

Is career advancement important to disadvantaged jobseekers?

Analysis of a large survey of disadvantaged
jobseekers

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This study is part of ARC Linkage project ‘Job retention and advancement of disadvantaged jobseekers’.

I Introduction

For many jobseekers low-paid work is in itself not a good stepping stone towards a better job (Perkins & Scutella 2007). Research indicates that some groups of Australian workers are at risk of churning between unemployment and low paid jobs (Dunlop 2002; Richardson 2003). Evidence from the United Kingdom also suggests that low-paid low-skilled employment, like unemployment, can lead to similar ‘scarring’ effects on future employment opportunities, as these jobs allow skills to deteriorate and act as signals to prospective employers of low future productivity (Stewart 2007). The policy focus has thus shifted from helping welfare recipients to obtain jobs, to supporting employment in quality jobs that offer opportunities for wage and career progression. ‘Employment Retention and Advancement’ (ERA) demonstration programs have been developed in the US and the UK to learn what works in promoting stable employment and career progression for welfare recipients and other low-income workers.

While much has been learned about what factors are likely to encourage (Brown et al. 1998); (Holzer 2004); (Kellard et al. 2002); (Strawn & Martinson 2000); (Yeo 2007) or act as a barrier to (Holzer et al. 2004); (Holzer & Martinson 2005); (Wood & Paulsell 1999) advancement, there has been comparatively less inquiry into how low-wage workers themselves define advancement and their attitudes towards it. This study seeks to fill part of the gap on research in this area by examining career aspirations amongst Australian unemployed and other jobless groups that have experienced long spells out of the workforce, such as sole parents and people with minor disabilities. Using survey data from the ARC Linkage project ‘Job retention and advancement of disadvantaged jobseekers’ the study will determine the importance placed on and identify determinants of attitudes towards career advancement.

2 Literature review

Definitions of employment retention and advancement

Kellard et al (2002) developed a definition of employment sustainability that can be easily applied to the related concepts of employment retention and advancement: ‘the maintenance of a stable or upward employment trajectory in the longer term’. Employment retention is a broader concept than job retention because it refers not only to a single job of a long duration, but also to a series of jobs separated only by short incidental periods of non-employment (Kellard et al. 2002). Advancement need not be within a single job; the most effective means of advancing may be to begin a new job (Holzer 2004).

Attitudes/approaches to advancement

Advancement means different things to different people and holds varying levels of applicability and appeal for different groups. Advancement for people at the lower end of the labour market could be as modest as getting a permanent contract instead of a temporary one or bargaining a wage sufficiently above the minimum wage to feel like the job is worth persisting with (Hall et al. 2005). In a comprehensive inquiry into perspectives on advancement from the UK ERA, Hoggart et al (2006) conceptualised attitudes within three broad categories: positive, ambivalent/ambiguous or negative/indifferent.

Among positive attitudes to advancement:

Different groups conceived of advancement in different ways. Long-term unemployed clients in the UK ERA were likely to view the aim of working full-time as a given, whereas lone parents

were more likely to associate advancement with job satisfaction and achieving a successful work/care balance (Hoggart et al. 2006). Females were especially likely to understand advancement in terms of job satisfaction (Hoggart et al. 2006). Motivations for advancement were also varied. Long-term unemployed males with manual work histories often combined desire for a 'decent job' with self-identity motivations, as a worker or as an economic provider. Lone parents also stressed identities as economic providers, mentioned desires to find self-fulfilment through work and emphasised the benefits of advancing for their children (Hoggart et al. 2006). Many lone mothers taking part in a study by Millar (2007) were motivated to find a better job because they were seeking more 'flexible' employers.

There was diversity in that some wanted to increase their working hours but did not want extra responsibility. Others wanted to advance only within self-defined limits – such as wanting a supervisory position, but not wanting to move into management (Hoggart et al. 2006). Participants across several studies felt like their current job didn't offer opportunities for advancement and they would have to change employers in order to advance (Hoggart et al. 2006); {Tessler, 2008 #2080}; (Strawn & Martinson 2000). Several studies involving lone mothers found that their career aspirations had to be balanced and sometimes put on hold as they managed their current situations (Hoggart et al. 2006); (Millar 2007). Those concentrating on training and acquiring new skills also deferred advancement now in order to advance in the future (Hoggart et al. 2006).

Among ambiguous or ambivalent attitudes to advancement:

Clients from the UK ERA who exhibited an instrumental work orientation of seeing work as a means to an end were likely to believe that advancement was irrelevant to them (Hoggart et al. 2006). Those with little work experience or who had not worked in some time often viewed securing a permanent job as a significant accomplishment and prioritised retention over advancement (Bloom et al. 2006); (Nixon 2006). This was often the case for lone parents with interrupted work histories (Millar 2007). Some were focused primarily on their caring responsibilities (Bloom et al. 2006); (Hoggart et al. 2006); (Millar 2007). Others were simply unsure what they wanted to do in the future.

Among negative or indifferent responses to advancement:

Dislike for managers led some manual workers to reject the notion of advancement if it meant assuming such roles (Hoggart et al. 2006). Strong identity as a manual worker was strongly related to indifferent attitudes to advancement and precluded people from considering re-skilling in another occupational area, despite a decline in manual jobs (Hoggart et al. 2006); (Nixon 2006); (Miller et al. 2008). Some were not ambitious, were content with their work situation and did not want to gain new skills, increase their hours, or take on additional responsibility (Hall et al. 2005). Some felt they were too old to advance. UK ERA staff had particular difficulty promoting advancement to customers over 50 (Miller et al. 2008).

Several studies found that not all ERA customers have traditional, middle-class views of what constitutes a 'better' job (Hall et al. 2005); (Bloom et al. 2006). Many Chicago ERA clients were working for cash as babysitters or housecleaners and although earning far below the minimum wage, were working near their homes with flexible hours that allowed them to pick up their children after school. The ERA program offered access to jobs in the formal labour market, but the idea of commuting downtown to work in a rigid, formal work environment was often not appealing, even if wages would be higher (Bloom et al. 2006).

Attitudes to ERA as dynamic

People's attitudes to advancement are not fixed and are likely to change over time. Hoggart et al (2006) identified two main forms of change:

- change alongside life course changes: as their children grow older, customers' attitudes towards advancement can become more positive, while customers reaching the end of their working lives often express more indifference to advancement.
- change in concert with experiences in work: those in steady work, who have successfully managed the initial transition period and established an acceptable work-care balance, often develop more positive views about advancement.

3 The ERA survey

Method

The ARC Linkage project 'Job retention and advancement of disadvantaged jobseekers' began in 2007 and is jointly conducted by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Part of the project involves tracking the employment experiences of people who have moved off benefits into work after participating in a Department of Employment and Workplace Relations-funded program. Participants were recruited from amongst the clients of three partner organisations on the project – Mission Australia, Job Futures and CRS Australia. Questionnaires were developed and mailed out to 8,302 clients in June-November 2008. 1250 were returned; amounting to a response rate of 15 per cent. Follow-up questionnaires will be sent to these clients after one year, two years and three years. The questionnaire covers a range of topics including the health of participants; their education; parents' work history; attitudes to work and advancement; information on their current job; their satisfaction with their employment assistance case manager; their work history; income; and personal details.

Participant characteristics

This study targeted disadvantaged job seekers who had been taking part in the Intensive Support Customised Assistance phase of the Job Network, the Personal Support Programme, or Vocational Rehabilitation Services and that had moved into employment in the three months prior to the survey being mailed out.

Around 60% of the sample was female, around 25% were married or in a de facto relationship and roughly the same proportion were lone parents (see Table 3.1). Two-thirds lived in metropolitan areas, with 27% born outside Australia and 5% being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Levels of education were low, with almost 70% of people having not completed year 12 schooling. In addition, around two-thirds of participants were found to have poor mental health as measured by the five item Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5) (Kelly et al. 2008) and almost 40% had been out of work for more than 12 months prior to the commencement of their current job. By the time surveys were returned around a third were again out of work, highlighting the high level of employment instability among such a disadvantaged cohort.

Table 3.1 Sample characteristics (n=1250)

	n	Percentage of total valid responses*
Female	738	59
Married or defacto	334	27
Lone parent	306	25
Have children	492	40
Live in a metro area	838	67
Born outside Australia	329	27
Aboriginal or Torres strait Islander	65	5
English main language spoken at home	1094	88
Did not complete year 12	842	68
Read/write English well or very well	1126	91
Poor mental health	797	65
Receiving Centrelink payments	824	66
Not working at time of survey	299	24
More than 12 months since previous job	465	38

*Excludes missing

4 The importance of career advancement

The survey asked participants to rate the importance of a range of employment attributes on a 1 to 5 scale where one was not at all important and five was very important. The job attribute that was most commonly rated as important (includes responses of important or very important in following discussion), by 85% of respondents, was job security (see Table 4.1). This was closely followed by interesting work, 81%, and then flexibility to balance work and non-work commitments, being able to work independently and having opportunities for skill development, all of which were seen as important by around three quarters of respondents. A high level of pay and opportunities for advancement or promotion were less commonly viewed as important, by 56% and 57% of the sample respectively, while the attribute least commonly viewed as important, by just fewer than half the sample, was a high level of responsibility.

Table 4.1 Job attributes important or very important to respondents (n=1250)

	n	Percentage of total valid responses*
Job security	1049	85
Interesting work	999	81
Flexibility to balance work and non-work commitments	944	77
Being able to work independently	925	75
Opportunities for skill development	915	74
Opportunities for advancement or promotion	696	57
A high level of pay	705	56

*Excludes missing

Other research has suggested that some disadvantaged job seekers may focus on retention instead of advancement (Bloom et al. 2006; Hoggart et al. 2006; Millar 2007). Further analysis of this sample found that job seekers viewing job security as important were no less likely than the sample average to also see advancement as important. Sixty-four percent of those that viewed job security as important also viewed opportunities for advancement as important, slightly higher than the overall sample proportion of 57%.

Items that were most strongly correlated with the importance participants' placed on advancement were a high level of responsibility ($r=.63$, $n=1226$, $p<.000$) and opportunities for skill development ($r=.58$, $n=1228$, $p<.000$), while the weakest correlation was found between, opportunities for advancement and flexibility to balance work and non-work commitments ($r=.28$, $n=1218$, $p<.000$). This suggests that respondents' views of advancement are fairly much in line with traditional notions of advancement based around up-skilling and increasing responsibility and career progression.

A comparison of responses of five items that are comparable with the broader population through the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Wilson et al. 2005) (see Table 4.2) shows that job seekers in this sample were less likely to see all these job attributes as important or very important. The greatest difference, however, was in interest in advancement which was viewed as important or very important by 82% of the broader population but only 57% of this sample. These differences were not significant based on the 95% confidence interval for population proportion differences, but the trend suggests that in line with research discussed above, disadvantaged job seekers who have recently transitioned into work may be more concerned about the job itself than future progression. However, advancement does remain important or very important for the majority of those in this group.

Table 4.2 Comparison of job attributes important or very important with the broader population

	ERA survey percentage of valid responses	ASSA percentage of valid responses
Job security	85	94
Interesting work	81	96
Being able to work independently	75	77
A high level of pay/income	56	70
Opportunities for advancement	57	82

*Australian Survey of social Attitudes

Bivariate analysis

Analysis using independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA tests, was undertaken to explore differences in respondents' interest in advancement by a range of characteristics. To do this a composite variable was created that summed the scores given for importance of advancement or promotion, opportunities for skill development, and having a high level of responsibility. The created variable had a potential value of between 3 and 15, with an average for the sample of 11.23. A range of characteristics reported in and Table 4.3 and Table 4.4 were found to be associated with interest in advancement although differences between sub-groups were generally modest.

Health

A number of health characteristics were associated with statistically significant differences in the importance placed on advancement by respondents. Those with better self assessed general health reported a higher level of interest in advancement, as did those reporting higher levels of vitality (using the 4 item vitality subscale of the SF36 survey) (see Table 4.4). The average interest in advancement for those reporting the highest levels of vitality was higher than any other population subgroup examined. The relationship with mental health was less straight forward. A weak positive relationship was found between interest in advancement and better mental health ($r=.06$, $n=1202$, $p<.05$) overall. However, a one way-ANOVA and Tukey HSD post-hoc test revealed that those reporting very poor mental health had a level of interest in advancement that was significantly greater than those with moderate or poor mental health (see Table 4.4).

Individual and family characteristics

No significant difference in interest in advancement was found between males and females ($t[1223]=1.33$, $p=.18$), but as reported in other studies (Hoggart et al. 2006; Miller et al. 2008) age was negatively associated with interest in advancement ($r=-.15$, $n=1213$, $p<.000$). There was no significant differences for those living in metropolitan/non-metropolitan areas (see Table 4.3), but advancement interest did differ according to housing situation. Surprisingly, those living in temporary accommodation/a boarding house/caravan reported the highest level of interest in advancement, while those living in their own home reported the lowest interest in advancement (see Table 4.4).

Being born outside Australia was not associated with greater advancement interest, but those who spoke a language other than English as their main language at home and people from an aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background had a higher level of interest in advancement than those not from these groups (see Table 4.3).

Those that were married or in a defacto relationship reported a lower interest in advancement, but this was only significant at the $p<.10$ level. No significant differences existed between those with or without children, however the age of the youngest child was negatively correlated with advancement interest ($r=-.10$, $n=$, $p<.05$).

A number of studies have reported that lone parents have less interest in traditional notions of advancement than other groups (Bloom et al. 2006; Millar 2007). However, we found no significant differences in advancement interest between lone parents and other groups and this remained the case when we looked only at females in the sample (see Table 4.3). Interestingly, there was some indication that lone parents may actually have a greater interest in advancement than other groups. A one-way ANOVA test found significant differences were present in advancement interest by Centrelink payment type, however, Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed that the one difference that was significant was between those on Newstart Allowance and those on Parenting Payment, who had the lowest (10.95) and highest (11.57) interest in advancement respectively. A further break down of those receiving parenting payment shows that lone parents have a slightly higher interest in advancement (11.58) than others on parenting payment (11.51). Similarly the only significant differences in advancement interest by living situation were between those living alone (mean=10.78) and single parents, who reported a greater interest in advancement (11.56).

Both mothers' and fathers' main occupation had no significant impact on advancement interest, but surprisingly, those whose fathers had spent periods of time unemployed during their childhood reported a significantly greater interest in advancement.

Higher levels of self perceived work readiness were strongly associated with respondents' interest in advancement ($r=.27$, $n=1213$, $p<.000$) and those with the lowest levels of work readiness had a lower average score than any other population sub-group examined.

Table 4.3 Differences in interest in advancement by participant sub-groups

	N	Yes	No
Poor mental health	1207	10.97	11.68***
English main language spoken at home	1212	11.12	11.95**
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	1220	12.06	11.17**
Born outside Australia	1215	11.53	11.12
Married or defacto	1208	11.00	11.30#
Have children	1212	11.32	11.15
Lone parent (all)	1200	11.44	11.14
Lone parent (females)	711	11.45	11.23
Father unemployed for periods of time	1019	11.53	11.00**
Living in public housing	1137	11.64	11.15
Centrelink payment main source of income	1194	11.41	11.05*
Working at the time of survey	1222	11.34	11.18
More then 12 months since last job	1203	10.93	11.36*

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$ (independent samples t-test)

Employment history and education

Differences in advancement interest were found by the highest year of school completed, but interestingly the greatest interest in advancement was present among those whose highest year of school was year 7 to 9. However, a Tukey HSD post-hoc test revealed that the only differences that were significant were between the 7 to 9 group and those whose highest year was year 10 or 11. The presence or type of post-school qualifications, and proficiency in reading and writing English were both unrelated to advancement interest (see Table 4.4).

Still being in work when the survey was returned was unrelated to advancement interest, but those who had been out of work for more than 12 months since recently commencing work did report a lower level of interest in advancement, in line with research discussed earlier.

Differences in advancement interest were also found according to individuals' previous occupation, but these did not seem to support the findings from the UK ERA study that manual workers tend to reject or be indifferent to the notion of advancement and increasing responsibility (Hoggart et al. 2006; Miller et al. 2008; Nixon 2006), or other literature suggesting that people at the lower end of the labour market are likely to have more modest desires relating to advancement (Hall et al. 2005). In contrast, in this study professionals, the self employed and managers and administrators reported the lowest interest in advancement, while intermediate production and transport workers, intermediate clerical and labourers and related reported the highest advancement interest (see Table 4.4). These findings suggest that the desire for traditional advancement based on skill development, increasing responsibility and ascending the career ladder is far from being a middle class aspiration.

Table 4.4 Differences in interest in advancement by participant sub-groups

	Mean
General health ***	$F=(4, 1205)=9.56$, $p=.00$

	<i>Excellent</i>	12.17	
	<i>Very good</i>	11.76	
	<i>Good</i>	11.13	
	<i>Fair</i>	10.71	
	<i>Poor</i>	10.41	
Mental health **			F=(3, 1198)=5.07, p=.00
	<i>Good</i>	12.07	
	<i>Moderate</i>	11.05	
	<i>Poor</i>	11.18	
	<i>Very poor</i>	11.38	
Vitality ***			F=(3, 1184)=13.76, p=.00
	<i>High</i>	12.32	
	<i>Moderate</i>	11.25	
	<i>Low</i>	10.90	
	<i>Very low</i>	10.59	
Work readiness (self perceived)***			F=(4, 1208)25.35, p=.00
	<i>Very ready</i>	11.84	
	<i>Moderately ready</i>	10.80	
	<i>Neither ready or not ready</i>	10.31	
	<i>Not very ready</i>	9.87	
	<i>Not at all ready</i>	9.38	
Highest year of school completed*			F=(3, 1202)2.85, p=.04
	<i>Year 12</i>	11.16	
	<i>Year 10 or 11</i>	11.06	
	<i>Year 7 to 9</i>	11.68	
	<i>Did not go to high school</i>	10.88	
Currently in education*			F=(2, 1208)4.23, p=.02
	<i>Yes, full time</i>	11.66	
	<i>Yes, part time</i>	11.80	
	<i>No</i>	11.13	
Housing situation***			F=(4, 1212)6.74, p=.00
	<i>Own home</i>	10.62	
	<i>Rent privately</i>	11.31	
	<i>Rent public</i>	11.63	
	<i>Boarding house/caravan/temporary accommodation</i>	11.98	
	<i>Other</i>	11.08	
Previous occupation*			F=(9, 1128)2.0, p=.04
	<i>Managers administrators</i>	10.80	
	<i>Professionals</i>	10.20	
	<i>Associate professionals</i>	11.09	
	<i>Tradespersons and related</i>	10.92	
	<i>Advanced clerical and service</i>	10.83	
	<i>Intermediate clerical</i>	11.56	
	<i>Intermediate production & trans</i>	11.59	
	<i>Elementary clerical & service</i>	11.00	
	<i>Labourers and related</i>	11.37	
	<i>Self-employed</i>	10.50	
Provider***			F=(2, 1222)14.37, p=.00
	<i>Job Futures</i>	11.66	

<i>Mission Australia</i>	<i>11.61</i>	
<i>CRS Australia</i>	<i>10.78</i>	
Centrelink payment type (if applicable)#		F=(5, 800)1.91, p=.09
Living situation*		F=(6, 1212)3.05, p=.01
Mothers main occupation		F=(9, 624)0.81, p=.61
Highest year of school completed		F=(9, 1068)1.25, p=.26
How well read and write English		F=(3, 1215)1.7, p=.17
Fathers main occupation		F=(9, 1068)1.25, p=.26
Post-school qualifications		F=(2, 1163)1.22, p=.30

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, #p<.10 (one-way ANOVA)

Employment characteristics and interest in advancement

Analysis of responses from the 76 percent of the sample that were still in work at the time of sending back the surveys indicated that some employment characteristics were associated with individuals interest in advancement (see Table 4.5). Those wanting to work less hours than they were currently working reported significantly lower advancement interest than others. The job satisfaction variable indicated that those who are completely satisfied are significantly more interested in advancement than those that are satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, or dissatisfied, but interestingly no significant differences were present with those who were completely dissatisfied- suggesting that being completely dissatisfied may provide some motivation for people to advance and improve their situation.

Those that strongly agreed that their job fitted their career goals also reported significantly greater interest in advancement. No differences were found by respondents' main occupation, industry of work, length of employment, or employment arrangement (casual, permanent or fixed term contract), again suggesting that desire for advancement is not related to socio-economic status.

Table 4.5 Differences in interest in advancement by employment characteristics

Job fits career goals***		F=(4, 846)5.27, p=.00
<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>11.03</i>	
<i>Disagree</i>	<i>10.93</i>	
<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	<i>10.88</i>	
<i>Agree</i>	<i>10.88</i>	
<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>12.08</i>	
Overall job satisfaction***		F=(4, 850)5.89, p=.00
<i>Completely satisfied</i>	<i>11.88</i>	
<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>10.81</i>	
<i>Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied</i>	<i>10.90</i>	
<i>Dissatisfied</i>	<i>10.71</i>	
<i>Completely dissatisfied</i>	<i>11.81</i>	
Satisfaction with work hours***		F=(2, 851)10.15, p=.00
<i>Yes</i>	<i>11.06</i>	
<i>No, would like more hours</i>	<i>11.55</i>	
<i>No, Would like less hours</i>	<i>9.81</i>	
Main occupation		F=(9, 848)1.20, p=.30
Industry		F=(9, 839)1.25, p=.26
Employment length		F=(2, 861)0.75, p=.93
Employment arrangement		F=(3, 851)2.98, p=.83

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$ (one-way ANOVA)

Multivariate analysis

To control for the range of characteristics we undertake regression analysis of the determinants of our samples attitudes to career advancement. We use the same dependent variable used in the previous section, but transform this into a final indicator with a value between 0 and 100, with higher values capturing higher levels of importance placed on career development and advancement.

On the right hand side we only include variables that are likely to be exogenous. Employment characteristics such as hours worked and occupation are likely to be endogenous in that people who place more importance on career advancement are more likely to seek the types of jobs that allow them to advance.¹

Table 4.6 presents the results of our linear regression estimating the determinants of the importance placed on career advancement for our sample.² These results confirm the findings of the descriptive analysis presented earlier.

Consistent with the literature (Hoggart et al. 2006); (Miller et al. 2008) the importance placed on advancement declines with age. We estimated the model using a range of specifications of the age characteristic, and a linear relationship was the best fit. People's health (coded as 1 'Excellent health' to 5 'Poor health' had a significant impact on the importance they placed on advancement, with importance declining with declining health. As the descriptive results showed the importance placed on advancement exhibits a u-shaped relationship with mental health, with those with low and high levels of mental health as captured by the 5 item Mental Health Inventory placing more importance on career advancement. This unexpected result warrants further investigation. Also Job Network clients placed more importance on career advancement than CRS clients. CRS clients are more likely to have both chronic health conditions thus, even after controlling for general health, this result is perhaps not surprising.

Interestingly, respondents identifying that they mainly spoke a language other than English at home placed more importance on career advancement than respondents mainly speaking English at home. Clients' assessment of their work readiness was also a significant determinant of the importance placed on career advancement; with those not work ready placing less importance on advancement.

¹ Educational qualification is also likely to be endogenous to an extent so we ran the model both with and without these indicator variables to check how sensitive the results are to their inclusion. The results did not alter significantly therefore we keep educational qualifications in the final model specification presented in this paper.

² As the dependent variable is not strictly continuous we also estimated the model using an ordered Probit specification. The results however were not qualitatively different and thus we present the linear regression results for simplicity.

Table 4.6: OLS results of factors affecting importance placed on career advancement, 2008

Constant	0.814*** [0.084]
Female	-0.001 [0.012]
Age in years	-0.002*** [0.001]
Mental health (scale from 1 to 25 with higher values representing better mental health)	-0.025*** [0.009]
Mental health squared	0.001*** [0.000]
General health (1 'Excellent' to 5 'Poor')	-0.013** [0.007]
Tafe/technical qualification	0.020* [0.012]
University degree/diploma	0.022 [0.020]
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	0.04 [0.025]
Married or in a defacto relationship	0.006 [0.015]
Job Network client	0.025** [0.012]
Lone parent	0.025* [0.015]
Youngest child under 5 years	-0.016 [0.026]
Language other than English main language spoken at home	0.058*** [0.017]
Own home/paying off mortgage	-0.029 [0.023]
Renting privately	0.003 [0.021]
Public housing resident	0.019 [0.024]
Boarding house/caravan park	0.056* [0.029]
Resides in metropolitan area	-0.008 [0.012]
Father unemployed for 6 months or more	0.018 [0.014]
Identifies as not work ready	-0.106*** [0.022]
Observations	1,079
R-squared	0.115

Standard errors in brackets: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

5 Conclusions

For disadvantaged job seekers the initial transition into employment does not guarantee a path to employment stability, decent income and social inclusion. Many disadvantaged jobseekers are at risk of being trapped in low quality jobs with, poor pay and conditions, and little opportunity for skill development or career advancement.

Interventions to support career advancement are one approach to assist such individuals to improve their situations. However, overseas studies have suggested that some groups may have less interest in conventional notions of advancement, based on career progression, skill development and increasing responsibility. These include the long-term unemployed, those at the lower end of the labour market, sole parents, and those working in manual industries.

Advancement may also have different meanings for different groups, with sole parents, for example sometimes being motivated to advance to a better job that will provide more flexibility of hours, and females more likely to understand advancement in terms of job satisfaction.

This study has sought to fill part of the gap on research in this area by examining career aspirations amongst Australian unemployed and other jobless groups that have experienced long spells out of the workforce. The sample represents a disadvantaged cohort of unemployed people that have recently made the transition into work. Around 70% have not completed year 12, around two-thirds have poor mental health, and 40% had been out of work for 12 months or more prior to recently commencing work.

Analysis of this sample indicated that the job attribute that was most important was job security (85% of respondents), with the second most important attribute being interesting work (81%). Opportunities for advancement or promotion was seen as important by 57% of respondents, with the close linked attributes of opportunity to develop skills, and having a high level of responsibility being seen as important by 74% and 47% of people respectively. Comparisons with the broader population using Australian Survey of Social Attitudes indicates that disadvantaged unemployed people may be less likely to see advancement as important, although these differences were not statistically significant. However, it is possible that any lower interest in advancement may be due to recent experiences of being unemployed and that these will increase with employment duration, as suggested by Hoggart (2006).

Bivariate analysis identified a range of characteristics that were associated with increased interest in advancement. These included general health, vitality, and mental health. Although, interestingly, those with the poorest mental health reported a greater interest in advancement than those with moderate mental health. The related measure of self perceived readiness for work showed one of the strongest associations with advancement interest, with those feeling less work ready reporting significantly lower interest in advancement. In contrast to other studies women and lone parents, were both found to have an equal interest in conventional notions of advancement as those not in these groups.

Interestingly those facing greater levels of disadvantage in terms of low levels of education and being in insecure housing reported high levels of advancement interest. Importantly, unlike the UK study discussed earlier, analysis of this sample found that conventional notions of advancement, were equally or if not more important to workers in lower skilled occupations, suggesting that the so called middle-class view of advancement is equally applicable to those at the lower end of the labour market in Australia.

For those in work, main occupation, industry of work, length of employment, or being casual were all unrelated to interest in advancement. A job fitting an individual's career goals and wanting more hours were associated with increased interest in advancement, while being completely satisfied or completely dissatisfied overall were both associated with increased interest in advancement. Parents, occupation was unrelated to interest in advancement but a having a father that had spent periods of time unemployed, was associated with a greater interest in advancement.

Multivariate analysis identified not being work ready, having poor general health and age as being negatively related to an individuals interest in advancement, while mainly speaking a language other than English at home, being a Job Network client, and having a TAFE/technical qualification were positively related advancement interest.

Overall, these findings suggest that advancement based around career progression, skill development and increasing responsibility is important to a majority of disadvantaged job seekers. Moreover, the strong level of interest shown by disadvantaged groups such as lone parents, those at the lower end of the labour market, early school leavers and people in insecure housing, suggests that augmenting existing employment services programs with longer-term retention and advancement support could play a useful role in improving the social inclusion outcomes for these groups.

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