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Job Search Among Informal Contacts

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I.   Introduction

Understanding the role of informal contacts in job search can be important given that roughly half of workers find employment through such sources. Some previous research finds that informal contacts improve labor market outcomes. Other work shows that individuals who found their jobs through friends and relatives had lower wages and less job satisfaction than those who used other methods. In light of the varying effects, the purpose of this paper is to uncover why individuals differ in the types of contacts used to find the jobs that they hold.

II.   Literature Review

A.   Friends and family compared to other search methods

A given job search method will be the source of an individual's current job if using the method generates an offer greater than the reservation wage. The optimal use of any given search method, in turn, occurs where the marginal costs equals the marginal benefits. Marginal costs equal the value of the time and money foregone. Marginal benefits are measured by the expected gains in employment and earnings.

Accordingly, one reason cited for extensive job search through family and friends are the relatively high returns. Holzer (1988) reported about 80 percent of offers found through these informal sources were accepted compared to 65 percent of offers found through direct application and 40 percent of offers found through newspapers.   Blau and Robins (1990) showed that, relative to other methods, job search using friends and relatives resulted in the highest number of offers per contact and the highest number of acceptances per contact for both employed and unemployed individuals.

Low costs are another reason for using informal contacts to find jobs. Frequent, casual contact with family and friends for reasons unrelated to providing labor market information could account for negligible costs (Granovetter, 1995) and would imply that jobseekers may rely on friends and family even when expected returns are also small. Consistent with this premise, Holzer (1988) showed that higher probabilities of receiving an offer from using friends and family had no significant effect on how frequently jobseekers used this source. In contrast, workers were more likely to search through newspapers or directly apply to employers the higher were the chances of receiving an offer. Similarly, Osberg (1993) argued that low costs account for the frequent use of friends and family during recessions despite reduced probabilities of finding jobs through such sources.

B.   Differences among Friends and Family

Differences in marginal costs and benefits, not only explain why job seekers use friends and relatives compared to other job search methods, but also why they use different types of informal contacts. Workers may rely on some types of contacts because they lead to jobs with higher wages and other large marginal benefits. On the other hand, job seekers may use friends and relatives that mainly generate low wage offers if marginal costs of using alternative sources are sufficiently high.

Payoffs from informal sources may vary because friends and relatives differ in their access to high wage offer distributions or the likelihood of passing along information about good jobs to others. Montgomery (1991) argues that networks vary in the number of social ties between jobholders (density) and in the correlation of productive traits between acquaintances (inbreeding bias). The greater is the network

density and the degree of inbreeding bias the greater is the competition among firms for referred workers and the higher are their resulting wages relative to others. Jobseekers, therefore, gain more from friends and relatives in such networks (see also Simon and Warner, 1992 and Saloner, 1985).

Calvo-Armengol and Jackson (2004) contend that the higher are the wages contacts receive the more information they are willing to give to others. Employed workers will pass along information only if they cannot use the information to improve their own wages. Similarly, Topa (2001) showed that employed social contacts were more likely to provide information to jobseekers than unemployed social contacts. Unemployed social contacts more often use the information to find their own jobs.

Reviews of literature on informal contacts and labor market outcomes (Ioannides and Loury, 2004, and Marsden and Gorman, 2001) indicate that informal contacts are likely to generate higher wages than other sources if friends and relatives are employed, earn more, are located in more extensive networks, and/or more strongly reduce the employer's uncertainty about the job seeker's productivity.

Conventional findings of demographic differences in wages, job tenure, and unemployment rates suggest that older men more often fit these characteristics than women or younger men. Accordingly, Mencken and Winfield (2000), Smith (2000), and Beggs and Hurlbert (1997) reported that women who used female contacts found employment in lower-paying occupations. In addition, Loury (2006) showed that young men who found their jobs through older male relatives who knew the boss or served as a reference earned substantially more than those who directly applied to the employer or used formal methods.

Jobseekers do not, however, rely solely on the types of informal sources that produce lucrative job offers. For example, Addison and Portugal (2002) reported that, on average, workers earned less if they got their jobs through recommendations by friends and family (see also Antoninis, forthcoming and Pellizzari, 2004). Elliott (1999) found that, while jobs found through non-white contacts paid less, about 30 percent of jobholders in some urban neighborhoods used this source. Loury (2006) showed that 10 percent of young men found their jobs through female relatives and friends even though they earned lower wages than those in jobs found through other means.

The previous discussion indicated that workers may rely on informal sources that generate low job offers when the costs of searching for high-wage offers are sufficiently large. These costs may be sizeable because many high-wage jobs may be filled largely through informal sources (Pellizzari, 2004) and some workers may have few, if any, family members, friends, or other acquaintances with information about such jobs. Costs may also be large if high quality contacts are unwilling to recommend their low productivity friends and family members because they fear potential damage to their own reputations (Rees, 1966). Furthermore, after job seekers have remained unemployed for long periods of time, they may reevaluate the likelihood of success of and the returns from informal and formal strategies thought to generate higher wage offers. The corresponding decline in reservation wages could lead workers to accept jobs generated through methods that provide access mainly to less attractive jobs rather than incur continued costs of unemployment. Osberg (1993) used similar reasoning to explain why workers take jobs found through public employment agencies even though they generally list jobs that pay well below average wages (see also Thomas, 1997).

III.   Description of Data

This paper estimates the effects of selected variables on the search method used to find the respondent's 1982 job and interprets the results based on differences in costs and benefits of different types of informal search. The data used in this paper comes from young men in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY).   The NLSY is nationally representative panel of 12,686 individuals ages 14-21 in 1979 who were interviewed annually to determine information about schooling, work, and other experiences. The sample consists of civilian workers who were out of school in 1982[1].

The NLSY reports whether individuals found their 1982 job from direct employer contact, newspaper want ads, public employment agencies, informal contacts, and other sources[2]. Details about informal contacts are based on responses to the questions (1) Was there anyone specifically who helped you get a job with your most recent employer, (2) Was this person male or female, (3) Was this person a relative, and (4) If yes, what

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[1] The NLSY has 6403 male observations. A total of 3508 observations were not included in the analysis. Most exclusions resulted directly from the age of sample members in 1982 (1317 individuals were still in school).   Some (824) were part of the military sample. Others were missing key dependent or explanatory variables (278 had invalid data for years of schooling in 1982, 1089 did not work in 1982 or had invalid data for 1982 wages or 1982 job tenure). The remaining number of observations (2895) is similar to that in other studies on using 1982 data NLYS for men (Korenman and Turner, 1996; Holzer, 1987; Loury, 2006).

[2] Other possible sources were private employment agencies, labor unions, civil service tests, teachers, and school placement offices.

was the person's relationship to you. These responses were used to distinguish between older male relatives (fathers, stepfathers, uncles, and fathers-in-law), female friends and relatives (mothers, stepmothers, aunts, mothers-in-law, sisters, and cousins), and younger male friends and relatives (brothers and cousins).

Table 1 presents means on selected variables used in this analysis[3]. It indicates that informal contact with family and friends was the most frequent source of the 1982 jobs held by NLSY men at 56 percent of the sample. Brothers (including in-laws), male cousins, and male friends accounted for much of this fraction (34 percent).   Prior generation male relatives (fathers, stepfathers, uncles, and fathers-in-law) made up about 10 percent each.   All female relatives and friends also composed 10 of the 56 percent of the sample.   After family and friends, direct employer contact was the next most common source of jobs (18 percent) followed by newspaper ads (5 percent).

Table 2 shows multinomial logit results for four of the seven job search method used to find the 1982 job[4]. The multinomial logit model has the form:

(1) $P_J = \exp(\beta_J'X)/ \Sigma_J \exp(\beta_J'X)$ for J=1, ...K

The X measure individual productivity characteristics, local labor market conditions, and background characteristics. The K are the seven job search methods examined in this

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[3] Differences between ethnic groups in the job search method used to find the 1982 jo are, in general, relatively small. However, African-Americans were less likely to have applied directly with the employer and both Hispanics and African-Americans were less likely to have used older male relatives.

[4] The full results are available from the author.

paper - β_J is set equal to zero for older male relatives so that the coefficients for the other six categories represent change relative to using older male relatives.

As indicated earlier, marginal returns from using older male contacts to find jobs are typically higher than from other informal sources. These workers would be most likely to have the characteristics identified earlier (employment, higher wages, location in extensive social networks, and larger reductions in employer uncertainty about the job seeker's productivity) that generate more high wage offers.

Table 2 shows, however, that jobseekers do not share the same probability of taking advantage of the benefits of older male relatives. Young men whose fathers who were professional and craftsmen workers were significantly more likely to have used older male relatives to find their 1982 jobs (compared to finding them through female or young male relatives and friends, newspaper ads, or direct employer inquiries). Frequent, casual contact could have reduced costs of access to high wage-offer informal sources for young men with well-placed fathers.

Father's occupation imperfectly measures access to good jobs. While father's earnings would be a valuable additional proxy, this variable is not available in the NLSY. The effects of father's earnings may be indirectly estimated using mother's employment since previous work shows that husband's earnings and wife's labor supply are negatively correlated (Blundell and MaCurdy, 1999). Consistent with this premise, Table 2 shows that the coefficients of mother's higher full and part-time employment are positive and significant for almost all of the analyses. Job seekers were less likely to rely on older male relatives (compared to newspaper ads, direct employer contact, young male

friends and relatives, and female friends and relatives) when their mothers were employed and correspondingly when their father's earnings were more likely to be low.

Related results in Table 2 indicate that older and married men are especially likely to find jobs through older male relatives rather than using female friends and relatives. Grant and Hamermesh (1981) show that teenage men and women are closer substitutes in the labor market than older men and women. Female friends and relatives would then be especially poor sources of good jobs offers for older men compared to younger men.

The net gains from relying on older male relatives to find jobs may not always remain high. Longer periods of job search may reduce the marginal value of non-market time and the reservation wage. Jobseekers would then search more intensively among and accept offers from informal sources that provide access largely to less attractive jobs. Table 2 shows that longer durations of unemployment increased the likelihood that jobseekers found their 1982 job through younger male and female relatives and friends compared to older male relatives. These findings suggest that female and younger male relatives and friends may serve as "last resort" alternatives[5]. This result echoes the higher use of public employment agencies after longer periods of unemployment (Thomas, 1997; Osberg, 1993; and Clark, 1988).

Since the coefficients of the multinomial logit are difficult to interpret directly, Table 3 lists the corresponding estimated probabilities of using different types of informal contacts. It then calculates the differences in probabilities of using older male relatives compared to female relatives and friends and compared to young male relatives and

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[5] The relative probabilities of using newspaper ads or inquiries directly to the employer do not similarly increase with longer periods of unemployment.

friends. For the sample as a whole, 11.1 percent of young men used older male relatives and 9.3 percent used female relatives and friends to find their jobs. The overall percentage point difference is then 1.8. The size of this gap varies across workers with different characteristics. For example, the probability that young men with professional or managerial fathers used older male relatives was 8.2 percentage points higher than the probability for young men whose fathers were in the left-out category (row 5 column 1). In contrast, young men with professional or managerial fathers were only 0.3 percentage points less likely to use female relatives and friends than young men whose fathers were in the left-out category (row 5 column 6). This implies that having a professional or managerial father increased the probability of using older male relatives compared to female relatives and friends by 8.5 (8.2-(-0.3)) percentage points (row 5 column 4).

Looking at other probabilities for those using older male relatives to those using female relatives and friends shows that the largest effects were for young men who were married (8.5), whose mothers worked full-time (6.1), or whose fathers were craftsmen (5.6). The largest gaps between using older male relatives and using young male relatives and friends occurred for those with professional or managerial fathers (12.2), those whose mothers worked full (8.2) or part-time (7.2), and those who were unemployed for more than 13 weeks before finding a job (5.2).

C.   Spurious Correlation and Unobserved Worker Heterogeneity

The results in Table 2 indicate that jobseekers do not use the same types of contacts used to find jobs. The paper explains this variation through differences in costs and benefits of access to different types of informal contacts among similar jobseekers. An alternative explanation is unobserved heterogeneity. Suppose, for example, that

jobseekers without well-placed fathers average lower levels of unobserved productivity characteristics. The correlation between unemployment duration and using younger male and female relatives and friends would then result from their limited attractiveness for employers[6] and not from limited access to high wage-offer search methods.

Two pieces of evidence indicate that spurious correlation is not likely to account for the results. First, existing work shows that years of schooling and AFQT scores account for much of the observed variation in worker wages and productivity (Altonji and Pierret, 2001; Blackburn, 2004). However, neither has a significant effect on the likelihood that jobseekers used younger male and female relatives and friends compared to older male relatives (see Table 2). This indicates that any unobservables that are correlated with schooling and AFQT scores do not affect choices among informal job contacts. Second, if fixed unobserved individual productivity factors (i.e. not measured by years of schooling and AFQT scores) alter job search choices, the spurious correlation between job search choices and observed productivity measures would persist over time. However, most studies that compare the wage effects of contacts over time find that any initial positive effects become insignificant as workers age (see Corcoran, Datcher, and Duncan, 1980; Simon and Warner, 1992; and Loury, 2006).

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[6] Workers using public employment agencies disproportionately consist of those with chronic problems finding employment (Holzer, 1987) and those looking for employment in lower skilled occupations (Clark, 1988).

IV.   Summary

In previous work, the rationale for distinguishing between different sources of job information is, in part, the variation in net gains to jobseekers. For example, employment agencies are not treated as one category because of widely different benefits and costs associated with public compared to private agencies. This paper argues that similar distinctions should be made among informal contacts. Jobseekers do not uniformly find jobs through informal contacts, such as older male relatives, that are likely to generate the highest wage offers.   They appear to rely on more lucrative wage-offers sources when costs of access to these sources are relatively low. Correspondingly, they turn to lower wage-offers sources when access to informal and other sources that generate high wage-offers is limited.

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Table 1. Variable Means and Standard Deviations of Selected Variables (in parentheses)

Contact Variables

Directly with employer	0.1805 (0.3847)
Newspaper ads	0.0505 (0.2189)
Public employment agency	0.0140 (0.1175)
Other (private employment agency, civil service test, teachers, labor union, school placement officer)	0.2064 (0.4048)
Had help to find job with present employer from friends and family, total	0.5616 (0.4963)
Father (including in-law and step), grandfather, or uncle	0.1106 (0.3137)
Female relatives and friends: mother (including in-law and step), grandmother, aunt, sisters, female cousins, or female friends	0.0931 (0.2907)
Brothers, male cousins, or male friends	0.3448 (0.4754)
Other relatives	0.0133 (0.1145)
N	2895

Table 2: Multinomial Logit Results (Omitted Category: Older Male Relatives)

	Newspaper ads	Direct contact with Employer	Young male friends and relatives	Female friends and relatives
Years of schooling	0.0535 (0.0846)	-0.0689 (0.0604)	0.0045 (0.0549)	0.0989 (0.0761)
AFQT score	0.0007 (0.0065)	0.0072 (0.0044)	0.0031 (0.0039)	0.0045 (0.0050)
Father: professional or managerial worker	-1.3227 (0.4515)	-0.9594 (0.3103)	-0.8788 (0.2800)	-0.7930 (0.3539)
Father: clerical or sales worker	-0.3839 (0.5492)	-0.6056 (0.4362)	-0.2931 (0.3935)	-0.1010 (0.4626)
Father: craftsman	-0.6682 (0.3017)	-0.4849 (0.2334)	-0.3656 (0.2111)	-0.6069 (0.2669)
Mother: full-time/ full-year worker	0.6163 (0.3091)	0.3773 (0.2316)	0.4964 (0.2040)	0.5899 (0.2546)
Mother: part-time worker	0.5003 (0.3128)	0.6243 (0.2310)	0.4507 (0.2093)	0.1453 (0.2758)
Father's years of schooling	-0.0380 (0.0566)	0.0284 (0.0367)	0.0445 (0.0306)	-0.0067 (0.0384)
Mother's years of schooling	0.0269 (0.0574)	-0.0196 (0.0435)	-0.0492 (0.0391)	-0.0156 (0.0496)
Weeks looked for work before finding 1982 job	0.0136 (0.0143)	0.0019 (0.0127)	0.0230 (0.0105)	0.0242 (0.0121)

Table 2: Multinomial Logit Results (Omitted Category: Older Male Relatives)

	Newspaper ads	Direct contact with Employer	Young male friends and relatives	Female friends and relatives
African-American	0.1893 (0.3348)	0.2636 (0.2605)	0.3035 (0.2311)	0.3044 (0.2927)
Hispanic	-0.0127 (0.4139)	0.3944 (0.2858)	0.4511 (0.2686)	0.4824 (0.3225)
County rate of unemployment	0.0251 (0.0386)	0.0125 (0.0274)	0.0408 (0.0232)	0.0138 (0.0290)
Married	-0.2885 (0.2962)	-0.4692 (0.2223)	-0.2212 (0.2019)	-0.9770 (0.3048)
Age	0.0046 (0.0668)	0.0660 (0.0505)	-0.0047 (0.0438)	-0.1278 (0.0586)

$\chi^2 = 377.21$
$N = 2895$

Table 3. Estimated Job Search Method Probabilities

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
		Used Older Male Relatives	Used Female Relatives And Friends	Used Younger Male Relatives and Friends	Column (1) - Column (2)	Column (1) - Column (3)
	Father's Occupational Group					
1	Professional	0.159	0.095	0.305		
2	Clerical	0.098	0.114	0.368		
3	Craftsmen	0.118	0.083	0.332		
4	Other	0.077	0.098	0.345		
5	Professional-Other (row 1 - row 4)	0.082	-0.003	-0.040	0.085	0.122
6	Clerical-Other (row 2 - row 4)	0.021	0.016	0.023	0.005	-0.002
7	Craftsmen-Other (row 3 - row 4)	0.041	-0.015	-0.013	0.056	0.054
	Mother's Employment Status					
8	Full year, full-time	0.094	0.113	0.364		
9	Part-time	0.097	0.074	0.357		
10	Other	0.133	0.091	0.321		
11	Full year, full time-Other (row 8 - row 10)	-0.039	0.022	0.043	-0.061	-0.082
12	Part time-Other (row 9 - row 10)	-0.036	-0.017	0.036	-0.019	-0.072
	Marital Status					
13	Married	0.138	0.054	0.373		
14	Not married	0.102	0.103	0.336		
15	Married-Not married (row 13-row 14)	0.036	-0.049	0.037	0.085	-0.001
	Job Search Status					
16	Looked 13 Weeks	0.076	0.103	0.364		
17	Looked 0 Weeks	0.092	0.091	0.328		
18	Looked 13 weeks-Looked 0 weeks (row 16 - row 17)	-0.016	0.012	0.036	-0.028	-0.052

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