

Issue Brief 2: Indigenous Job Search Behaviour

The process of finding the right worker for a job is facilitated by the job search behaviour of job seekers, the recruitment procedures of employers and the institutional systems in place to coordinate the needs of job seekers and potential employers.

There are many reasons why people look for work and many different pathways to finding a job. The success achieved will vary depending upon the intensity of search, the type of search method used and the characteristics of the job seeker. International evidence suggests that job search by the employed may be more effective than that of the unemployed, possibly because of better contacts, access to internal career ladders or because they don't carry the stigma associated with unemployment.

This issue brief examines job search behaviour of Indigenous job seekers and identifies the characteristics of successful job search behaviours of respondents to a longitudinal survey conducted by the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

The survey tracked the experiences, over an eighteen-month period, of 1,580 Indigenous Australian job seekers who were registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service. Information was collected in three waves, with the first interviews being conducted between March and June 1996 and the last between June and September 1997. The data and analyses presented here show patterns of responses of those who responded to the survey questionnaires and should not be used to draw inferences about wider populations. Response rates, attrition rates, methodological issues and design aspects make generalisation of these results problematic.

Benchmarking Indigenous job search

Job search methods differ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous job seekers. Some evidence of these differences can be obtained by comparing the longitudinal data set with the Survey of Employment and Unemployment Patterns data set. Non-Indigenous job seekers appear to use more pro-active search methods (such as answering newspaper job advertisements, directly contacting employers, advertising or tendering for work or checking noticeboards on employer's premises) than Indigenous job seekers. In particular, non-Indigenous job seekers are more likely to have contacted employers directly than Indigenous job seekers, who are more likely to report having asked friends or relatives about jobs, despite some evidence that such methods are less likely to secure them employment.

Characterising Indigenous job search behaviour

Given that information about Indigenous search behaviour is scarce, the longitudinal data provide a unique opportunity to investigate effective job search behaviours. Job search methods can be described in terms of levels of pro-activeness. The more pro-active search methods include: answering a newspaper job advertisement, checking noticeboards or signs on an employer's premises, contacting employers to find out if there was a job going, advertising or tendering for work or starting a business and becoming self-employed.

The data show that the types of job search methods used by employed and unemployed Indigenous respondents are remarkably similar, a result which stands in contrast to overseas findings on job search behaviour. There also appears to be little or no difference in the search methods used by Indigenous respondents by gender, broad age group or whether or not they were case managed. There does, however, appear to be systematic geographic variation in the use of job search methods. The most notable is that jobseekers in regional centres and remote urban areas use substantially fewer search methods than jobseekers in large cities. This regional variation in the intensity of job search may reflect differences in the demand for

labour between areas, a lack of access to facilities and some administrative arrangements in place in some areas.

While the job search methods used by the employed and unemployed survey respondents were remarkably similar, those employed were twice as likely to get job offers than the unemployed in the four weeks prior to interview. Despite the low number of job offers received by unemployed job seekers, they were more likely than employed job seekers to indicate that they were not prepared to move to take up a job offer.

How important are attitudes to work in the process of job search?

The data show that employed job seekers are more likely than unemployed job seekers to believe that 'having work which helps Indigenous people' or work which offers 'opportunity for promotion' is very important. This may indicate that employed job seekers regard the quality of a job as more important than those who are unemployed, and that the unemployed are more willing to take a job that has less favourable conditions.

The survey findings also provide support for current policy directions in improving Indigenous employment outcomes in the private sector. The majority of respondents to the survey reported that they either would like to work in the private sector or did not care which sector a job was in. Importantly, younger indigenous job seekers were more likely than their older counterparts to indicate a preference for seeking work in the private sector.

Does Indigenous job search behaviour affect Indigenous employment?

Unemployed Indigenous job seekers appear to be more likely to find a job, and remain in employment, if they used pro-active job search methods or searched intensively.

Moreover there is evidence of a link between the type of job found and the job search methods used. Permanent jobs, for example, are more likely to have been found through external advertisements in a newspaper than casual jobs. Conversely, casual employment is more likely to have been found through friends or relatives, direct approaches to employers or through a private employment agency.

While job search method is linked to employment prospects, the relationship is weak, with other factors such as educational attainment, health status and region of residence having a greater impact on job search success. Notwithstanding the weak observed relationship in this study it is an important area that may warrant further investigation.

An increase in job search intensity (as measured by the number of jobs applied for) was also found to increase the likelihood of finding employment, but was found to be unrelated to the probability of job retention.

While there may be some room to encourage more pro-active and intense job search activity among Indigenous job seekers, other research suggests that macro-economic policies are probably more important for improving overall employment outcomes. It is important to create an economic environment conducive to increasing the overall number of jobs available to Indigenous people.

This Issue Brief summarised the report 'An analysis of data from the longitudinal survey of ATSI job seekers, Topic 2: Indigenous job search behaviour', by Drs Matthew Gray and Boyd Hunter.