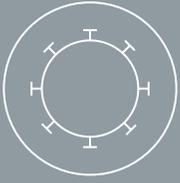


STRATEGICALLY VIRTUAL



Long-term Unemployed Older Workers Persist in a Boom Economy

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on the economy, causing massive job loss and unemployment since early 2020. The pandemic shifted the way people work, and later caused many people to drop out of the traditional labor market entirely, ushering in lower official unemployment numbers and the “Great Resignation.” While there is now, understandably, an increased focus on how to attract new workers and decreased attention being paid to those who are still long-term unemployed, research at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey shows that there are still people “falling through the cracks” of the traditional workforce development system. Researchers believe that more can and should be done to help long-term unemployed individuals who are still struggling to find employment.

To better understand the experience of long-term unemployed workers, Heldrich Center researchers conducted a series of brief web-based surveys related to six factors that are tied to job search success: job search engagement, job search intensity and duration, confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, and well-being. These surveys were sent to members of the New Start Career Network, a program operated by the Heldrich Center that provides job search support to New Jersey residents age 45 and older who have been out of work six or more months. This brief discusses the survey findings and insights, and suggests focus areas the public workforce system should consider to better serve the long-term unemployed.

Job Search Engagement Versus Intensity

One of the starkest findings from the survey of New Start Career Network members is the disconnect between reported feelings of job search engagement and reported job search intensity.

As shown in Figure 1, almost 75% of survey respondents reported feeling either very engaged or engaged in their job search. This does not seem to closely align with how much time and effort is devoted to weekly job search, however, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 1: Job Search Engagement

When evaluating your job search progress, how engaged are you in your search? (N=31)

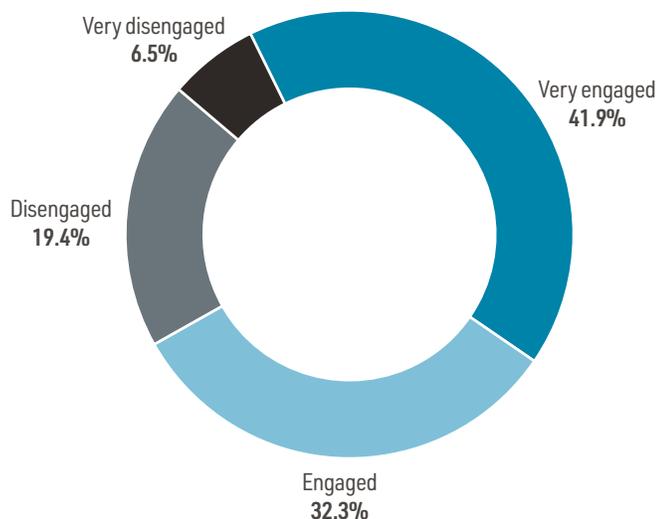


Figure 2: Weekly Hours Spent on Job Search

On average, how many hours do you put toward the job search per week? (N=70)

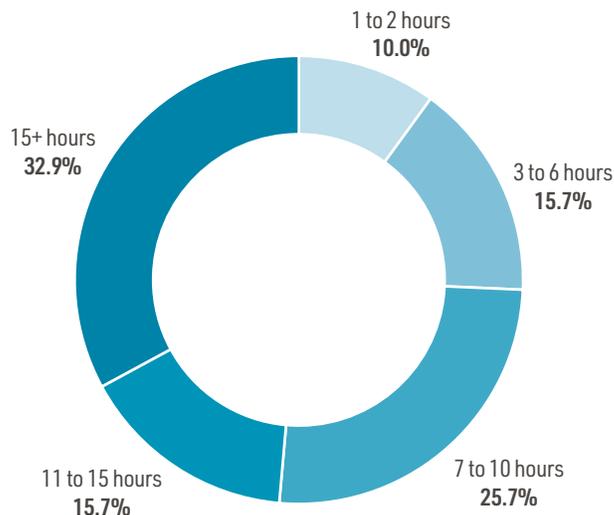
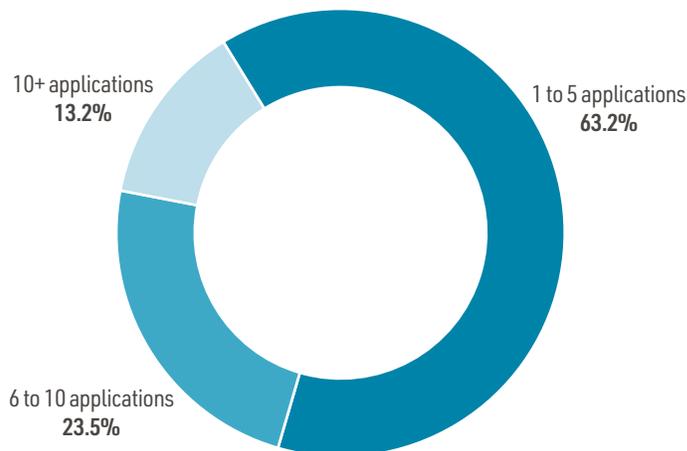


Figure 3: Job Applications Submitted per Week

About how many job applications do you submit per week? (N=68)



Only a third of survey respondents reported spending more than 15 hours per week on job search activities. Most submit five or fewer job applications per week (see Figure 2).

Researchers suspect there could be many reasons behind this disconnect. Job search burnout was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many respondents reported feeling isolated, disconnected, and tired. Many New Start Career Network members reported feeling defeated by the number of interviews (sometimes five or more interviews for one position) that they needed to go through, only to ultimately not land a job.

Job seekers are also subjected to extra care-giving requirements brought on by the pandemic, including caring for elderly and/or sick relatives, and providing back-up child care for children and grandchildren whose schools and daycare centers have not been reliably open for the past two years. Additionally, both physical and mental health concerns

persist and, if left unaddressed, can prevent a job seeker from obtaining full employment. This can be a catch-22 situation, however, with healthcare benefits so closely tied to employment in the United States. Many job seekers require access to care before they can be fully employable; however, they require traditional, steady employment to access healthcare benefits.

Self-reporting about what increases and decreases job search intensity can also be useful when thinking about how to best serve this population. People spend more time on job search if they feel excited by finding relevant positions posted and/or feel motivated to return to a “normal” working environment with stable employment, learning opportunities, and connections with colleagues. Time spent on job search goes down when job seekers lose hope, and feel shame, guilt, or fear.

Other Job Search Success Factors

The results from the surveys on job search confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, and well-being aligned with the results from job search engagement and intensity. In general, long-term unemployed job seekers feel stressed and not very confident about their job search. Their self-reported well-being was not good and indicated high levels of burnout.

Interestingly, the activities that job seekers feel the most confident in are the ones that traditional workforce development spends the most time and resources providing assistance for: résumé and cover letter writing and finding the right job postings. Networking and addressing gaps in résumés were some of the areas that job seekers reported having the least confidence with, and are issues that often get less attention from more traditional public workforce supports.

Concerns and Strategies

What can be done to help the long-term unemployed who are increasingly frustrated as narratives increase about low unemployment and a labor deficit while they are still struggling to find employment? Fundamental societal changes such as access to health care that is not tied to employment would certainly be a move in the right direction, but are there things state and local governments and workforce development systems can do to help as well?

Acknowledging that there are still long-term unemployed individuals who want to work is a good first step. This is frequently getting lost in the narratives about the economy. Governmental agencies have an opportunity as well as a dictate to help those who are struggling to find employment. There are large groups of talented, skilled workers who want to get back to work but will need some help to get there.

Workforce system outreach to older workers should be balanced with and included with youth outreach and outreach to other targeted populations. Connections with partner organizations, social service agencies, and mental health services should be made if not already in place, and existing partnerships should be strengthened where possible.

Specific services provided to job seekers might need to be more tailored. Many New Start Career Network members do not need traditional résumé and interviewing help and coaching, but would benefit from more intensive services and one-on-one casework. As previously mentioned, mental health struggles and burnout persist among long-term unemployed workers. Including well-being considerations in any workforce programming might significantly increase program success and employment outcomes.

Conclusion

Although unemployment numbers have turned around since the start of the pandemic, many long-term unemployed job seekers still lack the support they need to be successful in their job search. They feel like they are fully engaged in the job search process, but are often so burnt out that they are only spending a few hours a week applying to a handful of jobs. This leads to cycles of rejection and disappointment that lead to more burnout and less job search motivation and effort.

The public workforce system has the tools to help address these challenges, but must first acknowledge that problems of long-term unemployment persist, consider what will truly best serve this population, and modify existing services and traditional service delivery to meet the unique needs of those who have been out of the labor force for a substantial amount of time, during a global pandemic. There are certainly challenges here, but there is also opportunity and hope.

Acknowledgments

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About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- ▶ Career and Technical Education
- ▶ Data Collection and Analysis
- ▶ Disability Employment
- ▶ Job Seekers in Transition
- ▶ Program Evaluation
- ▶ Trend Analysis

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