

# Research on Job Search Interventions: Examination of the Feasibility of a Cyclical Self-Regulatory Model of Job Search Process Quality

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## I. Introduction

Since the 1970s, psychologists have been focusing on the psychological mechanisms of job seekers to clarify how job seekers can find jobs that lead to stable employment, and based on their results, they have been examining what kinds of support should be provided to increase the possibility of finding employment through on-the-job research.<sup>1</sup> The former focus of the study is referred to as “job search,” and that of the latter “job search interventions.” When applied to services provided for job seekers through “Hello Work” (public employment security offices), examples of job search interventions include personalized services such as career counseling duties and group services such as orientation meetings and job search support seminars for unemployment insurance recipients.

Starting in the 2000s, major researchers in the job search field cooperated, incorporating the latest research results and taking into account the results of previous research in the same field, in proposing a cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality (see Figure 1) that provides overall guidelines for job search.<sup>2</sup> This model emphasizes self-regulation, which entails job seekers “thinking for themselves and finding jobs.” This does not mean that job seekers carry out job searches all by themselves. Self-regulatory job search also consists of seeking help from others, such as staff of “Hello Work” and friends and acquaintances, if necessary.

The JILPT (2020) Research on Job Search Interventions, JILPT Research Report No. 203 (referred to below as “the report”) examined the

feasibility of a cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality at Hello Work, with the cooperation of Hello Work staff who participated in the workshops held at the Labour College.<sup>3</sup> Having reviewed the research on job search, we report the results of the study here.

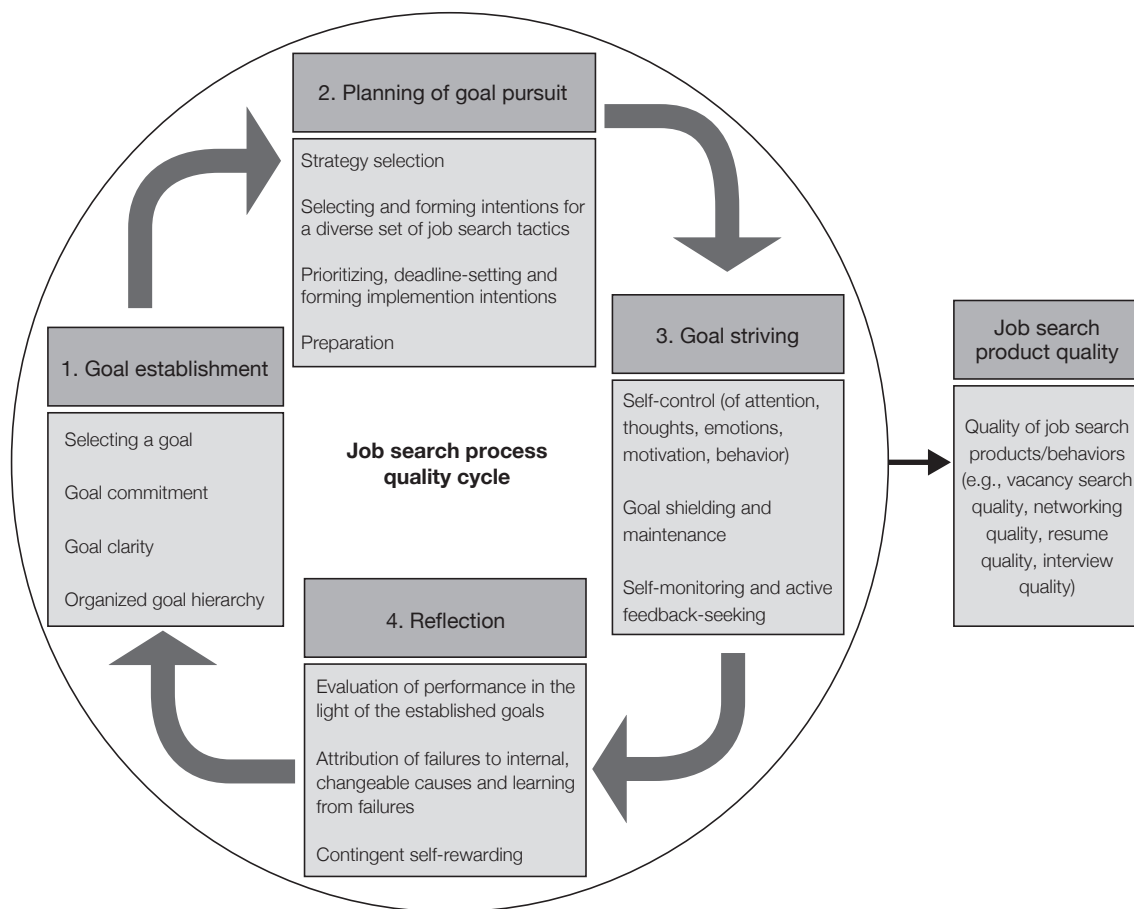


## II. Research on psychological mechanism during job search

A cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality systematically shows the development of self-regulation, and specific cognitive skills, such as how individuals utilize psychological mechanisms that enable them to think for themselves and find jobs (see Figure 1).

Here “cognitive” refers to individuals perceiving objects in their environment through sensory organs such as the eyes and ears and using that information for psychological mechanism such as inference, i.e., assessing their current situation or predict what will happen next. In terms of job search, this applies to a sequence of psychological mechanism in which unemployed people perceive their unemployment and selectively assess how to deal with it.

“Cognitive skills” are abilities related to the psychological mechanism that can be acquired through experience and training, and are effective in securing employment. For example, psychology has revealed that the more specific a goal is, the more likely it is to be achieved.<sup>4</sup> When these findings are applied to job search interventions, the result is a



Source: Van Hooft, Wanberg & van Hoye (2013: 10–30)

Figure 1. Cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality

support policy that aims to clarify what kind of job a job seeker wants to do. For example, cognitive skills constitute the concrete know-how that clarifies an image of the desired job.

### III. Evolution of approaches to job search interventions

Currently, in research on job search interventions, there is consensus that the basic approach is to support job seekers so that they can acquire self-regulation, thinking for themselves, and finding jobs autonomously, as seen in the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality. The historical background leading to this conception is as follows.

#### 1. The roots of research on job search interventions: Unemployment research during the Great Depression

The roots of research on job search interventions extend back to unemployment research during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Research at this time was widely carried out by field researchers who visited areas suffering from high rates of unemployment, observed the lives of the unemployed while living among them as members of the community, and interviewed them.

At this time, there were already two basic approaches to job search interventions, namely environment-centered and people-centered. Jahoda et al. conducted a field study immediately after the simultaneous closures of a large-scale factory in the Austrian industrial village of Marienthal and

related factories in industrial areas of Austria and investigated the impact on the physical and mental state of unemployed workers and their families.<sup>5</sup> Their conclusion was that unemployment had a negative impact on the psychology of individuals, and it was difficult for unemployed individuals to change their situation unless aspects of their environment, such as their employment situation, improved. This approach later evolved into models in which support for job seekers was centered on their environment (such as “deprivation theory” and the “vitamin model.” Details are given in Chapter 2 of the Report).

Around the same time, Bakke conducted a field survey of working-class families living in the community of Greenwich in south-east London, UK.<sup>6</sup> He found that among unemployed people, skilled workers were happy to find and carry out jobs related to their skills even if they were not paid accordingly, whereas unskilled workers were not willing to work at all without what they considered appropriate payment.

These findings seem to indicate that the psychological effects of unemployment differ depending on how unemployment is perceived, and differences in perception depend on work experience up to that point. This idea later evolved into person-centered approaches to supporting job seekers (“agency theory” and applied research from general psychology, etc. Details are in Chapter 2 of the Report). After World War II and the postwar reconstruction period, the economy improved, and the unemployment rate declined, and unemployment research fell by the wayside.

## **2. Applied research based on general psychology theory: Toward behavior, cognition, and metacognition**

In the 1970s and 1980s, as unemployment rates worsened due to economic stagnation in the United States and other developed countries, unemployment research once again became the focus of attention. During this era, however, due to the enhancement of the social security system, including unemployment insurance and other elements, the social environment

was improved to the extent that absolute poverty (“malnutrition to the extent that physical strength cannot be maintained, lack of clothing and housing to the point of freezing to death”<sup>7</sup>) could be avoided, and more psychological factors as reflected by the people-centered approaches took on relatively more significant importance. In this process, the general psychology theories were applied, and job search and research on support for it became the focus of attention.

The core of job search intervention theory followed general psychology theory and evolved from the 1970s learning model to the 1980s cognitive model to a socio-cognitive model in the 2000s. To explain each of these: the learning model was popularized in the 1970s, and it remains the basic approach to job search interventions. The idea is that people can change through learning, and it is also known as behaviorism. At the other end of the spectrum of the theory is nativism, which holds that “human beings are strongly influenced by their predispositions and genetics, and do not change.”

In the learning model, unemployed people have difficulty finding new jobs simply because they have not learned effective behaviors for job search, and if they can master such behaviors, they are more likely to find employment. For this reason, job search interventions include programs that teach job search practices advantageous for employment, such as writing a resume that conveys your strengths to employers who are hiring, and facial expressions, gestures, and ways of speaking that lead to positive evaluations at interviews (for example, the “job club” (Azrin et al., 1975. For details, see Chapter 3 of the Report).

In the 1980s, the scope of the study was deepened from job-seeking behavior advantageous for employment to the cognition that produces the job-seeking behavior: “If you change your mind, your behavior will change as well.” Job search interventions based on this theory focus on programs that work on the psychological mechanism of job seekers (such as the “JOBS-program” or “self-efficacy workshop.” For details, see Chapter 3 of the Report).

For example, job seekers who have lost confidence due to experiencing unemployment or lack of job search success may change their cognition, such as noting points that have improved compared to previous job searches, gain more confidence, and as a result, decide to take a proactive approach to job search, which will increase their chances of finding employment.<sup>8</sup>

In the 2000s, the socio-cognitive model came to be dominant (note that this is different from Bandura's social cognitive theory. For details, see Chapter 3 of the Report). This model focuses on individual cognition in social situations, and cognition is conceived as a form of information processing. Specifically, it is a series of processes in which an individual inputs information from their environment, goes through multiple processing steps (attention, perception, judgment, information retrieval, and so on), and the result is output in the form of action on the environment.

In the socio-cognitive model, psychological adjustment mechanisms for environmental adaptation are emphasized through the active incorporation of environmental factors surrounding job seekers in their search for employment. Differences between the cognitive model and job search interventions can easily be understood when their objectives are compared. In the cognitive model, the goal is learning cognitive skills that increase one's chances of finding a job. On the other hand, in the socio-cognitive model, the goal is the acquisition of the ability to select appropriate cognitive skills according to changes in the employment environment. This is known as metacognition.

Metacognition is "cognition of cognition."<sup>9</sup> It is the process of objectively reconsidering one's own judgments and choices in the manner of a third party. For example, if you are a job seeker who feels unable to actively search for jobs due to experiences with unemployment or poor job search performance, your psychological processes operating at a deep level may make the judgment that "even if I apply for a job, I'm sure to be rejected." When you realize that this judgment has a negative effect on employment potential, which is metacognition at work, a higher

dimension of cognition is required, and the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality is in line with this way of thinking.

## **IV. Feasibility considerations for the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality**

### **1. The cyclical self-regulatory model**

As shown in Figure 1, in the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality, the job search process is divided into four stages: "Goal establishment," i.e., expression in the specific language of "what kind of job I want to do" and "how I want to work;" "Planning of goal pursuit" to achieve this goal; "Goal striving" in which the plan is put into action; and "Reflection," entailing looking back on one's job search after learning results such as whether one passed or failed screening of job application forms and whether or not one received notice of hiring. By cyclically repeating these four processes, job seekers are able to improve the quality of their job searches.

The quality of job searches forms a basis for employers' judgments as to whether or not to hire a person, with employers likely to select individuals whose search quality has reached a sufficient level. For example, from an employer's perspective, the questions are, "Is this the right person for the job?" "Does this resume make me want to hire the person?" "During the interview, is the person able to answer questions in a manner that makes me think I would like to work with them?" For each of these four stages, points for improving the quality of job search are offered (for details, see Chapter 5 of the Report).

The following four significant merits of the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality can be cited.

The first is its incorporation of the labor market as a social context. Psychologists focus on human psychological mechanisms, and a resulting drawback is the field's blurring of the social context in which a person is placed. In particular, psychologists involved in labor have continually been faulted for their neglect of attention to social contexts such as

the employment system and the labor market.

The cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality presents one solution to this problem. The idea is to incorporate the perspectives of the potential employer into the psychological mechanism of the job seeker. The macro-level of the employment system and labor market does not directly affect the psychological mechanisms of job seekers, but job seekers do regulate their job-seeking behavior by being aware of potential employers' viewpoints, and this cognitive process appears to be influenced by the employment system and labor market. From the standpoint of supporters who encourage adaptation to the environment, the point is that how to make job seekers aware of employers' perspectives.

Second, the model explains the motivational mechanisms of job search. The most significant success factor in the job search that leads to employment is persistence, i.e., continuing to seek a job until one is secured.<sup>10</sup> From the supporters' perspective, it is vital that job seekers do not lose their willingness to search for a job until one is found.

Crucial to the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality is job seekers' dealing head-on with the job search process, clarifying their desires and needs concerning what kind of job they want to do and how they want to work at the "Goal establishment" stage and considering their job-seeking behavior from the perspectives of potential employers during the "Goal striving" stage. When job seekers are aware of the gap between their wishes or needs and reality, to put it simply, it becomes a driving force of job search as they become cognizant that "if I do not take action, I cannot fulfill my wishes or needs."

Third, the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality is designed as a management cycle and is easy for both job seekers and their supporters to adopt. The "PDCA cycle" (plan-do-check-act) is well known as a management cycle, and the idea is that goals can be achieved by repeating this cycle. When we are aware of this cycle, we have a mechanism that allows us to

recognize what needs to be done next. The cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality can be called a management cycle that circulates in a similar way, which could be summarized as "set goal-plan-act-reflect."

However, the most significant difference is the inclusion within this management cycle of the setting of goals that express individual desires. Generally speaking, organized workers' goals are stipulated to some extent before they are set, depending on the medium- to long-term goals of the organization to which they belong and the annual targets of their workplaces. This is not the case for unemployed people who are not part of an organization. If they do not take the initiative in setting goals, they cannot efficiently approach the search for a job.

Recently there has been a focus on career self-regulation in career development within organizations.<sup>11</sup> Career self-regulation is defined as a "(personal) life-long commitment to developing one's career and continuing to learn new things in a rapidly changing environment." (Hanada et al. 2003).<sup>12</sup> In order to achieve career self-regulation, it is important for individuals to be aware of their desires and needs, such as what they want to do and be. A stage similar to the "Goal establishment" of the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality is critical even among organized workers.

Fourth is the clarification of the cognitive skills necessary for job search from the perspective of metacognition. At the self-regulatory model stage of "Goal establishment," it is essential for job seekers to have a subjective awareness of their desires and needs, such as what kind of job they want to do and how they want to work. During the stage of pursuing goals, it is necessary to have skills at the level of metacognition to examine one's job-seeking behavior from potential employers' point of view. From the standpoint of supporters, a key goal of support is for the job seeker to shift from their subjective perspective to an objective perspective that is conscious of those who are doing the hiring, which is from cognition to metacognition.

## 2. Feasibility considerations

To examine the feasibility of the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality at Hello Work offices, Evening Session workshops, which are voluntary extracurricular training sessions for Hello Work staff held at the Labour College, were utilized to conduct two types of training programs that outline the approach and know-how of the model, “Employment Support for Welfare Recipients” and “Frontiers in Job Search Intervention Research,” and questionnaires were administered to determine whether the model is effective in promoting career counseling work by participants, i.e., staff at Hello Work offices.

With regard to both training programs, most participants responded that they understood the concept of the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality and obtained information and know-how that were useful for their career counseling duties (See Figure 2 and 3).

In addition, to examine the feasibility of the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality, career counseling TIPs\* were created so as

to apply the desirable job search criteria specified by that model to the know-how used for career counseling duties, and participants were asked to assess the TIPs.

\*Career counseling TIPs are defined as “small techniques for choosing expressions and little devices for phrasing words.”<sup>13</sup>

The findings were that almost all TIPs were assessed as being useful on the job (see Figure 4). Regarding on-the-job utilization, a majority of participants responded that it was not difficult to utilize six out of the eight TIPs in their duties. In comparison, the other two TIPs were evaluated by a majority of participants as raising job seekers’ awareness of their impatience or anxiety and the problems they were facing and it is difficult to apply effects on the job (see Figure 5).

## V. Key future task

From the findings of this research, we were able to gain a picture of the on-the-job feasibility of the cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality. Although this is a model developed by

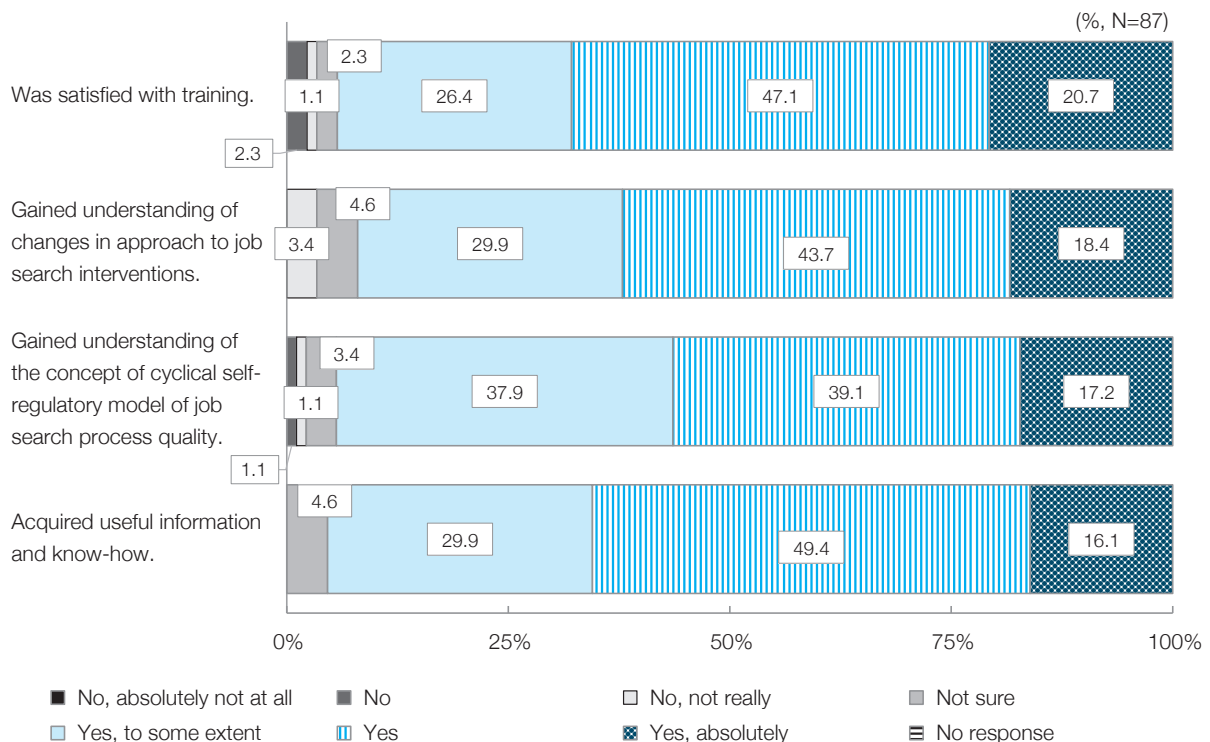


Figure 2. Assessment of Evening Session workshop “Employment Support for Welfare Recipients”



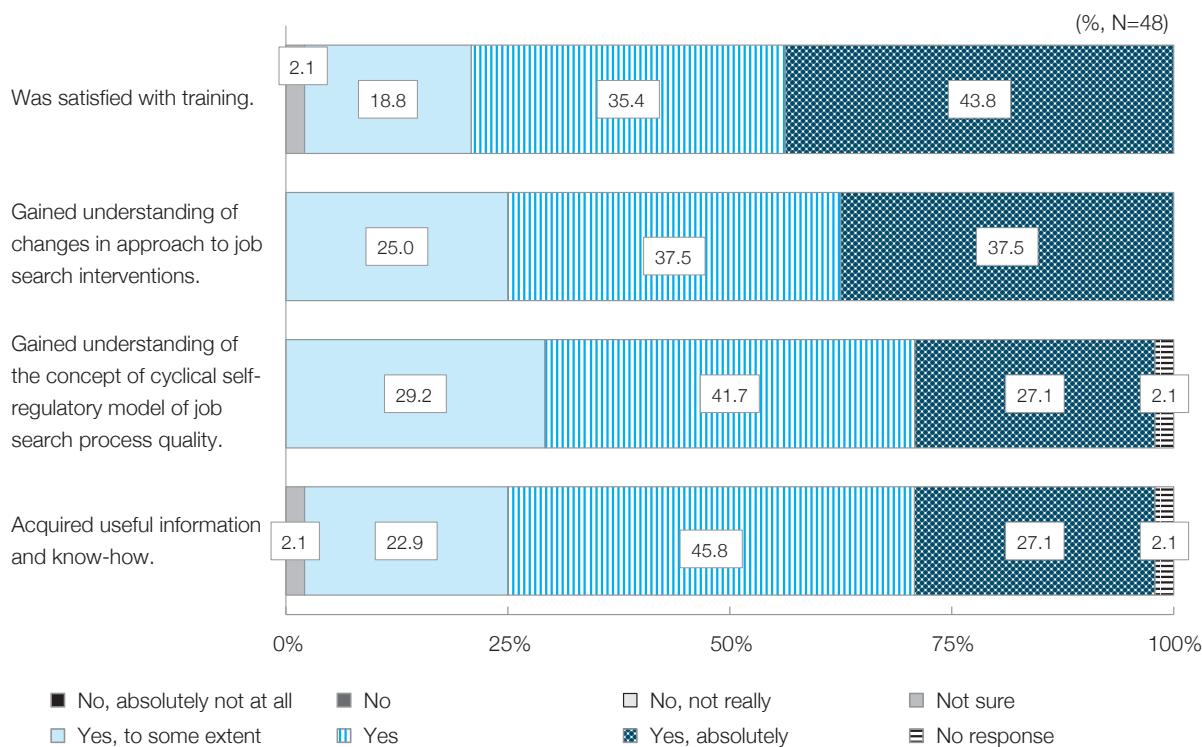


Figure 3. Assessment of Evening Session workshop “Frontiers in Job Search Intervention Research”

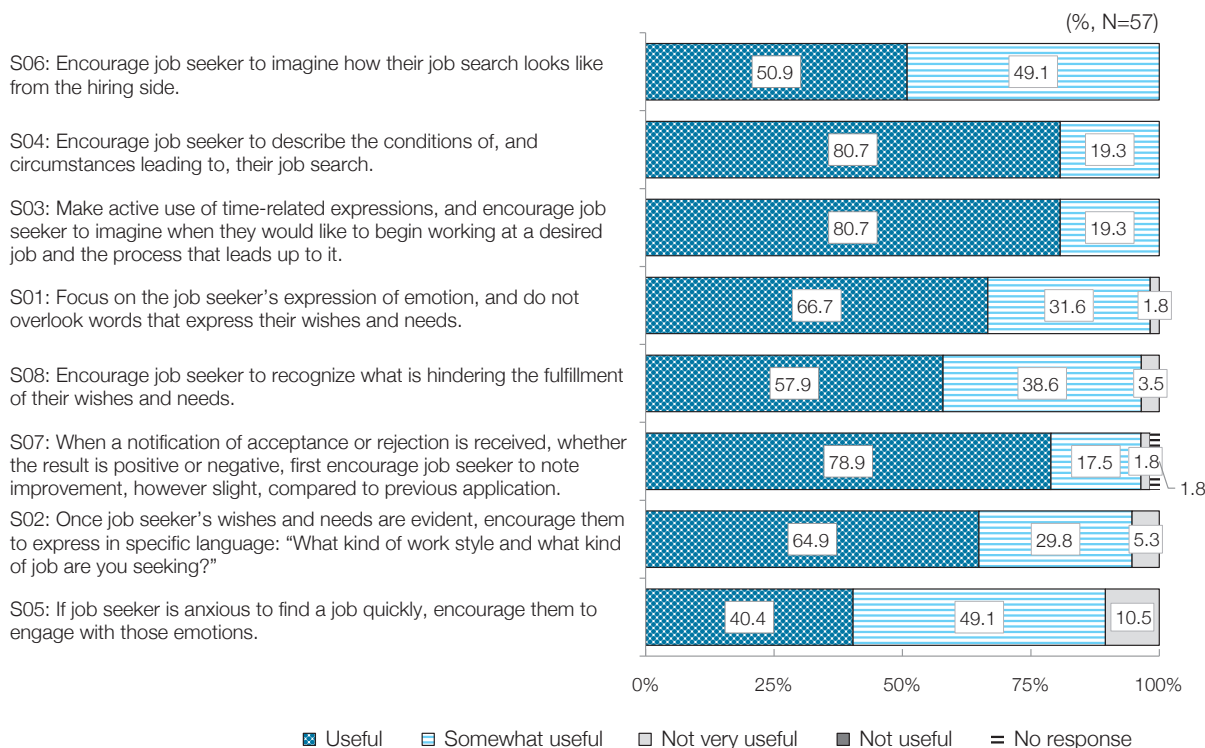


Figure 4. Usefulness of career counseling TIPs on the job

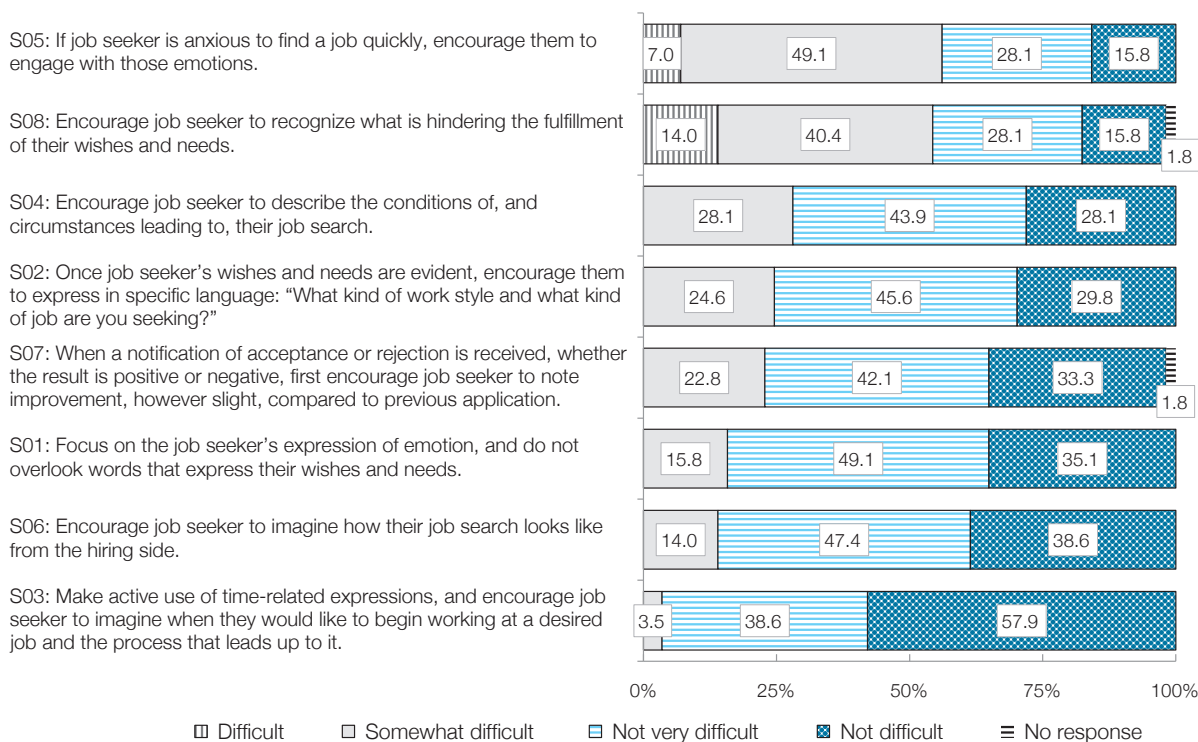


Figure 5. Difficulty of utilizing career counseling TIPS

Western researchers, it is considered to be broadly applicable, including in the field in Japan.

A critical future task is to develop a job search intervention program based on this cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality for job seekers. For this reason, we must take advantage of the opportunities presented by the Evening Session workshops, ask participants (Hello Work staff) for their cooperation, give them opportunities to evaluate the program from the standpoint of job seekers, and, based on the results, refine and improve the training program.

After that, it is necessary to implement the program on a trial basis in an orientation meeting at Hello Work offices and job search intervention seminars, etc. And then, collect evaluations from job seekers using questionnaires and other means and revise and update the program regularly. If the results of the questionnaires are positive, we will develop a manual for the program and promote its dissemination, with the goal of widespread implementation at Hello Work offices.

Finally, I would like to explain the need for

research on job search interventions in Japan. I find that the job search interventions are seen in job search seminars, etc. in Japan, and the Hello Work career counseling duties that I am involved in, are quite excellent when compared internationally. On the other hand, I believe that research in this field is not even close to catching up with countries conducting advanced research such as the Netherlands and the United States.

I am aware that if a problem arises in the field, supporters can respond quickly without relying on research. However, as is evident when we review the history of research on job search interventions, researchers use scientific methods and accumulate objective knowledge to draw up medium- to long-term guidelines and establish perspectives based on them.

If we elevate the level of research on job search interventions in Japan as quickly as possible, the following two points will be important. First, it is necessary to actively engage in joint studies with Western researchers to learn the methods of applied psychology that are highly useful in the field. In



particular, these researchers excel at using general psychological theories and constructs to the study of job search interventions. Studying these methods will make it possible to save the time and effort of constructing original theories of job search intervention research, and to make it a broadly applicable field of psychological research.

Secondly, researchers should always consciously give feedback to on-the-ground personnel based on their research results so that supporters in the field can feel the benefits of research, and to build a trust-based relationship so that researchers can ask them for their cooperation in conducting studies.

This article is a translation of the author's article posted in the website of the JILPT: [https://www.jil.go.jp/researcheye/bn/035\\_200527.html](https://www.jil.go.jp/researcheye/bn/035_200527.html) (in Japanese).

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