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Supporting Experienced LTU Professionals

Preliminary Lessons from a Boston-Area Case Study

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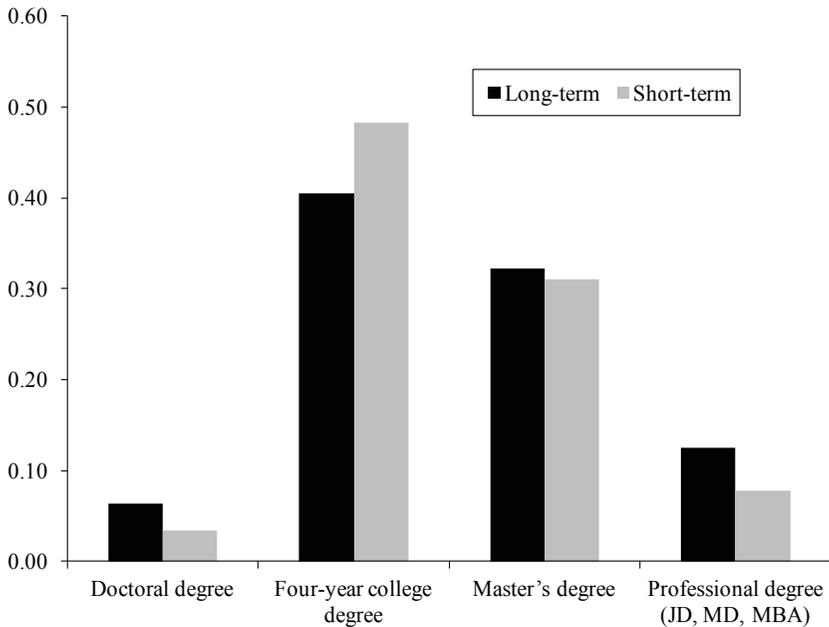
The United States is in the midst of a crisis of long-term unemployment, with the percentage of unemployed workers jobless 27 or more weeks at levels unseen in decades. A broad literature associates long-term unemployment with a variety of social ills, including poverty, the loss of homes and retirement savings, and deteriorating physical and mental health (e.g., Van Horn 2013). The devastating emotional toll of prolonged unemployment can often lead to deep discouragement and self-blame, which make it difficult to continue job searching (Sharone 2013).

This case study focuses on long-term unemployment among experienced college-educated professionals. Contrary to popular perceptions, college degrees and industry experience offer no protection to the unemployed. Although college-educated workers do have lower levels

of unemployment, once unemployed, they are just as likely to become long-term unemployed (LTU) as their non-college-educated counterparts (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2007). And, upon becoming LTU, the most significant barrier to reemployment is not a lack of education, relevant skills, or experience, but simply the duration of their unemployment (Ghayad 2013).

To look more closely at long-term unemployment among college-educated professionals, and to explore possible interventions supporting this group in reentering the workforce, the authors invited LTU professionals to participate in research that would either offer them free career coaching/counseling or pay them to complete surveys. While we began by recruiting LTU job seekers at One-Stop Centers, networking groups, and libraries, the majority of participating LTU job seekers learned of our research from a prominent newspaper story in the Boston area (Woolhouse 2013). We asked LTU professionals interested in participating in our research to fill out a short sign-up survey to determine if they meet the following criteria: unemployed six months or longer, between the ages of 40 and 65, college-educated professionals, and, in order to control for labor market conditions, looking for work in the Boston area.

While over 800 unemployed job seekers signed up, many of them could not be invited to further participate in the research because they were unemployed for *less* than six months. Nevertheless, the information provided in the sign-up process gave us a chance to compare some of the basic characteristics of short-term and long-term college-educated professionals. Studies cited above show that college degrees do not offer protection from long-term unemployment for the unemployed, but are those with advanced degrees less likely to be LTU? Contrary to theories about long-term unemployment being driven by lack of sufficient educational credentials, our data show that the LTU are in fact more likely to have advanced degrees than the short-term unemployed. Specifically, from among the respondents to our initial sign-up survey, 6.3 percent of the LTU have doctoral degrees compared to 3.4 percent of the short-term unemployed; 12.5 percent of the LTU hold professional degrees compared to only 7.7 percent of the short-term unemployed; and 32 percent of the LTU hold a master's degree compared to 31 percent of the short-term unemployed (see Figure 30.1). This finding is consistent with other recent studies, including Krueger, Cramer, and

Figure 30.1 Highest Level of Education Completed

SOURCE: Data compiled from authors' survey results.

Cho (2014), which draws on Current Population Survey data, and an Executive Office of the President (2014) report, which, using Bureau of Labor Statistics data, shows that the LTU are equally or slightly more educated than short-term unemployed workers.

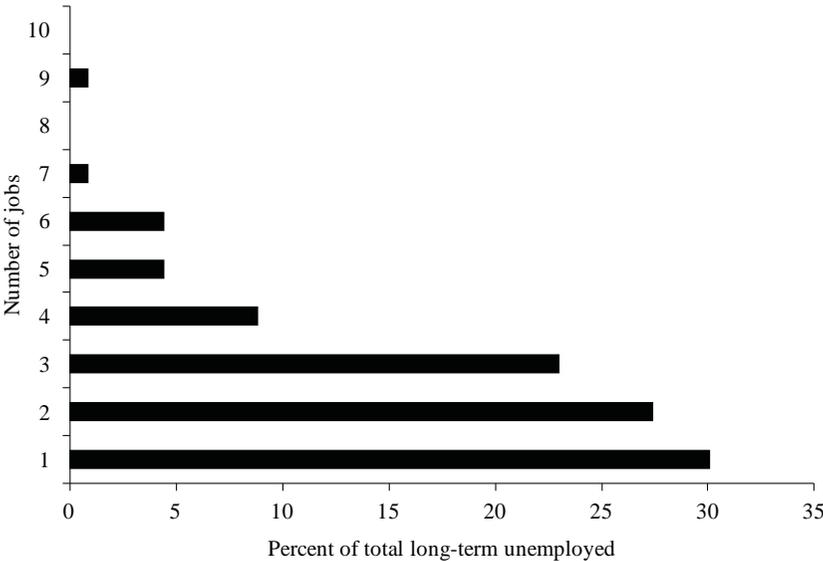
A CLOSER LOOK AT COLLEGE-EDUCATED 40+ LTU

LTU professionals invited to participate in our research completed an initial survey with detailed questions about their career histories and job search experiences. Given the high educational attainment of our LTU sample, we wondered if perhaps obstacles arose because of their job histories and past employment transitions. Bills (1990) reports a

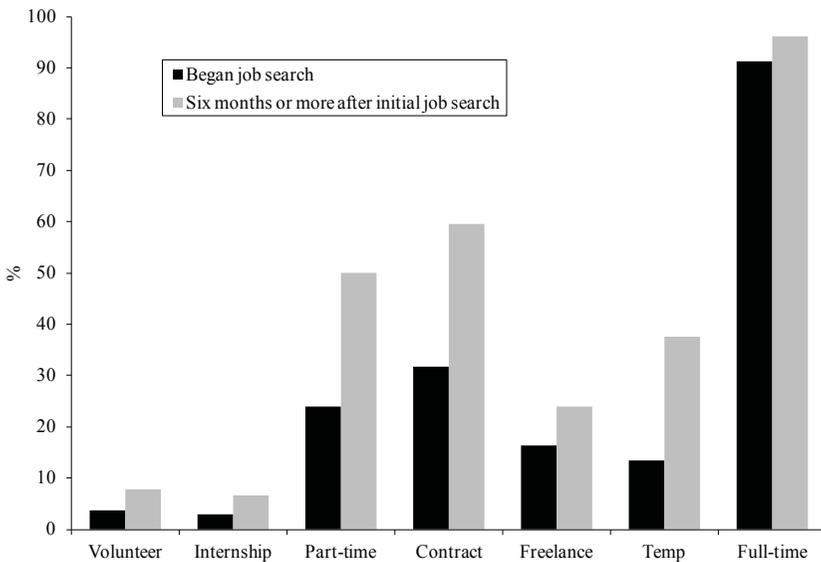
number of job screening criteria used by employers when assessing job candidates and identified “job hopping,” or staying at a job for less than a year, as a factor employers consider even before looking at educational credentials. Our data show that job hopping is unlikely to be an important factor underlying long-term unemployment among professionals. More than 70 percent of workers in our survey held three or fewer full-time jobs over the preceding 10 years (and over 50 percent held two or fewer jobs over these years), suggesting that the number of past job transitions is not the cause of their being out of work (see Figure 30.2).

Our data about LTU professionals also allow us to dispel some stereotypical notions about such job seekers being inflexible with high reservation wages or unreasonable expectations (for a critical review of these arguments, see Howell and Azizoglu [2011]). Our survey asked LTU professionals to compare the type of work looked for when they first started their job search with the type of work that they are currently looking for. Figure 30.3 shows considerable increase in job seekers’

Figure 30.2 Number of Full-Time Jobs Held over the Past 10 Years



SOURCE: Data compiled from authors’ survey results.

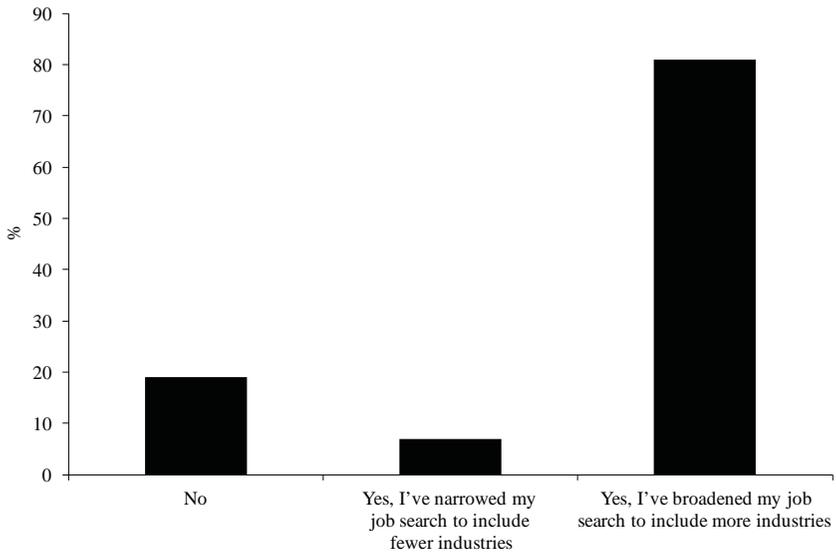
Figure 30.3 What Type of Work Are You Currently Looking For?

SOURCE: Data compiled from authors' survey results.

flexibility over time. For instance, while the percentage of individuals looking for part-time work at the beginning of their search was 24 percent, in their current situation as LTU job seekers, 50 percent are looking for part-time work. Similarly, the percentage of job seekers looking for contract work and temporary work shows a significant increase with long-term unemployment, rising from 32 percent to 60 percent, and 14 percent to 38 percent, respectively.

Our findings also show that over time, LTU professionals change the scope of their search in terms of industry, job level, and targeted salary. Compared to when they first began searching, 75 percent of our LTU respondents indicated that they have broadened their search to include more industries (see Figure 30.4), 82 percent are now looking for jobs in a wider range of levels (see Figure 30.5), and 77 percent are now open to a lower salary (see Figure 30.6). Our survey also shows that LTU professionals are willing to take much lower-level jobs than their recent full-time jobs. As reported by our respondents, in their most recent full-time jobs, nearly half were earning between \$50,000 and

Figure 30.4 During the Past Month, Have You Changed the Industries in Which You Are Looking for Work?



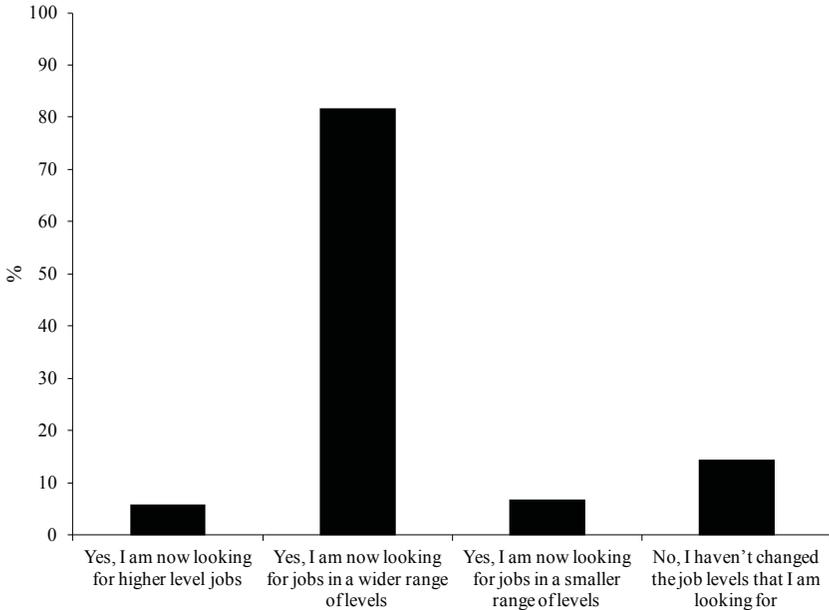
SOURCE: Data compiled from authors' survey results.

\$99,000, and 42 percent were earning more than \$100,000 a year. The mean work experience of our sample is 27 years. Only two individuals in our sample reported that they were working in an entry-level position in their last job, and 45 percent of our sample was working in a managerial position. Despite this employment history, 33 percent of our respondents reported that they are ready to take an entry-level position.

PILOT INTERVENTION TO SUPPORT EXPERIENCED LTU PROFESSIONALS

Given our findings that LTU professionals are facing obstacles in the labor market such as discrimination against the LTU (Ghayad 2013) and severe emotional distress (Sharone 2013), not lack of education, inconsistent job histories, or inflexibility, we hypothesized that job

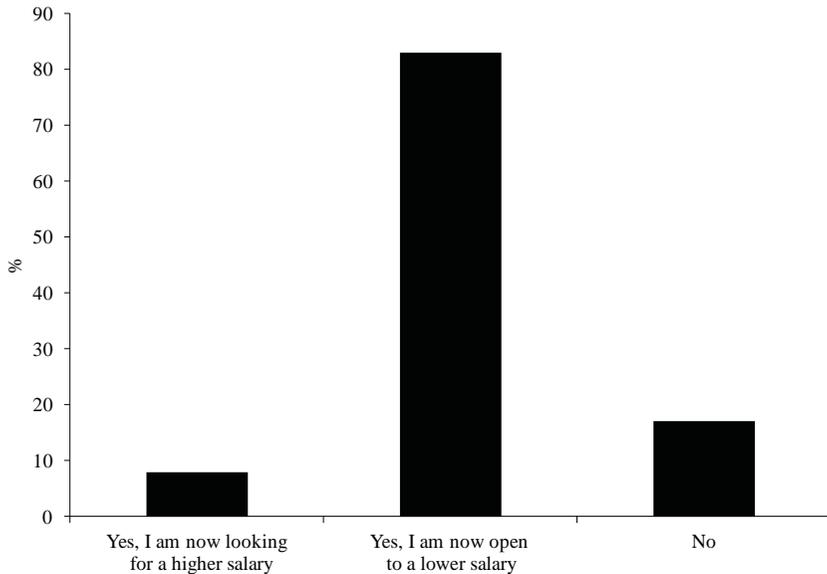
Figure 30.5 During the Span of Your Current Job Search, Have You Changed the “Job Levels” in Which You Are Looking for Work?



SOURCE: Data compiled from authors' survey results.

search support interventions may be helpful. While studies of interventions abound, to our knowledge no existing studies focus on support for 40+ LTU professionals. To explore this question, from among the over 800 job seekers who applied to participate in our study and who met the previously discussed criteria, we randomly selected 102 LTU professionals and randomly matched them with 42 career professionals who provided them with regular and free job search support for at least three months.¹ Prior to receiving any support, job seekers completed surveys about their search experiences as well as their emotional well-being, which were followed up with surveys to examine change over time. A subset also participated in in-depth interviews. From the same pool of 800 job seekers, we also randomly selected 22 LTU professionals to form a control group that would not receive support but be paid for completing our surveys.

Figure 30.6 During the Past Month, Have You Changed the Salary Brackets in Which You Are Looking for Work?



SOURCE: Data compiled from authors' survey results.

During a four-month period of data collection, 30 percent of the LTU professionals who were matched with support (31 out of 102) reported finding a full-time open-term job or a fixed-term contract position for at least three months. During the same period in our small control group, 18 percent reported finding such jobs (4 out of 22). These preliminary results suggest that while formidable institutionalized obstacles cannot be fully overcome by intensive support—with 70 percent of supported LTU professionals *not* finding work in a four-month period—the substantial improvement in the rate of finding jobs for the supported group compared to the control group also shows that support makes a significant and meaningful difference.

At this preliminary stage of data analysis, in examining how career support is helpful, we find most striking the reduction in job seekers' degree of self-blame, which likely increases job search effectiveness. Prior studies have found that although LTU professionals can develop a fear that “something is wrong with me,” which results in a loss of

confidence and discouragement, such self-blame and anxiety are not an inevitable result of LTU (Sharone 2013). Job seekers looking for work in similarly difficult labor market conditions can come to have very different subjective understandings, depending on the lens through which they interpret their difficulties (Sharone 2013). Our preliminary findings show that support can make an important difference to how LTU is experienced. Prior to receiving support, 61 percent of LTU professionals in our study either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I fear there is something wrong with me.” In a follow-up survey 10 weeks later, this fear had increased among our control group to 84 percent but decreased to 41 percent among job seekers receiving support. While the sample is not large enough for these numbers to be statistically significant, the direction of the results is consistent with our qualitative findings.

How does support help diminish self-blame? We find most illuminating the qualitative data from in-depth interviews with job seekers before and during the period of support that point to three key elements of support that produce this outcome, often as an unintended consequence. First, supporting job seekers to effectively present themselves to potential employers involves identifying the strengths and skills that underlie their past career successes. Job seekers report that this support is not only helpful to better present themselves externally, but it also helps create an internal “counternarrative” to the belief that “something is wrong with me.” Second, in small facilitated groups, job seekers are typically encouraged to share their experiences so that they can learn useful strategies from each other. Job seekers report that in this context, the emotional hardships of unemployment are often shared, leading many to describe the relief that comes from recognizing that they are not alone in their experiences. Through group discussions, structural factors become more apparent, and job seekers receive a powerful, if indirect, message that negative outcomes in the labor market are not, as one job seeker put it, “just something about me.” This form of support alters the lens through which job seekers interpret negative market outcomes and reduces self-blame by not overstating individual-level factors in determining search outcomes.

Finally, our preliminary data suggest that perhaps the way the intermediation of support can change the job search experience is more effective than anything that can be said to an LTU job seeker. The

unmediated LTU job search experience can lead to unrelenting negative outcomes, which cause many job seekers to fear that “something is wrong” with them and to become discouraged. Support structures disrupt this dynamic and create an intermediary set of outcomes and institutionalized feedback that can show progress and success in achieving goals that are tied to skill, effort, and risk taking, but they use metrics that are independent of direct market responses. Rather than telling job seekers to avoid negative thoughts (as is done in many self-help books), these support structures create positive experiences similar to what workplaces often do for workers through evaluative structures, providing feedback and internal recognition for achievements that are otherwise invisible in the market.

While meaningfully addressing the crisis of long-term unemployment will require a broad array of policy responses, the findings in this case study suggest that such responses should include increased funding for job search support targeted at older LTU professionals, and that such support would not require as much funding as might be assumed. Specifically, our findings suggest that only some dimensions of support are best provided by expert counselors/coaches, while others can be provided by peer groups. LTU job seekers benefit from individualized advice from experienced career counselors for understanding available labor market information, opportunities for workers with their skills and interests, and getting on the right track in terms of search strategies. However, other crucial elements of support can come from being part of a peer group, which reduces isolation and self-blame and creates structure and accountability for executing one’s strategy. While effective groups require some skilled facilitation, it is likely that such facilitation training can be provided by webinars and other cost-effective online education platforms. A promising hybrid approach to effective and relatively inexpensive support would combine weekly in-person peer-support with less frequent (perhaps monthly) virtual one-on-one strategic advice sessions with experienced counselors. In any such effort it would be important for counselors, just like the peer facilitators, to receive some training to help this particular group of LTU job seekers. The authors would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with any interested partners in creating such trainings.

Notes

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1. Thirty-five were career coaches or counselors who have a private practice or work for other organizations and who agreed to provide their service pro bono, and seven were career consultants who work for an outplacement company, which volunteered to provide its consultants' time for the research.

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