To apply or not? Factors important to job seekers

March 2018
The Pittsburgh metro area labor market features a variety of opportunities, with more than 178,000 unique job postings in 2017 across more than 20 occupational clusters. Nonetheless, the average time to fill jobs in the region is 41 days. For many job seekers, however, the decision to apply for a job involves more than the occupation itself; it include factors such as access to the job, length of commute and work hours, too.

Only about one-third of jobs in the Pittsburgh metro area are accessible within 90 minutes by public transportation. These jobs, especially if not offering competitive wages, tend to experience lukewarm interest of local job seekers or a high turnover. However, often the thousands of job openings that go unfilled are attributed to skills gaps, or perceptions of job seekers’ motivation or work ethic.

To better understand how access to a job, length of commute and work hours influence choices, Partner4Work talked to more than 110 local job seekers during the fall of 2017. Slightly more than half of these job seekers had recently lost their jobs, about 10% had recently quit their jobs, about 22% had been unemployed for six months or more, and the rest were working, but actively seeking better opportunities. Almost two-thirds were between the ages of 25 and 54 (65%), followed by job seekers ages 55 or older (29%), while those 24 years old or younger made up 5% of respondents. All the job seekers had at least completed high school, 43% had an associate’s degree or some post-secondary education, and 29% had a bachelor’s degree or higher.

**Job access: The importance of public transportation**

Six out of 10 local, currently active job seekers said it is important that a job be accessible by public transportation. For some this preference is about the cost of parking, especially in areas such as Downtown or Oakland. As one job seeker said, “I’ve worked downtown for over 20 years and it's very expensive to park down there, so public transportation is a lot cheaper and less hassle [than] sitting in traffic.”

For others, public transportation is their only option, as one job seeker explained:

“My car didn’t pass inspection. It’s going to be more than what I could afford to fix. So, for the time being, until I’m able to get a steady income, so that I can make a payment or down payment on a vehicle, I have to rely on public transportation to be able to go in and from work.”

For some job seekers, it is a matter of personal preference, especially during winter. “So, with the hills and everything – I had just moved here and that first winter driving my truck was insane,” related one job seeker.

There are others who do not rely entirely on public transit, but value it as a backup. As one participant noted:

“I say it’s important, because even though you’ve got a vehicle, things happen, and you still need some type of transportation – you can’t just call off.”

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Demographics play a role in job seekers’ views on the importance of public transportation. Two-thirds of prime-age job seekers (ages 25-54) reported that it is important for a job to be accessible by public transportation, compared to 50% of job seekers ages 55 and older.

Job seekers with an associate’s degree or some post-secondary education care the most about a job’s accessibility via public transit, with 69% describing it as such. For those with a bachelor’s degree or higher, this proportion goes down to 60%, and a slight majority (53%) of job seekers with only a high school diploma or GED consider this to be an important factor.

Employment situations also differentiate job seekers’ views on public transportation. Nine of 10 job seekers who recently quit their jobs consider the accessibility of a job via public transit to be important. This stands in high contrast with the views of job seekers who lost their jobs. Only 56% of the recently laid-off and 45% of the long-term unemployed view access to public transportation as important when applying for jobs.

These contrasting views stem from different experiences of the two groups of job seekers. Many job seekers who recently quit their jobs did so because of difficulties accessing their jobs, as one person described:

“Bus fare wise, when I was working at the prior branch it was 15 minutes from home, versus the other branch they sent me to [where] I had to take two buses. One bus into Downtown, which was a half hour or 45 minutes, and then the bus to upper Fifth Avenue which would take me another 10 or 15 minutes. So, it was over an hour and it didn’t give me any kind of a pay raise or discount on transportation or anything like that. So, I was basically making less than what I was actually before.”

On the other hand, the unemployed job seekers tend to focus on getting a job, leaving worries about transportation for later. “I would just be most grateful to have a job,” explained one job seeker. “I’ll do whatever it takes. I could drive, [use] public transportation, walk. Whatever it is.” Another participant said:

“Right now, I’m unemployed, so whatever I can get right now, I would take. You can still work and search for other jobs or change your job once you found one, but being unemployed is a big problem, so you have to find employment and then you can be picky after that.”

A strong preference for shorter commutes
Nine out of 10 local job seekers Partner4Work surveyed responded that length of commute is a factor when deciding whether to apply for a job. Six out of 10 women and five out of 10 men said the time spent on commuting to work is a very important factor in their decision. Most job seekers said longer commutes negatively affect their work-life balance, their ability to take care of family responsibilities, such as daycare and school pick-ups, and their stress levels. As one job seeker said, “Time is of the essence, and it is not on our side when you’ve got to get home and make dinner, and pick up your children and [help with] homework.” Another job seeker related similar concerns:
“I have some family obligations that I attend to in the evenings, where I have to visit mom in the nursing home. And commuting back and forth to work would kind of have an impact on that because I would have to be there at a specific time in the evening and if I’m working [until] 5 o’clock, I would never get there before 6 p.m.”

The perspectives on acceptable commute times differs. Only a small share of job seekers search for jobs within a 20-minute commute (3%). Two-thirds look for jobs within 25-45 minutes of their homes; 35% of job seekers prioritize jobs within a 25-35-minute commute; and 52% said they would accept a 45-60-minute commute. No more than 10% would consider jobs with commutes greater than 60 minutes.

Men and older workers tend to tolerate a longer commute as do job seekers with associate’s degrees or other post-secondary training. About 31% of male job seekers, 34% of job seekers ages 55 or older, and 36% of job seekers with more than high school education (but less than a four-year degree) would consider a 60-minute or longer commute. On the other hand, only 15% of job seekers with bachelor’s and graduate degrees would consider the same commute.

Job seekers who recently quit their jobs place the greatest importance on commute time, with 77% selecting the short to mid-range commutes. In contrast, job seekers experiencing long-term unemployment care the least for commute time, with 39% willing to commute 60 minutes or more.

Nevertheless, even some of those who prefer shorter commutes are open to longer commutes for the right price. “As long as the compensation is there to justify the commute, then I can live with it,” said one job seeker, while another who was willing to commute for an hour explained:

“...that’s not anywhere close to what my ideal commute would be, but it would be something I felt like, if I had a job that gave me a decent wage that I felt comfortable living on, and allowed me to afford transportation – then I would be willing to make that sacrifice of time.”

**Job seekers want predictable schedules**

Close to nine out of 10 job seekers who participated in the focus groups said regular work hours are important when determining the jobs to which they will apply. For most this preference stems from past experiences with shift work. For some, the physical toll of shift work is driving them to search for a job with regular hours, as one job seeker said:

“Sometimes we don’t understand what it does to our bodies – because our bodies are designed to sleep during the night. Sure, we may take a job in the evening until something comes up a little better or if someone is going to school. But, it tears our body down from the inside out when you work during the night and sleep during the day.”

Others value the predictability of a schedule more than the time of day in which they work their shift. As one job seeker explained:

“I worked four years as a computer operator where we rotate shifts. It messes with your sleep, messes with your body. You just can’t handle any more. It’s more important to have a steady shift so you get sleep.”
But for most job seekers the primary benefit of regular work hours is that it makes it is easier to manage home-life responsibilities. As one job seeker related:

“While my daughter is in school, my son is in daycare during the day, while I’m at work. Then, at the end of the day, I can spend time with them. I have multiple job offers, but I’m not taking the 5 o’clock until 1 o’clock in the morning [shift]. I have to be there for my kids.”

Among job seekers of different educational levels, those with bachelor’s or graduate degrees value regular work hours the most, with 73% considering it “very important” and only 9% “not important at all.” Job seekers who have been unemployed for at least six months do not seem to place a high level of importance on whether a job has regular work hours in its schedule, with only 47% saying it is “very important” to them and 21% saying it is “not important at all.” By contrast, 73% of those who recently lost their jobs responded that regular work hours are “very important” to them while only 10% said otherwise.

What’s an employer to do?
Access to the job, length of the commute, and work hours play a significant role in job seekers’ decisions whether to apply for a job. Many hiring employers describe difficulty finding enough interested candidates to fill their job openings. Typically, this is perceived as a skills gap, which in turn often suggests there should be more investments in skills training and workforce development.

However, Partner4Work’s research indicates that local job seekers are evaluating employment opportunities on a basis broader than just skills fit. Two-thirds of job seekers look for jobs that are accessible by public transportation; those who are willing to drive to work look for a shorter commute. Nine out of 10 job seekers prefer stable work hours to irregular hours associated with shift work.

As the talent supply in the labor market continues to tighten, employers hiring for jobs outside of the reach of public transportation or requiring irregular work hours may experience even more difficulties recruiting and retaining workers. These employers will need to find strong incentives to attract job applicants or adjust their hiring criteria – such as considering the long-term unemployed, who are more flexible regarding commute times and work schedules – to widen the available talent pool.