

The Promises and Perils of Online Job-Seeking: Experiences from London, Ontario and St. Louis, Missouri

A summary of the SSHRC Research Project: *Possibilities and Boundaries in the Socio-Political Shaping of Unemployment: How Service Seekers and Service Providers Negotiate Long-Term Unemployment*.

Introduction

The findings of this report are based on the Phase 2 data from an on-going collaborative research project on long-term unemployment in London and St. Louis. *Possibilities and Boundaries* is a collaborative research project on long-term unemployment, with data collection occurring between 2014 and 2017. It aims to understand how policy and program changes since the 2008 recession have impacted employment services organizations and the strategies used by individuals to negotiate long-term unemployment.

This report adds to the growing body of data gathered from previous phases of this research, which explored: alternative and complementary understandings of long-term unemployment, the limits and strengths of existing policies and service delivery models, as well as how to create and sustain opportunities for the unemployed in more effective and socially just ways. Previous reports have also addressed how the absence of transportation acts as a key barrier to re-employment, reinforcing both the geography and persistence of long-term unemployment in low-income and socially disadvantaged communities (see Fanelli, Rudman and Aldrich, 2016abc).

This article explores a range of barriers identified by employment services counsellors as unemployed workers seek to adapt to the growing usage of online job applications. This includes: premature exclusion of applications from review for those with infrequent access to the internet or inadequate computer literacy skills; software systems that may indiscriminately reject some applicants if controls (such as minimum education levels and work experience) and accessibility designs (e.g. for the

visually impaired) are too limited; interface configurations that may not display the data correctly and/or prevent the candidate from completing the application in time; and applicant frustration over errors encountered in the process, which prompt their exit from the online application system.

This report finds that online-only applications, as reflected in the broader literature and identified by employment counsellors, are becoming more prevalent for accessing employment opportunities. This raises a new set of challenges for unemployed individuals as they seek to negotiate these tensions and adapt to a shifting labour market.

Online Applications as New Norm

Online job applications are increasingly becoming the new norm for job-seekers. As one employment counsellor in St. Louis noted:

"Everyone needs a computer or access to a computer because most applications are online." (St. Louis)

According to a survey by Monster Canada (Niedoba 2016), 9 in 10 Canadians between the ages of 18 and 30 reported applying online for a job following graduation. The survey found that many millennials lacked confidence in the online application process. For example, 67% of those surveyed noted difficulty finding a job posting that interested them, while another 65% noted trouble finding a job they were qualified for.

Possibilities and Boundaries

Another 81% noted frustration with not hearing back from potential employers, 75% raised concerns about vague job descriptions, and 72% found the online application system confusing.

Growing usage of online applications was also noted in the United States. A survey of more than 2,000 respondents conducted between 2013 and 2015 by the PEW Research Center, found that more than half (54%) of US adults have gone online for job information, while 45% have recently applied for a job online (Smith, 2015: 3).

The PEW survey found that job seekers are just as likely to have turned to the internet during their search for employment as they did to their personal or professional networks. One of the fastest growing trends identified by the PEW Research Centre is smartphone usage as part of a job search, with 28% of all respondents – and 53% of 18-29 year-olds having used a smartphone as part of their search for employment.

The growing reliance on smartphone usage to access employment opportunities was identified by employment counsellors in St Louis.

“A lot of these folks don’t have access to the internet or laptops, but they have smartphones. Through the right Facebook sites you can get to a lot of people [for job opportunities].” (St. Louis)

These findings mirror research from the Joint Center for Political and Economic studies, which found that internet usage for job-seekers was especially important to the job seeking habits of certain socio-demographic groups, such as African-Americans and Latinos, sub/urban residents, as well as long-term unemployed individuals and those with lower incomes and levels of educational attainment (Horrigan 2013).

Accessibility Barriers

“One of the things that’s changed [since the 2008 recession] is the expectation for people having a certain level of computer skills just to even apply. I’ve watched them sit there...and it’s just too overwhelming and they just freeze and stop.” (St. Louis)

Employment services counsellors in both St. Louis and London noted frequently that one of the most pressing challenges concerns the lack of basic computer skills and difficulty accessing training opportunities. *“We don’t have that many organizations that offer computer training for free,”* noted one employment counsellor in London. *“Mostly you have to pay for that and sometimes it’s too much for the client to pay.”*

These challenges were particularly noted amongst older workers. As one London employment counsellor explained: *“OLD AGE MATTERS. [Aging adults are] not used to filling online applications, and sometimes they say, ‘We can’t, we used to just drop off our resumes and they would call us the same day.’”*

As was noted by employment counsellors in St. Louis, London counsellors also found that the inability to access the internet made it very difficult for unemployed persons to get in touch with prospective employers:

“Not having a cell phone or a home phone, not having the internet. It’s very hard [for the unemployed] to connect with them [employers].” (St. Louis)

Possibilities and Boundaries

A Report to the Chairman, Special Committee on Ageing, US Senate (GAO, 2012), raised similar concerns noting that inaccessibility and unfamiliarity with online applications is especially difficult for older workers with limited technological skills. Older workers were found to have experienced higher incidences of not completing or saving in time the contents of online applications.

In a similar vein, the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology (PEAT) conducted a nationwide survey to determine some of the barriers that visually-impaired persons encounter when undertaking online applications. It found that typical online recruiting practices tended to exclude 1 in 5 candidates from consideration. Accessibility barriers included: complex navigation; timeout restrictions; lack of video captioning; no alternative text for captioning; poor screen contrast; inaccessible form fields; and mouse-only input option. PEAT (2015) found that 46% of respondents rated their last experience applying for a job online as “difficult to impossible.” Of those, 24% required additional assistance from others, and 9% were unable to complete the application entirely.

Commenting on the diverse range of abilities, work experiences and computer competencies amongst unemployed individuals, respondents in St. Louis noted how these new challenges “require a whole different way of applying, a whole different way of generating resumes that can get through these automated systems.” This was a sentiment shared in London, where it was noted how the slow pace of change and mounting rejections has shaken the confidence of many older workers and those with varying dis/abilities.

“The insecurities and fear, and the lack of confidence takes over, and they can backslide and it's frustrating when it happens.]” (London)

Technological Challenges

With the growing prevalence of online job applications has arisen a number of unique technological challenges. For example, in the PEW national survey noted earlier, nearly half of all job-seekers encountered difficulty accessing job-related content on their smartphones because it was not displaying properly, they encountered difficulty reading the text, and/or they were unable to submit files and other supporting documentation (Smith, 2015).

In London and St. Louis, respondents observed a number of related technological constraints, such as:

► Computer literacy

“We have several people who don't know how to use the computer or certainly aren't comfortable using it.” (St. Louis)

► Time demands

“Even to apply to work at McDonald's as a crew member they have a questionnaire that's about 120 questions. That is after one fills out the regular application with their job history, education and basic information. So one application may take well over an hour to complete. And Walmart, for any job there, they have 65 questions and they are mostly situational [and behavioural].” (St. Louis)

Possibilities and Boundaries

► Online application-jobs mismatch

“A lot of the time the computer skill that it takes to just fill out online applications or do the assessments is not reflective of the skill level that’s needed for the job. And so, it’s a huge barrier and it’s just daunting for so many people that they don’t even apply or they don’t finish it.” (London)

► Complex application systems

“The online applicant tracking system statistically eliminates 82 percent of the people within the first ten minutes of starting the application.” (London)

Together, these technological challenges made it much more difficult for unemployed individuals to not only access other resources and services available online, but to complete in a competent and timely fashion online job applications.

A Holistic Approach Forward

Employment support counsellors in London and St. Louis noted a number of measures they are taking to assist individuals with overcoming accessibility and technological constraints. This includes workshops and seminars on posting cover letters and resumes online, basic computer skills, assistance setting up an email address, and leveraging social media for help in their job search.

Other initiatives include online counselling, one-on-one assistance with application systems, information on how to follow-up with potential employers via email, roundtable sessions exploring

how to do a job search online, and information on where to access free internet services, such as at local libraries and community centres. Although such initiatives were spread throughout the data generated with employment counsellors, broader opportunities for redressing technological barriers were not discussed.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that unemployed persons face a range of challenges when completing online job applications, particularly for aging workers, the differently-abled, and those lacking access to the internet and/or computer proficiency. This includes concerns over online application systems that are not inclusive of the extra time or needs required for certain socio-demographic groups, frustration navigating complex application systems, and onerous questionnaires.

As the trend toward online applications continues, a multi-faceted approach that takes into consideration the experiences of employment support counsellors and unemployed individuals will be central to developing inclusive strategies for individuals to (re)enter the workforce. Given the seemingly unlimited possibilities of new digital technologies, online developers and human resources staff will also need to consider new ways to increase accessibility and facilitate inclusive applications systems in an effort to integrate diverse communities into their workforces.

Possibilities and Boundaries

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For further information visit: possibilitiesandboundaries.ca

