

## Why frequent job hopping can harm your employment prospects

### BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

Employers want to hire job candidates with a positive work attitude—those who are cooperative, loyal, and reliable—yet until a worker joins an organization, hiring managers are unable to observe this behavior directly. Instead, research suggests, hiring managers use employment history to gauge a job candidate's work attitude, including the ability to work well with others.

Alain Cohn, a postdoctoral researcher at Chicago Booth, along with Michel André Maréchal, Frédéric Schneider, and Roberto A. Weber of the University of Zurich, finds that, all else being equal, frequent job changes can indicate poorer work attitude in a prospective hire. (The researchers find that both perceived and actual work attitudes matter in this context.) That is, someone who changes jobs frequently may be the type of person for whom interpersonal and workplace conflicts arise more often. Consequently, employers will be less likely to hire those candidates for positions in which a good work attitude is important.

Although there is literature on screening and signaling in labor markets, it usually focuses on how cognitive abilities, which may herald a certain aptitude to learn and perform on the job, are reflected in education level. More recent studies, however, indicate the importance of noncognitive social and behavioral skills including reliability, trustworthiness, self-control, loyalty, and cooperation.

The researchers derive their results from three studies using complementary laboratory, field, and survey experiments. In the lab, the researchers' testing indicates that work history allows employers to screen for a candidate's reliability in complying with requests to provide voluntary effort. In the field experiment, in which Cohn and his colleagues sent out fictitious resumes, varying the frequency of job changes in the listed work history, they find resumes with fewer changes received a 40–50 percent higher callback rate than those with more. Finally, the researchers surveyed human-resources professionals, finding that most preferred applicants with fewer job changes because this corresponded to perceptions of more positive work attitude.

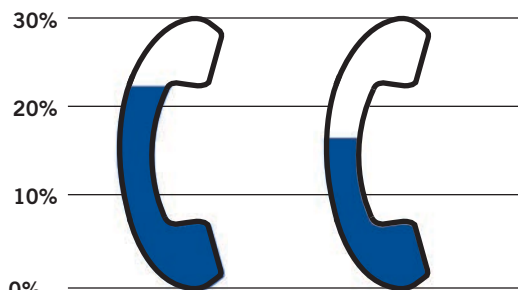
Employers evidently discriminate against applicants whose resumes cite frequent job changes—a practice that may cultivate stagnation in the labor pool. Workers may be unwilling to change jobs out of fear of negative impact on future employability, which may create inefficient matching between employees and employers.

The researchers note that this paper is not a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between job-change frequency and work attitude. In many domains, it is possible for significant flux in one's work history to be viewed positively. For example, job hopping may increase the stock of general human capital, skills, and knowledge, and convey a breadth of experience, more extensive professional networks, and greater ambition. This nevertheless supports the importance of job history as a signal of worker characteristics, either positive or negative: work history creates differing perceptions of applicants' work attitudes, and these perceptions are important drivers of callbacks. —Megan E. Doherty

Alain Cohn, Michel André Maréchal, Frédéric Schneider, and Roberto A. Weber, "Job History, Work Attitude, and Employability," Working paper, August 2015.

### Callback rate

Workers with many employers and frequent job changes on a resume were less likely to be called for an interview.



Cohn et al., 2015