

Ghosted and Discouraged: How Recruitment Conditions Shape Candidate Behaviours and Create Challenges for Employers

ABSTRACT

This study examines how student and experienced job seekers describe and interpret their recruitment experiences. Although these two groups' recruitment processes differ structurally and temporally, little research has compared how they experience the job search process. Drawing on affective events theory, this study examines whether these differences translate into distinct job-search experiences. Using a qualitative research design, 66 first-person job-search narratives were passively collected from Reddit and analyzed using a reflexive, comparative thematic analysis. Findings reveal that, despite differences in recruitment processes, both student and experienced job seekers report similar experiences. Across both groups, job seekers describe a demanding, often discouraging job-search process resulting in limited employer communication. In response, job seekers adopt adaptive strategies such as applying en-masse to jobs and rely on technological tools to manage the process. These adaptation strategies, in turn, contribute to higher application volumes and reinforce the conditions that shape the job market. Practical implications suggest that organizations should prioritize clear and timely communication throughout the recruitment process to improve the candidate experience and reduce unintended consequences of current hiring practices.

Keywords: Student Job Seekers, Experienced Job Seekers, Candidate Behaviours, Affective Events Theory

SYNOPSIS

Purpose

This study compares the experiences and first-person narratives of student and experienced job seekers. Using secondary, publicly available accounts of the job search process via Reddit, I qualitatively analyzed 66 job seeker experiences from 2025 to 2026. I examine how job seekers describe the conditions under which they search for employment, how they engage with the application process, and how they respond to these experiences. In doing so, the study identifies emerging patterns in candidate behaviour and highlights implications for employers navigating increasingly high-volume, low-effort job applications.

Problem of Practice

Due to distinct structural differences in student recruitment processes, it is increasingly apparent that the job search experience of student candidates may differ meaningfully from that of experienced job seekers. Student recruitment by firms is typically characterized by highly structured, cyclical hiring processes driven by post-secondary institutions' timelines (Rynes & Boudreau, 1986) and extended time horizons between offer acceptance and employment commencement (Bloomberg, 2026). In contrast, experienced job seekers typically participate in recruitment processes shaped by organizational vacancies and individually motivated job-search timelines rather than by third-party schedules, such as those of post-secondary institutions (Barber, 1998). These differences suggest that the job search process is experienced differently by students than by other job seekers, yet this distinction has received limited empirical attention in recruitment literature. Without understanding how both populations experience the job search process, employing organizations may lack the insights to accurately design recruitment campaigns and processes that engage candidates across the different job-seeking populations.

Results

The findings suggest, surprisingly, that student and experienced job seekers experience the job search process in similar ways. Specifically, both groups report a difficult-to-navigate process characterized by demanding application requirements and limited communication from employers. This experience has significant consequences for employers, as both groups' adaptive behaviours suggest that candidates respond to these conditions by relying on AI to generate application materials, following up with hiring managers and HR, and applying en-masse to a wide range of job opportunities in which they may not be competitive candidates. In turn, these behaviours increase the volume of applications organizations must screen and manage, effectively reinforcing the very conditions that produced them.

Conclusion

Current recruitment processes may encourage candidate responses that negatively impact employing organizations, via en-masse low-effort applications, lower candidate engagement in the application process, resulting in increased workload and negative candidate feelings. Employing organizations should critically examine their recruitment processes and recruiter KPIs to understand how their actions shape candidate behaviour and impact the overall job market.

Practical Relevance

As both students and experienced job seekers report submitting hundreds or even thousands of applications, it is key for employers to recognize their role in shaping the conditions of the job search market. Hiring organizations may need to adjust their practices to better meet the expectations of job seekers, in an effort to reduce administrative work and curb excess applications.

Research Question

How do student job seekers describe and interpret their recruitment experiences as compared with experienced job seekers?

Method and Design

This exploratory study employed a qualitative research design (Flick, 2014; Creswell, 2018) and utilized interpretive and reflective comparative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine and compare the online narratives of student and experienced job seekers.

Data Collection, Sample, and Analysis

Data for this research were collected from public information posted on Reddit. Specifically, data collected were first-person narratives in 3 popular job-focused subreddits in 2025 and 2026. Saturation metrics were tracked and met, resulting in 66 posts and 986 lines of data analyzed.

MAIN BODY OF THE PAPER

Practical Problem

AccidentproneAddition934 (username changed) is a 36-year-old, experienced job seeker. He is currently unemployed and taking to Reddit to voice his frustrations. He shares on Reddit's r/JobSearch that he holds an MBA, 12 years of relevant experience, and is landing interviews. However, he is being ghosted by employers after multiple rounds of interviews. He says he is completely demoralized and types, "*honestly, screw this market. The only things out there seem to be entry-level roles paying peanuts*" (**Transcript 6**). Perhaps things are better for those well-suited for entry-level roles?

Unfortunately, Mid_Allow6766 (username changed) disagrees. She, too, is encountering difficulties in securing a role, despite the support of her university career office to craft a

competitive resume, recent academic achievements, and letters of recommendation from professors. She is a 22-year-old Mechanical Engineering Graduate student and states she cannot land an entry-level internship. In fact, in the past 5 months, she has applied to over 200 roles. Her high application count is due to the fact that she isn't hearing back about the status of her candidacy. Following one promising application, she posted in r/Internships that she had been offered an interview but was having trouble scheduling it because the recruiter had not responded. As such, she never progressed further in the process and resorted to submitting additional applications elsewhere. In response, she states, *“I’m just shooting applications into the void now because anything is better than nothing”* (**Transcript 59**).

Employers are increasingly separating their recruitment campaigns for experienced job seekers from those for student job seekers, highlighting the different approaches organizations use to attract and select candidates. For example, when entering the main career page for CN, a major employer in the Canadian transportation industry, job seekers are first asked to select whether they are an experienced candidate or an ‘Early Careers’ candidate. This approach is common across many industries and employers, including Amazon US where job seekers select from ‘Student Opportunities’, ‘Hourly Jobs’ or ‘AI Careers’. These differences are mirrored in many organizations’ recruitment team structures, with separate teams handling campus recruitment versus experienced hiring.

Student candidates are not a new population of study, yet they are frequently treated as representative of all job seekers rather than recognized as a distinct population. Researchers have long critiqued the disproportionate use of students in recruitment research (Barber et al., 1994; Rynes et al, 1997). Specifically, Barber (1998) noted that “virtually all empirical tests of

expectancy theory have been conducted in college placement settings,” and Chapman et al. (2005) commented that their meta-analysis may have been limited by the prevalence of student-focused studies. As such, the central research question for this study is: *How do student job seekers describe and interpret their recruitment experiences as compared with experienced job seekers?* By addressing this question, the study seeks to deepen understanding of the unique experience of the early talent recruitment process and contribute to theoretical development regarding how different job seeker populations navigate the recruitment process and their ultimate job choice decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early Talent Acquisition

The size of the student job seeker population and the structured, cyclical nature of campus recruitment offer significant advantages for empirical research (Rynes & Boudreau, 1986). Despite these advantages, few researchers have explicitly examined early talent acquisition as a distinct recruitment process. While some studies have explored related topics, such as job choice dissonance and job choice (Lawler et al., 1975; Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1971), these works are now dated and do not fully reflect the complexities of modern campus hiring. For example, Rynes & Boudreau’s (1986) research suggests that employing organizations do not keep detailed records of their campus-hiring activities, in stark contrast to recent practitioner literature, which describes a highly organized practice driven by data insights (Ellis, 2022; Bloomberg, 2026).

Campus recruitment, now referred to as Early Talent Acquisition in industry, typically involves close coordination between employing organizations and post-secondary institutions

(Moss-Pech, 2021). Activities often include career fairs, networking events, sponsorship of student competitions, interview preparation workshops, speaker series and realistic job previews, often expanding over months during the academic school term (Ellis, 2022; Daoust, 2020). This approach to recruitment is described as “conveyor-belt style recruitment,” in which a steady flow of students is hired year after year (Moss-Pech, 2021). Although these activities provide multiple opportunities for employers to engage with potential candidates, determining the most effective mix of recruitment strategies remains a challenge for organizations seeking to attract and secure student talent efficiently (McCracken et al., 2016). Within these systems, students are frequently encouraged to engage with multiple employers and apply to all roles for which they are eligible (eg., University of Manitoba, 2025). The result is an intensive and often competitive, event-focused recruitment environment distinct from experienced-hire recruitment practices.

Campus recruitment is also not limited to post-graduation roles. The growth of work-integrated learning programs, such as required co-operative work terms for academic credit and summer internships, often supported by government funding, reflects the unique nature of early talent recruitment (eg., CEWIL, 2025). Funding for employers and the expectation that students earn work experience during their academic career introduce additional layers of coordination and administration to what was once a relatively straightforward recruitment transaction between a job seeker and an employer. Now, employers work closely with university recruiting centers, professors and other third parties to secure talent for their workforce (Smith & Green, 2021).

Experienced Talent Acquisition

In contrast, experienced job seekers navigate recruitment processes that are more decentralized and demand-driven, often characterized by continuous job-search activities,

less-structured timelines, and fewer institutional supports guiding the process (Barber, 1998). Experienced job seekers enter their job search with more prior work experience, defined career paths and established professional networks to leverage in their job search (Harris, 2026; Wanberg et al. 2000). Further, experienced job seekers may be impacted by economic and financial pressures, need to support family, career transitions or periods of unemployment, which may change the urgency of their job search process (Wanberg et al. 2000).

Changes in the Job Seeker Experience

Recruitment research has traditionally focused on outcomes such as applicant attraction, job choice, and organizational fit, with less attention to how candidates experience the job search process (Dineen et al., 2022; Chapman et al., 2005). At the same time, research has emphasized organizational impacts, including early predictions that recruitment campaigns would, in the 2020s, be defined by large pools of unaligned candidates (Uggerslev et al., 2012). While these studies highlight increasing complexity in recruitment processes, they do not fully account for how these conditions shape the day-to-day experience of job seekers.

For example, one growing topic in practitioner literature is ghosting (Richard-Craven, 2024; DePaul, 2021). Despite practitioner discourse, the topic has received limited attention in management literature. Drawing on Kay & Courtice's (2022) definition of ghosting in a personal relationship setting, I propose that ghosting, in the context of recruitment, is the abrupt end of communication from employers, effectively signalling the end of the candidacy of the job seeker. Earlier research suggests that such communication breakdowns in recruitment processes were relatively rare. For example, Powell and Goulet (1996) report that only five out of 194 applicants did not receive formal communication after campus interviews. This stands in clear contrast to

the widespread reports of ghosting observed in practitioner-focused literature, suggesting that the job seeker experience may have fundamentally changed since the foundational recruitment work of Barber (1998).

Affinity Spaces

Affinity spaces, such as online forums (Gee, 2007), provide a safe setting in which individuals openly discuss their recruitment experiences, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of job seekers. Affinity spaces such as Reddit offer anonymity, emotional safety, and peer validation, and job seekers widely use them to make sense of difficult employment decisions. Reddit is a popular social networking website with more than 100,000 online communities, called subreddits (Reddit Inc., 2025). However, these platforms remain largely absent from management and career development research, despite evidence that online peer communities shape individuals' decision-making and perceptions of norms (e.g., Andalibi et al., 2018). This online community provides a strong platform for collecting first-hand narratives from both student and experienced job seekers. To examine how both student and experienced job seekers describe and interpret their job-search processes, this study draws on first-person narratives shared in online affinity spaces. Reddit provides a unique setting where candidates openly document their experiences, offering candid reflections on the job search process.

Theoretical Background

Affective events theory suggests that workplace actions and experiences trigger emotional responses in individuals, which then shape their subsequent behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Based on this well-accepted theory, students and experienced job seekers should experience and react to their recruitment processes markedly differently, as organizations

treat these two groups differently through their recruitment strategies. Although job seekers are not yet employees, they interpret and react to organizational actions during recruitment and selection, and therefore experience specific emotions and behavioural intentions in response to these interactions.

In the context of this study, recruitment and selection interactions such as the application process, communication from recruiters and interviews can be understood as affective events. Job seekers will interpret these positive or negative interactions with an employing organization as signals which, in turn, generate an emotional response. These emotional responses then influence how job seekers engage in subsequent job-search activities. As employing organizations often differentiate between student and experienced candidates in their recruitment and selection strategies, affective events theory would suggest that these groups may be exposed to different types of affective events and therefore exhibit different emotional and behavioural responses.

Research has used affective events theory to explore job satisfaction and turnover intentions at the individual level (eg., Mitchell, 2011; Craig et al., 2013). However, less attention has been paid to how the theory applies across groups experiencing different organizational processes. In this study, affective events theory is used to examine how exposure to job search related events differs between student and experienced job seekers, enabling a comparison of how each group interprets and describes their respective recruitment processes.

METHODOLOGY

This study provides an overview of the differences in the job search experiences of student job seekers and experienced job seekers. From a reflectivist perspective (Flick, 2014;

Creswell, 2018), I conducted a thematic content comparison analysis of the online narratives of student job seekers with those of experienced job seekers.

Data Collection

The data for this research consist of job seekers' first-person narratives collected via Reddit, a social media platform where users openly share personal experiences. Reddit was selected because it provides access to candid, first-person narratives of the job search process without organizational influence. The data, job seekers' posts and subsequent responses were collected passively via extraction in the Winter and Spring of 2026 from the social media platform Reddit. The collection of public information on Reddit has been chosen for its relative ease of access and collection (Rocha-Silva et al., 2024). Further, the use of this secondary data did not require ethics approval as the information was in the public domain (Tri-Council Panel on Research Ethics, 2022). While management research has not yet adopted Reddit for widespread data collection, it is widely used in other fields, such as healthcare and education (e.g., Proferes et al., 2021; Na & Staudt Willet, 2024). Further, extensive best practices for utilizing Reddit data for empirical research have been developed (Reagle, 2020), which I have implemented in my data preparation.

The following subreddits (focused community groups on Reddit) were used to collect data: r/Internships, r/GetEmployed and r/Jobs. As seen in *Appendix I*, these subreddits were also selected for their rules and moderation. In these subreddits, community-appointed moderators review and approve all posts to ensure alignment with the community's overall goals and standards. As approval is not necessarily instant, only posts that were deemed relevant via inclusion/exclusion criteria that had a positive score via the Reddit voting feature of 'upvotes' were selected.

Boundary Conditions

To start, I identified the 10 top posts (by engagement score, using the top filter) from each subreddit over the last 12 months that met my inclusion criteria. In r/jobsearch, I created a separate Boolean search to pull the top 5 from each, a student perspective and an experienced job seeker perspective, for a total of 30 posts for the initial round of data collection.

My inclusion and exclusion criteria include a recency check, filtered by post age to ensure these posts were published between March 2025 and March 2026, and meta tags indicating geography (North America). When meta tags are not available, I relied on self-identification statements or subreddit context. These conditions ensured the data is timely, relevant and truly representative of each study population. Posts were filtered out if they were image-focused or video (i.e., just a title and a photo or video without text in the post body). Further, only first-person narratives were included. Examples of excluded posts include a husband seeking job-search advice for his wife and a student sharing a story about their father's recent interview. Further, the selected content focused on the job search process and excluded narratives about onboarding or work situations. Further, I excluded posts from hiring managers in the student subreddits or those that seemed to be self-promotion. For example, there were a few posts about hiring managers complaining about student conduct in interviews and folks self-promoting their blog or social media accounts.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis. First, posts were read multiple times to achieve familiarity with the dataset. During this phase, initial observations were jotted down in the linked Memo feature of NVivo. During this phase, two narratives of experienced job seekers were removed and replaced with

subsequently rated posts on r/getemployed. Upon closer review, these posts were not clearly aligned with narratives or discussions of the job search process.

Following the initial review, I started my first coding round. Coding was conducted in NVivo to categorize meaningful text segments related to the job-seeker's experiences. Codes for student job-search experiences were mirrored for experienced job-seekers and vice versa to clearly categorize the differences and similarities in both job-seeking populations. This facilitated the subsequent comparative analysis portion of the data analysis process.

To support the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis, saturation metrics were tracked throughout the coding process using the approach proposed by Guest et al. (2020). Specifically, the number of new codes identified in each additional set of posts (ie runs) was recorded and compared with the initial base dataset to assess when little new information was being generated. Initial batch was 30 narratives: 10 from each subreddit, representative 15 narratives from each population. Subsequent posts were added in runs of 12 (6 posts per population and 4 from each subreddit), and the proportion of new information introduced in each run was calculated. Following Guest et al. (2020), a threshold of $\leq 5\%$ new information was used to indicate that thematic saturation had been reached, as shown in *Table 1* below. One additional run was added and coded for validation in saturation. This resulted in 66 posts with 984 lines of data.

Table 2. Saturation Table - Student Versus Experienced Hire Experiences

Population Batch	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Post # in Batch	1 - 15	16-30	31-36	37-42	43 - 48	49 - 54	55-60	61-66
New Themes in Post Batch	23	11	2	2	0	1	1	0
New Themes in Run	34		4		1		1	
% Change over Base	-		12%		3%		3%	
					Saturation met		Saturation validation	

FINDINGS

Based on observations in practice and affective events theory, we would expect student and experienced job seekers to report different experiences. Instead, both groups describe a very similar job search process. This is a surprising finding, given how many organizations differentiate between their experienced and student job-seekers in their recruitment and selection processes. The thematic comparative analysis identified several common patterns across the two groups, organized as follows. First, candidates in both groups took to Reddit to reflect on their current circumstances and the general state of the job market. Second, they describe the demanding job-search process, including the significant effort required to complete each application and a lack of communication or feedback from employers at every stage of this selection process. Finally, candidates discuss the strategies they adopted to remain competitive under these conditions, as summarized in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Coding Structure Between Student and Experienced Job Seekers

Concept (Aggregate)	Second Order Code	Illustrative Quotes (First Order Concepts)	Population	Source
Reflection on Current	Experiencing Emotional Strain	I am gonna laugh at it because if I don't I will cry.	Student	Transcript 11
		Biggest piece of advice: if you want to cry out of frustration. do it but then let it go and keep applying.	Student	Transcript 31
		I've completely spilled into a state of depression I have bills to pay and kids.	Experienced	Transcript 25
		I've applied to hundreds and hundreds of jobs and have gone through so many interviews and even final rounds but I'm at the point where I'm completely mentally, emotionally and spiritually drained. [...] year ago, I was a whole different person, I was successful, young, ambitious and had places to be but now, I don't even recognize myself anymore.	Experienced	Transcript 52
	Showing Disdain for the Market	This job market? A bloodbath. And it doesn't matter if you were a hotshot back home—the game is different here.	Student	Transcript 43
		As we all know, the job market is awful right now.	Student	Transcript 41
		WTF is going on?! We have a job market problem that is NOT being accurately reflected in the monthly jobs report.	Experienced	Transcript 34
		Job seeking in the current market is more competitive than ever, and it can take a real toll on your confidence	Experienced	Transcript 54
	Wanting to Give Up	Now I've reached burnt out point where I can't send out more applications and emails. Anyone else in the same boat?	Student	Transcript 56
		It's been discouraging putting in so much effort without seeing results, and I'm starting to wonder if I should keep on applying or just accept the fact I won't get an internship.	Student	Transcript 58
		I'm starting to have difficulty getting up in the morning because every day I wake up to more rejection emails and I kind of don't want to keep waking up if that's the case. Feeling very empty.	Experienced	Transcript 37
		I can't keep doing this. So I'm done. Maybe I'll try again in the future, but for now I don't want to	Experienced	Transcript 53

		participate in a game that is making me lose hair and keep me up at night.		
Navigating the Job Search Process	Managing Demanding Application Processes	Honestly, Indeed and LinkedIn felt like a black hole. You submit a resume and never hear back, especially when there are 200+ applicants on a post that went live yesterday. Even after uploading your resume, platforms like Workday make you retype every word. (Why is that still a thing?)	Student	Transcript 16
		Treat [Handshake] profile like a second resume, set alerts, prioritize school events + roles you clearly qualify for, follow up after fairs	Student	Transcript 34
		You spend hours building a solid CV, then every application wants you to re-type the same info into clunky forms and answer pointless questions that don't even seem to matter.	Experienced	Transcript 27
		i've been treating this whole process like a second job. wake up, tweak the resume, send applications, write cover letters that feel like love letters to companies that will never write back, practice fake smiles for interviews that never get scheduled. rinse and repeat.	Experienced	Transcript 51
	Being Ghosted/Ignored	THE MOST disrespectful thing EEEVERRRR is the fact that so many companies and organizations will go radio SILENT on your application when you've spent literal months crafting it.	Student	Transcript 15
		I applied to about 600 jobs in total, but the result was clear: 0 replies, not even one rejection letter.	Student	Transcript 32
		You get through multiple rounds, and then complete radio silence.	Experienced	Transcript 6
		Applied to lots of jobs - got ONE call back, when I went to return the call (3x) always got VM and they never called me back...	Experienced	Transcript 35
Candidate Survival Strategies	Relying on AI	Polished my interview answers daily using ChatGPT until it achieved full memory.	Student	Transcript 14
		ChatGPT saved me hours, but only after I figured out how to use it correctly. I'd paste the job description + my resume, ask for a tailored version, then give it back to ChatGPT for feedback, asking "Does this align with the role?" I revised over and over again until I got something that felt right.	Student	Transcript 16

		I've even been trying to work smarter about it. been using smartapplier ai to help organize and send out applications, which definitely saves time. but even with that, the silence can get loud and sad.	Experienced	Transcript 51
		This is truly a numbers game, try to apply to 20 jobs every single day, use AI to tailor your resume, eliminate any subscriptions like LinkedIn premium (they're are worthless) and practice your interviewing skills.	Experienced	Transcript 26
	Applying en Masse	I stopped counting at 175 but I probably submitted about 400 applications. Over the past month I was just applying to anything and everything.	Student	Transcript 55
		Earlier this month, I started applying to everything because it's taken friends in my program, and elsewhere, 6-12 months to find a job. I applied for 20+ jobs since the start of August.	Student	Transcript 41
		Well, it's been a year and 600+ applications later and I have scored... 1 interview.	Experienced	Transcript 21
		I've been applying to jobs since late February. Every day M-F I've managed to apply to anywhere between 20-30 positions per day.	Experienced	Transcript 50

Job Seeker Reflection

Overall, job seekers provided detailed descriptions of the conditions under which they conducted their job search. Common comments included the state of the economy, how they were faring compared to other job seekers, and the emotional strain and pressure they experienced during their job search. For example, one experienced job seeker described their situation as follows: "Savings have dwindled and there just isn't much time left before I can't pay the rent." (**Transcript 21**). Similarly, one student echoed, "*I am currently very desperate for money and im looking for any sort of jobs ive applied everywhere in person and online and I haven't even gotten an interview what am I doing wrong?*" (**Transcript 2**). Job seekers across both populations appeared discouraged and frustrated, and sought or provided advice on managing emotions and discouragement in the competitive job market. One student job seeker

shared the following advice: *“biggest piece of advice: if you want to cry out of frustration. do it but then let it go and keep applying”*. **(Transcript 31)**.

Lack of Communication

Both groups also described, in depth, their job search process and the lack of communication received from employers. In sharing their routines and best practices, both groups of job seekers described lengthy application processes, multiple rounds of interviews, and how they were ghosted by employers. From a student perspective, one job seeker shared, *“I’ve had dozens of interviews, I’ve written god knows how many cover letters, I’ve applied to so many jobs not even remotely related to my field, I’ve been ghosted about a million times.”* **(Transcript 4)**. Experiences were the same with experienced job seekers, including the general observation that, *“like so many others on here, I was sending hundreds of resumes and getting little to no response.”* **(Transcript 5)**.

Many job seekers reported feeling like a number or of little importance because the amount of effort they invested in the job search was met with silence from organizations. One student shared the following situation: *“its so INFURIATING OMGG like why can’t you just email me a simple 2 sentence rejection letter?? You asked me for 3 recommendations, my official academic transcript, a cover letter, and a resume. WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DONT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO REACH OUT AND LET US KNOW IF WE WEREN’T PICKED ITS THE BARE FREAKING MINIMUM.”* **(Transcript 15)**.

Candidate Adaptation Strategies

In response, job seekers then ‘played the game’ by relying on artificial intelligence (specifically ChatGPT and Claude) to generate resumes, cover letters and responses to interview

questions and reporting applying to jobs in the hundreds, including one student stating they sent in 1,870 applications in 18 months **(Transcript 17)**. One experienced job seeker echoed that they've "*submitted thousands of job applications*" **(Transcript 29)**. Candidates in both groups also reported giving up, acknowledging they sent in low-effort applications and to any role in which they could find, whether it aligned with their skills or not. The general advice being touted across all three subreddits was that recruitment was a numbers game, and if employers showed little respect for their time, then it was perfectly ok to show the same with low-effort applications **(Transcript 26)**. As one student stated, "*it's a numbers game*" **(Transcript 34)**.

Additional candidate adaptation strategies also significantly increased recruiters' workload. Often, these actions were framed as 'playing the game' and as creative ways to connect with or monitor Recruiters, despite potential unethical actions. For example, one student used AI and online tools to monitor recruiter actions on their application: "*I used Mailtrack to know when recruiters read my emails and followed up right away – This one's kinda sneaky but effective. I used Mailtrack so I could tell when an Amazon recruiter actually opened my email. Every time I saw they read it, I'd follow up or reply again within the same day, while I was still fresh in their mind. I made sure every email had my resume, GitHub, and my portfolio link so they had everything they needed to check me out*" **(Transcript 45)**. Similarly, experienced job seekers used online tools to increase their communication with recruiters, despite these emails not being publicly available. One job seeker shared, "*this week things have gotten so empty I started cold-emailing hiring managers about positions I applied to by reverse-engineering their email addresses.*" **(Transcript 37)**.

Ultimately, the experiences of the two groups of job seekers reflected one another. While reported processes differed, such as the use of tools like Handshake for students and networking

for experienced job seekers, both groups encountered high levels of ghosting, felt worried about their future, and expressed disdain for the process. In turn, they applied en masse to any opportunity, trying to increase their chances amid worries about dwindling funds and future opportunities. One student pleaded, *“I am currently very desperate for money and im looking for any sort of jobs ive applied everywhere in person and online and I havent even gotten an interview what am I doing wrong?”* (Transcript 2). This worry and adaptation strategy was echoed by an experienced job seeker who shared, *“I’ve been stuck in the job search for some time. And I can’t really seem to find a way out. I have good experience in my field. On paper, I tick all the boxes. But I don’t hear back from anything. I’ve been applying everywhere.”* (Transcript 28).

DISCUSSION & LESSONS FOR PRACTICE

This study examined how student and experienced job seekers describe and interpret their recruitment experiences. While no key differences between the two populations emerged, the findings demonstrate the phenomenon of ghosting and job seekers' responses, as reflected in the prevalence of low-effort, high-volume applications. Based on the findings, I offer five lessons for practice to address the rising number of low-effort applications from job seekers. These lessons emphasize the role organizations play in shaping the job-search environment and highlight opportunities to improve both the candidate experience and recruitment outcomes. These lessons include acknowledging the risk of no or low communication to candidates, redesigning or restricting the application portal to focus recruitment efforts on target populations,

- 1) **Communicate With Intent:** Employers must recognize that failing to acknowledge or respond to candidates is not neutral. Candidates interpret a lack of communication as a signal about their status and value, which can negatively influence both their perception

of the organization and their subsequent job-search behaviour. Even minimal communication, such as automated rejection messages, may reduce candidate frustration and discourage low-effort, high-volume applications. As candidates are adapting by trying to locate hidden email addresses to follow up and reach out to recruiters via LinkedIn and other social media platforms, clear candidate codes of conduct can be developed that restrict communication to official channels (such as two-way communication via an applicant tracking system), or candidates can forfeit their candidacy. This could eliminate unnecessary communication with recruiters while also providing transparent selection criteria for candidates.

- 2) **Restrict Application Portals to Target Profiles:** Employers should anticipate and respond to the rise of high-volume application behaviour. As job seekers increasingly treat job search as a “numbers game,” and apply to roles with little connection to their own knowledge, skills and abilities, organizations must adapt their recruitment strategies accordingly. This may include rethinking reliance on volume-driven recruitment strategies and investing in more targeted approaches to candidate attraction. This research suggests that recruiters are seeing a rise in applications. Perhaps access to application portals can be restricted to candidates who have previously engaged with the organization via in-person recruitment events or through a pre-screening activity, to ensure applications are focused on target profiles. This may mean fewer online recruitment activities and more focus on community and event-based recruitment strategies.
- 3) **Screen for Authenticity:** Organizations must acknowledge the growing role of AI in candidate applications and subsequent selection activities. Job seekers are actively using

generative tools to produce resumes, cover letters, and interview responses. Rather than attempting to eliminate this behaviour, employers may benefit from adapting evaluation methods to better assess candidate fit and authenticity. To reduce time spent on a candidate, it may be prudent to move up some validation activities, such as background checks, earlier in the selection process from the typical post-offer timeline followed by North American employers. Further, interviews may be best conducted in person to limit the use of AI in virtual or prerecorded interviews.

- 4) **Review Recruiter KPIs.** Recruitment practices that prioritize volume over engagement may inadvertently exacerbate the very challenges recruiters face, including large applicant pools and lower application quality. Addressing these issues requires moving from transactional, quantitative-focused KPIs to more intentional, responsive candidate-engagement strategies. Having recruiter success tied to the number of applications received or the number of screening calls conducted is not strategic. Tying success to candidate engagement, source of hire and conversion rates may be more beneficial for both recruiter workload and candidate experience.
- 5) **Mental Health Support During Onboarding:** This research documented a concerning level of discouragement and distress among job seekers in online affinity spaces. Many candidates describe feeling ignored and increasingly hopeless. For some individuals, the job search is emotionally taxing in ways that may extend beyond employment outcomes and into broader well-being. Mental health support is often used as an inducement in recruitment campaigns; however, this may require even more investment to ensure the new employee is engaged and emotionally well. Early access to Employee Assistance Programs, reduced waiting periods for mental health benefits, and in-organization

workshops as part of onboarding may help reduce some of the lingering negative feelings job seekers express during the job search process and help ensure new employees start their employment mentally sound and supported.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY

This study makes several contributions to recruitment research by reconceptualizing job market conditions not simply as antecedents of candidate behaviour, but also as outcomes that are partially shaped by candidates' responses to recruitment practices. Drawing on affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), this study advances understanding of the job search process by demonstrating how job-search-related events generate emotional responses that shape subsequent candidate behaviours.

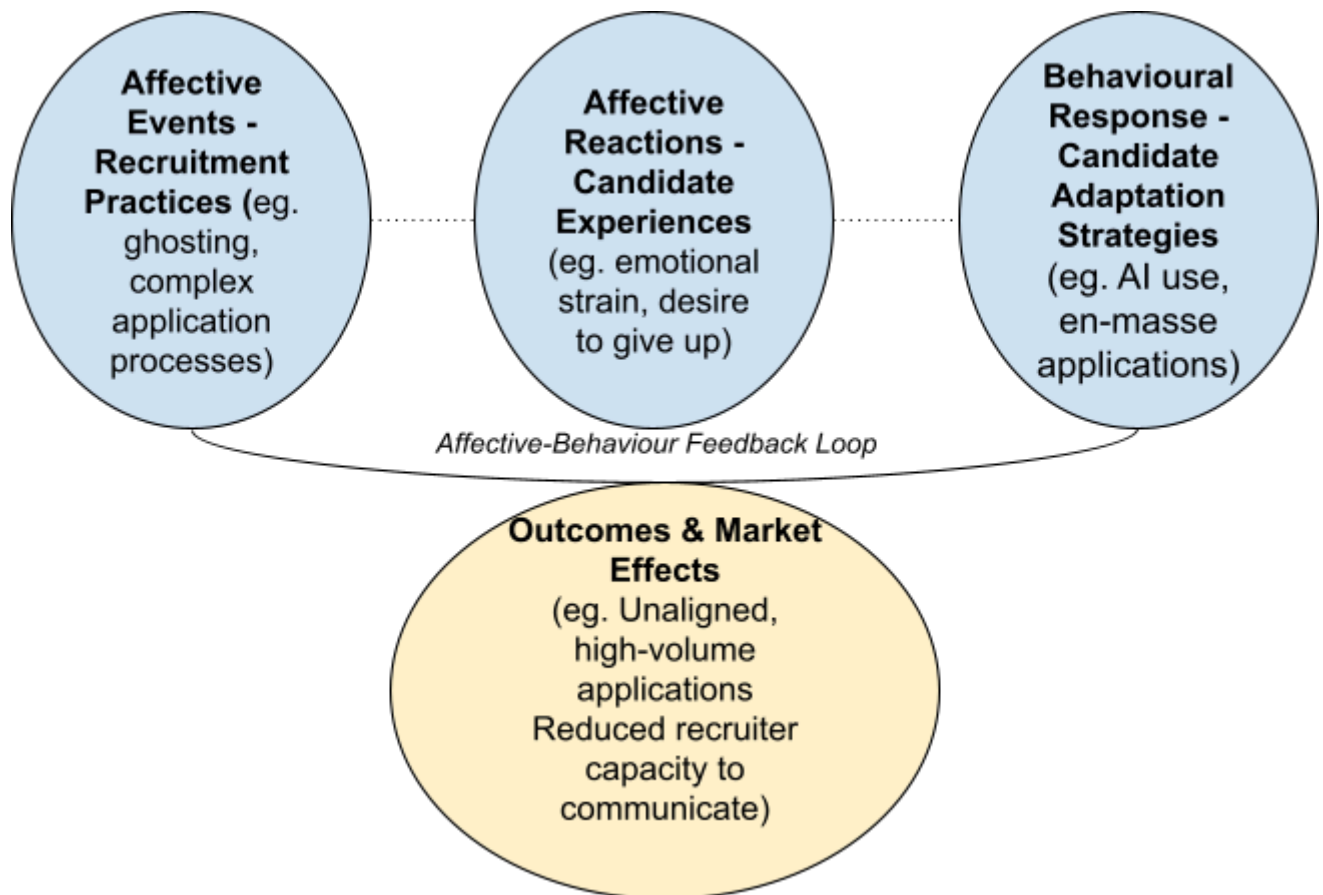
While affective events theory would suggest differences between the two populations due to structural and temporal differences in how they search, apply and compete for roles, the findings indicate that these differences do not translate into meaningfully different interpretations or behaviours across groups. Interestingly, across both student and experienced job seekers, repeated exposure to common job seeker events, such as a lengthy and complicated application process and what we define as ghosting, elicits strong emotional responses, including discouragement and emotional exhaustion. These affective reactions, in turn, shape how candidates engage with their subsequent job-search activities.

These findings suggest that candidates actively respond to recruiter signals and market conditions via affect-driven adaptation strategies. In particular, candidates report high levels of ghosting, which shapes how they approach subsequent applications to other organizations, often with lower effort and misalignment. Narratives state that this was an appropriate response as it

demonstrated the same level of care that recruiters tend to show candidates. Candidates also describe the job search as a “numbers game” and report using technological tools, such as AI, to increase their capacity to submit applications. In turn, this contributes to a higher volume of applications for recruiters to review during selection activities, reducing their ability to communicate effectively with candidates and creating a feedback loop. These findings reflect the affective event theory, where employing organizational-led events (e.g., ghosting) triggers affective reactions (e.g., discouragement), which in turn shape behavioural responses (e.g., applying en masse with low-effort applications).

Second, this study extends affective events theory by demonstrating that these affect-driven behaviours do not remain at the individual level; instead, they aggregate across job seekers, shaping the dynamics of the broader job market. The rise of low-effort, high-volume applications, alongside a more disengaged and desperate applicant pool, may undermine efforts to attract a targeted and qualified set of candidates. As application volumes increase, recruiters may have less capacity to meaningfully evaluate applicants or communicate with them, reinforcing the very conditions that contribute to candidate disengagement in the first place. In this way, recruitment practices intended to broaden applicant pools may inadvertently reduce the quality of interaction between organizations and candidates. Taken together, these findings suggest a self-reinforcing recruitment cycle. Please see *Figure 1.* below for a visual of this dynamic.

Figure 1: Affective Events Shaping Job Market



LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The use of Reddit as a data source introduces several limitations. First, Reddit discussions may include bots or AI-generated narratives that mimic first-person experiences (McClellan, 2025). With the increased availability of generative AI tools, the possibility of fabricated narratives must be acknowledged. To mitigate this risk, posts that appear inauthentic or inconsistent with typical user discourse have been removed from the dataset during screening. Examples of this include a post that, upon closer review, was an undisclosed advertisement for an artificial intelligence interview-coaching application.

Second, Reddit users represent a self-selecting population, which may introduce bias. Individuals who choose to share their experiences online may differ from those who do not publicly discuss their job search experience. As such, it is worth acknowledging that these narratives may skew toward bias toward one population over another. For example, it has been reported that men use Reddit at higher rates than women (Pew Research Center, 2025).

Third, it is worth acknowledging the phenomenon referred to in online circles as shitposting. Shitposting is a post in online affinity spaces like Reddit where the poster intentionally distracts from the main conversation or narrative with low-effort, mocking or flustering content (Cavanaugh, 2021). However, recent discourse suggests that shitposting is beneficial to study within the context of public pedagogy, and there is merit in examining such posts (Woods, 2023). For the purposes of this study, I excluded shitposting posts due to the complexity of deciphering their meaning or intent.

Future research is recommended to validate the generalizability of both the student and experienced job-seekers' experiences. As data were collected passively from Reddit, the use of semi-structured interviews may help uncover differences between the two populations through

probing and clarification. Further, it is suggested that researchers empirically verify the claims that ghosting is a growing phenomenon that negatively impacts job seekers. We also acknowledge that the landscape for both experienced and student job seekers is ever-changing, including unemployment rates. High unemployment rates, for example, may make it more difficult to secure an aligned job opportunity. At the time the data were collected, the March 2026 unemployment rate in the USA was 4.3% (US Department of Labor, 2026), and in Canada, the February 2026 rate was 6.7% (Statistics Canada, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how student and experienced job seekers describe and interpret their recruitment experiences, in order to inform practice to better support the development of unique, population-focused recruitment practices. Despite differences in the two groups, specifically the structural and temporal aspects of their recruitment and selection processes, there were no notable differences in how job seekers navigate or describe their job search experience.

However, the research reveals a concerning phenomenon: the ghosting of candidates. This study not only advances the understanding of ghosting in recruitment and offers a definition of the construct, it also explores the prevalence of the phenomenon. Both student and experienced job seekers report a frequent lack of communication from employers after applying and/or interviewing for a position. This exploratory research suggests that organizations then suffer the effects of their own unintended signals to candidates, with increased applications from

low-effort and misaligned candidates, thereby reducing the window of opportunity for meaningful engagement.

For practitioners, this means that improving the candidate experience goes beyond simply targeting different talent groups. It also requires changes to how recruitment processes are designed and managed more broadly. Small changes, such as timely and clear communication, restricted application portals and candidate codes of conduct, may reduce some of the behaviours that are currently creating additional strain for both candidates and recruiters. Further, attention may need to be focused on the new hire's emotional well-being. Waiving waiting periods for access to mental health benefits or providing mental health workshops during onboarding may help reduce the negative effects of a difficult-to-manage recruitment process.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Major Job Search, Candidate Focused Subreddits on Reddit				
Subreddit	Weekly Visitors	Focus Type	Subreddit Description & Purpose	Moderators
r/internships	61K	Student job seeker focused	Discussions about navigating internships and co-ops. Everything about the process and experience from application to full time offer.	3
r/getemployed	59K	Experienced Job Seeker Focused	A place dedicated to giving and finding job-related advice, be it for resumes, job applications or career paths.	7
r/jobsearch	92K	Mixed (students + experienced)	The subreddit for discussing job hunting strategies and tips, hacks, or anything related to career and job search. Ranting is fine too, we all know job searching is soul-crushing. If you are tired of seeing ads targeting job seekers, you can come here for a	5

			change. We are in this together. Please read the rules before posting - Job Listings and directly soliciting jobs is not allowed.	
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