How do I get hired? Early career individuals’ employment strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

Rochelle Parks-Yancy & Delonia Cooley

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the employment and career expectations of millions of Americans, including individuals in their early career stage. Instead of the robust labour market that was projected prior to the pandemic, this population faced layoffs, job offers rescinded, unemployment, and underemployment in 2020. Their job hunt strategies amidst the pandemic are an important topic of research inquiry. This qualitative study investigates respondents’ perspectives of online employment sites, social capital, and personal branding via social media as methods to obtain employment information and to get hired. The authors provide practical suggestions to enhance job seekers’ employment searches.

Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the personal and professional lives of millions of people around the world. It destroyed the job market for millions in the U.S.A., including access to career opportunities and employment for early career talent (Auceio et al., 2020; BLS, 2020; Duffin, 2020). Recent college graduates, defined as people ages 22-27 with a Bachelor’s degree or more, experienced severe job losses (Duffin, 2020). Companies stopped recruiting at universities (Reidy, 2020), job offers were rescinded (Hess, 2020; Shastri, 2020), and individuals were laid off (Auceio et al., 2020). The pandemic altered the employment and career expectations of recent college graduates and college students who may have expected a plethora of job opportunities post-graduation (Reidy, 2020). Instead of working in roles commensurate with their education, thousands were rendered unemployed (Beland et al., 2020). They probably experienced substantial challenges with finding a job, given the pandemic’s effect on employment.

This paper examines the pandemic’s effects on the employment strategies of U.S.A. job seekers who are in their early career stage. The research focuses on three ways in which early career individuals’ seek employment: submitting resumés to employers’ websites and/or to employment sites; being a referral (social capital); and personal branding, which is promoting one’s candidacy to employers via the social media.

This study is important contribution to the labour market and career studies literatures. While there is a plethora of research regarding job hunt methods (e.g. Alexander et al., 2019; Marr & Cable; 2014; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Parks-Yancy, 2010; Roulin, et al., 2014), the pandemic’s effect on employment is still ongoing (del Rio-Chanonna, et al., 2020). Researchers are still examining its impact on individuals’ current and future careers. The study addresses knowledge gaps regarding the pandemic’s effects on the employment strategies of job seekers who are in their early career stage. This is an important line of inquiry, given that this population is the next generation of the labour force. The findings may be used to understand their employment perceptions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
and to inform impending policy decisions among organizations within the U.S.A.

The study is explorative and is structured as follows: The authors review the literature regarding the COVID-19 pandemic’s effect on labour markets and the ways in which early career candidates seek employment. Next, the authors address the data, the methods, and the research findings. The study concludes with practical implications.

**Literature review**

**The impact of COVID-19 on employment and perceived career opportunities**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the labour market in the U.S.A. (Parker et al., 2020). As of May 2020, 53% of adult Americans were employed, compared with 61% at the beginning of 2020 (Parkinson, 2020). At its first peak, the unemployment rate rose to about 16% in May 2020 and decreased to 6.7% in November 2020 (BLS, 2020), which was still above the February 2020 rate of 3.5%. Evidently, the environment in 2020 was very challenging for employment, even after the pandemic’s initial wave.

There are burgeoning studies that address pandemic’s effect on the employment of early career individuals. Aucejo et al. (2020) conducted a study of the impact of COVID-19 on college students’ perceptions of their career prospects. Of the 1500 students surveyed, 40% lost their job/internship or their job offer was withdrawn by the employer. Thirteen percent (13%) chose to delay graduating, given the high unemployment rate and perceived lack of career opportunities. Twenty-nine percent (29%) believed their future earnings potential was negatively affected. They expected to earn less at age 35 than they had expected to earn prior to the pandemic. Studies have found that resiliency and self-efficacy are significant contributors to individuals’ perceptions of likely reemployment, after experiencing job loss (McLaurnon et al., 2020). However, these students expressed a belief that challenging employment conditions would continue for a sustained period.

**Company websites/online employment sites**

Applying for job opportunities generally includes submitting a resumé (CV) to employers’ applicant portal and/or to online job sites, such as Indeed, Monster, Jobvite, etc. (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018). Employers gain insight into applicants’ employment objectives, their education, their specific technical and language skills, and their work history (Cole, Field & Giles, 2003). Resumé content affects employer’s perceptions of applicants’ personality and intelligence (Cole, Field & Giles, 2003; Mader & Mader, 2015). Employers utilize resumé content to determine whether to advance a candidate in the employment screening process (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019).

However, employers are inundated with resumés for job openings, which lessens the likelihood of applicants gaining access to a job interview, let alone to receive an offer (Ingold & Langer, 2021). On average, of 250 resumés submitted per corporate job, up to six candidates will be interviewed and only one person will be hired (Economy, 2015). Hence, there are tempered benefits of job seekers’ submitting their resumé to employment sites, as the sole way to promote their candidacy (McCabe, 2017).

Individuals in their early career stage often do not have extensive work experience or professional achievements. They are probably less likely to be actively sought after by employers and may be relegated to submitting resumés to the hypercompetitive online job sites (McDonald et al. 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated employment competition, given the large numbers of people who were abruptly unemployed and actively seeking work during 2020 (BLS, 2020; Beland et al., 2020).

**Social capital**

Social capital is a well-documented research stream about the effects of social networks on various professional outcomes, including employment, career trajectories, objective career rewards (e.g., compensation, access to training, promotions) and organizational memberships (Granovetter, 1973; Seibert et al., 2017; Strathdee, 2001). Social capital...
contributes to individuals’ career trajectories via resources that are shared among individuals and groups, who comprise social networks (Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998). These resources include sharing information about employers that are hiring, the willingness of social contacts to influence employment decisions on one’s behalf (i.e., refer for employment), and relationships with individuals who directly make hiring decisions (Parks-Yancy, 2012). Access to these resources is embedded among individuals and groups within social networks (Lin, 2001). Thus, social capital resources help people obtain employment (Granovetter, 1973), obtain training (Parks-Yancy, 2010), and receive better-paying and/or more prestigious jobs than they already have (McDonald, 2015).

Referrers are people that are connected to employers. They recommend people within their networks for employment (Lin, 2001). People who are referred to employers are referrals. Their personal connection with the referrer provides access to employers (Portes; 1998; Parks-Yancy, 2012). Referrers leverage their relationships with employers to support the referral’s candidacy. In turn, employers view referrals more favorably than candidates with similar skills, but are not a referral (Brown, Setren, & Topa, 2012; Di Stasio & Gerxhani, 2015; Schlachter & Pieper; 2019). This is because, by definition, referrals’ qualifications have been validated by the referrer (Dustmann, Christian, & Glitz, 2000). Obviously, this impacts employers’ hiring decisions, such that referrals are more likely to be hired than applicants who are not referrals (Seibert et al., 2017). Thus, access to social capital resources provides employment advantages over people without such resources.

Before the pandemic, companies often conducted some or all parts of their screening processes for early career talent on university campuses (Vinson, Reardon, & Bertoch, 2014). University career centre professionals and, sometimes professors, serve as liaisons between the employers and applicants (Vinson, Reardon, & Bertoch, 2014). Accordingly, referred students have an employment advantage over non-referral applicants (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018).

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals in their early career stages may not have been able to obtain referrals for desired roles. First, the job market contraction meant that there were simply fewer jobs available compared to pre-pandemic. This increased employment competition substantially (BLS, 2020; Parker et al., 2020). Second, in 2020, universities furloughed or laid off numerous academic and staff positions (Burke, 2020). So, they were likely not available to help students obtain employment.

**Personal branding**

Personal branding involves garnering notice by others (Chen, 2013; Zakarda, 2012). Social media branding represents a significant advancement in the ways that applicants promote their qualifications to employers (de Land et al., 2016; Vallas & Christin, 2017). Numerous early career job seekers are competing for employers’ attention. The challenge of getting noticed, let alone hired, is substantial (Economy, 2015; Lebowitz & De Luce, 2019) because there are millions of people seeking to create a brand that employers will notice (Shepherd, 2005). This challenge likely grew substantially in 2020, given the extent of pandemic-related job losses and, consequently, the numbers of individuals’ seeking employment (BLS, 2020; Duffin 2020).

Social media enables job seekers to show their personal brand publicly and simultaneously (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019; Deckers & Lacy, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Ward & Yates, 2013). Once content is posted on social media, it is immediately available to the entire world, including employers (Bhagdat & Parrish, 2018). In contrast, if an applicant uploads their resumé to a company’s employment site, their information is, generally, confined to that specific site. Job seekers’ social media activity provides employers with information about their personal brand that is not necessarily evident on resumés. This can enhance applicants’ candidacy.

Employers’ perceptions of a candidate can be influenced by their social media activity (Chiang & Suen, 2015; Forbes, 2018; Lam, 2016; McCabe, 2017). In one study, 37% of employers stated that their assessment of candidates’ social media brand supported their positive view of the candidate (Driver, 2018). In another study, applicants’ LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter activity affected hiring decisions (Sameen
& Cornelius, 2015). Thirty-one percent (31%) of the respondents indicated that the candidates’ social media brand favorably impacted their receipt of a job offer. Though, candidates’ social media brand may not always reflect their true employment qualifications, it is still a method by which employers evaluate candidates (Jeske & Schultz, 2016; Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has possibly both helped and hindered early career job seekers’ personal branding. Personal branding enables early career individuals to display their employment suitability beyond just submitting resumés to company websites or online job sites. It can elicit employer interest in candidates (McDonald et al., 2019) who are not referrals. Conversely, given the pandemic’s economic effects, it may have been more challenging for job seekers to garner employers’ attention (Beland, 2020), despite personal branding.

Early career individuals utilize social media branding to promote their candidacy to employers (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). This is in addition to more traditional methods, such as submitting resumés and being a referral. Therefore, it is important to explore their job hunt methods in the context of the challenging economic environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Sample

Eighty-three (83) undergraduate business majors and MBA candidates completed the surveys. Fifty-four percent (54%) were juniors and seniors, while 46% percent were MBA students. They were enrolled at a mid-sized, comprehensive university, located in the Southwestern region of the U.S.A. Eighty percent (80%) of the student population receives federal financial assistance to support their education and 45% are commuter students, such that they do not reside on campus. The average age of the sample was 27 and they were approximately 48% male and 52% female.

Table 1: Survey questions

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Have you been employed within the past 2 years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>If yes, what is the longest time that you’ve been employed? Please select one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 6 months or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More than 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Did you or someone you know lose their job during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What methods are you using now (or have used in the past year) to find out about available jobs? Select all that apply:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Applying via Online Job Sites (e.g. Indeed, Monster, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Contacting Personal Relationships (e.g. friends, family, former co-workers/managers, professors, University Officials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social Media (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Other (please specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>In your opinion, which methods are most likely to help job seekers get hired? Please rank them from 1 (least likely) to 4 (most likely) by typing your answer in the textbox below?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Which method helps job seekers get hired the fastest? Select one. Why did you select this method?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Please provide any other comments that you may have that will help explain how you were able to find a job (or are still looking).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
female. Sixty-three percent (63%) worked 25 or more hours per week. This population was appropriate for the study because the respondents were primarily in early career stages and were accustomed to being employed.

Methods

The survey was developed by determining common employment-related personal branding methods (Landers & Schmidt, 2016; SHRM, 2016). The respondents completed the survey online, utilizing Survey Monkey. They were assigned a unique identification code to ensure they could only complete the survey once. They were incentivized to participate by way of receiving extra credit points towards a class assignment. However, if they did not participate in the survey, they received additional extra credit opportunities that were similar in content and duration as the survey.

Table 1 shows the seven survey questions. The authors created a survey comprised of items from employment-related sources and from research about employment methods. SHRM (2016) provides a detailed overview of hiring processes, including employers’ evaluation of social media activity. In addition, studies indicate that social capital impacts employment determinations (Brown et al., 2016; Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018; Granovetter, 1973). The study survey was extrapolated from those sources and modified to befit this investigation.

Data analysis

The authors utilized qualitative methods help understand the meaning of phenomena and how or why they occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The research goal was to determine patterns in the participants’ responses. The authors categorized common themes contained in the respondents’ comments and organized the comments by the numerical proportions. Counting is a tactic in qualitative analysis to determine the content of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is a form of content analysis (Berg, 2001) to find patterns in communications and to understand individuals’ beliefs or intentions. It is not meant to provide quantitative analysis nor statistical inferences. Instead, its purpose is to ensure that the patterns reported reflect the data. Where appropriate, we also included quotes from the interviews to highlight the points herein.

Results

Job availability information: Online employment sites matter

Ninety percent (90%) of the respondents were employed within the previous two years. Fifty-four percent (54%) were employed less than one year, but more than six months, while 29% were employed for one year or more. Eighty-two percent (82%) lost their job or knew someone who lost their job during the pandemic. This finding aligns with data regarding the pandemic's significant effect on employment (BLS, 2020).

Online employment sites, such as Indeed, were the participants’ most common methods to learn about available jobs (81%). It is not surprising to observe that method ranked first for learning about open positions. Online job sites are advertised quite frequently online, in television advertising, on phone apps, and are, apparently, well-known among this population. A few respondents mentioned employment sites targeted to college students, such as Handshake. Handshake is an app connects universities with employers seeking collegiate talent for available positions. Some of the participants’ responses are below:

‘I created an application to collect [employment information] and they displayed all jobs available. Indeed is a great tool to help with finding a job.’

‘I used Indeed.com and Zip Recruiter.’

‘Employers are very responsive and able to communicate efficiently in response to applicants [on Indeed].’

‘Handshake was my go-to. Sometimes [I] went to [employer’s website].’

Social capital (Personal Connections) and personal branding (Social Media) were equally the second most common methods (49%) for participants to obtain employment information.
‘Connections are the best way to get a job. I’ve usually gotten jobs like that.’

‘My dad said his friend’s company was hiring, so I applied.’

‘Since I knew a family member in HR at my old job, I was notified promptly on when positions were available and how soon the hiring process would be. You have a 80% chance scoring a job by utilizing your pre-existing connections.’

**Personal contacts: The fastest way to employment**

Employment sites were the most utilized methods to gain job information. However, utilizing referrals was perceived as the fastest way for applicants to get hired. The majority (58%) ranked personal contacts first, followed by online job sites (48%), then, social media (14%).

‘Having a relationship established before a job could be very beneficial as that person can give you tips and help you secure the job.’

‘I’ve noticed that a person is most likely to get a job when they know someone. In my experience I’ve gotten jobs faster this way.’

‘Hiring manager isn’t sifting through candidates, rather looking at the one(s) handed to them directly. Every job I have had has come through a personal relationship.’

‘Most of the jobs that I have gotten or seen others get were based on relationships they had and were given. Networking is the key.’

The participants did not perceive social media as the first nor second fastest way to get hired. But, a small proportion deemed it to be important because of its speed and accessibility for communicating individuals’ talents to employers.

‘LinkedIn, although very professional, sometimes has a lot of standards for higher paying positions, companies [that] are looking to fill higher ranked jobs. It’s good for those sorts of jobs.’

‘People are more adapted to online websites, such as LinkedIn. People can be hired with Facebook and IG [Instagram]. Snapchat has jobs, too.’

‘[Social media] is fast and can reach [people] anytime. Anybody can see it, that’s why I use it [for employment].’

**Advice to the unemployed: Personal contacts and online employment sites**

Eighteen percent (18%) of the study participants did not lose their job during the COVID-19 pandemic and did not know anyone who was terminated, either. However, some still provided advice to job seekers. They recommended personal contacts, first, and employment sites, second, as the most effective employment methods.

‘Personal contacts and in-person networking events were the fastest and most successful in my [past] search.’

**Discussion**

The early career respondents utilized online job sites, first, to access information about available jobs. Personal contacts and personal branding were the second most prevalent methods. Though personal contacts was ranked second to utilizing online job sites for employment information, respondents ranked it first as the fastest method to get hired, followed by online job sites and personal branding. The respondents believed that being referred by a trusted source to an employer increased the prospects of getting hired. Finally, some respondents believed that applicants’ personal branding and social media were efficient ways to learn about new jobs.

The research results indicate the following:

1. The pandemic wrought extensive job losses among early career individuals (Auceio et al., 2020);
2. Early career individuals utilized online job sites to obtain employment information;
3. Personal branding was a source of employment information and, probably, a method to promote their talents to employers;

4. Personal contacts, that is, social capital, provides an employment advantage over people who do not have such personal connections. Personal connections were substantive contributors to the speed at which the respondents’ gained employment.

Implications

There were many employment challenges wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the evidence from this study suggests that leveraging personal relationships can be effective for obtaining employment. There are opportunities for early career applicants to develop personal relationships with individuals who are employers, themselves, or can refer them to employers. Namely, they should get involved with their desired industry's professional organizations. For example, if a job seeker is interested in the accounting roles, they should be active with local chapters of the AICPA (American Institute of Certified Public Accountants). Attending virtual and, when available, in-person professional development events, enables job seekers to evince their employment attributes to professionals and potential hiring authorities (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018).

Job seekers can also engage regularly on employers’ social media sites and develop professional relationships via LinkedIn (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018). Hiring managers and other industry professionals on the sites may observe job seekers’ engagement and be supportive of their candidacy. Though social media activity does not guarantee hire, it can help individuals display their employment attributes and develop professional relationships with employers, as well as with people who work in their desired field. These actions can cause employers to have a favorable view of the candidate, which can lead to positive employment outcomes.

References


Gallagher, S. & Palmer, J. (2020). The pandemic pushed universities online. The change was long overdue. HBR. https://hbr.org/2020/09/the-pandemic-pushed-universities-online-the-change-was-long-overdue


Articles

‘How do I get hired?’ Early career individuals’ employment strategies...


For correspondence

Rochelle Parks-Yancy
Professor of Management,
Texas Southern University

Rochelle.Parks@tsu.edu