direct effects of career-enhancing strategy on the protean career attitude. As for determinants of career strategies, literature has showed that the primary sources behind employees' career strategies are their own proactive personality and their work experience in full-time jobs (Mihail 2008).

### **2.3 Employability**

In the information age, the days of the long-term relational contract is over and there is a new understanding of loyalty in the corporate culture (Byron 1995). Organizations no longer promise people a stable workplace and long-term commitment for employment. Instead, they make a new promise: we will invest in you, make you attractive for other employers (Baruch 2001). This new promise is called employability and not only organizations but also individuals are responsible for enhancing their employability. Accordingly, employability is defined as the capacity to control one's employment options through the creation, identification, and realization of career opportunities (Direnzo & Greenhaus 2011).

Employability provides individuals with control of being able to change employment if necessary which provides them with greater freedom of action (Berntson et al. 2010). Also, job alternatives appear more accessible to individuals whose skills are in high demand in the market (Griffeth et al. 2005). Because the volatility of the economy focuses employees' attention on the importance of control over their career options, most employees desire to be highly employable. As employability increases, individuals are likely to increase their perceived capacity to find and attain viable career alternatives (Direnzo & Greenhaus 2011).

In most studies, employability has been studied in terms of perceived employability (e.g. Berntson & Marklund 2007; De Cuyper et al. 2011; Wittekind et al. 2010). Perceived employability is an important variable to study since it is associated with key employee outcomes. For instance, De Cuyper et al. (2011) have found that perceived employability relates positively to life satisfaction, self-rated performance and turnover intention. Moreover, Berntson and Marklund (2007) showed that perceived employability is positively associated with global health and mental well-being. Determinants of perceived employability have also captured research interest. For instance, in their longitudinal study, Wittekind et al. (2010) showed that education,

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support for career and skill development, current level of job-related skills, and willingness to change jobs are significant predictors of perceived employability.

### 2.4 Hypotheses

Direnzo and Greenhaus (2011) focused on job search behavior as an ongoing process by which individuals increase the likelihood of voluntary turnover. They suggested that, during job search, individuals engage in a process in which they compare the level of employability they desire with the perception of their current employability. The detection of a negative discrepancy between desired and current employability during the comparison process is likely to spark the enactment of specific career strategies in order to reduce the discrepancy by enhancing individuals' competencies. One of the aims of the study is to empirically test the propositions made by Direnzo and Greenhaus (2011) about job search and career strategies. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the frequency of job search activity is related to the use of career strategies.

***H1: The greater the frequency of job search activities, the greater the use of career strategies.***

Direnzo and Greenhaus (2011) also proposed that the enactment of career strategy behaviors is associated with the development of knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why competencies. As individuals develop these competencies in return to their career strategies, they are likely to gain a greater freedom of action and control of being able to change employment. Thus, we hypothesize that the use of career strategies is related to greater perceived employability of individuals.

***H2: The greater the use of career strategies, the higher the perceived employability of individuals.***

We also hypothesize that there is a relationship between job search activity and perceived employability of individuals that is mediated by the use of career strategies.

***H3: There is a relationship between the frequency of job search activities and perceived employability, intervened with the use of career strategies.***

Figure 1: Research Model



## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Sample and Procedure

Population of interest of the study consisted of employed and unemployed individuals in the job market of Istanbul. A questionnaire was designed and published at an online survey website that ensured confidentiality. Data was collected during the 2011-2012 academic year. Two methods were followed for data collection. First, college networks

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were contacted online and the link with the questionnaire was sent to e-mail addresses of graduate students. Second, paper-pencil data was collected from MBA and PhD students enrolled in one of the large universities in Istanbul. At the end, a total of 250 individuals were reached, of which 60 completed the questionnaire (response rate was 24%). The sample consisted of 72% employed and 28% unemployed individuals. The majority was between 24-30 years old and holding a university degree.

Graduate students were preferred as the sample of the study because of their engagement in extensive job search activities and their active involvement in forming career strategies. Hence, graduate students represent a group which may provide rich data for theoretical purposes of the study, despite the limitation of generalizability of results.

### 3.2 Measures

*Job Search Activity:* Job search activity was measured with the Job Search Behavior Index (JSBI) developed by Kopelman, Rovenpor and Millsap (1992). The JSBI asks respondents to indicate (yes vs. no) whether they have engaged in ten different job search activities over the past year. Job search activities listed in JSBI include examples from both formal and informal job search. For a higher level of measurement, an interval scale was preferred for the present study instead of dichotomous items. Respondents were asked how often they have engaged in various job search activities over the past years. Items were evaluated on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from “never” to “very frequently”. Two items from the original scale specific to working individuals “Sought to transfer to a new job within your organization” and “Talked to coworkers about getting a job in another organization” were eliminated because study sample also included non-workers. In addition, one new item “Made job applications” was added. One item from the original JSBI “Read a book about getting a new job” was changed to “Gathered information about getting a new job from the media or the internet” taking into consideration the habits of the Turkish population. Items were translated into Turkish. Cronbach’s alpha of the 9-item scale was 0.922.

*Employability:* Employability was measured with two items from the Self-perceived Employability Scale developed by Rothwell and Arnold (2007). This scale is a self-report measure of individuals’ perceived employability. Two items used in the present study were “Anyone with my level of skills and knowledge, and similar job and organizational experience, will be highly sought after by employers” and “I could get any job, anywhere, so long as my skills and experience were reasonably relevant”. Items were translated into Turkish. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.760.

*Career Strategy Behaviors:* The enactment of career strategy behaviors was measured with four items consisting of single item measures for four career strategies; enhancing employability, mentoring, networking, and career planning. Items were adapted from an empirical study on career strategies (Mihail 2008) that in turn was based on Claes and Ruiz-Quintanilla (1998). Career strategy items were “I have developed knowledge, skills and gained experience that may be needed in future job positions” (enhancing employability), “I have sought advice from my co-workers, family or other people about additional training or experience I need to improve my future

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work prospects” (mentoring), “I have built a network of contacts or friendships with co-workers or other people to provide me with help or advice that will further my work chances” (networking), and “I have recently begun to think more about what I would like to accomplish in my work during the next year or two” (career planning). Items were translated into Turkish. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these statements. Items were evaluated on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.643.

### 4. Analysis and Results

#### 4.1 Factor Analysis

As discussed, previous research has found that job search behavior is multidimensional (e.g. Reid 1972; Steel 2002). In order to find out underlying factors of job search behaviors, factor analysis was conducted with the data. First, to determine whether the data set can be put to factor analysis, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test of sample adequacy and Bartlett’s test of sphericity have been applied. Results of the tests were above acceptable levels (KMO=0,894; Bartlett significance=0,000). Factor analysis with principal components method and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization is conducted to determine the factors. Contrary to previous research, one single factor emerged as a result of factor analysis, which explained 62,887% of the total variance. Factor loadings are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Factor Loadings of JSBI items**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Factor loading</i>
Sent copies of resumes to prospective employers	,905
Made job applications	,900
Gone on job interviews	,890
Contacted an employment agency or executive search firm to obtain a job	,850
Made any telephone inquiries to prospective employers	,839
Read advertisements in the newspapers/on the internet	,800
Talked to coworkers, friends or relatives about getting a new job	,681
Revised your resume	,618
Gathered information about getting a new job from the media or the internet	,571

#### 4.2 Descriptive and Correlational Analysis

Means, standard deviations and correlations between variables are shown in Table 2. There is a positive, significant correlation between career strategy behaviors and job search behavior (0.27) and between career strategy behaviors and employability (0.32), but no correlation between job search behavior and employability.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Study Variables**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1. WORKING	1,28	0,45	1			
2. JSB	2,54	0,91	-0,01	1		
3. EMP	3,76	0,82	-0,09	-0,03	1	
4. CAR	3,75	0,61	-0,08	0,27*	0,32*	1

\* p<0.05

### 4.3 Regression Analysis

In addition to examining descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables, regression analyses were conducted to test hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 stated that the greater the frequency of job search behavior, the greater the use of career strategies. Results of linear regression analysis showed that, as hypothesized, job search behavior was positively related to the use of career strategies ( $B = .265$ ,  $t = 2.096$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

Hypothesis 2 stated that the greater the use of career strategies, the higher the perceived employability of individuals. Results of linear regression analysis also supported Hypothesis 2 showing that the use of career strategies was positively related to perceived employability ( $B = .320$ ,  $t = 2.572$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Hypothesis 3 stated that there is a relationship between the frequency of job search behaviors and employability, intervened with the use of career strategies. To test this hypothesis, mediation tests were conducted. As proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), a four step approach is applied in which several regression analyses are conducted. Accordingly, the first step of the mediation analysis involves testing the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Results of the regression analysis showed that the frequency of job search behaviors was not significantly related to perceived employability ( $B = -.028$ ,  $t = -.217$ , NS). Therefore, consequent steps were not conducted. Hypothesis 3 did not receive support.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between job search activities, career strategies, and employability. Regarding first hypothesis, results confirmed that there is a significant relationship between job search activity and use of career strategies. Apparently, individuals who are in a perpetual job search mode are more prone to use career strategies such as enhancing employability, mentoring, networking, and career planning. The study also provided indirect support for Drenzo and Greenhaus' (2011) proposition that in the job search process, individuals compare their current employability with their desired employability and engage in career strategies to reduce the gap in-between. The relationship between job search activity and use of career strategies may be attributed to this comparison process, nevertheless the study provides only indirect support for the proposition.

We also hypothesized that the greater the use of career strategies, the higher the perceived employability of individuals. Results showed a significant interaction between career strategies and employability. Apparently, in the career-enhancement process, individuals gain a feeling of control over their employment options as they enhance their human capital and develop social capital. This feeling of control increases their likelihood of career goal attainment and lets them perceive themselves as more employable. We may propose that the relationship between career strategies and employability is due to individuals' development of career competencies. But again, the study only provides indirect evidence for this proposition. Since we measured perceived and not actual employability, its relation to the use of career strategies may also be attributed to psychological factors and not to actual development of career competencies.

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Another hypothesis was related to the relationship between job search activities and employability. Contrary to previous hypotheses, results did not provide support for this hypothesis. No significant relationship was found between the frequency of job search activities and perceived employability. Results suggest that job search activities are related to career strategies and career strategies to employability, but no significant relationship exists between job search activities and employability. Our hypothesis that career strategies acts as an intervening variable between career strategies and employability is therefore rejected. The finding that job search activities do not directly lead to employability is an interesting finding of the study. It lets us think more about the roles of career strategies, along with the attainment of career goals and competencies in achieving high levels of perceived employability.

### **5.1 Implications for Further Research**

This study was an attempt to understand interactions between job search activities, career strategies and employability. The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence for the links between individuals' job search behaviors, their career strategies, and perceived employability. Future research may focus on the processes by which individuals feel themselves employable in the job market. This study suggests that objective measures of career goal attainment and development of career competencies may be investigated for the purposes of clarifying the processes underlying individuals' perceptions of employability.

Additionally, in order to understand the mechanism underlying the relationship between job search activity and use of career strategies, future studies may measure individuals' desired and actual employability levels and investigate the mediating role of their discrepancy in the relationship between job search activity and use of career strategies.

### **5.2 Limitations**

The study had several limitations which should be noted. First, sampling methodology of the study raises concerns for the generalizability of results. Second, study design was cross-sectional. Ideally, we should have measured variables over time to be able to establish causal linkages and investigate how relationships developed. Unfortunately, we were unable to conduct a longitudinal study due to practical obstacles. Third, our data is vulnerable to common method variance since all study variables were collected from the same source. However, to minimize the impact of potential common method bias participants were guaranteed response confidentiality.

Finally, individuals' employability was operationalized measuring perceptions rather than actual employability. This may seem as a limitation but given that perceptions are a more proximal predictor of individual outcomes (Van Vianen, Shen & Chuang 2011), measuring perceived employability has been suitable for the study design.

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