

I. Introduction

On any given day, 40,000 people in our region are unemployed or underemployed. At the same time, thousands of job openings are posted online each month.

If every open job in the region were filled, the unemployment rate would fall to 2 percent. If 40,000 people went to work at an average wage, more than \$2 billion in annual earnings would be added to the economy, significantly impacting families, communities, and the overall economic health of the region.

Connecting people with opportunity isn't a simple one-to-one fix. The conversation often focuses on the skills gap, the assumption that if only job seekers had the right training, the right skills, people would path into jobs and employers would easily find the human capital needed to grow. However, other barriers are at play.

Job seekers report difficulty with perception and the process of finding work. Navigating the job-seeking process, understanding online recruitment systems for application, and realizing that systems, not people, are assessing qualifications based on algorithms has disheartened those looking for work. For them, it's not a skills gap preventing them from re-employment, it's a humanization gap. The process of finding a job and perception of the market are barriers to employment.

In this report, Partner4Work expands on its 40,000 voices campaign, the opportunity to share stories from real-life job seekers trying to connect to opportunity in the region. They echo common obstacles and challenges, and these are the people we commit to help.

II. Job Seekers

The majority of active job seekers we serve are either coming off long-term employment tenures or are re-entering the workforce after extended absences. Both groups feel disadvantaged in the current job market and find it challenging to navigate the job search process because they have not kept pace with the changes brought upon by new technologies and shifting talent acquisition practices.

"It's just that we have been in a job so long, and have been comfortable, and things have changed so drastically, that is not the same as when we were young looking for a job."

"My resume is only three years old. And I have to revamp the whole thing again. There's no way anybody's going to look at me using my old resume."

Some of the people looking for opportunities after losing a long-term employment are concerned with being perceived as having outdated skills or lacking in-demand credentials. Others who experienced longer periods of unemployment also believe their efforts to keep sharpening their skills through volunteer work or similar activities carry little weight with potential employers.

"I have been in the field 20 plus years, various operations, project management roles, but I don't have a formal Project Management Certification. In the ads it seems that's all that everybody wants right now."

“Definitely the number of years I have been away it's hurting me at this point. I mean, they probably think I have lost my skills. I have done a lot of volunteering and have done a lot of leadership as part of volunteering in the time that I was away. But I am not sure that has any value.”

II. Job Search

Making Sense of How to Search for Jobs

The internet has transformed the way we find and apply for jobs. There are many leads, sources of information and resources available online; however, effectively sorting through the information is a daunting task. Most job seekers describe the overall process as time-consuming and cumbersome, a source of frustration that in many cases can cause someone to give up.

“I think the Internet changed everything. It used to be a long time ago you could go pound the pavement. You could sell yourself right on the spot, personally. Not send a resume in, and they don't know you from Adam.”

“If you don't know how or where to look, and how to apply for certain jobs, you are just going to get left out.”

“I think we all are finding the online job search very frustrating on several levels but to the point where you just want to shut down.”

Job seekers also tend to feel online applications have voided the process of personal interactions. Without it, many find it extremely difficult to market their skills and successfully stand out from the pool of candidates.

“And it's real difficult, as far as putting out your skills, or different things out there. Because everything is on the computer and just from looking at it you don't know if you are getting a response or anything like that. So you almost feel like you have to put on a show. You know, just to get attention, which is ridiculous.”

On the other hand, many job seekers experience that despite the impersonal nature of online job ads and employment applications, getting hired ultimately depends on who you know. They understand that networking is an important aspect of job search but many struggle to do it and do it well due to their unfamiliarity with the concept as well as social media tools such as LinkedIn. Some job seekers also express frustration after witnessing their professional network greatly reduced by unemployment as well.

“You go developing these skill sets, that's important and you really got to look at yourself, but it's hard on the market, to network, going on LinkedIn...I just started doing that, I was never on social media.”

“A lot of the time you spend time developing networks in your field of expertise, but when your entire network is laid off, you really are grasping at thin air. In my last position, it wasn't unique. I saw a lot of my peers, upward, vertically, as well as below...all partners were wiped out.”

Navigating Job Portals

Those unfamiliar with online job portals often struggle to perform job searches that return postings for positions closely aligned with their salary, skill or location preferences. The inability to do this puts many job seekers in situations where they invest a significant amount of time preparing online applications for jobs not well suited for them.

"I go to Monster.com, and you might see there is a lot of jobs out there, and you put your search inquiries in there and it takes you to another place somewhere away. I mean there is just a lot of information, if you don't really know what you are looking for or how to look for it you can go in a whole different direction and you just get tired of looking because you don't know how to narrow your search."

"You apply now and then it sends you to another listing of jobs that either don't pay or I'm not interested or qualified for. And that's through JobCase, Monster, I mean, they're all guilty of it. And I have my resume online with all of those. I've gotten called for a few interviews, but where they wanted to start me was at a wage for somebody fresh out of high school. And it's like I can't live on that. I have a mortgage, car payment and all that kind of stuff."

An unintended consequence for most job seekers accessing job portals is spamming. They report receiving constant emails and phone calls offering opportunities for training or "quick-cash jobs". Job seekers find this extremely frustrating and worrisome, because they feel their personal information is somehow shared with third-party recruiters. These spamming practices are disruptive, rerouting them from a job search to unwanted websites and, in the process, deleting the unsaved drafts of their online application.

"A lot of these search engines are just ridiculous. They're incredibly frustrating. You apply for a certain position and the next thing you know, you get 600 posts for being an Uber driver. Or I get phone calls about furthering my education. Did I ask to further my education? No. My call block list is a mile long at this point in time because I get every wacka-doodle on the planet calling me about something that has nothing to do with the job."

Resume Writing

Employers have not only changed the way they advertise job opportunities, they also shifted their preferences regarding the structure of resumes. They want to know what an individual has accomplished, instead of a list of job responsibilities. Most job seekers, unaware of this change in philosophy, continue to rely on chronological and descriptive rather than functional and more achievement-oriented resumes.

"I am learning to understand why I'm not getting hits. I'm chronologically listing things, instead of focusing on my actual functional skills and so, I'm 49 years of age, I look like kind of like a relic."

"In addition, to the shock of being laid off or going through that and the finances and then affecting your personal life. Now you got to worry about, do I have a functional or chronological resume? And then if it's not, then what are my chances of getting called."

A significant part of the resume challenge is the fact that the most job applications are initially screened by computer software, not people. Many job seekers are deeply surprised to learn that without proper keywords, their resumes are less likely to reach the hiring manager.

“You know, so it's just—it's disheartening to know that I'm sitting here, putting applications and doing this online and doing that online, and everything—and you know, it's something that seven out of the ten I put in, they're not getting it.”

“I'm filling resumes out not knowing that there's a certain way that they're really looking for. That a computer reads it.”

“I'm finding out now the way my resume's built, the keywords and what I should have been putting in there, I haven't. I don't have my resume in the right format and there's a lot of different things that people are calling for resumes to look like. So I'm learning why I haven't been getting any call backs recently.”

III. Employer Market

Perception of Labor Market

Most job seekers report that there is not a scarcity of jobs, but an abundance of low salary, no benefit jobs. Those coming off long-term employment tenures describe this as a challenge when their goal is to secure employment at salary/benefit levels that will allow them to continue to meet their financial obligations prior to unemployment.

“Unfortunately, it seems like the only jobs that people can get quickly are low paying, no benefit-paying jobs. I'm 40 years old. I can't run around like I used to when I was 16 years old. I don't want to live paycheck to paycheck. When you get into a cycle of living on a low level financially, it does something to you and to people around you.”

“I want to be where I was before I got laid off. Am thinking that is not reality. That's what I am afraid of right now.”

The presence of large regional employers poses another challenge for job seekers. They feel it allows these employers to dictate salary ranges. And through blacklisting hiring practices, many feel pushed out of many of the employment opportunities.

“Once you get let go, once you leave UPMC, I think they black ball you after that. So once I tried to apply there, because they are the main hospitals here, I don't even think they even looked at it.”

“UPMC is one of the biggest employers in the city because they have in the health care industry. They don't pay anything. I mean...they don't pay...I worked for Western Psych, I was getting paid \$14.01 an hour.”

Additionally, many job seekers perceive the local labor market as highly competitive due to the presence of many universities and colleges in the Pittsburgh region. They believe this has flooded the market with a large pool of younger, talented candidates with a college degree and lower salary expectations.

“Most companies are looking for, you know, younger people. You got what, I don't know, six universities here in Pittsburgh? And when they are trying to keep these students here when they graduate, so they are offering them most of the jobs.”

“A lot of the younger kids are just getting that right off the bat and I just never done it. I've done multiple classes in project management stuff, got a Master's certificate from Pitt. But it doesn't carry that same weight as the PMP certification.”

“This town is a college town, I mean, it is all these universities here and the people here a lot of them in the big jobs have their degrees. And without a degree, it's hard – it's harder to get a job.”

Misalignment of Opportunities

Many job seekers perceive a mismatch between available job openings and their degrees and skill sets. Those with more advanced education and more robust work experience feel especially overlooked by hiring managers.

“Sometimes people don't want to hire me because I am over qualified. Because I have a higher degree, but sometimes that counts against me when I'm applying for an Admin position. And then when am trying to get into the higher level position, I'm competing against the younger people graduating with a higher degree.”

Some job seekers experience this misalignment in the apparent ubiquitous need for a bachelor's degree. They feel that employers have come to unreasonably expect a college degree from applicants even for positions that should not need it.

“Education is a big thing now, some administrative assistants, executive assistants have their bachelor's. And there is a lot of companies that expect that and if you don't have that then you are already down a couple of notches.”

“I have been so stuck in my job before, and now that I am trying to get into a management position, I don't have a degree. I mean, I have an Associate's degree, but I don't have a Bachelor's.”

For those individuals attempting to switch to a new career, acquiring a new skills is not always enough. They encounter most employers require a significant amount of on-the-job experience which puts them at a disadvantage.

“Trying to transition over now to the HVAC field, and there is different requirements that comes with that and I don't have any experience, but I went to school for it.”

“How do you fight the battle of picking up skills that you can only learn in a work environment and there isn't any entry level position? And the most entry level positions seem to be for like college graduates.”

Many job seekers also experience misalignment of opportunities due to physical limitations or personal constraints. For some, age or past injuries limit their physical ability to perform certain types of jobs. While for others, long commutes and transportation challenges are restricting their job market.

"I've had two offers of interview, and the two that I've had I would basically have to commit to be away from home and travel as far as Canada for up to two weeks at a time. And that won't fit my schedule, I am raising a 15-year-old. So I didn't even take the interview."

"If I go back in, they're going to make me a line cook somewhere and you know, have me on my feet for 13 hours a day."

"I could probably get a job at Giant Eagle standing, and you know, cashier, but I can't stand that long. I'm not going to make it; walk or stand for eight hours."

Employers Attitudes and Preferences

Personality and behavioral assessments have become commonplace for many hiring managers. This type of hiring practice is discouraging to many job seekers who experience these assessments as anxiety-producing challenges, especially those who feel they have "failed" them in the past and believe it cost them the job opportunity. They do not understand what the assessments measure and do not understand how to successfully "pass."

"I took that test another time and some kid was next to me. He was answering and he was gone, and I'm still sitting there and I'm still thinking, I didn't have a chance, you know. Because, he was through, I'm taking two hours, he took an hour."

"One obstacle that I have been running into is the psychological testing. Where they ask you two hundred questions, and some of them are all about the same thing. When you have to be tested, I don't think it gives you a clear sense of how companies can really evaluate who you are and what kind of worker you would be as far as being a diligent, honest worker in any job by testing. We are just going to move into this age of technology where everything is just so technical that we forget about the personal side of things, you know."

In regards to hiring preferences, job seekers tend to think employers default to younger individuals with similar degrees. Thus, job seekers believe employers are willing to compromise on experience, rather than salary. This reinforces the perception of many job seekers that loyalty of employers towards their employees is fading. Many express feeling the only concern of employers is to protect their bottom line, citing their cost-cutting practices and hiring attitudes.

"With the level of experience and education that I've had, I would think that I would be very attractive to a lot of companies that are around here. But my experience is that many companies instead chose to recruit from certain college campuses and they want a certain type of person to fit the mold, and mold that person into their culture."

"I think that based on your experience level and background, you have an expectation of salary up to some point. But if they can bring someone in that is more salvageable, moldable, or trainable, to fill that same role, even if it means a ramp up time of a year or so, you'll go for that other person."

"The system ain't fair. It just ain't fair. We're all just temporary you know, tools you know, that they use until they come up with a program or some software that – that eliminates you from the equation."

“And so, it’s inevitable for most people, you know, with large companies, you know, after a while, they want more money, so what do you do, you trim the fat, you know.”