

## STUDIES AND RESEARCHES

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# **Openness to experience and job search behavior: a study on the mediating effect of job search self- efficacy**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aimed at advancing the findings on the role that personality plays on the job search behavior by testing the indirect effect of openness to experience on job search intensity and job search effort with the mediation of job search self-efficacy. One hundred and three unemployed individuals provided data for the present cross-sectional study. The results do not support the partially mediated relationships, but contrary to the hypotheses, revealed full mediations. The findings point out that openness to experience plays an important role in the job search process especially by assuring the needed adaptability to the irregular and constantly changing job search environment. In addition, job search self-efficacy serves understanding the motivational process involved in linking openness to experience to job search behavior.

### **Keywords**

openness to experience, job search self-efficacy, job search behavior, employment

### **Rezumat**

Studiul actual și-a propus extinderea rezultatelor în ceea ce privește rolul personalității asupra comportamentelor de căutare a unui loc de muncă prin testarea efectului indirect al deschiderii spre experiență asupra intensității și efortului de căutare a unui loc de muncă, cu autoeficacitatea în căutarea unui loc de muncă în calitate de mediator. O sută trei persoane fără loc de muncă au furnizat date pentru actualul studiu transversal. Rezultatele obținute nu oferă suport relațiilor parțial mediate, însă contrar ipotezelor, evidențiază relații mediate complet. Descoperirile sugerează faptul că deschiderea spre experiență are un efect important în procesul de căutare a unui loc de muncă, mai ales prin asigurarea capacității de adaptare la contextul instabil și schimbător de căutare a unui loc de muncă. În plus, autoeficacitatea în căutarea unui loc de muncă servește înțelegerii procesului motivațional care face legătura dintre deschiderea spre experiență și comportamentul de căutare a unui loc de muncă.

### **Cuvinte cheie**

deschidere spre experiență, autoeficacitate în căutarea unui loc de muncă, comportament de căutare a unui loc de muncă, angajare.

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## Résumé

Cette étude cible l'approfondissement des découvertes pour le rôle que la personnalité joue sur le comportement de recherche d'emploi. Elle teste l'effet indirect de l'ouverture à l'expérience sur l'intensité de la recherche d'un job et l'effort, par la médiation de l'auto efficacité dans la recherche d'un job. Cent trois personnes sans emploi ont fourni les données pour cette analyse transversale. Les résultats n'appuient les relations de médiation partielle, mais, contrairement aux hypothèses, elles ont relevé des médiations complètes. Les résultats montrent que l'ouverture à l'expérience joue un rôle important dans le processus de recherche d'un job, surtout par assurer l'adaptabilité nécessaire à l'irrégulier et constamment changeable environnement de la recherche d'embauche. En plus, l'auto efficacité dans la recherche d'un job peut aider à la compréhension du processus motivationnel impliqué dans le lien entre l'ouverture à l'expérience et le comportement de recherche d'emploi.

## Mots-clés

ouverture à l'expérience, l'auto efficacité dans la recherche d'un job, comportement de recherche d'emploi, emploi.

A phenomenon with deep economic repercussions, unemployment poses a threat including to the mental health of the individuals (Paul & Moser, 2009). The negative consequences are more concerning since the unemployment rate has reached alarmingly unprecedented levels (Eurostat, 2014). The issue has been increasingly tackled over the last decades, especially in terms of identifying and attempting to understand the individual and contextual factors underpinning successful employment (Wanberg, 2012). Even so, the first attempts to systematically investigate and integrate the antecedent variables of job search and reemployment are relatively recent (e.g., Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Saks, 2005). In this context, Kanfer and colleagues' (2001) meta-analysis revealed that personality represents an important class of job search antecedents. More precisely, extraversion and conscientiousness are the strongest job search behaviors' correlates (i.e., medium-sized true score correlations) being followed by openness to experience, agreeableness and neuroticism, in the exact order (Kanfer et al., 2001). While the linking mechanisms (e.g., job search self-efficacy) between conscientiousness (Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, & Shalhoop, 2006), or extraversion and neuroticism (Zimmerman, Boswell, Shipp, Dunford, & Boudreau, 2012), and job search effort have been previously studied, the remaining dimensions benefited of less attention and with rather inconclusive results (Tay, Ang & Van Dyne, 2006).

Since the job search process, especially high quality one (Van Hooft, Wanberg, & van Hooft, 2013), is based on complex

activities that are most often conducted in unforeseeable environments, achieving performance in such rapidly changing contexts is facilitated through high adaptability and flexibility (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). From this perspective, job seekers that are dispositionally adaptable and driven by curiosity could perceive the job search activities as challenging, and thus could also perceive themselves as being efficacious in performing them. Hence, in the present study we will test the role that openness to experience plays as a job search precursor and try to partially explain its effect through the mediating role of job search self-efficacy.

## Openness to experience and self-efficacy beliefs

As Burns and Christiansen (2011) stated, "there is likely to be a relationship between personality traits and domain-specific expectancies when the activities within the efficacy domain demand competency on core behaviors captured in the construct domain of the personality trait" (p. 430). Job search self-efficacy is a domain specific beliefs-set referring to a person's confidence in his / her own ability to carry out tasks and activities characteristic to the job-search process (Bandura, 1997; Kanfer & Hulin, 1985). Judge and Ilies's (2002) meta-analysis revealed that the relationship between openness to experience and performance motivation is weaker and less consistent as compared to other Five Factor dimensions (i.e., extraversion, neuroticism, and conscientiousness); however, in relation to self-efficacy beliefs, it displays a positive

association ( $\rho = .20$ ). Taking into account that the nowadays job search process requires high adaptability and receptiveness to the rapidly changing job market and that openness is a central factor for personal adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004), we aspect that the association between openness and job search self-efficacy to be stronger as compared to other, more stable, performance domains. Convergent to this view, openness to experience displays positive and stronger links, compared to the other Five Factor dimensions, with other irregular and high in novelty areas of efficacy, such as computer self-efficacy (Saleem, Beadry, & Croteau, 2011) or negotiation efficacy beliefs (Burns & Christiansen, 2011). Therefore, we first hypothesize that:

*H1: Openness to experience is positively related to job search self-efficacy.*

### **Job search self-efficacy as a determinant of job search behavior**

Job-search behavior is a fundamental antecedent of the employment success (Kanfer et al., 2001; Moynihan, Roehling, LePine, & Boswell, 2003; Saks, 2005). Kanfer and colleagues' (2001) meta-analysis supports this view for both job search effort (the overall dedication for seeking a job) and behavioral intensity (the specific activities' frequency). Therefore, the current job search models posit individual difference variables as job search behavior precursors which in turn influence the success of the employment process (i.e., Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, 2005). Except for a small number of recent studies, based on repeated measures designs (Sun, Song, & Lim, 2013; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010), the prevalent view places job search self-efficacy as one of the key predictors of job search behavior (i.e. Saks, 2005). Therefore, we expect that:

*H2: Job search self-efficacy is positively related to job search intensity.*

*H3: Job search self-efficacy is positively related to subjective job search effort.*

### **Job search self-efficacy as mediator between openness to experience and job search behavior**

Even though with a modest magnitude, Kanfer and colleagues' (2001) meta-analytic findings revealed a positive association between openness to experience and job search behavior ( $r_c = .27$ ). Thus, we also expect that:

*H4: Openness to experience is positively related to job search intensity.*

*H5: Openness to experience is positively related to job search effort.*

The process of understanding the relationships between personality and performance brought into attention the need to identify their linking mechanisms (Burns & Christiansen, 2011; Judge & Ilies, 2002). One of the underlying factors explored in this context is perceived self-efficacy (Locke, 2001). There is already consistent research that tested the mediating role of efficacy beliefs between distal traits and task performance (e.g., Burns & Christiansen, 2011). Based on this perspective, proactive personality is proved to act an indirect effect on job search behaviors and outcomes through job search self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2006), extraversion and conscientiousness are linked to interview success through interviewing self-efficacy (Tay et al., 2006), and job search self-efficacy is mediating the relationships of extraversion and neuroticism with job search behavior, in the case of employed job seekers (Zimmerman et al., 2012).

Not only that job-seeking involves little routine but it also requires high adaptability to the rapidly evolving job search means, such as the case of social media (Eslamian, 2012). In this context, we assert that imaginative and curious persons, as are those high in openness to experience, can exert an increased adaptability to the job search environment, translated in a less restrained search effort. Moreover, an opened to experience seeker would perceive the uncertainty of the job search process as

challenging and, thus, stimulating his perceived capacity to face it (i.e., job search self-efficacy). Since the relation between openness to experience and self-efficacy is less intense than for other personality factors (Judge & Ilieş, 2002) and the relationships between openness and job-seeking behaviors could also be mediated by other performance drivers such as personal adaptability (Fugate et al., 2004) or, more specific, career adaptability (Savickas & Profeli, 2012), we propose a partially mediated model. Hence, we consider that:

*H6: Job search self-efficacy partially mediates the relation between openness to experience and job search intensity.*

*H7: Job search self-efficacy partially mediates the relation between openness to experience and job search effort.*

## The present study

The aforementioned hypotheses (*H1-H7*) are integrated in the theoretical model depicted in Figure 1. Even though the presumed direct effects (*H1-H5*) benefited of some support from previous findings, to our knowledge, the proposed mediated paths (*H6-H7*) were not explored. Moreover, in order to test whether openness plays an incremental role in understanding the job search process and its effect is not ruled-out by other personality dispositions, we considered important to control for the remaining Five-Factor dimensions' effect. Thus, based on structural equation modeling framework with the partial correlation matrix (controlling for extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and agreeableness) as input data, in the present study we test the hypothesized partially mediated model. Besides the presumed model, we also tested an equivalent path model (Kline, 2011) specifying fully mediated relationships for both job search behavior indicators.

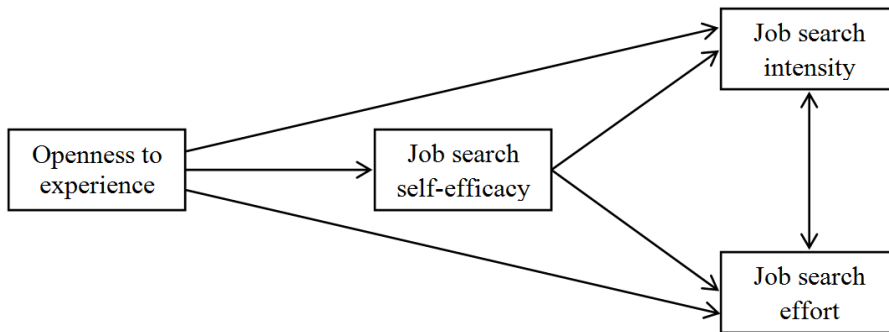


Figure 1. *Hypothesized Model*

## Method

### Participants and procedure

Undergraduate students in Psychology from a Romanian University received partial course credits for inviting unemployed individuals to take part in the study. A total of 121 persons agreed to participate and were contacted by a research assistant in order to check for eligibility; all participants had to be unemployed, not enrolled in a study program and actively searching for a job in the past six

months. One hundred and eleven individuals completed a questionnaire that included a set of scales among which there were those relevant for the present study. Of these, eight (7%) were removed because of providing random and / or outlier responses.

The final sample included 103 unemployed individuals with a median work experience of 14 months (Min = 0, Max = 398). Their age ranged between 20 and 55 years ( $M = 30.54$ ,  $SD = 10.59$ ), and 63% were females. Slightly more than half had

vocational studies or graduated high school (57%), while 43% had higher education.

## Measures

Personality was measured with the IPIP-50 questionnaire (Goldberg, 1992; Romanian version by Rusu, Maricuțoiu, Macinga, Virgă, & Sava, 2012). Participants had to report their agreement with each descriptive statement on a 5-point scale (1 - *Very inaccurate*; 5 - *Very accurate*). On the present sample the scales had acceptable reliabilities (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : *Openness to experience* / *Intellect - Imagination* = .76; *Extraversion* = .65; *Agreeableness* = .79; *Conscientiousness* = .65; *Emotional Stability* = .79), similar with the coefficients obtained in the adaptation study for the local population.

*Job search self-efficacy* was measured with the single-factor instrument by Saks and Ashforth (1999). The scale consists in 10 items describing job-seeking activities (e.g., "Prepare resumes that will get you job interviews."). Participants had to evaluate their confidence in performing each activity on a 10-point scale (1 - *Not at all confident*; 10 - *Totally confident*). The scale was highly reliable ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

The *job search behavior intensity* was measured with a tailored version of Blau's (1993, 1994) inventory. It consisted in a list of 10 examples of job-seeking behaviors (e.g., "Sent out resumes to potential employers."). One item from the author's version was removed because it was inadequate for unemployed individuals ("Used current within company resources to generate potential leads.") and another one representing a current practice was introduced ("Used online professional social media networks in order to search for job openings."). Participants' task was to recall the frequency with which they performed each activity, on a 5-point scale (1 - *0 times*; 2 - *1 or 2 times*; 3 - *3 to 5 times*; 4 - *6 to 9 times*; 5 - *at least 10 times*). Reliability was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Subjective job search effort* was measured with two items from Blau's (1993, 1994) inventory (i.e., "Focused my time and energy on job search activities." and "Gave best

effort to find a job."). Participants reported their agreement with each assertion on a 5-point scale (1 - *Strongly disagree*, to 5 - *Strongly agree*). The Spearman-Brown estimate, which is considered a more appropriate statistic for two-item measures (Eisinga, Te Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2012), revealed optimal reliability (.85).

## Data analysis

In order to test the hypothesized model we applied a two-step approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First we tested the fit of the measurement model, but also for common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) since the entire measurement procedure was based on self-report. In order to reduce the sample size to parameter ratio we computed item parcels (Little, Cunningham, & Shahar, 2002) for both psychological constructs and also for job search intensity, while, for job search effort we kept the two items as separate indicators. After ensuring that the measurement model optimally fitted the data, we tested the hypothesized path model based on manifest variables and with the partial correlation matrix as input for the analysis.

For testing model fit, we used maximum-likelihood estimation and the following indices: the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990), the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR; Bentler, 1990), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), and the normed fit index (NFI; Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Good model-data fit is indicated when:  $RMSEA \leq .06$ ;  $SRMR \leq .08$ ;  $GFI, CFI$  and  $NFI \geq .95$ . Moreover, for testing the hypothesized indirect effects we applied the Sobel Test (1982).

## Results

As can be seen in Table 1, all the variables of interest are interrelated. Especially, taking into account that the remaining Five Factor dimensions are controlled, openness to experience (OE) possesses significant associations with job-search self-efficacy (JSSE), and also with job search behavior

intensity (JSI) and subjective effort (JSE). These findings are in line with our assumptions that OE represents a relevant factor for the job search process.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and partial correlations among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. OE	3.51	0.58	-					
2. JSSE	7.18	1.42	.26**	-				
3. JSI	3.06	0.76	.21*	.34**	-			
4. JSE	3.31	1.04	.20*	.20*	.71**	-		
5. Gender (1 = male; 2 = female)	-	-	-.13	.17	.03	-.08	-	
6. Work experience (months)	69.93	103.28	-.17	-.09	.06	.14	-.09	-

Note. *N* = 103. OE = openness to experience; JSSE = job search self-efficacy; JSI = job search intensity; JSE = job search effort; higher scores are indicating higher levels for each of the measured constructs. Controlled variables: extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and agreeableness.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

Table 2. Fit statistics for the measurement model

Measurement model	$\chi^2$	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta$ df	CFI	GFI	NFI	SRMR	RMSEA [90% CI]
Four-factor	53.28	38			0.97	0.92	0.92	0.04	0.06 [0.00, 0.10]
One-factor	332.04**	44	278.76**	6	0.52	0.61	0.49	0.18	0.25 [0.23, 0.28]

Note. *N* = 103. CFI = comparative fit index; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; NFI = normed fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation.

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

The fit estimates for the hypothesized measurement model (four correlated factor solution: OE, JSSE, JSI and JSE) as also for a one-factor model (common method bias) are reported in Table 2. The four factor model fitted the data best, being also significantly superior to the one factor solution ( $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 278.76, p < .001$ ). Moreover, the standardized factor loadings ranged between .616 (corresponding to one of the indicators for openness to experience) and .912 (for a JSSE indicator).

The hypothesized partially mediated model failed to receive support since the direct paths between OE and both JSI and JSE are not statistically significant. Thus, we continued by testing the alternative fully mediated model. As can be seen in Table 3, except for RMSEA confidence interval's

upper limit value (0.21), all indexes indicate good model-data fit. The model together with the standardized path coefficients is depicted in Figure 2.

As can be seen from Figure 2 and Table 4, OE relates significantly with JSSE (*H1*), JSI (*H4*) and JSE (*H5*). JSSE is significantly associated with both JSI (*H2*) and JSE (*H3*). In sum, *H1*, *H2*, *H3*, *H4* and *H5* received full support. The direct effect of openness on JSI and JSE were not statistically supported; hence, the partially mediation hypotheses of JSSE between these variables (*H6*, *H7*) fail to be sustained. Moreover, as specified in the alternative model, the path between OE and JSI is significantly fully mediated by JSSE, while the full mediation to JSE receives partial support ( $p = .10$ ).

Table 3. Fit statistic for the full mediation model

$\chi^2$	df	p	CFI	GFI	NFI	SRMR	RMSEA [90% CI]
2.80	2	.246	0.99	0.99	0.97	0.06	0.06 [0.00, 0.21]

Note. N = 103. CFI = comparative fit index; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; NFI = normed fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation. The partial correlations matrix with extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and agreeableness as controls was used as input for the path analysis.

Table 4. Standardized total, direct effects and indirect effects

Predictor	Total effects		Direct effects		Indirect effects	
	JSI	JSE	JSI	JSE	JSI	JSE
OE	.21*	.20*	.13	.16	.09*	0.05†
JSSE	.34**	.20*	.30**	.17†		

Note. OE = openness to experience; JSSE = job search self-efficacy; JSI = job search intensity; JSE = job search effort. The indirect effects' significance test is based on Sobel Test statistics. †p = .10, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

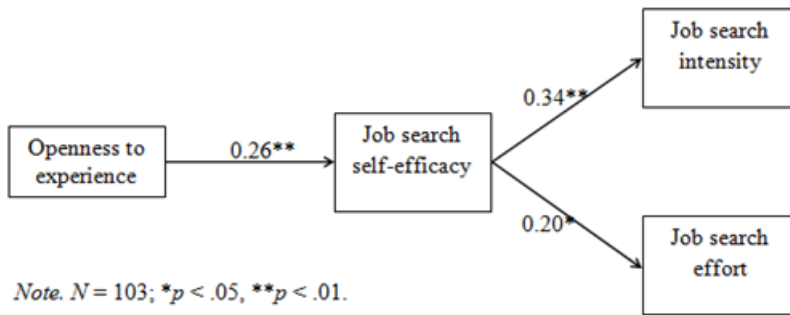


Figure 2. Standardized path coefficients for the tested model

**Discussion**

Previous research neglected the role of openness to experience in the context of the job search process and focused more on other personality traits such as conscientiousness (e.g., Brown et al., 2006), or extraversion and neuroticism (e.g., Zimmerman et al., 2012). One of the reasons for this approach could be based on the findings that the aforementioned traits are the strongest Five Factor correlates of the job search behavior (Kanfer et al., 2001) and also have the strongest associations with performance motivation (Judge & Ilies, 2002). Moreover, as Judge & Ilies (2002) stated, the literature linking openness to experience to performance motivation is majorly sparse, and only recent records are dedicated to this subject (e.g., Burns & Christiansen, 2011). Hence, the purpose of the present study was to partially fill this gap by testing the role that openness

to experience plays in the job search process. First, we aimed to offer support for the positive association between openness to experience and job search behavior and, furthermore, to shade some light on the nature of this relationship by testing the mediating role of job search self-efficacy (JSSE).

The results confirmed that openness to experience can be a significant distal precursor to job search behavior (Kanfer et al., 2001), and extended the previous findings by demonstrating that JSSE mediates these relationships. Contrary to our hypothesis, the path between openness and both types of job search behaviors were fully mediated by JSSE. Thus, even if we hypothesized that the inconsistent findings from the literature could be due to a wider set of mechanisms through which openness influences performance, in our study JSSE manifested an exhaustive

role. Moreover, the revealed effects provide an incremental explanation in understanding job search behavior's precursors since were obtained while controlling for the other Five-Factor dimensions' effects. Hence, these findings suggest that a high in openness job seeker is more prone to explore new environments and use all genres of means suitable for the search process, thus, enhancing his mastery over the job search process which will in turn enable his job search behavior.

Our findings also offer practical implications. Tailoring job search interventions based on job seekers' personality could boost their overall effect on employability. Presenting new and exciting job-seeking activities could work best for individuals scoring high on openness, while for those scoring low on this trait could be more appropriate to propose predictable and structured practices.

From limitations' point of view, first of all, our research relied on a cross-sectional design. Thus, limiting our conclusions to, at most, suggesting possible causal links. However, the results converge with previous findings that revealed the role of self-efficacy as a coherent motivation mechanism in linking dispositional tendencies to performance (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Tay et al., 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2012). Furthermore, the reduced sample represents another concern that constrained us to use item parcels in order to reduce the sample size to parameter ratio for the statistical analyses. Also, the sample size could be a cause for the partially significant indirect effect between openness to experience and job search effort (Type II error threat; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The major limitation that needs to be acknowledged is that our presumed theoretical model failed to be supported while the alternative model benefited of full support. More precisely, both hypothesized partially mediated paths proved to be fully mediated based on our data. In this context, since previous findings and theoretical developments on this matter are sparse and, thus, making our approach more exploratory in nature, a proper settle would be provided by replicating the study and testing the model on an alternative

sample (Kline, 2010). Finally, future research should focus on the integration of all five personality dimensions and extend the study of possible mediators to other relevant proximal variables.

## Conclusion

Our paper tested the understudied role of openness to experience as job search antecedent and advanced previous findings on linking personality to the job search behavior. The data revealed a fully mediated relationship by job search self-efficacy between openness to experience and both job search intensity and job search effort. These findings suggest that since the job search process is most often conducted in rapidly changing environments, highly adaptable individuals can more easily enable the motivational resources needed for an actively sustained job search.

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