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When Job Search is Deemed Insufficient: Experiences of Unemployed People Disbarred Following Compliancy Monitoring

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Job search is a central element of activation policies, which aim to transform unemployed people into active jobseekers who are subject to checks. We examine a neglected aspect of activation: sanctions. To do so we analyse, through biographical interviews with formerly-unemployed people whose benefit payments have been stopped, what it means when a job search is deemed insufficient. Although these formerly-unemployed people have failed to present enough written and tangible evidence of their job search during checks, they have pursued a different type of job search comprising more informal activities that are difficult to convert into written documents. So, we identify a twin-stranded job search – prescribed and alternative. We also point out that the gap between institutionally-framed job search and experience-based job search widens among unemployed people having low employability attributes, so that ever-stricter checks penalize those who are most vulnerable.

Keywords: Unemployment, job search, checks, sanction, activation.

Introduction

Increasing conditionality in access to social benefits, particularly unemployment benefits, is a strong trend at the heart of the evolution of welfare states (Dean, 2004). The watchword is the activation of benefit recipients, which implies boosting both their sense of personal responsibility and their ability to work (Serrano Pascual and Magnusson, 2007). This principle has become predominant in socio-economic and political debate (Eichhorst *et al.*, 2008) as well as in labour market reforms (Clasen and Clegg, 2006; Van Berkel and Borghi, 2008). Activation has become a political slogan, supporting the promotion and establishment of an active social state (Handler and Hasenfeld, 2007; Beer and Shils, 2009).

Activation policies combine two logics known as 'carrot and stick' (Serrano Pascual, 2004; Van der Klaauw and Van Ours, 2013). 'Carrot' refers to the provision of services such as professional advice, dissemination of vacancies, vocational training, assistance with writing CV and job search, targeted employment subsidies, etc. 'Stick' includes obligations relating to registration at employment offices, conducting an active job search,

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responding to letters about mandatory appointments, accepting job offers, entering training schemes, etc. These obligations are subject to checks – now an important component of contemporary policies (Deeming, 2016). In such a context, job search becomes the central aspect of unemployment, as summarised in the formula: 'the death of unemployment and the birth of job seeking' (Boland and Griffin, 2015). Indeed, not only must the unemployed search for a job, they must do so 'actively'. They are also subject to interviews (checks) designed to monitor this 'active search', conducted at varying intervals in each country (Anderson, 2001). Claimants whose job search is deemed insufficient are sanctioned. These sanctions are graduated – in some countries (particularly Belgium) going as far as disbarring the jobseeker and definitively abolishing their entitlement to benefits (Venn, 2012).

In the main, analysis of job search control and sanction mechanisms has been confined to micro-economic and econometric evaluations (Parent, 2014), which measure the effects of control on both the return to employment and the acceptability of lower quality jobs (Wright, 2002; Aurich, 2011; Van Berkel *et al.*, 2017). However, job search as such has been little studied, other than through intensity metrics. Some evaluations show, however, that control mechanisms can influence job search methods, since the unemployed tend to favour formal search channels, to the detriment of informal channels (Van den Berg and Van der Klaauw, 2006). This is because monitoring operations often entail evaluating the paper trail left by the job search – documents collected and produced by unemployed people (Boland, 2016; Clouet, 2018; Dubois, 2019). The unemployed thus have a dual obligation: to look for a job and to provide evidence in the form considered credible by the controllers. And from this perspective, it is probably easier to provide copies of applications, responses to job offers and emails sent to companies, than it is to gather evidence of exchanges with acquaintances, requests made within relational networks, and direct contacts with potential employers.

Not all job search methods are equally amenable to checks, and this is the fact that invites us to explore what is meant by 'insufficient' job search, deemed and sanctioned as such. This study allows consideration of the job search within the context of a) articulation of the standards used during monitoring interviews, and b) practices included in the experiences of the unemployed. In order to analyse this articulation, we conducted an interview-based study of unemployed people who had lost their right to benefits. Our hypothesis is that loss of entitlement to benefits punishes failure to conduct a job search in accordance with its institutional definition, rather than failure to conduct a job search per se. In other words, steps taken by those unemployed people removed from the register may have been beyond the bounds of the control framework – and as such, neither recognised nor legitimated. Nevertheless, the steps taken were those considered relevant to their own experience, and do constitute an alternative job search, whose characteristics we will explore.

Active job search

The obligation to look for work is what is demanded in exchange for receiving unemployment benefit. In the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties, payment of unemployment benefits implied that jobseekers were 'genuinely seeking work' (Denman and McDonald, 1996). This classic job-seeking obligation, which has now become an injunction to *actively* seek employment, is not theoretical. Activation policies have

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transposed this obligation into the area of administrative monitoring of the unemployed, though the combinations of work incentives, income support and coercive control vary across OECD countries (Immervoll and Scarpetta, 2012). Since activating the unemployed is a general objective (Demazière, 2018), job search requirements tend to increase. However, the concrete consequences of activation policies for the unemployed depend strongly on how they are implemented in practice. Harshness of legislation is thus not a reliable indicator of its actual impact on job-search behaviour, especially given that professionals in public employment agencies have a great deal of discretion in the local application of legislation (Martin and Grubb, 2001; Senghaas, 2021).

Although concrete translations of the active job search standard have been the subject of many studies, these have tended to focus more on supporting the unemployed than on the control aspect, that is on the carrot rather than the stick, on the 'enabling' rather than the 'demanding' component of activation (Eichhorst *et al.*, 2008). Studies conducted in training, coaching, job-search assistance or skills development organisations show how methods and advice are provided and inculcated to produce active and dynamic job seekers (e.g. Dean, 1995; Divay, 1999 for pioneering work, and more recently Garrett-Peters, 2009; Gabriel *et al.*, 2013; Van Oort, 2015). The unemployed are thus trained to become active job seekers, mastering job search techniques, developing their own networks, reviewing their requirements and expectations. This activation is a conversion process that convinces them both of their own responsibility for the situation they find themselves in (Uchitelle, 2006; Smith, 2010), and that access to employment depends on them (Sharone, 2013; Boland, 2015). The production of a belief in the effectiveness of the active job search standard is a powerful mechanism for both internalising and adhering to it. These studies show, then, that job search becomes 'the work of unemployment' (Griffin, 2015: 123).

Monitoring and sanctioning activities serve to relay these obligations, assessing unemployed people's compliance with the active job search model. However, in the analysis of checks and sanctions, active job search – the backbone of these schemes – remains a black box (Parent, 2014). Analyses assess the impact of checks on return to employment or the quality of jobs found, and show that the consequences of sanctions on job-seeking behaviour are more closely related to 'threat effects' (ex ante) than to the application of sanctions (ex post) – all the more so when these are limited in duration and intensity (Van den Berg *et al.*, 2004; Lalive *et al.*, 2005; Boone and Van Ours, 2006). On the other hand, how job search is assessed in the checks is not described, so that the reference frame – active job search – remains abstract. However, some of this analysis does shed light on the relationship between this reference norm and the behaviour of the unemployed. For example, the realignment effects of job search triggered by checks are weaker for the least-employable unemployed (Cockx and Dejemeppe, 2007) or when job opportunities are few (Cockx *et al.*, 2011): that is, when the likely yield of job search is lower. Checks can have exclusion effects, from unemployment to health insurance, disability status or various forms of inactivity, and this is truer still of sanctions.

The few qualitative analyses that are focused on strong sanctions provide additional knowledge about their consequences. An investigation in the UK on the impact of severe sanctions (suspension of benefit for twenty-six weeks) for refusal to participate in an active labour market instrument shows that those facing significant barriers to returning to work (transport, childcare, employability, learning difficulties, illiteracy, criminal record, drug or alcohol problems) did not intensify their job search (Adler, 2018). For these vulnerable

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unemployed people, sanctions result in feelings of shame and loss of self-confidence, which are detrimental to job search. Another UK study of unemployed people applying for Jobseeker's Allowance highlights the suffering caused by welfare conditionality and sanctioning, including the demoralising effect of the 'futile job-search treadwheel' (Wright *et al.*, 2020). However, these users develop a variety of responses including acceptance, resistance, adaptation and disengagement – thus expressing their autonomy, albeit in a limited way.

While these studies offer information about unemployed people's experiences with checks and sanctions and concrete mechanisms for evaluating behaviour and sanctions, they do so without placing job search at the heart of the tensions between the two. Our contribution focuses specifically on job search, which we consider both a major component of the lived experience of the unemployed and a central dimension of evaluation and checks. In this framework of analysis, rather than implying an absence of job search, the sanction highlights discrepancies between the normative requirements of the control services and the actual practices of the unemployed, which are nourished by their experiences. Belgium is a particularly apt location for such an analysis because job search controls there were tightened, institutional requirements increased and sanctions enhanced in the 2000s.

Checking procedures in the Belgian context

In Belgium, where we carried out our fieldwork, entitlement to unemployment benefit is not limited in duration; however, the control of job search is particularly well-developed. While international comparisons admittedly place this country in an intermediate position with regard to job search requirements and monitoring, the requirement that job search activities be documented in a detailed and verifiable way is high (Immervoll and Knotz, 2018: 34). Above all, Belgium has two particularities. 'Carrot' and 'stick' are dissociated because until 2018 checks were entrusted to a dedicated agency (the National Employment Office – ONEM). Moreover, sanctions applicable in the event of insufficient job search can go as far as definitive abolition of entitlement to benefits, which is particularly burdensome in view of the generally unlimited nature of these rights. Monitoring is based on periodic individual interviews with frontline staff known as 'facilitators'. A reform brought in by the Liberal government in 2014 has systematised the half-yearly evaluation of 'active availability' and 'sufficiency of job search efforts' and tightened the applicable sanctions. Two types of sanctions are now combined: a contractualisation of job search obligations and the suspension or cancellation of benefits.

The work of these (so-called) facilitators is governed by general guidelines, though it is their responsibility to translate into practice what 'actively seeking employment' and 'making sufficient effort' look like (Beuker, 2019). The central evaluation criterion is the number of steps completed; no indicative or minimum gauge is set. These steps must also be both regular and consistent with the unemployed person's personal situation and occupational goals. When facilitators conclude that a job search is insufficient, they must raise requirements in the new contract with the unemployed person. Frequency of checks is also increased, so that the level of pressure on the unemployed person rises. If three successive interviews result in a negative assessment, the unemployed person at fault is automatically excluded from unemployment benefit. Restoration of these rights then entails working for (on average) at least eighteen months within a twenty-four-month

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period. In the Brussels-Capital Region where our fieldwork was carried out, the rate of sanctions applied during the third interview (following two negative assessments) was 22 per cent in 2015 (ONEM, 2016), and the number of sanctions applied tripled between 2012 and 2015 (ibid).

While the work of facilitators is thus framed, the monitoring and sanctions that may result are based on the job search assessment activity. Here, facilitators are in the typical situation of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), which opens up room for the exercise of discretion, as also highlighted in other contexts (Galligan, 1986; Brodkin and Marston, 2013). The job search evaluation is based on the examination of written and concrete evidence of the job search. And the ONEM asks the unemployed to compile job-search files containing proof of their job search. Observation of facilitators' practice (Beuker and Orianne, 2016) shows that they do indeed rely on written documents and are suspicious of unemployed people's narratives, which they may neglect – or even disqualify. Moreover, not all written documents are treated equally. Among the documents in the file, they differentiate between those that are 'solid' and those they consider 'fragile' or 'suspect'. Simple statements made by the claimant indicating that they have contacted a company arouse suspicion – all the more so when this type of document dominates the records. The checks are de facto tightened on examination of the acceptability of the documents provided, which leads to the definition of a perimeter of practices identified as valid and legitimate job-seeking approaches in the eyes of the facilitators. However, certain methods are easier to encode in writing: job offers collected and responses to them, application letters, electronic messages, publication of advertisements, interview invitation documents, etc. This type of job-search method is more easily valued, and therefore enhanced, in the checking systems.

This leads us to hypothesise that exclusion from unemployed status and loss of entitlement to unemployment benefits as a result of a check does not imply an absence of job search; rather, it means that the job search carried out fails to conform to normative expectations and has thus not been recognised as such. On this basis, we argue this perspective empirically, by analysing the job-search characteristics of unemployed people who have been sanctioned as a result of it being established during assessment interviews that they were not seriously looking for work. We show that there are twin strands to their job search; the first of which is certifiable via the rulebook and has been found wanting, and the second of which is not a good fit for the monitoring framework and whose characteristics, foundations and justifications we will seek to capture.

Methodology

In the Brussels-Capital Region, we conducted in-depth interviews with fifty-five people who, though still unemployed, had been stripped of both their official unemployed status and their unemployment benefit. The analysis presented here is based on thirty-one interviews with unemployed people sanctioned for insufficient or failed job search (the remaining twenty-four cases concern other administrative sanctions or rights restrictions). These interviews were conducted in 2016, eight to twelve months after deregistration. The retrospective nature of these interviews raises the problem of reliability of respondent answers and memory failure (Dex, 1989). Because starting with a salient event favours greater reliability of responses (Shattuck and Rendall, 2017), we deliberately placed the deregistration episode at the centre of our approach from the outset. The interview

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therefore began with this event, providing a consistent biographical anchor for developing a narrative of the job search at this period and earlier. The interview structure focused more broadly on biographical backgrounds, the consequences of being sanctioned, and its effects on relationships to work and employment, etc. The purpose of the interviews was to generate narratives combining accounts of events and activities conducted by the unemployed with the meanings and interpretations they attributed to them (Bruner, 1987; Ezzy, 2000).

The thirty-one interviewees had varied profiles, in terms of gender (seventeen men, fourteen women), age (four were aged under thirty, five were aged between thirty and thirty-nine, thirteen were aged between forty and forty-nine, nine were aged fifty or older) and ethnic origin (sixteen were of Belgian origin, seven were newcomers to Europe, eight were from outside Europe). However, what they had in common was being fairly distant from employment, in terms of having characteristics which (in the Belgian context) indicate relatively low employability, in the sense of 'the individual's employability skills and attributes' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). All had been unemployed for more than eighteen months, and eleven had been unemployed for more than three years. Their educational levels were low, with sixteen not having begun high school, eleven not having completed high school, and only four having started higher education. Their professional careers were strongly marked by instability – the duration of their last job was in most cases less than five months, and exceeded ten months only in rare cases. Finally, they had held positions (as labourers, commercial or service employees) requiring few or no qualifications – though three had been supervisors, four had been managers and three had been artists. Given their backgrounds, these formerly-unemployed people had, in all likelihood, faced significant obstacles on the road to employment. Their job search had therefore been particularly difficult, exposing them to a high risk of discouragement. They also appeared potentially vulnerable with regard to job search monitoring procedures.

Our empirical research was difficult to conduct, because this population was no longer registered with a welfare state institution. We were unable to obtain a list of the names of unemployed people who had been excluded from unemployment benefits. So, in a dozen municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region, we contacted more than fourteen organisations (charities, community centres, trade unions, lawyers, shelters, local groups) likely to be in contact with our target population. We asked people working in these organisations to disseminate information about our study to their users, and distribute flyers explaining it. We launched calls for people's accounts of their own experiences in places likely to be frequented by formerly-unemployed people, and through a social media page dedicated to the investigation. To diversify the sample, it was necessary to vary the approaches and intermediaries involved. As soon as an approach yielded good results, we abandoned it, to minimise the risk of sample distortion through over-representation of a single category of users. Interviews were most often conducted at interviewees' homes or in coffee shops, and lasted between ninety minutes and two hours (Demazière and Zune, 2019).

A thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews, with the focus on describing and understanding what job search activities had been conducted in the period leading up to disbarment. We wanted to understand not only what these unemployed people had been doing, but also why they had been doing it, as well as the constraints and resources of their living environments. We therefore paid close attention to the evaluative

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and argumentative dimensions of job search narratives (Ezzy, 2001). In order to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees, we use pseudonyms when quoting from interviews.

Job search as evidence production

Respondents had received three negative assessments, and their job searches had been judged insufficient. Our study shows that they had tried to both meet the requirements and integrate them into their job search. In light of the resulting exclusion, these adaptations are recounted as the result of using tactics (De Certeau, 1990), i.e. practices of hidden resistance to a system that imposes its rules and stratagems, aimed at displaying 'conformity'. This game remains playable for as long as the job search is defined as a collection of tangible evidence.

The main challenge may then become the production of a paper trail – evidence. This results in a range of practices: ticking off obligations in a very short time, to avoid being caught off guard; sending the required number of applications without even examining the offers; drawing up lists of companies to send CVs to in line with the terms of the contract, etc. Job search thus becomes routine, reduced to the collection of evidence, as explained by both Ousmane and Yasmina.

> Once a week I would do my CVs, so I would all have my five or six CVs a month, four unsolicited cover letters for applications, three from the newspaper and one from the Internet and then I was safe.
>
> (Ousmane, aged forty-two, no qualifications.)

> I ended up applying for anything to reach my target numbers (. . .) that's what the ONEM asks for, they don't care about the rest. And I thought it was unfair. I think smart people soon understand that the goal is to meet the ONEM requirements, rather than to get a job.
>
> (Yasmina, aged thirty-four, qualified social worker.)

Following each negative evaluation, ONEM facilitators exert increasing pressure, raise the level of requirements, and set higher objectives in contracts. This demands more intensive investment in a practice (already devoid of meaning) intended only to save face and preserve entitlement to benefit. The gap between two conceptions of job search widens: the one requires collecting evidence yet does not lead to results, while the one that does give meaning to the condition of the unemployed, allowing hope to be maintained, does lead to some casual work – as Louis explains.

> I still don't understand why they ask you to do all this at the ONEM. Unless the point is to break you – otherwise it's pointless. You don't get anywhere by applying online. It's just bullshit. It's not how I used to get jobs. Because my tactic is to not do things that don't work. (. . .) If it's just applying for the sake of applying, I don't see the point.
>
> (Louis, aged forty-four, vocational secondary school.)

Unemployed people disregard this job search on the grounds that it seems to them false, fictitious – carried out for the sole purpose of maintaining rights, without any hope of it helping them escape unemployment. Indeed, the stages involved in formalising an application (in a CV or covering letter) serve to highlight shortcomings that become easily

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perceptible in the course of the selection process: lack of qualifications, age, periods of professional inactivity, or indeed discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. Insistence on use of the written word adversely affects their applications by revealing the weakness of the skills that can be attested to. This argument is expressed in various ways, including by Najet who symbolically challenges the interviewer to recruit her on the basis of her CV, and by Faruk, who believes he has no particular asset to put forward.

> This is bullshit, these resume stories, the classifieds and all that claptrap. Frankly, I don't have a trade, I don't even know what to put on my CV, and I haven't even mentioned my name yet. Look at my CV, would you consider… with all the others who are also after the same jobs? Would you pick me? Definitely not, right?
>
> (Najet, aged fifty-one, did not complete secondary school.)

> I got two replies, out of about 120. I understand that my wife gets to the point of saying, "Okay, but do at least try looking". But I say, "You just don't get it – it's a game, it's all a joke." (…) I carry on applying, but I'm well aware that for every job offer, there are 170 people. And then, there's in nothing in my CV to grab anyone's attention – on the contrary.
>
> (Faruk, aged forty-four, did not complete vocational secondary school.)

Ultimately, the formerly-unemployed interviewees had made efforts to comply with the requirements, but over time their commitment to this diminished. As we have pointed out, their employability is low, and they have accumulated numerous job search failures over long periods of unemployment. Here we find the time-worn effects that the most-vulnerable unemployed are exposed to (Cottle, 2001). Beyond that, experience has taught these people that formal job search methods are not only ineffective, but also leave them at a disadvantage and fragilise their applications. Their significance is thus limited to avoiding deregistration. There are several reasons why these unemployed people have found this goal increasingly difficult to achieve. Belgium's activation reform strongly and brutally changed the basis of checks, with requirements (fulfilled until then) being increased; each negative control raised the pressure through the signature of a contract; the reinforced obligations became more unbearable the more ineffective they proved, and the radical sanction of deregistration was unimaginable in a traditionally-protective system. In other words, the sudden and significant change in the rules of the game has made the least-employable unemployed more vulnerable still. This is why they find it increasingly difficult to maintain a 'prescribed' job search based on collection of written evidence and therefore on formal channels that tend, in their experience, to devalue their applications. Yet at the same time, they do engage in a different kind of job search that has contrasting characteristics.

An alternative (albeit illegitimate) job search

All respondents stated that they had taken alternative steps to the collection of written evidence. They had therefore been engaged in an alternative job search to the model underlying the checks, but which made sense to them and fit their own perspectives well. Being based on direct solicitation to potential employers – often small companies located in close and familiar localities, or part of inter-knowledge chains, these approaches are different, less formal. They are also iterative, based on maintaining a presence within these

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narrow networks – as if it were a matter of waiting your turn, or being there at the right moment.

> That's how it works. I've been a road sweeper, a gardener, a refuse collector too, a tiler. Everything really. (. . .) And you do have to search. Ah, they need you – perfect. But if they don't have work, it's 'Thank you, goodbye.' That's it, that's it, it's important to be aware.
>
> (Adrian, aged twenty-nine, no qualifications.)

> I've had to make my name in the small restaurants around here. I've managed that, but I still come by to see what there is to do, and stay in the loop.
>
> (Esther, aged thirty-nine, completed secondary school.)

The outcome of this type of job search is often informal, too. Far from leading to an employment contract, it demands an acceptance of working trial shifts (sometimes declared, sometimes not), responding to as-and-when needs, and fluctuating activity levels. It is more about improving your situation marginally or temporarily than moving directly from unemployment to employment, as both Emmanuelle and Jacques say:

> Well, when I go to apply for a job, it's to work, not to search. Do a little something, anything. Show you're ready. And then, easy does it. You have to work hard, arrive on time, don't count your hours, you have to smash it. (. . .) Then the boss calls you or sends you somewhere else too.
>
> (Emmanuelle, aged twenty-eight, NVQ Level 1.)

> I'm not picky, as long as I have a small salary to improve my everyday life. I hope to get something more solid, of course. But what matters is showing that I'm available, that I can be trusted.
>
> (Jacques, aged forty-five, NVQ Level 1.)

Working provides an opportunity to show what you can do. And this can open up other opportunities, because it is through the exercise of work that uncoded qualities (far removed from what is recorded on CVs) are able to emerge: reliability, speed, availability, trust, network dependency, docility, etc. These qualities, and their value at work, refer to fragile, subordinate positions in the world of work: jobs that are often temporary (with occasional or atypical working hours), sometimes undeclared, and low paid. This search for informal employment can therefore develop on unskilled and deteriorated labour markets.

Moreover, because it leaves few tangible, written traces, it is very difficult to provide evidence of this type of job search, which comprises oral exchanges, direct contacts, verbal promises and handshakes. Further, such a job search can hardly be accountable, because it is as likely to lead to informal (and in certain cases, clearly illegal) jobs, as it is to 'official' jobs. Respondents thus concealed this aspect of their activities and commitments during interviews at the ONEM, out of fear that they would be punished. And if Aubin (unlike Jean-Claude) did throw caution to the wind, it was because he knew he was going to be excluded.

> I always managed the checks. You have to know how to keep quiet, there are some things that won't be okay. That's the rule – say as little as possible because there's no reason to be naïve.
>
> (Jean-Claude, aged fifty-two, completed high school.)

> When I show up for a job in the kitchen, people ask me: "What can you do?" That's all. They're not going to ask for papers, documents, and so on. It's almost impossible to get a contract in the

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> restaurant sector. (. . .) I told them clearly [at ONEM], it's undeclared work, they need to understand how things are.
>
> (Aubin, aged forty-four, NVQ Level 1.)

These formerly-unemployed interviewees were not inactive. Despite having been deprived of unemployed status, they were still engaged in job search – albeit one that transgressed the norms underlying the checks. This alternative job search is far from the institutional requirements and cannot be either recognised or explained, for several reasons. First, it is based on oral and informal approaches that leave no paper trail and are difficult to provide evidence of, but which the unemployed people themselves consider better suited to their poor employability. Second, it directs them towards odd jobs and even undeclared activities that unemployed people – in view of the difficulties they encounter – do consider as work. The 'twin-stranded' job search therefore expresses a contradiction between institutional norms and lived experience, between the requirements formalised in the request for evidence and practical activities that remain both invisible and illegitimate.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that what the disbarment suffered by the unemployed people interviewed served to sanction was failure to search for a job in line with institutional expectations, rather than a lack of job search. Indeed, these unemployed persons deemed ineligible for benefit as a result of insufficient job search were not at all bothered by talking about their job search activities. They produced consistent narratives reminiscent of the results of surveys of those officially recognised as unemployed: they combined various methods (Bachmann and Baumgarten, 2013); they formulated questions and doubts (Sharone, 2013), and expressed reasoning and arguments (Demazière, 2021). However, because the harshest of sanctions (permanent disbarment and the loss of their unemployment benefits) has been imposed upon them, the study of these formerly-unemployed people provides new insights into both job search and checks and sanctions.

This study underlines the importance of considering the institutional categorisation of job search within an activation context. Because it is inseparable from evaluations, judgements and checks that record (or fail to record), validate (or fail to validate), and recognise (or fail to recognise) these behaviours and experiences, job search must not be reduced to a set of behaviours that can be described by statistical surveys, or to individual experiences that can be observed by qualitative fieldwork. This analytical framework has enabled us to highlight the fact that a formalised job search is more easily translated into a paper trail, facilitating accountability. It has also enabled us to identify an alternative component of job search, both downgraded and illegitimate, used as a fallback by unemployed people who feel disadvantaged by formal procedures and prescribed job search.

This alternative job search is based on informal rather than formal channels (Rees, 1966; Holzer, 1988; Huffman and Torres, 2001). Often both types of channel are combined, although relational networks are considered more effective (Granovetter, 1973; Holzer, 1987). Yet the decisive feature of alternative job search is that, rather than adding to the prescribed job search, it becomes a refuge for unemployed people unable to meet institutional requirements. Such an alternative job search is hampered in

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several respects: the scope of job search narrows because direct contacts are few and far-between, and targets deteriorate because informal work and activities gradually take over from formal employment. As a sign of a drift away from employment and a weakening of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), alternative job search is problematic in relation to institutional job search standards and monitoring procedures, especially if not balanced by prescribed job search in accordance with the checks requirements. Relationships with potential employers are verbal, made up of promises and eventualities yet to come, and can hardly be attested to in writing. The work secured is agreed orally, and rarely transcribed into contracts. This kind of job search cannot withstand exposure to the monitoring institutions. The job search that really counts for these unemployed people is thus stripped of probative value, becoming both invisible and illegitimate.

Our results also reveal that exclusion from unemployment benefits is much more than a sanction for a failure to seek employment: it invalidates the experiences of those unemployed people who occupy lower positions in the labour market, and lower ranks in the unemployment queue. In this sense, it is similar to 'carelessness', observed among other unemployed people in difficulty (Bowman *et al.*, 2016). However, the twin-stranded nature of the unemployed respondents' job searches appears to be an adjustment to difficulties they have encountered – a product of their job search experiences (McDonald, 2010). They prefer methods that allow them to highlight their informal and uncodified qualities and (until they are sanctioned) limit their involvement in approaches that tend to highlight their weakness in terms of the usual employability signals. In so doing, they moderate their career aspirations, falling back on narrow segments of the labour market where employment opportunities amount to a combination of precarious contracts, informal work, trial periods and vague promises. Ironically, these sanctioned unemployed people follow an approach described in the economic literature as rational – that of lowering their occupational expectations (Devine and Kieffer, 1991; Manroop and Richardson, 2016).

The study also shows that the aim of checks and sanctions is not to activate unemployed people who would have little investment in job search (whether as a result of discouragement or calculation); the unemployed people deprived of unemployed status for insufficient job search that we met were not inactive. Their job search was persistent (Wanberg *et al.*, 2005), and they were not in search of a substitute status (social assistance, disabled status, etc.). These were unemployed people facing significant difficulties in accessing employment who had adapted their job search behaviours accordingly, and were critical of the 'absurd' treatment they had received from the ONEM. In this respect, the literature has shown the relatively weak effect of sanctions on the return to work within the framework of activation policies (Cockx *et al.*, 2012; Busk, 2016). Moreover, our investigation underlines the fact that such sanctions accelerate downward movement towards the most precarious and informal segments of the labour market – in which these people are trapped. This movement only becomes more pronounced as the formerly-unemployed invest in an alternative and un-monitorable job search (Van den Berg and Van der Klaauw, 2006), thus swelling the ranks of an invisible working population.

Conclusion

At a time when monitoring of the unemployed and their job search is rising on both political and institutional agendas, it is worth recalling, in the light of our research, that this notion of job search is not at all straightforward. There are many ways of conducting a job

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search, as shown by both statistical surveys and qualitative fieldworks, some of which are very old (Bakke, 1940). Monitoring job search entails defining (even implicitly) what job search is, what falls within its scope and what does not. However, our fieldwork in Belgium shows that evaluation via paper trail – produced by unemployed people and examined by facilitators – leads to invalidation of alternative job searches and sanctioning those unemployed people who have fallen back on it. Therefore, any monitoring operation (and more broadly any measurement of job search for knowledge purposes) should be attentive to both the limits of current categorisation and the actual practices of the unemployed. From this point of view, it seems necessary to revise the control referential, making job search evaluation via paper trail more flexible, and to modulate checking practices by category of unemployed person, so as to avoid penalising those who sit on the most peripheral and downgraded fringes of the labour market.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Brussels Employment Observatory. The fieldwork was carried out by a team comprising the two authors and Elise Ugeux. We appreciate the constructive comments from the anonymous reviewers.

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