

New insights into callback likelihood for unemployed job applicants

Peter C. Fisk

You applied for a job but got no response. How come?

A recent study may help to answer that question. Henry S. Farber, Dan Silverman, and Till von Wachter conducted the research and reported their findings in “[Factors Determining Callbacks to Job Applications by the Unemployed: An Audit Study](#)” (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 21689, October 2015).

Their approach was to submit fictitious job applications in response to real posted openings, concentrating on three variable characteristics as possible factors in whether applicants received a callback: age, duration of unemployment, and whether the applicant had taken a lower-quality interim job. (Implicitly, the study’s definition of *unemployed* seems to differ from that used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which would classify interim job holders as employed.) The three variables under study were randomized among applicants. All applications were for administrative support jobs, and all applicants were women with substantial relevant work experience and 4 years of college education. The report includes examples of the résumés as an appendix.

Several key findings emerged. First, there was no relationship between unemployment duration and the callback rate. This contrasts with previous findings associating longer unemployment spells with lower callback rates and reduced likelihood of job finding. The authors thus surmise that the previously identified correlations don’t necessarily apply to all subgroups of the labor force. They also raise the possibility that the previously observed correlations might not be entirely attributable to a causal effect on employer behavior, but perhaps to other factors such as changes in the jobseeker’s search behavior as the period of unemployment lengthens.

Second, workers age 50 and over were significantly less likely to receive a callback than workers in their 30s and 40s, reinforcing previous observations of age discrimination in the U.S. labor market. Presumably, employers readily deduce an applicant’s approximate age from the dates of employment history and college graduation.

Third, applicants who had taken a low-level interim job were significantly less likely to receive a callback. This finding could have important implications for people weighing the potential costs and benefits of taking such a job to help make ends meet, or in deciding whether to mention an interim job on a résumé. The authors note that this negative effect of interim jobs on callback rates may be related to automated screening of résumés.

Observable characteristics, such as age or whether the applicant has an interim job, have less effect among employers who call back a higher percentage of applicants. The authors interpret this as an indication that when employers are more strongly motivated to hire, they are less selective with regard to the variables under study, and

that aggregate demand stimulus may therefore be an effective policy remedy to help boost hiring interest in job applicants who aren't currently receiving callbacks.

The researchers acknowledge that because they restricted their focus to work-experienced, college-educated women seeking administrative support jobs, the findings might be demonstrative of only this demographic subgroup, and not necessarily the labor force as a whole.