The Sociology of Job Finding – by Elizabeth Hirsh, Sylvia Fuller, Amy Hanser, and Rima Wilkes

How do you find a job in today's tight, turbulent, unpredictable labour market? Sociologists who study job searching and labour markets identify two distinct stages: searching and screening. In the searching stage, applicants turn to online resources, career services, and their social networks for information about job openings. In the screening stage, hiring agents sort countless applications to find the "right" worker. Thus, landing a job is a two-sided matching problem, with workers searching for good, fulfilling jobs and employers screening for capable, productive workers. So how do you maximize your chances of finding (and landing) a good job?

Job Searching: It's Who You Know. Really.

According to sociological research, over half of job seekers find their positions through ties or links in their personal networks (Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore 2000; Marsden and Gorman 2001; Neckerman and Fernandez 2003). These ties can be both "weak" – ties to acquaintances, career counselors, and faculty members – and "strong" – ties to friends and family members. Though both may provide sources of information (and advice) about job seeking, weak ties tend to provide access to more expansive information and are most effective for landing professional jobs. In fact, a recent study by the American Sociological Association (ASA) found that 60 percent of sociology graduates who sought job information from career services, workshops on campus, faculty members, internship supervisors, or former employers landed career-level jobs compared to only 45 percent of those who turned to family or relatives (Spalter-Roth et al. 2013). Thus, to find your dream job, visit career services, workshops, former employers, and yes, bother faculty (helping you is part of our job).

But what do you do if you exhaust your weak (and strong ties) and come up empty? For those not relying on personal contacts, online search methods may be the next best thing (Choi 2011), yet there is often a trade-off between quality and quantity – for both job seekers slogging through online postings and hiring managers reviewing hundreds of applications (Fountain 2005; Spalter-Roth et al. 2013). In fact, in the ASA study of sociology graduates, although those who used online search strategies landed jobs 68 percent of the time, those jobs were typically service and clerical work, not on the career track. Think barista, not policy analyst.

Why do networks work? It's simple: they are cheap and easy. It is far easier for employers to give a job to someone they know or has been recommended by a trusted source than to go through the trouble of putting out an ad, sifting through applicants, calling references, conducting interviews, and so on.

Applicant Screening: It's What You Know. And How You Show It.

Does this mean that knowing people is everything? Absolutely not. No one is going to hire you, even if you come highly recommended, if they don't think you can do the job well. You must convey to each and every hiring agent that you have the necessary aptitudes, competencies, and motivation. The critical problem-solving, communication, and writing skills that you have acquired through your sociology studies will make you an attractive applicant (Andrews and Higson 2008; Maes et al. 1997).

The fact that you have pursued studies that highlight social diversity, intercultural understanding, and an appreciation for multifaceted forms of knowledge, including divergent ways of doing and thinking, will signal to employers that you can manage variations in interpersonal interactions and team work, which are increasingly common workplace arrangements (Bell et al. 2011).

Beyond your hard skills, be sure to showcase your personality, talents, and soft skills. Employers are looking for people who "fit" well with the workplace culture – in large part because they want to work with people they feel comfortable with (Rivera 2012). Although such "homophily" – or preferring people who are like you – can lead to preferential hiring in some situations, applicants who are wise to it can take advantage by seeking out companies that fit their dispositions, and play up any skills, traits, or values that "fit" the company culture. Among a slew of qualified candidates, your unique experiences and traits can set you apart. Still, as much sociological research demonstrates, employers' gender, race, and ethnic biases can lurk beneath homophily, contributing to discrimination in hiring. To ensure that your resume gets a fair look, you can craft materials in gender- and ethnically-neutral ways to prevent employers from falling back on unconscious biases and stereotypes. The other message here – do your homework on potential employers and craft your messaging accordingly.

Remember too, from your own sociology courses, that considerable research points to systemic processes of unfairness and inequality in getting a job. Be prepared for this. The world is unfair. However, you also cannot let this awareness totally undermine your personal efforts. Persistence is important. Staying positive, while sometimes difficult, is important. Being proactive is important. But enter the job search with some realism, with an awareness of this as a social process open to a myriad of ups and downs.

Finally, you need to demonstrate that you are highly motivated, can take initiative, and think for yourself (especially in professional jobs). What does this mean? Every cover letter says "I'm highly motivated."   You need to *show* that you are highly motivated as you go about your life. Offer to do things for other people. Be a go-getter. Don't wait to be asked. Someone will notice. Even if they don't hire you on the spot, they will come away impressed, and who knows, might just provide that network-tie to your dream job.

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