

# Shopping the Job Market

Persistence and a positive mindset pay off in a job search.

by T.J. BECKER

A new study confirms what some job seekers may suspect.

**T**he more effort people put into a job search, the more likely they are to find employment, even in difficult economic times, says Ruth Kanfer, a Georgia Institute of Technology psychology professor.

“That may seem intuitive, but it’s something people forget — especially if the economy is bad,” she says. “When jobs are scarce, people often assume that there’s no point in looking.”

Kanfer specializes in self-regulation in the workplace, the process by which people set goals, evaluate resources and manage their behavior. Researchers have used self-regulation for several decades as a framework to study issues such as weight and smoking cessation. But Kanfer has been among the first to apply it to job searches following involuntary layoffs.

She is completing a two-year study in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Labor that sheds more light on job-search behavior. Although she is still crunching numbers, Kanfer says preliminary findings show a positive relationship between active job-search behavior and re-employment success — even in a time of recession.

Aided by Georgia Tech graduate student Tracy Kantrowitz and other researchers, Kanfer worked with the Labor Department’s Rapid Response Team. When layoffs occur at a company, this team meets

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have confidence in your ability to search for a job

with workers to provide information about unemployment benefits and resources. During the study, Kanfer's research team attended the Rapid Response Team meetings to recruit candidates for the study. They asked people about their employment goals and job-search strategies.

"Dr. Kanfer's study really validates our approach to assisting dislocated workers and our emphasis on positive job-search techniques," says Helen Parker, assistant commissioner of the Georgia Department of Labor. "This research will help us to ensure that the services we offer continue to be what our customers need to be successful."

The Labor Department study builds on earlier research by Kanfer, showing how certain personality traits relate to job-search behavior. For example, people tend to look harder for jobs and conse-

quently have more success if they are:

- Optimistic and view the job loss as an opportunity to improve their position.
- Higher in self-esteem and self-efficacy (have confidence in their ability to search for a job).
- Extroverted.
- Conscientious, in the sense that they're more organized and concerned with follow-up.

"That doesn't mean that introverts or less conscientious individuals have poor re-employment prospects," Kanfer stresses. "But those personality traits are less conducive to the path that they're up against. In contrast, some people are naturally outgoing or predisposed to set goals and follow through. In a job search, it's often the little extras that can make a difference impressing employers."

### Outplacement: One Size Doesn't Fit All

Kanfer's research will help human resources professionals respond to the different needs among job seekers.

"A formulaic approach to outplacement doesn't work," observes John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray and Christmas, a Chicago-based consulting firm that specializes in outplacement. "The job search is a process where there is constant rejection. People are rejected by their former companies — and companies that decide not to move them further along in the process."

Not everyone has the emotional resiliency to bounce back from those daily rejections. Yet companies too often focus on delivering administrative services, such as daycare or places where job seekers can make phone calls, rather than one-on-one counseling support, Challenger explains.

The idea is to enhance job-search behavior. If outplacement counselors can identify individuals who aren't strong in the personality traits conducive to a job search, they can be more proactive with training and counseling.

"Personality traits may be stable and enduring, but you can still learn coping skills," says Kanfer, adding that it's possible to raise both self-efficacy and self-esteem. For example, individuals who aren't confident about their ability to search for a job could get help with writing resumes, filling out applications to their best advantage and even how to dress for an interview. To raise self-esteem, counselors could help individuals identify valuable skills they may possess, but not be aware of.

"Especially in today's service-oriented workplace, skills that get you a new job don't have to be the same ones that defined you in your previous job," says Kanfer, referring to a friend who was laid off. The woman, an attorney, was very extroverted. Instead of interviewing with law firms, she began to apply for sales jobs and worked her way into a great position selling legal software.

### Change of Routine

One surprising result of the Labor Department study: Many people who have lost jobs reported that a change in their routine positively affected their ability to find work.

"There's been an implicit notion that people should try to maintain the status quo after losing a job," says Kanfer, "but we're finding that people

who change their daily routine — for example, engaging in more exercise or going to more church activities — were more successful in finding re-employment." That makes sense, she says, because exercise or connecting to social support groups can help buffer the stress that comes from losing a job.

When Ken Markham of Milwaukee lost his job as a project engineer at a pattern manufacturing company earlier this year, his stress-busting strategy was to stay busy. Over the next 10 weeks, Markham searched for a job, but he also chauffeured his three children about, tackled more housework, landscaped his yard and refinished kitchen cabinets. "The busier I was, the less stress I felt," he says.

What's more, Markham believes the positive feelings that resulted from achieving tangible results transferred to his job interviews. "If you feel good about yourself, potential employers will pick up on it," he says. "Plus, my projects kept me organized. I had plenty to do, but I still had to balance that with my job search."

Although Markham wasn't part of the Labor Department study, his situation illustrates the dual behavioral challenges that job seekers face:

1. Reducing the negative emotions that accompany job loss.
2. Self-regulation: Directing and motivating themselves to find and win a new job.

"What's difficult about job loss is that there's no structure pushing you to do something. For most people, it's all self-initiated," Kanfer says. "We want to learn about how people change their routines and determine which ones may be more helpful."

### Diverse Sampling

Most job-search studies examine human capital factors, such as education and age, when predicting job-search success. But Kanfer's focus on behavior provides a valuable pool of rich information on the processes and activities involved in a job search.

The study of 100 laid-off workers — primarily high school graduates an average of 40 years old — is smaller than Kanfer had hoped for. But it provides a useful complement to studies of job-search behaviors that have focused on new entrants to the workforce — mostly college graduates — who are in a more structured search environment, Kanfer says.

"For job seekers, a job search is self-managed



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see job loss as an opportunity to improve your position



## be outgoing and concerned with follow-up

and self-motivated — no one is offering them opportunity,” she adds.

Kanfer’s study differs from previous research in two other ways, as well:

- Greater ethnic mix. About half of the participants were African-Americans.
- Organizational diversity. Participants came from a variety of different companies.

Often job-search studies look at downsizing within a single organization, which can skew results. In contrast, the Labor Department study provides a look at job-search behaviors across different occupations and industries.

Almost half of the participants in Kanfer’s study had been laid off at least once in the previous five years. “That really speaks to how the work world has changed — that job loss is no longer an infrequent event,” Kanfer says.

On the brighter side, the study shows that job loss doesn’t necessarily mean settling for less.

Among the Labor Department study participants, several reported they were happier in new situations than the ones they had left.

The study also points to areas that warrant more research, such as the impact of age on job-search behavior. Older people may limit their options because they believe they don’t have the right skills, Kanfer says. “And that’s a vicious cycle because the more you look, the more likely you are to find employment,” she adds.

Granted, in a poor economy, the chances of finding a job are lower, but it’s still an active approach that can win results. Kanfer stresses: “You can’t make employment happen. But you help control what happens by managing your assets, marshalling your skills and getting yourself out there.”

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**Georgia Tech researchers received training prior to conducting a job search behavior study in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Labor.**



IMAGE COURTESY OF RUTH KANFER