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## WORKING PAPER

# BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON THE EXPLORATORY JOB SEARCH

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# **BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON THE EXPLORATORY JOB SEARCH**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper develops a theoretical framework about the applicant decision processes in the exploratory job search phase. In the past, traditional recruitment research has mostly focused on the ‘post-hire’ recruiting source effectiveness rather than focusing on the psychological determinants in order to choose recruiting sources. The framework presented here assumes that two questions were crucial for the applicant: ‘what job or organisation am I looking for?’ and ‘along which recruiting source can I find this job or organisation?’ Based on a literature study, the decision theories have been applied in our framework. Next, work experience and self-esteem are proposed to influence possible developments of the applicants’ search through their career. Finally, the paper examines how past research in the decision theories fit into this exploratory job search framework.

**Key words:** job search – decision theories – theory building

# **BUILDING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON THE EXPLORATORY JOB SEARCH**

Recruiting is an indispensable activity for many companies. In order to attract qualified people, using the most effective recruiting method is thereby of utmost importance (Wiley, 1992). Though empirical evidence is sparse, research suggests that a more effective job search leads to more favourable interview outcomes, greater job fit, greater satisfaction and enhanced organisational commitment (Steffy, Shaw & Noe, 1989). Within the turnover research, job search has also been consistently shown as an important predictor of turnover (e.g., Somers, 1996). Despite this importance, the applicant job search has been almost completely overlooked today. In this paper, a framework will be built up to reveal the antecedents in the applicant choice process of the recruiting sources.

At the broadest level, conceptions of job search and recruitment can be usefully organised in two perspectives: the organisation and the applicant. Where the former approach examines how organisations' recruitment and selection programmes relate to the applicants' search decisions, performance and attitude, the latter approach attempts to explain and predict individual success in job search (Brasher & Chen, 1999). In this paper, the job search processes will be studied from the perspective of the applicant. However, it is important to keep in mind that the organisation also has a crucial impact on the job search process.

**The exploratory job search phase.** From the applicant viewpoint, the job search and choice phase starts when applicants formally activate their search (Blau, 1993). From a structural viewpoint, it is empirically shown in the job search literature that applicants follow a systematically and logical sequence of different job search behaviours at different times (the sequential model) (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio & Phillips, 1994). Different authors suggest two phases: a preparatory/extensive search phase, in which the applicants collect information about job vacancies (McFadyen & Thomas, 1997) and an active/intensive one, in which the applicant acquires detailed information about specific job opportunities (Barber *et al*, 1994; Blau, 1993; Rees, as mentioned in Barber *et al*, 1994). Analogously,

Soelberg (Power & Aldag, 1985) conceptually breaks job search into two phases: planning job search and job choice, in which the planning phase stands for the allocation of time, effort and money to help produce initial job alternatives to consider (Blau, 1994). So in order to decide whether to apply for the job or not in the job choice phase (McFadyen & Thomas, 1997), applicants need to know in the planning job search phase if there are other desirable jobs out there (Bowen, 1982). Today, the job search literature is mainly focused on the evaluation of alternatives after the applicants had chosen the recruiting source they want to consult, and not the generation of different recruiting sources in which different applications can be found (Bretz, Boudreau & Judge, 1994; Schwab, Rynes & Aldag, 1987). In this paper, the exploratory job search phase, in which the recruiting sources are to be chosen, will be further conceptualised. The intensive phase (i.e. the choice of the job options within the chosen recruiting sources) will not be further discussed in this paper.

From a more process-oriented viewpoint, the vocational literature has focused on career exploration, which can be defined as ‘the purposive behaviour and cognitions which afford access to information about occupations, jobs or organisations, which were not previously mentioned’ (Stumpf, Colarelli & Hartman, 1983; Stumpf & Lockhart, 1987). This results in career maturity (e.g., Westbrook, Sanford, Gilleland, Fleenor & Merwin, 1988): ‘the extent to which an individual has acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to make intelligent, realistic career choices’ (Levinson, Ohler, Caswell & Kiewra, 1998; p. 475). These vocational constructs are primarily derived from the expectancy theory (e.g., Stumpf & Lockhart, 1987; Sugalski & Greenhaus, 1986) and imply that individuals explore primarily because they wish to attain a desired goal (Blustein, 1988). More specifically, Stumpf et al, 1983) delineate this career process into several analytical components: a) the source of information, b) the method of exploration, c) the breadth, scope and amount of information acquired, d) the job search intensity, e) the confidence applicants have that they will be successful as a result of their job search and f) the felt stress of the search process (Steffy *et al*, 1989). These components will be discussed and included in our framework.

**Building up the model.** Past research about recruiting sources is focused on its effectiveness. This research primarily identifies which sources are most effective by associating recruiting sources with its

post-hire outcomes. In order to determine along which recruiting source organisations could attract their 'ideal' employees, various operational definitions of 'post-hire' outcomes (tenure, performance, absenteeism, work attitudes) are used (Rynes, 1991). However, Brasher and Chen (1999) concluded in their overview that the type of outcomes that is used in this research drastically affects this effectiveness. This recruiting source effectiveness literature will be used as a starting point to explore conceptually on which grounds the applicants choose for a recruiting source.

The aim of this paper is to explain conceptually how an applicant choosing which recruiting source they want to consult. Our intention is to provide a suitable starting point for the further empirical investigations of this specific phase, in which applicants choose recruiting sources. The next paragraph is organised into three sections and roughly follows our multistep process of constructing the framework. In the first section, the recruiting source effectiveness literature will be reviewed. The equivocal results will be criticised. Based on these critiques, a literature study is conducted and a new framework will be built up. More specifically, two core dimensions will be represented and combined to a four-cell typology, in which the main different decision theories will be situated. Thirdly, based on the job search literature, two assumptions will be made regarding the possibly changing job search strategies through their working career. In the concluding paragraph, our framework will be summarised and the theoretical and empirical contribution will be discussed. It is not our intention to give a complete review of all studies within the job search and decision literature. Only these studies, that are relevant for the generation of job alternatives, will be discussed and completed with results from the recruitment literature.

### **RECRUITING SOURCE EFFECTIVENESS LITERATURE**

The exploratory job search phase is defined as 'the specific behaviours through which effort and time are expended to acquire information about labour market alternatives, irrespective of the motives for, or consequences of the information gathering activity' (Blau, 1993; Bretz *et al*, 1994; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Schwab *et al*, 1987). For the sake of conceptual clarity, this preparatory job search phase will be regarded as coming before applicants start the active job search phase, although Soelberg (Power & Aldag, 1985) stated that these two phases could influence each other.

Secondly, recruiting sources are defined as any possible medium by which applications can be transferred by the organisation. Thus, the term is used in this paper to refer to the formal recruiting sources and to the informal recruiting sources. Finally, our framework will conceptualise how applicants can choose one recruiting source, because Vecchio (1995) showed empirically that the use of multiple sources played no role in predicting attitudes.

### **The recruiting source effectiveness literature**

Brasher and Chen (1999) showed many of the presumably relevant outcomes for job search success are not significantly related to each other, this recruiting source effectiveness literature will be reviewed according to these different 'post-hire' outcomes. With regard to job tenure, this literature showed that applicants who were recruited along informal recruiting sources seemed to have a lower job tenure than applicants attracted via formal recruiting sources (Caldwell & Spivey, 1983; Decker & Cornelius, 1979; Gannon, 1971; Granovetter, 1974; Kirnan, Farley & Geisinger, 1989; Reid, 1972; Saks, 1994; Swaroff, Barclay & Bass, 1985; Taylor, 1994; Ullman, mentioned in Rynes, 1991). Contradicting results are obtained for other outcome variables like performance (Breugh, 1981; Reid, 1972; Taylor & Schmidt, 1983; versus Kirnan *et al*, 1989; Swaroff *et al*, 1985; Taylor, 1994) and absenteeism (Breugh, 1981; versus Taylor & Schmidt, 1983) and work attitudes (Breugh, 1981; Granovetter, 1974; Latham & Leddy, as mentioned in Rynes, 1991; versus Vecchio, 1995). Most present-day studies attempt to uncover the reasons why some recruiting sources are more effective than others (Griffeth *et al*, 1997). There are two hypotheses to explain the empirical findings on recruiting source effectiveness: the realism hypothesis and the individual differences hypothesis.

**The realism hypothesis.** In this hypothesis, it is stated that the differential effectiveness of the recruiting sources is due to the realism which applicants receive within the job information from these sources (Taylor & Schmidt, 1983; Wanous, 1980). This accurate job information functions as a 'Realistic Job Preview' (RJP) and reduces turnover in four different ways: these RJP's would permit applicants to 'self select' them out (self-selection hypothesis), it would lower their job expectations (met expectations hypothesis), it would increase their organisational commitment (commitment

hypothesis) and finally it would increase their coping behaviour with unpleasant job demands (coping hypothesis) (Rynes, 1991; Taylor & Schmidt, 1983; Wanous, 1980).

In general, a lot of research has studied the met expectation research, thereby overlooking the other realism hypotheses (Griffeth *et al*, 1997). Despite the substantial meta-analytical support in favour of the met expectations hypothesis (Wanous, Poland, Premack & Davis, 1992), Irving & Meyer (1994) argued that this research was done in a methodologically flawed way. In addition, Irving & Meyer (1995) demonstrated that the outcome variance accounted by met expectations was considerably reduced when controlling for perceptions of these post-entry expectations. Furthermore, in two meta-analyses, it was shown that job-enrichment efforts are about twice as effective as RJP's to reduce turnover (McEvoy & Cascio, 1985) and that the effectiveness of an RJP on the job performance is moderated by its timing within the recruitment process and by the medium (verbal versus written) (Phillips, 1998). Finally, Hom, Griffeth, Palich and Bracker (1998) investigated all the underlying RJP-processes in a research model and they found that met expectations have a direct effect on organisational concern and coping behaviour and an indirect effect on job satisfaction and organisational commitment. However, after remarks on the methodological weaknesses associated with the used difference scores (Irving & Meyer, 1999), Hom, Griffeth, Palich and Bracker (1999) reanalysed their data and concluded that 'RJP scholars should focus on other mediation theories rather than expectation fulfilment to elucidate how RJP's work' (p. 107).

With regard to the impact of the quality of transmitted job information after hire, it was found that applicants from informal recruiting sources (Quaglieri, 1982; Taylor & Schmidt, 1983) or referred by workers (Breugh & Mann, 1984) received more accurate and complete information and have more realistic expectations than applicants from formal recruiting sources (Breugh & Mann, 1984; Quaglieri, 1982; Taylor & Schmidt, 1983) or applicants who applied spontaneously (Breugh & Mann, 1984; Taylor & Schmidt, 1983). Saks (1994) found the most support. He reported that employees recruited through informal sources received more accurate job information, had greater met expectations and were more able to cope efficiently. However, Taylor (1994) did not find much support: when truckers mentioned they had a clear view of the job, it was found that those who had

applied by referral, had less intention to leave the job than those who applied via other recruiting sources.

**The individual differences hypothesis.** It is assumed in the hypothesis that applicants recruited from alternative methods constitute samples from different applicant populations (Schwab, 1988). This means that recruiting sources differ from each other as different applicants use different types of recruiting sources. Empirical research has to show which applicant characteristics can stipulate the differences in choosing a recruiting source. Most attention is paid to the demographic characteristics in the few empirical studies, instead of to the psychological criteria, despite the theoretical importance of the latter.

More specifically, Vecchio (1995) found some associations with recruiting sources on the one hand and age, education and gender on the other and Kirnan *et al* (1989) reported that women and blacks used more formal recruiting sources than did men and whites. However, Breugh (1981), Granovetter (1974) and Taylor (1994) found no significant relationships between the recruiting source on the one hand and age, sex, race, civil status, religious background and educational level on the other hand. Finally, Granovetter (1974) found also that, as the salary of a job rises, spontaneous applications fall steadily. Although formal recruiting sources are least likely at the highest salary, its use is somewhat less regular.

With regard to the psychological differences, two studies (Breugh & Mann, 1984; Kirnan *et al*, 1989) found that spontaneous applications and informally recruited applicants were evaluated as qualitatively better and had higher selection and job tenure rates than applicants recruited from other recruiting sources. They suggest that this can be due to motivational differences: e.g., people spontaneously applying were more motivated to work for the organisation, through which they performed better than people who had reacted to referrals and newspapers. Finally, Williams, Labig and Stone (1993) found that pre-hire knowledge, education and experience do not mediate the relationship between the recruiting sources, nurse performance and turnover. However, they also found that applicants from different recruiting sources have different pre-hire knowledge, which is on



its turn inversely related to turnover, and that applicants from different recruiting sources have different experiences and education, which in turn are valid predictors of subsequent performance.

**Conclusion.** Although there are a lot of equivocal findings in the recruiting source effectiveness literature and as both hypotheses are only tested in isolation in past research, Griffeth *et al* (1997) conducted a methodologically rigorous test of the two hypotheses together. Results support an empirical model in which both hypotheses are necessary. However, recruiting sources seem to have also a direct effect on the post-hire outcomes, which contradicts the hypotheses. Rynes (1991) assumed that these empirical inconsistencies are due to poor conceptualisations and poor operationalisations of the most important constructs and due to poor control of possible moderating variables. Based on these two critiques, a new framework will be built below.

### **A FRAMEWORK ON THE APPLICANT EXPLORATORY JOB SEARCH**

With regard to the poor control of moderating variables, it appears to us that it can be very difficult to control all possible variables which could influence this recruiting source effectiveness, because there is in reality some time lag between the moment of consulting a recruiting source and the measurement of the 'post-hire' outcomes. Furthermore, even when the chosen recruiting source and the outcomes are measured at the same time, it is possible that applicants can not remember why they have chosen a specific recruiting source at that time. As more stringent designs probably can not resolve this 'time lag' problem (e.g., Griffeth *et al*, 1997), we suggest to focus the research to 'pre hire' variables (Rynes, 1991). In the same way, Rynes (1991) states that research generally examines applicants' post-interview reactions to job opportunities rather than their actual job choice decisions. Thus, a new way of research within this literature is to look for possible psychological determinants why applicants choose specific recruiting sources.

Stevens and Beach (1996) developed a conceptual model to explain theoretically the decision processes within the exploratory and active job search phase. From the image theory framework, these authors assume that the decision process starts with adoption of a goal (i.e. the desired job), of which the decision-maker (i.e. the job seeker) can have a clear or fuzzy idea in mind (Stevens & Beach,

1996). As the three main decision theories (expectancy value theory – vocational development – generalised decision process model) are complementary, they can be integrated into this framework via two central questions: what is the goal and what is the strategy to accomplish that goal? It is further assumed that variations in this goal clarity can lead to different plans for goal achievement (i.e. the recruiting source to choose): for a clearly defined goal, the job search will be more focused on sources which are likely to offer the desired job features and if the goal is diffuse, the job seeker is more likely to use formal recruiting sources to learn about a broad range of options (Stevens & Beach, 1996). Based on the review of Stevens and Beach (1996), these decision theories will now be discussed and completed with two specific studies.

### **Decision theories**

**Expectancy value theory.** Essentially, this theory consists of two models, which can be represented in two formulas. In the valence model it is stated that the valence of an outcome is a monotonically increasing function of the algebraic sum of the products of, on the one hand, the valences of all other outcomes and, on the other hand, the person's conceptions of the specific outcome's instrumentality for the attainment of these other outcomes (Mitchell, 1974; Mitchell & Beach, 1976). The effort model is conceptualised as a monotonically increasing function of the algebraic sum of the products of, on the one hand, the valences of all outcomes and, on the other hand, the strength of the person's expectancies that the act will be followed by the attainment of these outcomes. Wanous, Keon and Latack (1983) have further specified these formulas to the occupational and organisational choice. They formulate the valence or attractiveness of an organisation as the algebraic sum of the products of, on the one hand, the desirability of each outcome to the individual with, on the other hand, the belief about each outcome associated with organisational membership. With regard to the organisational choice, the effort expended to try to join an organisation will be regarded as the algebraic sum of, on the one hand, the products of the expectancies of being admitted to the organisation with, on the other hand, the attractiveness of the organisation.

Based on a review of the empirical results, Mitchell and Beach (1976) concluded that 'the results suggest overwhelmingly that some sort of expected value theory provides a good representation of the

occupational preference and choice processes' (p. 243). Wanous *et al* (1983) also found a lot of support for this theory in their review. However, there is evidence which shows that the valences and the efforts of job seekers can be better predicted via other mathematical combinations (e.g., non-compensatory) than via the multiplicative one (Baker, Ravichandran & Randall, 1989). It seems that, depending on his needs, each person uses the 'expectancy value'-approach, which fits best to him (Baker, Ravichandran & Randall, 1989). In an application of this approach to pay preferences in application decisions, Rynes and Lawler (1983) reported that most of their subjects evaluated expectancies in ways not directly predictable from expectancy theory, as a wide individual variability was found in the way expectancies could influence job search patterns. More specifically, job seekers were more attracted to organisations which were perceived to offer high pay levels, flexible benefits, individual-based pay and fixed pay policies (Cable & Judge, 1994), although the attractiveness of this performance related pay system was higher for applicants with higher achievement motivation (Turban & Keon, 1993). In a review of the economical literature about the job search theory, the acceptance probability of the job when the reservation wage (the minimum wage the job seeker is prepared to accept) was exceeded, was found to be very high (Devine & Kiefer, 1993; McFadyen & Thomas, 1997), although (Blau, 1992) did not find this effect.

**Vocational Development.** It is assumed in this theory that people select a vocation about which they think it will match with their self-concepts (i.e. their self-perceived abilities, characteristics, goals and values) and from which they expect that further development of their self-concept will be possible. This vocational approach has been further worked out in person-environment theory of careers (Holland, 1985): as personality types search for environments in which they can best express their personality, 6 sorts of personal interests are found to match with 6 sorts of environmental interests. Both theories (Super and Holland) have been supported with lots of empirical evidence (Keon, Latack & Wanous, 1982).

A meta-analysis revealed that Holland's theory is an adequate representation of the structure of vocational personalities and work environments (Tracey & Rounds, 1993), although the results of meta-analyses of the 'Person Environment'-fit with specific outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) have been

equivocal (De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999). Tom (1971) applied this theory on organisational choice and found empirical support for the hypothesis that the congruence between the self-description and the descriptions of the most preferred organisations were greater than the congruence between the self-descriptions and the descriptions of the least preferred organisations (Tom, 1971). This means that applicants prefer those organisations for which their image matches their own self-concept (Stevens & Beach, 1996).

**Generalised decision--processing model.** Soelberg challenged two important assumptions of individual decision making research in this model: job evaluations are not independent from one another, as job seekers directly compared job alternatives, and, secondly, in complex, uncertain and ill-structured situations (like job search) people mainly use heuristics to make choices (Power & Aldag, 1985). Job search is conceptualised in this theory as a decision process (with four overlapping activity phases) in which the applicant compares existing job options with his personal 'ideal job criteria' (Stevens & Beach, 1996). Firstly, on the basis of an evaluation of the occupations on the perceived values and capacities, job seekers determine a list of primary and secondary job criteria in order to attain this perceived ideal job in the future (Power & Aldag, 1985). Within the economical job search theory, Bryant (1992) suggested that cancellation or the process to discard common components shared by different options edits these 'job prospects'. Afterwards, the job seeker plans which recruiting sources he will consult in the job search (Power & Aldag, 1985) and the ones he thinks that will be most effective in leading to information and job offers of the desired job (Stevens & Beach, 1996). In the third phase, the different job alternatives are compared with each of the ideal job criteria to screen out the unacceptable options (Stevens & Beach, 1996), due to the process of coding or the evaluation of the current job with the prospects (Bryant, 1992). When a job option meets all primary criteria and most of the secondary criteria (Power & Aldag, 1985), this option will be chosen as an 'implicit favourite', with which the other job options will be compared. In phase four, this job choice will be made explicitly and further confirmed by verifying the information and by providing post hoc reasons, so that he can ensure himself that he makes the right choice.

Research does not provide clear-cut support (Stevens & Beach, 1996). Furthermore, there were only four empirical tests (Cecil & Lundgren, 1975; Glueck, 1974; Hill, 1974; Sheridan, Richards & Slocum, 1975), which are seen as ‘flawed and incomplete’ (Power & Aldag, 1985). Despite this very weak evidence, this theory offers a more extensive picture of job seekers’ decisions processes than expectancy theory or the vocational approach (Stevens & Beach, 1996).

**Influence of intuition.** In our opinion, two articles were found to emphasise that taking a decision is a matter of emotion and not only of careful forethought or logical consideration. Moment (1967) assumes that people seldom see all or think thoroughly about these possibilities. That implies that occupational choices are more dependent on concrete interpersonal events than on vague and abstract appeals voiced in advertisements and brochures. Nisbet and Grant (1965) found in their longitudinal study with Arts students that most of these respondents lack insight in their motives for choosing a career and are uninformed about possible careers, although some respondents show some job knowledge and working conditions from personal experience (Nisbet & Grant, 1965).

### **Two core dimensions**

**Reasoning.** In correspondence with the image model of Stevens and Beach (1996), this framework assumes that there are two crucial questions to be answered by the applicant within the preparatory job search phase: what is the goal and what is the strategy to accomplish that goal? The answers on these two questions are also in correspondence with the first and second phase in Soelberg’s model (see above).

About the formulation of the desired job, Steffy *et al* (1989) assume that this would involve the cognitive analysis and self-assessment of personal skill strengths and weaknesses, interests and plans. However, it is argued in our framework that not the content of this self-assessment is compared, because every job seeker answer to these questions according to their personal characteristics (e.g., Anderson, Silvester, Cunningham-Snell & Haddleton, 1999; Boudreau, Boswell, Judge & Bretz, 2001; Caldwell & Burger, 1998), but the extent in which applicants can make these personal characteristics explicit. How the applicants answer to this question, was defined by Stumpf & Colarelli (1980) as ‘the

extent in which they explore themselves and their environment when investigating different career possibilities' (p. 986).

Concerning the recruiting source to find the desired job, Steffy *et al* (1989) consider that external exploration entailed obtaining jobrelated information from friends, family and other relevant information. However, in our framework, we argue that not the choice of recruiting source forms the comparison basis but the basis of which search strategy these recruiting sources are chosen (rational or social). Accordingly, individuals vary in their methods of exploration: systematic versus random (Stumpf & Colarelli, 1980; p. 986).

**Determining the two core dimensions.** More specifically, concerning the goal formulation, it is assumed in our framework that applicants will determine their personal ideal: which job do I want to do or in which organisation do I want to work? As applicants can have a concrete and pronounced idea about their ideal job or a general and vague impression of the ideal organisation, these answers can be compared with one another following the degree of goal clarity (fuzzy versus clear idea in mind, as formulated by Stevens & Beach, 1996). This comparison basis makes it possible to propose an underlying continuum on which all applicants' answers are situated from implicit to explicit. This dimension is defined as 'the extent in which the job seeker maintains an internally derived, active and involved posture versus an externally determined, passive and dependent posture' (Blustein & Phillips, 1988; p. 205).

When applicants are confronted with the question through which recruiting source they want to find their ideal job/organisation, it is assumed that their answers can be categorised according to the degree to which they choose their recruiting source in a rational or social way. More specifically, applicants can choose recruiting sources based on a comparison of the expected job options within this recruiting source or because of their personal impression of the medium. Within this range of possible answers, it is assumed that a dimension can be drawn evolving from rationally inspired to socially influenced answers. This dimension is defined as 'the extent to which the individual approaches decisions in a thinking-oriented, rational and deliberate manner, as opposed to a feeling-oriented, emotional and impulsive manner' (Blustein & Phillips, 1988; p. 205).

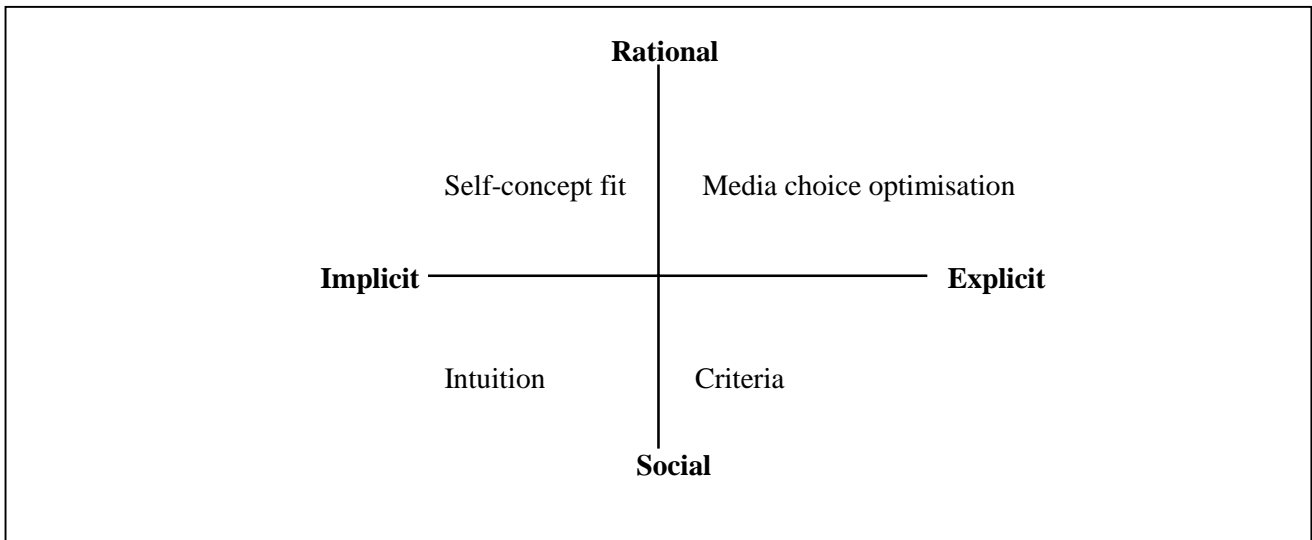
#### **Four exploratory search strategies**

**Reasoning.** The image model of Stevens and Beach (1996) assumes that goal clarity determines the choice of recruiting sources. However, it is still possible that the reverse assumption is true, as applicants can have a clear or diffuse job idea but that they also can look at respectively the formal and informal recruiting sources. Furthermore, as each of the decision theories provide unique insights into the applicants' decision processes (Stevens & Beach, 1996), it is unclear to us how the image model represents the different strategies to take job search decisions, as it was represented in these decision theories.

Apart from this intuitive and theoretical critique, Barber, Wesson, Roberson and Taylor (1999) showed empirically that graduating students can be grouped into three distinct clusters, according to their job search activity and their preference for the size of the desired organisation: preference for small organisations, preference for large organisations and uncertain. They found that this type of preference determined in a large proportion the job search behaviours (time of job search and chosen recruiting sources). More specifically, Glueck (1974) found that different decision theories could explain optimally the applicant choice strategies. Based on an interview, graduating MBA-students are clustered into 3 groups: approximately 25 % of this sample followed Soelberg's generalised decision processing-model (i.e. Validators) and approximately 50 % the expectancy-value model (Maximizers, who will look at as much organisations as possible and Satisficers, who will choose for the first alternative which will congruent with their personal goals).

Therefore, the two core dimensions are separated in this framework from each other and combined to a four-cell typology. Thereby, it is assumed that the decision theories are represented in the four cells as different strategies in choosing a recruiting source. This is shown in Figure 1 and will now be further elaborated.

**FIGURE 1:**  
Theoretical overview of the applicant's decision processes in the preparatory job search



**Self-concept fit.** The cell with an implicit goal and a rational choice represents the vocational development theory, because this theory proposes that the applicants search for vocations/organisations for which their image matches their own self-concepts (Tom, 1971). As the desired job is only broadly formulated in terms of the desired organisation/vocation, the applicant choice process in determining the desired job is partly implicit. Consequently, this type of applicants chooses those recruiting sources, that can convey them not only information about specific jobs but also concerning the vocation/organisation as a whole. Recruiting sources, which optimally fit with these types of applicants, are recruiting sources like spontaneous solicitations, walk-ins, referred by high schools, etc.

**Media choice optimisation.** As the applicants acquire a more clear and complete view of his ideal job (explicit goal and rational choice), it is proposed that the applicants make their choice as described in the expectancy value theory. Because the valence model can determine the combination of the valences of the job criteria and of the instrumentalities for the attainment of these criteria, these applicants are assumed to be capable of stating explicitly the job criteria in a list of differently weighing values. Moreover, the choice of recruiting sources is proposed to be based on the degree in which it can convey the explicitly stated ideal job to the applicants. Based on this reasoning, applicants are assumed to choose those recruiting sources from which they expect that this choice can give them



those job descriptions they are looking for and attracted to. In this framework, it is proposed that informal but specialised recruiting sources (like business contacts and referrals by employees, job propositions out their professional networks (Leicht & Marx, 1997) seem to correspond optimally with this type of applicants.

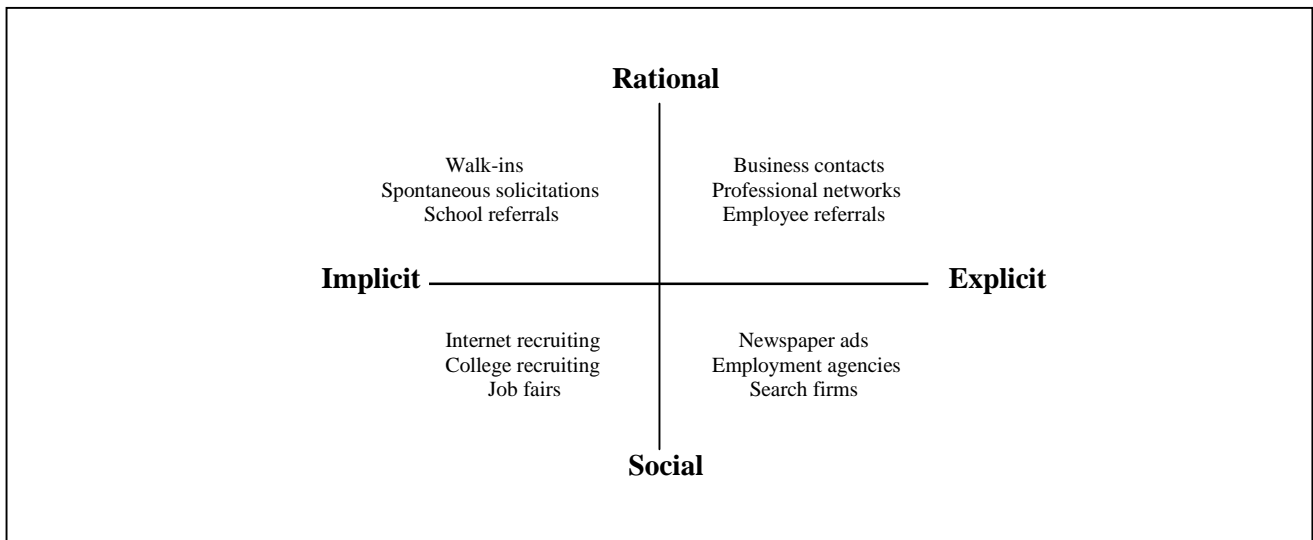
**Intuition.** However, when the applicants have only an implicit idea of the desired job and choose a recruiting source based on social impressions, it is proposed in our framework that they will choose like it is described in the study of Nisbet and Grant (1965). This lack of insight into their own motives and of the job they are looking for, forces the applicants to focus on choosing the right type of organisation, which implies that their idea of the desired job is implicit. Furthermore, as they choose without careful forethought and logical consideration, it is assumed that the choice of recruiting sources is based on other reasons than associated with the desired job (e.g., easy accessibility of a recruiting source, cheap recruiting source...), which implies that concrete interpersonal or social events have a greater impact on the choice process (Moment, 1967). It is proposed in our framework that this type of applicants uses more recruiting sources in which organisational recruiting campaigns, instead of jobs, are of importance: e.g., internet recruiting (Bartram, 2000; Cober, Brown, Blumental, Doverspike & Levy, 2000), campus interviews (Stevens, 1997; Turban & Dougherty, 1992), job fairs, radio/television. It is also assumed that recruiter characteristics (e.g., Connerley & Rynes, 1997; Harris & Fink, 1987; Kristof, 2000; Maurer, Howe & Lee, 1992; Powell, 1987) have the most influence with this type of applicants.

**Criteria.** Finally, applicants situated within the cell of an explicit goal and a social choice are assumed to follow the generalised decision-processing model. As these applicants try to formulate the desired job out of their intuitive feeling in a list of their personal 'ideal job criteria' (Power & Aldag, 1985), it is assumed in our framework that their desired job is made explicitly via this list. Furthermore, these applicants consult those recruiting sources from they think it will give them the most jobs in accordance with their criteria (Stevens & Beach, 1996), which implies that these applicants consult those recruiting sources on the basis of their personal impression of the extent in which it corresponds with the personal criteria. That is why it is proposed in our framework that formal recruiting sources will be preferred, in which applicants have to make choices on the basis of a number of specific job

criteria: employment agencies, search firms, newspaper advertising, etc. In Figure 2, an overview is given which recruiting sources fit optimally with the types of applicants.

**FIGURE 2:**

Overview of the recruiting sources according to their optimal fit with the different types of applicants



### **DEVELOPMENTS OF THE FOUR EXPLORATORY SEARCH STRATEGIES**

Rynes' (1991) second critique implies the poor conceptualisation and operationalisation in the recruiting source effectiveness literature. However, this problem seems to us almost inevitable, as we believe that the applicants' viewpoint and the organisations' viewpoint have been blurred. Particularly, in the explorative and the RJP-studies, the applicant choice of recruiting sources has been considered in relation to organisational criteria (e.g., job performance, absenteeism, turnover). Although the applicants are more considered as individuals in the few studies testing the individual differences hypothesis, they were characterised via demographics. However, since most individuals do not obtain a large amount of information before selecting a job or organisation (e.g., Granovetter, 1974; Greenhaus & Sklarew, 1981), there are likely to be psychological differences among job seekers who explore more extensively compared to those who do not (Stumpf & Lockhart, 1987). Therefore, in order to describe the applicant choice process based on their own characteristics and experiences, two psychological variables will be hypothesised to influence the choice of recruiting sources.

More specifically, from two different viewpoints it is suggested that work experience and self-esteem are important variables in this choice process. Rynes, Bretz and Gerhart (1991) use longitudinal structured interviews to let applicants explain in their own words how they made critical job search decisions. Firstly, they show that ‘applicants with previous work experience appear to be less affected by recruitment practices and more focused on the job itself’ (p. 513). This means that as work experience is obtained, applicants start to search more efficiently. Secondly, ‘applicants with higher grade point averages (higher GPA’s) seem to display greater confidence in their search strategies than those with lower GPA’s’ (p. 514). Because Stumpf *et al* (1983) and Steffy *et al* (1989) also found that applicants with higher self-esteem feel more confident about the job search outcomes, this confidence is conceptualised in our framework as the applicant self-esteem. Correspondingly, Barber *et al* (1994) review the job search literature and state that two models could explain changes in the job search process over time: the learning model and the emotional response model. This job search literature will be further worked out below.

### **Job search literature**

**Learning model.** It is stated in this model that applicants may learn (through personal experience, observation of the successes of others and through the popular job literature) that some search activities are more effective and efficient than others are (Barber *et al*, 1994). Kahn & Low (1988) showed empirically that ‘older workers, with their large stocks of knowledge, are more likely to search systematically in the labour market’. Furthermore, it seems that this goal clarity has a great influence on the job search intensity. Individuals with clear preferences for the type of work they want to do, have more opportunity to target their exploration activities to obtain their preferences than do individuals with ambiguous preferences (Stumpf *et al*, 1983; Stumpf & Lockhart, 1987). In the same way, Eckstein (1987) showed that, although experienced engineers and computer professionals knew what they wanted in a new job, they checked for new job opportunities, at least every other week. Kulik (2000) showed that at all education levels, unemployed men spent more time searching for work, although women were more likely to believe that intensive job search efforts results in finding a job.

With regard to the recruiting sources, there is research evidence which suggests that searching via informal sources and searching more intensely yields better job search results (Schwab *et al*, 1987; Stumpf *et al*, 1983). Williams *et al* (1993) report that applicants with different pre-hire knowledge, experiences and education used different recruiting sources. Finally, Rynes, Orliczky and Bretz (1997) questioned 251 staffing professionals on experienced-versus-college hiring practices and found that the majority of positions requiring a college degree are filled with experienced workers. Interestingly, their greater hiring success was perceived by these professionals as associated with greater use of effective recruiting sources (Rynes *et al*, 1997).

**Emotional response model.** As work roles, form an important part of the self-concept, job search can entail high levels of satisfaction (when applicants can locate employment successfully) or of stress and frustration (when not successfully) (Stumpf *et al*, 1983). In the same way, Eby and Buch (1994) argue that an effective job search process cannot commence until the psychological issues related to the job loss (e.g., feelings of failure, lowered self-esteem and confidence) are adequately dealt with. In accordance, this model assumes that these emotional responses may expand, contract or otherwise modify their search activities (Barber *et al*, 1994). Analogous constructs like self-esteem, self-efficacy and organisation-based self-esteem (Barber *et al*, 1994; Gardner & Pierce, 1998; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings & Dunham, 1989) have been regularly investigated. In this framework, the focus is on self-esteem, which can be conceptualised as ‘the favorability of the individuals’ characteristic self-evaluations’ (p. 11, Brockner, 1988; Jex & Elacqua, 1999).

Generally, high job-seeking self-efficacy was reported to be associated with increased job-search behaviour and reemployment (Kanfer & Hulin, 1985), even after a self-efficacy training (Caplan, Vinokur, Price & van Ryn, 1989; Eden & Aviram, 1993). More specifically, Rynes *et al* (1991) found that higher GPA’s take later first interviews, are also less likely to be negatively swayed by recruitment experiences, are more likely to attribute delays to organisational causes, have more negative reactions to late-responding organisations and rate recruitment practices as less important than low GPA’s. Furthermore, Ellis and Taylor (1983) investigate the role of self-esteem in the job search process and search outcomes experienced by a sample of college students and found, at the

time of graduation, that self-esteem is negatively related with the use of formal recruiting sources, negatively related with search intensity (planned and realised number of job interviews) and positively related with the evaluation after the job interviews. Finally, Shamir (1986) also found that those applicants who looked after their jobs through more 'individualistic' methods as personal contacts or direct applications have a higher level of self-esteem.

### **Changes in exploratory search strategies**

In correspondence with Barber *et al* (1994) and Rynes *et al* (1991), work experience and self-esteem are hypothesised in our framework to influence the possible changes in the exploratory search strategies. These propositions are worked out below.

**Work experience.** In the learning model, it is assumed that as applicants obtain more work experience, they would learn to use the recruiting sources more efficiently (Barber *et al*, 1994). It is assumed in our framework that, as applicants will obtain more insight into their own personal preferences and motives through their previous work experience, they could state more explicitly the specific job/organisation they are looking for. In the same way, it is stated in the vocational literature that 'an individual who explores, emerges from the experience with a clearer and more accurate assessment of him of herself (as an individual and in relation to the environment) and a more realistic, justified basis for taking decisive action' (Phillips, 1982; p. 129).

This means that applicants with more work experience mainly are situated on the right side of the framework and mainly use the expectancy value or the generalised decision process model as job search strategy. In an optimal way, this type of applicants uses those recruiting sources in which specific job criteria are formulated: newspaper advertising, Internet recruiting, employment agencies, business contacts etc. On the left side, it is hypothesised that applicants with few or no work experience do not know which job they want to do and choose recruiting sources more on the basis of more general preferences (e.g., vocations, occupations or organisations). This type of applicants optimally look for recruiting sources along which they can consult organisations where they can work

instead of specific job applications: e.g., referrals by employees, asking friends and relatives, job fairs, etc.

**Self-esteem.** In accordance with the emotional response model (Barber *et al*, 1994), self-esteem is proposed to influence the job search strategies. In order to make specific assumptions on its influence on the exploratory job search, the behavioural plasticity hypothesis is applied. This hypothesis states that, as a result of a lack of confidence in their own thoughts and feelings, low self-esteem individuals tend to be more sensitive to external cues than high self-esteem individuals (Brockner, 1988).

In an application, it is hypothesised that low self-esteem applicants can be more influenced by external cues as recruiters, family, friends and newspapers than high self-esteem applicants, who make their recruiting source choice more on the basis of what they personally want to do or which organisations they want to work for. This means that as self-esteem increases, the choice of a recruiting source is more based on which job or organisation the applicants specifically want to attain. This rational way of choosing is situated on the upper side of the model. This means that low self-esteem applicants mainly use Soelberg's strategy or their general intuition and that high self-esteem applicants are supposed to use an exploratory job search strategy following the expectancy value theory or the vocational development theory.

**Post-hoc evidence.** Empirical support can be found for the hypothesis that work experience influences the extent in which applicants have a clear view of the job they are looking for. Phillips (1982) showed that decisions made at earlier stages of career development are more likely to be of an exploratory nature and that decisions made at later stages are more likely to be of a terminal nature. Butler, Sanders & Whitecotton (2000) presented (exploratory) evidence that students (little or no work experience) have almost no self-insight concerning the importance of six job attributes. In comparison with the assessed importance, potential recruiters were unable to reveal what the students thought to be important. On the other hand, Eckstein (1987) showed that experienced but currently employed engineers and computer professionals preferred personal networks, newspapers and, to a much lesser extent, professional journals for looking at a new job. Furthermore, Meglino, DeNisi and Ravlin

(1993) and Meglino, Ravlin & DeNisi (1997) showed that persons with prior experience to the job they were applying for, overemphasised negative job information, which resulted in reduced job acceptances. Persons with no prior experience to the job showed no increased job acceptances.

With regard to self-esteem, two studies within the expectancy value literature (Hollenbeck & Brief, 1987; Moussa, 1996) found that high task-specific self-esteem respondents had stronger expectancies of achieving the goal than low task-specific self-esteem respondents, although self-esteem did not correlate significantly with goal difficulty and productivity (Moussa, 1996). Next, in the vocational development framework, it is stated in the self-consistency hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between self-esteem, the occupational choice and the self-concept (Korman, 1976), which implies that applicants act and think in ways that are consistent with their existing level of self-esteem, what correspond with the behavioural plasticity hypothesis (Brockner, 1988). Reviews (Dipboye, 1977; Korman, 1976) show that high self-esteem applicants prefer occupations consistent with their personalities more frequently than they choose occupations inconsistent with their personalities, while for low self-esteem applicants the relationships are not significant. Correspondingly, Tharenou (1979) concludes in her review that, in general, the evidence, although sparse, is in favour of Korman's self-consistency hypothesis. Keon, Latack and Wanous (1982) further this logic and find empirically that students with a positive self-image select schools most like their self-image, whereas students with a negative self-image select schools least like their self-image. Finally, Turban & Keon (1993) found that subjects with a low self-esteem were more attracted to decentralised and larger firms than high self-esteem subjects.

## **DISCUSSION**

**Overview.** Based on the conflicting evidence from the recruiting source effectiveness literature, Rynes (1991) states that there is a need to more research on the psychological determinants of job search. Stevens and Beach (1996) take a thought-provoking discussion by integrating the three main decision theories into the image theory. However, as these decision theories can provide unique insights into the job search process, it was our objective to develop a conceptual framework about the different strategies the applicants can take in order to choose an optimal recruiting source. In correspondence

with Stevens and Beach (1996), our framework assumes that the applicants have to answer two questions in the exploratory job search phase: which job or organisation do they want to attain and along which recruiting source can they find their job or organisation? However, in opposition with Stevens and Beach (1996), not the content of their answers is used as unit of analysis, yet the way in which these answers are formulated. In this way, these answers can be conceptualised as the two core dimensions in the framework: implicit versus explicit goal and rational versus social strategy.

The combination of these two core dimensions leads to a four-cell typology, in which the 3 main decision theories and Nisbet & Grant (1965) can be situated. In this way, our framework takes the work of Stevens and Beach (1996) a step further, offering a refined conceptualisation and specific predictions about the exploratory job search. In accordance with the learning model, our framework further proposes that applicants with work experience are more able to make explicit the desired job. The second proposition was suggested in the emotional response model and stated that a rise in self-esteem will enable the applicants to determine their recruiting source choice in a more rational way.

**Added value.** As this framework gives a new view on the job search phase, it can form a starting point for new conceptual and empirical analyses. Two new viewpoints are suggested.

Firstly, the conceptual distinction in two questions can shed a new light on the conflicting realism hypothesis and individual differences hypothesis. Particularly, the first hypothesis can refer to different recruiting source characteristics, which is of importance in the applicant's answer on the second question. As the individual differences hypothesis refers to the different recruiting sources applicants can choose, it represents the different ways in which applicants determine their goals.

Secondly, in reviews of the decision theories, Wanous (1977) and Wanous, Keon and Latack (1983) emphasised that most research on the expectancy value theory has been carried out on well-educated graduating students in Sciences or Economics or MBA. The results of the study of Rynes *et al* (1997) showed that their lack of work experience could be a moderating variable on job search. Moreover, as Nisbet and Grant (1965) found very different results with Arts students in opposition with sciences or economics, the strategies for choosing a recruiting source could be very different depending on the type and level of education. The fact that these expectancy value researches did find



empirical support, can be explained by the use of questionnaires that force applicants expliciting their preferences and motives, although they are not necessarily able to do this (Glueck, 1974). In the same way, Nisbet & Grant (1965) obtained other results, as they also used the interview technique. Clearly, empirical research on different types of applicants with different types of research methods in one study is surely needed.

Finally, although both job search and recruitment processes operate in substantially different ways across different types of job options, applicants and markets (Rynes *et al*, 1997), the practical contribution can be found in the emphasis on the recruiting source choice process. Furthermore, insight in this job search process and its crucial determinants can help HR practitioners in the attraction of the optimal applicant. In this way, the HR professional can ensure that the choice of recruiting sources, as a more specific component of the hiring process, is designed and delivered efficiently and correctly to the potential new employees (Buyens & De Vos, 1999).

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