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Beyond Generation Jobless: How Recent University Graduates Are Finding Meaningful Employment

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Beyond Generation Jobless: How Recent University Graduates Are Finding Meaningful

Employment

by

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Abstract

Obtaining meaningful employment is a common goal for university graduates, however, the school-to-work transition is an increasingly tumultuous time for young job seekers. Currently, limited research exists from the perspective of recent graduates about how they navigated the process of finding employment and, particularly, why some are successful in this search, while others are not. To address this gap in the literature, the present study incorporated social constructivist principles to explore incidents associated with successes and struggles among new-entrants to the workforce in finding meaningful employment. Using the exploratory method of the Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, eight meaningfully employed recent university graduates identified incidents that helped, hindered, or would have helped them successfully transition from school-to-work. The data analysis process resulted in 13 categories: (a) academic experience, (b) occupational experience, (c) personal learning, (d) perceived experience, (e) network, (f) networking, (g) concern, (h) control, (i) curiosity, (j) confidence, (k) unexpected opportunity, (l) labour market conditions, and (m) logistical skills. The researcher considered these findings within the context of existing literature, presenting both implications for key stakeholders involved in the school-to-work transition process as well as recommendations for future research.

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To my research participants and all of the other recent graduates who are carving out their career path and fighting for a place in this world. Your stories, struggles, and triumphs continue to inspire me. May your experiences bring hope to a generation that desperately needs it.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter presents an overview of the study by positioning it against a backdrop of previous literature and current contexts in the fields of career development, vocational psychology, and the broader societal context. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the research topic and related issues of focus, providing a foundation for the rationale and purpose of the present study. Next, I introduce my positionality and experiences related to the topic, then discuss potential biases and assumptions that may inform the research. The chapter concludes with a summary of this introduction and a brief outline of what is to follow in the remaining chapters of the thesis.

Background to the Topic of School-to-Work Transitions

Until recently, an expectation existed that the generation of students currently graduating university would experience the luxury of economic stability (Foot & Stoffman, 2001), such that integration into the labour market would occur in a seamless manner. However, the Great Recession of 2008 brought extreme economic decline to the country, with the Canadian job market still struggling to rebound. Although unemployment rates have, for the most part, decreased since this time, youth unemployment has stagnated and even increased in recent years (Bell & Benes, 2012). Despite the fact that obtaining relevant employment is a common goal for university graduates, these individuals are increasingly facing the prospects of unemployment.

Recent statistics show that nearly one in five people living in Canada between the ages of 15-24 were unable to find work in 2013, which was more than double the rate of unemployment in higher age groups that same year (The Lang & O'Leary Exchange, 2014). The latest report from Statistics Canada (2017) suggests that these elevated unemployment rates continue to persist, with an increase in employment of less than 1% for this age group over the past 12

months. Although it has been generally assumed that post-secondary education provides benefits in terms of employment prospects, this is not the case for all university graduates. De Broucker (2005) found many individuals with a post-secondary degree involved in work that did not align with their education or career goals. For example, 40% of employed 25 to 34 year olds in Canada with a university diploma or degree are overqualified for the work they are doing (Lao & Scholz, 2015), employed in jobs that are either low paying, part-time, or that do not require post-secondary training. According to the Certified General Accountants Association of Canada, despite the recent increase in highly educated youth, the proportion of this population employed in low-skilled occupations has remained unchanged over the past 20 years (Ariganello, 2012). Given these elevated rates of unemployment and underemployment among university graduates, the media and labour market researchers have started to refer to this population as "generation jobless" and "generation screwed" (The National, 2014).

Study Rationale

It is clear from the literature that a gap has emerged in expectations about how a post-secondary education benefits the future careers of students, and the realities of Canadian economy. Although most students and employers view higher education as a necessary pre-requisite to succeeding in the labour market (Wilensky, 2007), nearly half of college educated workers graduate and become employed in an area outside of their field, according to a national survey conducted by CareerBuilder (2013). With up to 80% of the work created in Alberta over the next 10 years requiring a post-secondary credential (Council of Alberta University Students, 2011), there is a critical gap between the needs of the economy and the pre-employment outcomes of recent graduates. Whereas the demand for a more highly educated workforce may

necessitate post-secondary training in many cases, it does not guarantee that recent graduates will find employment in their area of study.

The disparities between university education and employment leads to a myriad of obvious issues in the professional lives of university graduates; however, both unemployment and underemployment are also associated with a variety of personal concerns. Despite the psychological risks, occupational challenges, and performance-related consequences of economic inactivity being commonly understood, how new-entrants to the workforce are navigating the process of finding employment is largely unknown, and particularly why some graduates are successful in this search while others are not. For example, Ng and Burke (2006) identified a need for more research on the expectations of university students regarding work. Specifically, the job search processes of recent graduates, from their perspectives, is typically absent in the literature, which instead tends to favour the views of employers, universities, and government (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011; Tymon, 2013).

Statement of Research Purpose

In an effort to address the identified gaps in previous research, the purpose of the present study was to explore, from the perspective of recent graduates, incidents that promoted and impeded their ability to find meaningful employment in the current economic climate. Findings will aid in the identification of critical events and influences that provide recent university graduates with the necessary means to successfully become employed in their chosen field. A better understanding of their perspectives as new-entrants to the workforce can be realized through an analysis of how these individuals have approached the job search process. The identification of helping and hindering incidents, as well as wish list (WL) items related to the process of finding employment, will ultimately allow for students and university graduates alike

to make more informed career decisions, contributing to their professional development, occupational success, and psychological wellbeing. This knowledge will also serve to inform counselling interventions and post-secondary training, with practical implications for how practitioners and educators approach the career development process with students who are transitioning from post-secondary education to the workforce.

Research Question and Key Terms

In order to satisfy the purpose of this research as outlined above, the following question has been designed to guide the present study: What are the attributions made about experienced and perceived success or struggles associated with the job search process by recent university graduates who have found meaningful employment?

For the purposes of this research, the present study considered any student who graduated from a degree-granting educational institution within the past two years to be a recent university graduate (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011). Since the definition of meaningful employment is presumably more subjective, a definition was adopted that aligned with the work of Judge, Heller, and Klinger (2008), such that the present study defined meaningful employment as any work deemed to be personally fulfilling. To meet the criteria of being meaningfully employed and therefore considered eligible to participate in the present study, recent graduates had to have been working in an area directly related to their field of study (i.e., employed in a job they would otherwise not qualified to perform had they not earned their degree).

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Theoretical Framework

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To reflect an understanding and appreciation of the changing labour market, the researcher developed the present study under the framework of constructivist theories and, most

notably, Systems Theory Framework (McMahon & Patton, 1995) and Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). Constructivist theories responded to the changing ways in which work was structured. In stark contrast to the preceding century, the economic downturn of the new millennium created career uncertainty, vastly changing the way in which people conducted and conceptualized work. No longer able to depend on an employer for stability and security, individuals adapted to these changing conditions, which necessitated the subjective construction of their own careers (McMahon & Patton, 2006; Swanson & Fouad, 2015). This new process required individuals to actively construct both themselves and their careers by imposing direction on their behaviour to make meaning of their experiences (Savickas, 2013). From a constructivist perspective, careers become a story that individuals tell about their lives based on a process of self-construction that is ultimately driven by environmental adaptation.

The present study aimed to uncover how participants exercised career adaptability, a key component of Career Construction Theory (Hall & Chandler, 2005), with emphasis on the critical behaviours that participants engaged in to find employment in the complex systems and environments in which people live. The prominence placed on the meaning making process was of utmost importance, inviting a focus on the lived experiences of participants as they made sense of their job search successes and struggles. The foundation of constructivist theories support the prioritization of subjectivity and individual interpretation of unique experiences, as well as participants' explanations of their employment experiences (Patton & McMahon, 2014).

Research Approach

Given the exploratory nature of this research and its basis in constructivist theories, the researcher implemented a qualitative approach to the research. Creswell (2003) noted that qualitative inquiry is well suited to research aimed at collecting emerging data; where participant

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meanings, personal values, and contexts are of relevance. In order to best "classify observations of human behavior" (Gremier, 2004, p. 66), the present study utilized an enhanced approach to the critical incident technique (CIT; Butterfield, Borgen, Maglio, & Amundson, 2009). Focusing on the perspective of participants, the enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT) allows for expression of subjective understanding, an essential component in constructivist research such as the present study, which emphasizes the point of view and lived experiences of participants. First proposed by Flanagan (1954), this approach involves conducting interviews with participants to identify critical incidents (CIs) that promote or detract from one's experience of an event (e.g., finding meaningful employment). The present study also incorporated components of the enhanced version of this method, such as WL items (i.e., events or influences that would have been helpful in the situation) and credibility checks, in order to enhance both the robustness and validity of the research (Butterfield et al., 2009).

Researcher's Experience and Positionality

Identifying my positionality towards the present study was essential to understanding the potential influence of personal worldviews and experiences on the research (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). According to Bourke (2014), qualitative research occurs within a shared space in which both the participants and the researcher have the potential to shape the research process. Identifying my personal experiences, worldviews, assumptions, and biases related to the topic of career development allowed for the recognition of the influences of these perspectives on the research. Doing so not only enhanced the rigor of the present study (Morrow, 2007), but developed a more comprehensive understanding of the research approach used (Bourke, 2014).

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My view about the centrality of work has been informed through experiences as a white, educated, and career-oriented woman from a low-income, working class family. As the first generation to attend university, the struggle of my parents inspired me to pursue a life guided by my career direction and decisions. Although I see the benefits of this perspective in the way that it has encouraged and motivated me to become an advocate for the role that hard work and agency play in promoting career success, I also recognize how this position disadvantages other viewpoints that may place work at the peripheral of life (e.g., as a means to an end), or that otherwise attribute career achievement to experiences that are less individualized. In reflecting on how this informs my research, I am conscious of the way that this preference may influence what I choose to emphasize or reinforce among my participants in both the collection and analysis of data. However, in identifying and acknowledging this bias, it is my hope to minimize inadvertent influence on the research conducted.

Placing such value on the role of work in my life meant that I had a career path in mind from a young age, making me an anomaly. Throughout my education, both my peers and my instructors consistently reminded me of how lucky I was to not only know what I wanted from my work and career, but to also have the opportunity to realize those aspirations. Growing up during the Great Recession it became clear that success in the workplace was hard to come by, which meant that I quickly assumed a position of privilege. As I saw it, people started to externalize the successes of others in an effort to avoid the pain of internalizing failures in their own careers. Attributing my achievements to some external event was not a position I was prepared to adopt, and so I became motivated to understand why some people who were highly educated could still find meaningful employment even under the pressures of our current economic climate. It is, therefore, my intent in conducting this research to better understand how

recent graduates who are meaningfully employed are approaching the process of finding work and, in doing so, promote a more seamless school-to-work transition.

Assumptions and Biases

Several underlying assumptions and researcher biases guided the present study, which informed both the rationale and relevance of this work. Firstly, I made an assumption that individuals pursuing a post-secondary education were doing so with the goal of finding work in their chosen field of study. This is not to discredit the fact that many meaningfully employed individuals work in areas not directly related to their academic credentials, but to suggest that education is a means to this end. Counter to this point, an argument can be made that the intent of education is to promote the development of learners and encourage the value of education for its own sake. However, in today's competitive and consumerist educational culture, extrinsic goals associated with pursuing a higher education (e.g., finding employment) have become increasingly pertinent, particularly among students. With the surmounting relevance of this postmodernist educational mindset, it comes as no surprise that colleges and universities evaluate, rank, and have even begun to market themselves primarily as instrumental stepping-stones to greater career or work goals (Diver, 2005). Some have even gone so far as to recommend a shift in thinking that demands education be understood for what it is, and not as some might wish it to be (Barnett, 2009). For this reason, I assumed the position that students, for the most part, are pursuing a post-secondary education for the purpose of enhancing their employability.

A second assumption made was that participants would have the ability to identify themselves as meaningfully employed. According to Hu, Kaplan, and Delal (2010), employees have varied perceptions of job fulfillment based on their subjective experience. The present study

has accounted for the subjectivity of this definition by allowing participants to determine for themselves whether their work is personally fulfilling, under the belief that meaningful employment is not a coherent, quantifiable concept. Although the reliance on such a subjective measure of this concept may arguably weaken the validity of claims made, I did not expect participants to have a consistent definition of meaningful employment, nor was it the aim of this research to generalize findings beyond the scope of the study. Rather, the present study proposes to serve as an exploratory opportunity to learn about and better understand the experiences of individuals employed in personally fulfilling jobs within their chosen field of study.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of pertinent information related to the struggle recent graduates face in the search for meaningful employment as they transition from post-secondary education to the workforce. Research evidence supports the rationale for this study, which has effectively demonstrated the various professional and personal costs associated with both unemployment and underemployment (see Cassidy & Wright, 2008; Jalles & Andresen, 2014). Previous literature has also highlighted the need for a study to investigate, beyond a post-secondary credential, helpful or hindering influences on the process of finding meaningful employment among university graduates (Feldman, 2002), serving as the purpose for this study. This chapter also included a detailed discussion of the relevant experiences and positionality of the researcher, as well as relevant assumptions and biases, in order to locate the research.

Chapter Two provides an in-depth review of both the theoretical and empirical literature relating to the present study. The content of Chapter Three focuses on the choice of the ECIT as a research method and the design of this study, including details pertaining to the implementation of procedures and the type of participants involved. Findings from the current study have been

captured in Chapter Four, including a detailed description of the job search experiences of meaningfully employed recent graduates through an exploration of their perceived successes and struggles related to this process. Chapter Five includes a discussion of findings from the research, based on an interpretation of incidents that impact the transition recent university graduates make from post-secondary education to the workplace. Potential implications for students and recent graduates, career counsellors and practitioners, as well as post-secondary institutions and staff are outlined. Lastly, strengths and delimitations of the present study are considered, leading to a discussion of recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to effectively carry out an investigation of job search success among recent university graduates, it is essential to first become familiar with the circumstances that inform this perspective. As such, Chapter Two begins with an overview of career development and pertinent theories related to this concept. Several career development theories were selected through careful consideration of relevant theoretical and epistemological frameworks, the researcher's personal experience, and the specific research goals of the present study. A detailed investigation of career development among students and recent graduates as they transition into the workforce follows. The chapter concludes with a discussion of gaps in the existing literature on this topic, substantiating the rationale for the present study.

Overview of Career and Career Development

Definitions of career development have changed and expanded over time. Once restricted to a designation of the sequence of jobs occupied and performed throughout the working lifetime (Gray, Gault, Meyers, & Walther, 1990), rapid economic developments in the 21st century brought with it a new world of work that disrupted previously held notions of employment. Becoming progressively more information-driven, technology based, diverse, and globalized, such changes to the economy demanded a transformation in the way that career was understood and defined.

An expanding world of work prompted a corresponding need for a definition of career development that encompassed these changes. In addition to the sequence of jobs occupied and performed throughout a person's working lifetime, modern definitions of career development must also consider the broader accumulation of role-related experiences of an individual, encompassing all of the processes by which people come to develop and grow, not only through

work, but also within other important life roles (Gray et al., 1990; McMahon & Patton, 2006). Further to this point, Savickas and colleagues (2009) argued that an accurate definition of career development must emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and lifelong learning in order to be applicable to the present world of work. In an attempt to embody this evolved description, the present study has defined career development as the lifelong, individualized, and ongoing process of exploring and constructing various life roles. Although this study focused primarily on paid employment, the researcher recognizes the influence of other life-roles and life-circumstances in developing and shaping careers in a broader sense, including non-paid and caregiving roles.

Pertinent Career Development Theories

Corresponding with changes in the definition of career development, theories that inform career development have also evolved over time. Social systems, economic conditions, as well as individual influences actively shape the ways in which people pursue and define their careers (Swanson & Fouad, 2015). As such, career development theories represent a number of unique theoretical positions, differing or even opposing worldviews, and varied approaches to practice. Conceptualizing career development theory is not only an important foundation from which to explore the career choices and behaviours that people engage in (Swanson & Fouad, 2015), but also provides a meaningful framework from which to understand these experiences.

Thus, theories of career development in relation to the present study are presented, with particular focus on the ways in which the selected theories address the process of career decision-making within the context of change and the school-to-work transition. The following section begins with a discussion of traditional career development theories, many of which continue to influence the way in which career development is understood. This reflection leads to

a description of the post-modern, and specifically the constructivist theories, that directly informed and shaped the present study. Although no career theory is able to fully account for the labour market conditions characteristic of previous and contemporary times, each theory is recognized here for its unique historical and contemporary contributions to the field of career development (Sampson, 2009).

Traditional Career Development Theories

Beginning in the early 20th century, career and life considerations found roots in early vocational theories and the positivist worldview (McMahon & Patton, 2006). Driven by the industrialization, urbanization, and immigration characteristic of this time, an influx of people and opportunity to the Western world quickly created demand for a means by which to match job seekers with employment opportunities, a method that ultimately relied upon identifying abilities that best complemented particular work duties. This led to the development of Parsons' (1909) formula, one of the earliest recorded career theories, which matched presumably fixed abilities and interests with particular occupational requirements.

According to theories such as Parsons' (1909), career development occurred according to an orderly process within the relationship that an individual had with his or her employing organization (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Measured by the progression that one made along this linear route, traditional theories viewed career development as both predictable and systematic. Fortunately, the stable and secure organizational structure that prevailed throughout much of the early 20th century lent itself nicely to this approach, offering a firm basis from which to build a life and envision a future (Savickas, 2011). Following from this framework, new theories began to emerge, such as trait and factor theories and developmental theories, that utilized this notion of stability to inform the conceptualization of career development.

Trait and factor theories. Different approaches to the field of career and life development began to emerge towards the end of the 20th century, perhaps most notably Holland's (1997) trait-oriented Theory of Vocational Choice. Rather than emphasize vocational guidance, this approach focused instead on career education and on teaching individuals the attitudes, beliefs, and competencies that lead to realistic career choices and decisions (Brown & Lent, 2012; Savickas, 2011). Taking a progressive approach to development, trait-oriented theorists focused on the process of career choice throughout the human life course. Rather than developing within or in relation to a particular organization, career planning is believed to occur on an individual level, independent of one's current occupational environment. In conceptualizing career development as a process within the person rather than the organization, questions of occupational choice become a consideration of personal features deemed most suitable to particular environments. Proving to be a better fit for the modern work environment, Holland's (1997) Theory of Vocational Choice remains one of the most empirically supported and widely applied career theories to date (Brown & Lent, 2012).

Although trait-oriented theories rely heavily on matching attitudes, interests, and personality with particular career environments, there remained inadequate congruence between trait-career matching and levels of occupational satisfaction. Given that career satisfaction is typically of high value to employees, measures of career fit ought to account for this variable. Research demonstrated that trait-outcomes accounted for only 4% of the variance in career satisfaction (Arnold, 2004). Part of this issue results from the focus of trait and factor theories on fixed traits, rather than on change and development. According to Arnold (2004), in a time and cultural setting where career motivation stems from a desire to pursue life roles that develop and change over time (e.g., leisure, recreation, employment, and lifelong learning), trait-oriented

theorists who neglect to consider these increasingly relevant aspects of the lived experience are limited in their ability to explain career development in the modern world.

Developmental theories. Super's (1990) Theory of Vocational Development is one of the first and most notable theories to prioritize change and transition, particularly in the ways that self-concept transforms over time. Whereas early career theory focused almost exclusively on stable aspects of personality and occupational environments, developmental theorists turned their attention towards change within a person throughout the lifespan, with a particular focus on how change plays a role in the career decision-making process. Early developmental theorists deemed the process of growth and change experienced throughout the lifespan to be relatively stable. As such, although self-concept continually changes and develops, Super posited that if an individual's physical and mental development could be understood, along with his or her experiences within an environment, one could reasonably predict career development and choice (Swanson & Fouad, 2015).

Super's (1990) Career Development Theory received praise for its cross-cultural relevance and focus on self-concept and identity, an element missing from preceding career theories (Stead & Watson, 1998). However, the focus on predictable change limited the extent to which outside influences shaped lived experiences and career development, such as through unexpected events or atypical development (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004). Debate ensued about the predictability of people and their environments, challenging the notion that one could accurately anticipate change and transition in discrete stages of life. At the same time, traditional organizational structures quickly became outdated as a growing number of people sought out employment to fulfill needs for personal learning, growth, and fulfillment (Hall, 2004) as opposed to more conventional economical purposes.

Traditional vocational theories, such as the two highlighted here, failed to acknowledge the integral role individual qualities played in influencing, and in many ways shaping, career choice. As workforce and labour market conditions changed, so too did the conceptualization of career, along with demands for a more modern approach to career theory. At this time, it was no longer uncommon for individuals to take on self-directed roles in their career, change career direction multiple times throughout their working life, or even make lateral or downward job movements to fulfill personal needs (Hall, Gardner, & Baugh, 2008). These influences contributed to an understanding of career development as a more dynamic and continuous process, with individuals now assuming responsibility for their own career paths. Whereas traditional vocational theories focused on knowledge, changes in the workforce demanded an orientation towards action (Savickas, 2011).

Post-Modern Career Development Theories

Following the end of the 20th century, concepts of 'dejobbing' and 'jobless work' began to emerge, leading to values of mobility and flexibility overshadowing the prior theoretical emphasis on stability and commitment. With today's dynamic economic environment, the ability for organizations to provide structure to careers quickly diminished (Savickas, 2011). Instead, an expectation of individuals to take responsibility for managing their own work lives materialized. With this shift came reform to the field of career development, through a move away from the objectivity of positivism towards a more perceptive model. Whereas traditional career development theorists emphasized structure, post-modern career development theorists embraced a concept of adaptability among both workers and work environments (Inkson & Baruch, 2008; Luthans & Youssef, 2007).

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Contextual theories. Previous career development theories concentrated almost exclusively on the individual person or organization. In contrast, more recent perspectives emphasize contextual influences and the importance of environmental and dynamic systems on the career development process. These include theories such as Happenstance Learning Theory (Krumboltz, 2009) and Chaos Theory (Bright & Pryor, 2011), which suggest that individuals develop their careers within a complex system over which their control is somewhat limited. Perhaps more than any other model, contextual theories place change at the center of the career development process (Pryor & Bright, 2007), such that individuals respond to, rather than actively shape, their environment. Although individuals find themselves in these positions in part because of actions they initiate themselves, the influence of events over which one has little or no control make it nearly impossible to predict career change over time (Krumboltz, 2009). In this way, contextual theories consider career development to be a learning process in which change is not only expected, but considered normal (Krumboltz, Foley, & Cotter, 2013).

Constructivist theories. Forming the underpinnings of the present study, constructivist theories such as Systems Theory Framework (McMahon & Patton, 1995) and Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) developed from the notion that career development occurs within an environment that one can act on, rather than simply react to. Unlike contextual theorists, constructivist theorists posit that people and their environment continuously impact one another, alleviating individuals of their label as "passive recipients of environmental presses" (Buss, 1987, p. 1220). This invites an appreciation of human activity as agentic and driven by the knowledge that one can directly and deliberately influence his or her surroundings. In acknowledgment of this interaction, constructivist theorists generally position people and their circumstances as interdependent, suggesting that individuals act on their environment and make

changes to their workplace in order to best suit them (Furnham, 2001). This proactive nature of human knowing naturally threatens the underlying concepts from each of the previously outlined theories, which view one or both of personality and context as either unchanging and/or unalterable. When individuals are able to influence their work environments, the concept of predictability becomes less important and the need to actively create a suitable career path takes precedence.

Constructivist theorists assume careers to be fluid, and emphasize variability in how career development unfolds (Corey, 2012). Rather than rely on a prescriptive understanding of how careers should look, meaning is made through a consideration of how individuals construct their lives within the current context, taking into consideration environmental influences, as well as the multiple and varied perspectives of people. In viewing reality as constructed, career development is said to occur within the context of salient life roles (Savickas et al., 2009), such that the career construction process is directly influenced and informed by all of the roles occupied by an individual at any given time. According to Di Fabio (2010), this theoretical orientation lends itself to the perspective that there is no essential self or stable context within which career decision-making occurs, but rather a subjective understanding of self that guides this process. In relying on individuals to make meaning of their experiences and their career choices (Savickas, 2012), people decide for themselves what is relevant to their own lives and use this knowledge to inform and shape their futures. Although an understanding of theory provides some insight into the career development process, to fully understand the job search behaviours of recent graduates also requires an exploration of career development experiences leading up to their transition to the workforce.

Career Development and Post-Secondary Education

A recent shift in the role of post-secondary learning has occurred to ensure that higher educational systems better meet the demands of tomorrow's workplace. Educational institutions are now appreciated for their instrumentality as a vehicle in developing and preparing students for experiences outside of the classroom. As a result, students position themselves as customers of an education system anticipated to supply them the advanced credentials demanded of the labour market (Brown, Lauder, Ashton, Yingje, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). Many colleges and universities have responded by evaluating, ranking, and even marketing themselves primarily as stepping-stones to greater career goals (Diver, 2005). However, some continue to argue for the position that education be deemed an end in itself, intended to promote the development of learners and encourage the value of education for its own sake. Although both viewpoints have their valid merits, in today's competitive and consumerist educational culture, the extrinsic goals of education have become increasingly pertinent, demanding an understanding of higher education as it is, and not as some might wish it to be (Barnett, 2009).

The changing role of education is due, in large part, to a concept referred to in the literature as credential creep (Livingstone, 2004), which is the inflation of minimum requirements for jobs that would not have required certification at this level in the past. In fact, the Council of Alberta University Students (2011) determined that up to 80% of jobs created in Alberta over the next 10 years will require some form of post-secondary credential. The American population experienced a similar trend, where 63% of the almost 19 million new jobs created between 2009-2014 required employees be trained at the post-secondary level (Rothkopf, 2009). This makes it more important than ever for recent graduates to become productive, employed citizens, but to also have a quality educational foundation from which to draw upon.

A number of influences have contributed to this change, including: (a) increased competition for entry-level positions, (b) the call from information and technology driven economies for more highly educated employees, and (c) various other market pressures and workplace demands (Brown, 2001). Conversely, critics of education inflation argue that it is in fact qualification inflation within modern economies (i.e., the unnecessary increase in job requirements where the actual skills needed have not changed) that breeds the very competition employers are hoping to overcome by increasing the educational prerequisites of new hires (Burning Glass, 2014). Regardless of where this issue stems, the outcomes for today's youth remains the same. In many cases, youth are left with no choice but to chase the growing demands of the economy by enrolling in post-secondary and pursuing certificate and degree programs.

Youth in Canada have quickly recognized and responded to this demand, with over two million students enrolling in post-secondary programs in the 2014-2015 academic year (Statistics Canada, 2016). Unfortunately, with growing demands for a more highly educated working population comes increased labour market competition, leaving many recent graduates with high expectations of their ability to succeed, but reduced opportunity to do so. In accordance with the constructivist notion that individuals do not live in isolation (Patton & McMahon, 2006), contextual constraints and external influences (e.g., economic conditions) not only have the ability to change over time, but also to directly impact the career development process. In consideration of this, although soon-to-be graduates have often identified and taken action towards controlling the individual system within which career development occurs, many are still woefully underprepared to deal with the outside influences of entering the labour market, trusting instead the implication that an education will provide them access to an array of career opportunities (Universum, 2014). As a result of this, Perrone and Vickers (2003) argued that

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recent graduates have been left to navigate "a very uncomfortable kind of world" (p. 70), one that is commonly fraught with indecision, uncertainty, mistaken prospects about work, and which often culminates in extended periods of either unemployment or underemployment. As Patton and McMahon (2006) have emphasized, the complexities of the modern world directly influence the ways in which individuals construct their careers. Therefore, consideration must be given to the broader systems within which career development unfolds.

The Job Search Process in a Modern Economy

The process of finding work is perhaps more tumultuous than ever before. This is likely due in part to the fact that the world students are graduating into has changed dramatically over the past several decades. In their scan of the Canadian labour market, Lehmann and Adams (2016) noted that the workforce is shifting rapidly, and that these changes are most likely to impact those entering the workforce for the first time, namely, recent graduates. Trends towards globalization, advances in technology and information exchange, as well as decreased job security are just a few of the relevant influences that new-entrants to the workforce must contend with as they make their transition from student to professional. As a result, this transition has come to be understood as complex, unpatterned and, in many cases, unpredictable (Tomlinson, 2013).

Not only has the world of work recently evolved, but the concept of work itself has also changed. As noted in the previous section on traditional theories of career development, gone are the days of careers being characterized by commitment to a single employer and of jobs that serve as a stable and secure measure of one's professional identity. Rather, careers are now more commonly marked by multiple changes and shifts throughout the period of a working life, where lifelong learning, flexibility, and self-development take precedence (McKeown & Lindorff,

2011). The job search process is no longer a one-time transaction, but rather the new normal for most working professionals. Now undertaken numerous times during the span of a career, the very act of finding employment has quickly become an integral part of work-life. For example, workers in the United States can expect to make over a dozen job changes in the course of their working lives (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001), with more than half of people working in Canada indicating that they changed jobs at least once within the past two years (Workopolis, 2014). Perhaps more surprising is the fact that this number has more than tripled within the past decade, indicating a trend that is both temporally novel, but demographically normal for youth and young adults.

Youth Employment

A report released by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2014) identified the process of launching one's career as the single greatest challenge facing recent graduates. Numerous others have echoed this sentiment in the past, with some authors going as far as to say that career preparation and decision-making are the most stressful life decisions made by young adults (Bloxom, et al., 2008; Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2012). There are some indications that individuals graduating into the current world of work feel more unprepared, more anxious, and generally more uncertain about the future than previous generations (Royal Canadian Bank, 2016). Despite debate that surrounds the relative stress associated with this transition compared to other life events, the struggle to find employment and the fear of being unsuccessful remain primary concerns for youth.

Perhaps paramount among these stressors is the significant investment of an individual's time, money, and energy to pursue higher education. In recognition of these costs, students and recent graduates tend to place a high level of importance on finding employment in their chosen

field of study upon graduating (Jackson, 2014). Part of the reason that youth anticipate success in this endeavour relates to the fact that students typically view their degree as an operative means of achieving employment (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2010; Roy Morgan Research, 2009), expecting these advanced credentials to necessarily provide them with an advantage in the workplace. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and the costs associated with an unsuccessful school-to-work transition can be substantial. Research from Grant (2012) suggests that the inability to successfully transition to the labour market following graduation contributes to the loss of educational capital (i.e., the knowledge and skills developed through obtaining a post-secondary education), which gradually deteriorates over time. In fact, the more time that graduates spend without work, the less likely they are to enter their chosen field at all, limiting their ability to sustain gainful employment throughout their careers (Salas-Valasco, 2007).

Implications and Consequences of Youth Un(der)employment

Underemployment, unemployment, and temporary work place a financial burden on university graduates. These individuals also tend to suffer from a number of occupational and psychological costs as a result of their economic position. Considering the implications of these work conditions, Standing (2011) found that individuals without sufficient employment quickly begin to disengage from not only the labour market, but also from political processes and the community more generally. In other words, as youth started to feel apathetic towards the economy, these same feelings of indifference were projected into other areas of life. Additional costs associated with unemployment and underemployment that limit the ability of recent graduates to fully participate in the labour market and realize their potential include the erosion or loss of previously developed skills, knowledge, and abilities; diminished current and life-long income; as well as general job dissatisfaction and disengagement (Grant, 2012).

University graduates who experience job dissatisfaction or who are un(der)employed are also at risk of suffering from deteriorating levels of self-efficacy, social support, optimism, and achievement motivation (Cassidy & Wright, 2008), which tend to worsen over time (Jalles & Andresen, 2014). These personal and social concerns are known to contribute to a variety of mental health issues including depression, self-harm, suicidality, mental stress and anxiety, as well as physical health concerns such as insomnia, sleep deprivation, and poor health later in life (Goodchild, 2012; Pharr, Moonie, & Bungum, 2012). Although one would assume the personal consequences of unemployment to be greater than for those who have jobs, Fryer (2001) discovered that people involved in temporary work or underemployment experienced similar negative effects to those who were jobless.

Barriers to Job Search Success

Recent university graduates perceive numerous barriers to their successful employment, each of which negatively impacts their ability to find meaningful work (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2011). In consideration of the many barriers faced by young job seekers in their search for work, several common themes emerged from the literature. Many of these barriers uniquely impacted the job search process of young adults entering the labour market for the first time, suggesting that new-entrants to the workforce have a particularly difficult time obtaining employment compared to other job seekers (Brown et al., 2006).

Lack of preparedness. According to a recent study conducted by Bell, Benes, and Redekopp (2016), one third of youth in Canada believe that being ill-prepared for employment is the single most prominent barrier to a successful school-to-work transition. Over 50% of employers surveyed also expressed concern with the preparedness of recent graduates to enter the workforce, thereby sharing in this perception. The reason for this lack of preparedness is due

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in part to the fact that many recent graduates continue to rely on the unwritten promise that a post-secondary education will, in itself, lead to relevant and stable work experiences upon graduation. By overestimating the impact of their degree, young job seekers commonly enter the labour market with unrealistic expectations of both themselves and of their job prospects. This often results in disillusionment with the job search once graduates realize the mismatch between their expectations and the reality that faces them (Lau & Pang, 2000; McKeown & Lindorff, 2011; Perrone & Vickers, 2003).

A major influence on this discrepancy is a lack of relevant skills and job experience upon entering the workforce. According to the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (2009), the employment history of recent graduates is the most critical component of their application; with nearly three-quarters of employers favouring applicants who have relevant work experience (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014). Recent graduates also recognize the importance of work experience for finding employment. In their survey of nearly 6,000 new graduates, the Royal Bank of Canada (2016) determined a lack of relevant experience to be one of the obstacles of greatest concern for young job seekers entering the workforce for the first time. The requirement of work experience as a prerequisite to employment, paired with the absence of opportunity as a result of inexperience, fuels a paradox that leaves many new graduates struggling to break into the labour market.

Ineffective job search strategies. A common cause for the high rate of underemployment among young adults is a lack of persistence when looking for work (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). In an article published by CBC News, recent graduates from Canadian universities admitted to accepting any job offer they could get, even if it meant being overqualified for the work (Purdon & Palleja, 2017). Whether a means of getting their foot in the

door, a consequence of scarce opportunity, or for the financial stability, many young degree holders expressed the feeling that they did not have the luxury of looking for employment in their field, leading them to seek out and accept jobs that their qualifications exceeded.

With the average job search taking approximately 20.6 weeks to complete (Ragan, 2017), job seekers often perceive holding out for the right position to be a discouraging and even unfeasible approach to finding work. Although circumstances may necessitate a move towards underemployment, entering the workforce through a job unrelated to one's field of study can in fact make it more difficult to find meaningful work in the future, limiting the opportunity individuals have to gain the relevant experience that employers of skilled jobs require (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016; Salas-Valasco, 2007). If recent graduates are not prepared to invest the time and energy necessary to pursue employment related to their field of study, they inadvertently contribute to the cycle of underemployment they currently find themselves in.

Another job search strategy commonly employed by recent graduates, proven to be problematic, is the reliance on informal sources or networks. These are contacts established privately or external to the workforce, such as personal friends and relatives (Saks, 2005). New graduates tend not to be well connected or established within their field, limiting access to information or support related to work and employment. As a result, university students often rely on their parents, peers, and friends as sources of guidance when making career-related decisions (Case, Carolan-Silva, & Reyes, 2012; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Ölzen & Arnaut, 2013), a trend that likely persists during the transition to employment. Although informal sources of support may create an illusion or 'buzz' of opportunity, relying on friends and family for career advice has shown to be negatively related to the number of both job interviews and job offers received (Saks, 2006).

Educational climate. An increase in higher education participation has directly contributed to the inflation of minimum job requirements, creating a culture of credentialism that quantifies the labour market and qualifies applicants based on their education. In a survey of over 400 Canadian employers, 36% indicated that they hired employees with university degrees for positions that historically did not require any higher educational training (CareerBuilder, 2013). This ultimately works to diminish the value and earning potential of these credentials, creating an excess supply of post-secondary graduates that has brought Canada to the top of the list of countries with people holding university degrees who live in poverty (Hopper, 2014).

Literature suggests the basic concept fuelling this problem is that "credentialing, not education, has become the primary business of North American universities" (Jacobs, 2004, p. 44). According to a report by The Conference Board of Canada, despite the country excelling in both enrollment and completion at the post-secondary level, it fails to deliver the specific learning opportunities demanded of an evolving labour market (Munro, MacLaine, & Stuckey, 2014). This creates a gap or mismatch between the education provided by post-secondary institutions and the skills required by emerging markets, further contributing to the unemployment and underemployment common among university graduates.

A second feature of the educational climate that serves as a barrier to the successful entrance of recent graduates to the workforce is the cost of funding a post-secondary education. In a report released by the Canadian Federation of Students, the average student requiring a Canada Student Loan now graduates with over $28,000 worth of debt (Burley & Awad, 2015). High rates of debt coupled with a weak labour market has left many recent graduates struggling to participate in the Canadian economy to their full potential, often settling for underemployment outside of their field of interest as a result of necessity to repay loans and other debt (Royal Bank

of Canada, 2016). Many of the recent graduates who participated in the Royal Bank of Canada's (2016) Career Launch Program referred to their student debt as a restrictive burden to their employment choices, resulting in a competitive disadvantage during the job search process.

Labour market conditions. With over 50% of Canadian adults successfully completing some form of higher education, the competition for entry-level skilled jobs has seen a dramatic increase in recent years (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016). As a result, the qualifications required by a profession are now becoming more demanding. One in four Canadian employers admit to increasing the level of education for jobs over the past five years, with 59% requiring at least a two-year university degree and 45% requiring at least a four-year degree (CareerBuilder, 2013). The potential in Canada for a labour shortage creates even greater concern, with an estimated deficiency of workers nearing 2 million by the year 2031 (Bell et al., 2016). This combination of high competition for jobs with few vacancies, and labour shortages in emerging markets, contributes to an economic environment in which both the individual and the economy suffer.

Influences on Job Search Success

Although the literature has sufficiently captured the risks associated with unemployment and underemployment, few studies have attended to any potential positive experiences of finding employment and the various influences on job search success. Forseille (2013) found that the more job search 'tools' or strategies a recent graduate perceives to have at their disposal, the more likely they are to describe their transition to the workforce as successful. Given the variety of job search methods available to recent graduates, the influences on success in finding employment are complex and multi-faceted (Allen & van der Velden, 2001; Jacob & Weiss, 2010). However, a comprehensive review of the job search literature reveals several common themes, many of which mutually contribute to favourable pre-employment outcomes.

Personality. In Western society, the job search is typically a self-directed, independent practice that provides job seekers with a great deal of flexibility and autonomy regarding how to initiate and carry out their search for work. This demands a level of accountability towards the job search process that, although potentially unnerving to the ill-prepared, invites a call to action and welcomes the idea that current employment conditions characteristic of recent graduates are not inevitable. With limited guidance or structure, new-entrants to the workforce rely on individual characteristics and qualities to inform their transition to the workforce (Brown, Cober, Kane, Levy, & Shalhoop, 2006), with pre-employment outcomes depending largely on the choices made by graduates themselves (Piróg, 2016). Although the personal qualities that inform job search behaviours often interact and influence each other, making them difficult to differentiate or isolate (see Brown et al., 2006; Frese & Fay, 2001; Kanfer et al., 2001), their impact on the process of finding work is robust. As such, an investigation of personality serves as an informative lens through which to understand and predict outcomes of the school-to-work transition under these conditions.

Proactivity. The term proactivity or proactive personality refers to a "relatively stable tendency to effect environmental change" (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p. 104). Not unlike the basic tenets of constructivism, this definition of proactivity assumes individuals have the ability to exert influence over an environment regardless of presenting situational forces outside of their control. By responding adaptively to their environment, proactive individuals tend to be more successful in the workplace (Kanfer, et al., 2001), a trend that also applies to those who are looking for work.

In a cross-sectional study, Claes and De Witte (2002) found that individuals with proactive personality traits exhibited a greater number of job search behaviours, and were more

likely to receive job offers as a result. Frese, Fay, Hilburger, Leng, and Tag (1997) also identified personal initiative as negatively correlated with length of unemployment, such that the more personal initiative an individual demonstrated during their job search the sooner they found work. However, few studies to date have assessed the influence of proactive personality on pre-employment, with the vast majority of research focusing on employment outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2006). Direct evidence of this relationship is therefore limited, such that any reasonable claims about the underlying process of how proactive personality relates to job search behaviours and outcomes requires further investigation.

Conscientiousness. Moderately related to proactive personality, conscientiousness is the personality trait of being hardworking, achievement oriented, and persevering (Williams, 2002). A characteristic of self-disciplined and goal-directed people, conscientiousness is a significant precursor to several job search processes that contribute to successful pre-employment outcomes, including engagement in self-regulated behaviours, job search intensity, and job search effort (Kanfer et al., 2001). From a coping perspective, individuals high in conscientiousness better manage stress and utilize active coping strategies, allowing them to persevere despite encountering failures and difficulties common to the job search (Kanfer et al., 2001).

Self-esteem. High levels of self-esteem and confidence in being employable contribute to a graduate's success both within post-secondary and upon graduation (Nicholson, Putwain, Connors, & Hornby-Atkinson, 2013). When people are able to demonstrate accurate self-knowledge and a positive view of the self, others tend to reciprocate this valuation. As a result, Holmstrom, Russell, and Clare (2015) found self-esteem to be positively related to job search self-efficacy and job search behaviours, which ultimately predicted job offers received as well as employment status both prior to and following graduation. In their meta-analysis, Kanfer and

colleagues (2001) suggested this might be due in part to increased job search behaviours among individuals with higher levels of self-esteem. Active job search behaviour and the amount of effort invested in this process therefore appears to mediate the relationship between self-esteem and job search success.

Self-efficacy. Unlike the general or over-arching level of confidence measured by self-esteem, self-efficacy more specifically refers to one's level of confidence in successfully performing a given task, such as job search activities (Saks, 2005). The relationship between job search success and self-efficacy is well established in the literature. Although different views exist as to how exactly self-efficacy relates to the job search, Kanfer and colleagues' (2001) meta-analytical review determined it to be one of the best predictors of success when looking for work, shown to positively impact both the number of job offers received and one's employment status, as well as reduce job search duration. Self-efficacy also influences the job search process by increasing effort, persistence, and goal-directed activity among job seekers, thereby contributing to overall job search success (Brown et al., 2006; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). This is a result of the relationship between self-efficacy and control, such that individuals who feel they have greater control over their careers experience more success in making the transition from school-to-work (Forseille, 2013).

In an attempt to explain this relationship, Moynihan, Roehling, LePine, and Boswell (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of the effect of job search self-efficacy on job interviews and pre-employment outcomes, with results indicating that applicants' ability to move from a job interview to a job offer is dependent on their job search self-efficacy; such that job seekers with higher self-efficacy are better able to convert job offers into job outcomes. A similar study conducted by Saks (2006) produced contradictory results, which suggested that the relationship

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between self-efficacy and job search outcomes was stronger among individuals with low self-efficacy as a result of the increased likelihood for said individuals to accept any job offered to them. In other words, job seekers with high self-efficacy were more likely to continue their job search and hold out for a more suitable fit than to accept the first offer received, making the relationship between job interviews and pre-employment outcomes less meaningful.

Job search behaviours. Classified as the types of activities an individual engages in during the job search and the frequency with which one pursues these activities (Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994), job search behaviours include both preparatory (e.g., gathering information, reading job postings) and active (e.g., applying for jobs, submitting resumes) activities. As a result, the job search process often begins long before an individual officially starts working. In fact, Salas-Valasco (2007) acknowledged that the sooner post-secondary students begin their search for work, the greater their chances of finding employment upon graduating; meaning that both the preparatory and active job search are key components in predicting pre-employment outcomes. Additionally, Brown and colleagues (2006) identified that college graduates who used proactive job search strategies (i.e., by looking for job opportunities before officially being posted) were more successful at finding employment than those who used reactive job search strategies (i.e., by looking for job opportunities based on jobs already posted). These findings suggest that although the quantity of job search behaviours is associated with more job opportunities (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks & Ashforth, 2002; van Hooft, Born, Taris, van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004), the quality of job search activities also plays a key role in determining whether a job seeker's behaviour is successful (Purcell et al., 2013).

With that being said, specific job search behaviours tend to overlap, with job seekers often utilizing multiple strategies simultaneously (Jackson, 2014). Although this makes it

difficult to isolate the effectiveness of any given behaviour, one finding that remains consistent throughout the literature is that actively seeking work results in more employment opportunities (Krug & Rebien, 2011). This is directly related to job search effort, which is also shown to predict job interviews and employment status (Kanfer et al., 2001). Whereas measures of job search effort specifically focus on the level of intensity (i.e., time, effort, and focus) that an individual invests in his or her search for work (Brown et al., 2006), the effect of job search effort and job search behaviour often parallel each other (Saks & Ashforth, 2000). In order to better explain the independent influence of each, Brown and colleagues (2006) identified job search effort as linking proactive personality characteristics and job search behaviour, and is therefore integral to understanding the complexities of the job search.

Formal and informal strategies. To encapsulate the variety of job search behaviours and activities available to job seekers, the following section is divided into formal and informal strategies of finding work. Formal strategies are those activities that involve the use of a public intermediary or services established for the purpose of supporting the job search process, such as advertisements, employment agencies, and other career services (Saks, 2006). Informal strategies rely instead on private intermediaries or networks that connect a job seeker to the workforce in this particular context, but ultimately serve other purposes as well, such as friends, relatives, or colleagues (Saks, 2005).

Formal strategies. Formal job search strategies tend to be the most frequently relied upon method of finding work among new-entrants to the workforce. Given that many recent graduates are not yet well connected in their field, they often rely on more traditional approaches of finding work, such as responding to posted advertisement or conducting online searches (Jackson, 2014). Fortunately, Jackson (2014) found that recent graduates who actively used online searches to

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find work nearly tripled their odds of securing full-time employment. Although this number

appears promising, Kuhn and Skuterud (2004) recognized that applying for jobs posted online

tended to result in a high rate of rejection or lack of response, which the authors believed would

contribute to the method becoming less popular among graduates as it increased in popularity.

As such, job seekers who use formal strategies in the search for work should also initiate direct

contact with the employer (e.g., making a phone call, scheduling a face-to-face meeting) to

increase their chances of success. This strategy of pairing a formal method of finding work with

an informal connection proved to be effective for over 20% of job seekers who recently entered

the labour market after graduating with a Bachelor's degree (Jackson, 2014).

Other formal job search strategies, such as seeking out the support of public employment

agencies or career services within or external to an educational institution, are less frequently

used by recent graduates. This is likely a result of the lack of convenience for students to access

these services (Jackson, 2014), and their somewhat ineffectiveness as reported by unemployed

graduates (Martin & Grubb, 2001; Try, 2005). With so few students relying on these established

services, the passive search for work has emerged as the most commonly relied upon strategy,

which allows both applicants and employers to engage in a job search process that occurs almost

exclusively online.

Informal strategies. Given the recent explosion of Internet job hunting and the high rate

of associated competition, recent graduates increasingly rely on informal strategies to find work.

As a result, most jobs today are found through networking (e.g., social and work contacts); with

the Government of Alberta (2014) suggesting that employers fill 70-80% of vacant positions

before ever officially posting the job. This makes informal job search strategies a critical

component of the successful job search, with informal channels credited for nearly 1 in 3 job

offers (Allen & van der Velden, 2007; Schomburg & Teichler, 2006).

Not only are these strategies proven effective, but they also tend to be more exclusive and ultimately efficient than formal methods of finding work. This allows job seekers to tap into a network that, although easily accessible to them, may be otherwise unavailable to the public (Fernandez, Castilla, & Moore, 2000; Lambert, Eby, & Reeves, 2006). Knowing the value of personal contacts, 41.9% of students propose networking to be the most helpful solution to accelerating their careers (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016), with professional networking skills, strategic networking, and access to a social network all contributing substantially to employment prospects (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012; Purcell et al., 2013).

Experience. According to a recent study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2014), organizations prefer to hire recent graduates who have experience, both within and outside of the educational environment. Graduates themselves also identify work experience as an important additive to their post-secondary qualifications, ultimately allowing them to be more employable (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh, & Knight, 2001). As a result, students and recent graduates are now expected to excel both in the academic environment as well as professional work contexts in order to meet the needs of an increasingly skilled and enterprising labour force.

Education experience. Although educational experiences do not always directly translate into enhanced employability, many post-secondary institutions are now moving towards a culture of career preparation, focusing on students' ability to develop self-belief in their employability, maintain technical expertise, and transfer skills and knowledge to a variety of contexts (Bridgstock, 2009; Jackson, 2013). If students are able to cultivate a skill-set directly transferable to and demanded by the labour market, research indicates that they are up to 19% more likely to

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secure full-time employment upon graduation (Jackson, 2014). Not only do students enrolled in courses that promote a career focus (e.g., those that integrate industry collaboration, student-centered learning, and constructive workplace alignment) provide higher ratings for overall course quality, but they also have a better chance of securing full-time employment upon graduation (Jackson, 2014). Forseille (2013) uncovered similar findings in her research, suggesting that students with a strong understanding of their skills and the employers who hire them are able to make a smoother school-to-work transition.

Relevant work experience. Workplace experience comes in many forms and can take place either within or external to the educational environment. These experiences include service and work-integrated learning, volunteering, part-time jobs, summer internships, co-op programs, practicum placements, and any other paid or unpaid involvement in the workplace. Regardless of the type of work experience that one engages in, combining formal learning with participation in the labour market contributes to enhanced success in securing future employment (Jensen, 2009; Oliver, 2011). This is due in part to the career knowledge gained from taking on an active role in managing one's career from an early stage of the career development process (Forseille, 2013).

Given the strong connection between previous and future employment, it is no wonder both employers and students agree that relevant work experience is critical to accelerating the careers of recent graduates. In their recommendations for improving school-to-work transitions, 41% and 38% of undergraduate students found work integrated learning and volunteer experiences to be the most integral components of ensuring a successful school-to-work transition, respectively (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016). Employers also identified the employment history of an applicant to be the single most important consideration when making hiring decisions (Graduate Careers Council Australia, 2009), particularly when considering the

potential of a new-entrant to the workforce (Australian Association of Graduate Employers, 2012). Fortunately for students looking to break into the job market, research indicates that perseverance is more closely associated with the ability to find employment than specific job search skills (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011), inviting students at any stage of the career development process to partake in the important yet accessible experience.

Finding Meaningful Employment

Although one cannot overstate the importance of securing any form of employment in an economy burdened by recession, labour shortages, and credentialism, the value of finding work deemed meaningful is an unparalleled experience. What it means to be meaningfully employed has attracted a diversity of perspectives in research (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Given the focus of the present study on the employment of recent graduates and the demonstrated importance of finding work in one's field of study (Jackson, 2014), the researcher chose to emphasize congruence of work with educational endeavours and a sense of personal fulfillment.

Until recently, employment status (i.e., whether an individual obtained employment) was the most common indicator of success used in job search research (Kanfer et al., 2001). Whereas job attainment in itself is a priority for many, favourable pre-employment outcomes (i.e., obtaining work that aligns with training received in post-secondary) are vital for recent graduates looking to advance their skills in an area of specialization and interest, as well higher educational institutions looking to attract potential students and, in turn, advance their funding initiatives (Bourner & Millican, 2011). In this way, it is critical for research to go beyond the simple investigation of employment status and take into consideration influences such as employee fit and the perceived meaningfulness of one's work to provide a more comprehensive and informative analysis of the job search process (Saks, 2006).

The Present Study

The present study intends to advance research into the school-to-work transition by approaching the topic in a way that (a) provides an in-depth exploration of the topic, (b) reflects the current economic context, and (c) focuses on the perspective of recent graduates. Although the school-to-work transition has been extensively discussed in the literature, limited research exists that investigates this topic qualitatively (Biggeri, Bini, & Grilli, 2001; Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008), limiting the spectrum of job search behaviours and outcomes explored in any given study (Saks, 2006). By taking a qualitative approach to investigating the school-to-work transition of recent graduates who successfully integrated into the workforce, the present study intended to provide a more in-depth analysis of the job search, rather than job outcomes, an important first step of the career development process typically overlooked by previous research (Jackson, 2014).

Additionally, the quantitative approach typically employed in research of this nature has proven unable to fully articulate and encompass the context within which decisions are made, often overlooking the meaning-making process of participants as they reflect on their experiences. Given that people constantly interact with their environment to make meaning of their experiences (Patton, 2008), the exploratory nature of qualitative research is more likely to capture the nuances associated with participants' lived experiences. This is particularly relevant in the current economic climate, where labour market instability plays a critical role in shaping the behaviours and outcomes of individuals who initiate their job search during this time (Brown et al., 2006; Ross, 2012).

Recently, the contextual constraints that limit the generalizability of research findings has received increased emphasis in the literature (Johns, 2001), making it imperative that

investigations of pre-employment outcomes reflect the current economic context in order to determine the impact of labour market conditions on the job search process (Feldman, 2002). The constructivist perspective that framed the present study emphasizes person-environment interactions and the embeddedness of individual experiences within social contexts. Understanding and attending to unique and combined influences on the school-to-work transition contributes to a more accurate understanding of how meaningfully employed graduates navigated the job search process in a distressed economic climate (Purcell et al., 2013). This not only serves to inform how future university graduates approach the transition from post-secondary education to the workforce, but also promote the occupational and psychological wellbeing of job seekers.

To capture the voice of Canadian graduates of post-secondary programs and their experience of transitioning to the workforce, the present study investigated both the struggles and successes associated with the job search from the perspective of meaningfully employed graduates. According to the Government of Canada, there is currently a lack of evidence to support a sufficient understanding of the "obstacles that youth face during their passage to adulthood and how they manage (or fail) to overcome them." (Franke, 2010, p. 2). Although numerous studies have investigated factors that influence the job search successes and struggles of recent university graduates during the school-to-work transition, articles and research publications related to the job search methods of university graduates and their effectiveness remain modest (Jackson, 2014), particularly within a Canadian context (Bell et al., 2016). By focusing on the experiences of recent university graduates who have been successful in making this transition, the present study sought to address the following research question: "What are the

attributions made about experienced and perceived success or struggles associated with the job search process by recent university graduates who have found meaningful employment?"

Summary

Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, Chapter Two provided a brief overview of career development as well as summarized the history and progression of career theory during the past century. Constructivist theories were described as underpinning the present study. An exploration of theory set the foundation for an in-depth exploration of career development within the context of school-to-work transitions. Specifically, the discussion focused on career development and post-secondary training, demonstrating how the relationship between academia and industry has changed in recent years. An examination of the job search in a modern economy followed, including an overview of youth employment, incidents associated with job search successes and struggles, as well as implications and consequences of un(der)employment. This discussion also emphasized the importance of considering meaningful employment as a component of research investigating job search success, substantiating the potential for the present study to provide a unique perspective. In the chapter that follows, a rich description of the research approach and its application in the current study is offered.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The content of Chapter Three focuses on an in-depth exploration of the selected methodology for the current study. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the importance of considering philosophical underpinnings of research, leading to an examination of social constructivism as the philosophical framework for positioning this research. Next the study design is presented, including a rationale for the use of a qualitative approach to inform the research process. An introduction to the history and evolution of the ECIT follows, as well as its suitability as a qualitative method for this research. Consideration is given to the specific research procedures employed in the present study, including an overview of the participant selection criteria, participant recruitment strategies, and noteworthy ethical considerations. A detailed description of data collection and analysis is offered, with particular focus on the five-step ECIT process and associated credibility checks. A critical evaluation of reliability and validity within qualitative research concludes the methodological exploration of this study.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Research

Providing a philosophical framework from which to orient the present study invites an understanding for and appreciation of how researchers position themselves and their research within the field of qualitative inquiry (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). These philosophical beliefs serve as a basis from which to understand knowledge and reality (Scotland, 2012), thereby directly informing the methodological and theoretical preferences of the present study. With research paradigms and philosophical assumptions of human nature changing continuously to reflect existing societal beliefs, these perceptions are both highly subjective and variable.

Beginning with the Enlightenment and a movement towards intellectual and philosophical significance, the scientific paradigm quickly gained popularity as a means by which to interpret the natural world (Cohen, Manion, & McLeod, 2007). Tied to positivist notions and informed by a tendency towards realism, early scientific inquiry within the field of psychology sought to discover a reality that existed independently from and external to the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005; Pring, 2000). From a positivist position, reality is not only a discoverable entity, but one with an independent existence that is both quantifiable and objectively observable. Despite praise for its high degree of rigor and well-defined structure, this paradigm is ill-equipped to recognize and explain the complexities of human experience, often criticized for its inflexibility and oversimplification of real world phenomena.

In response to these limitations, a move towards post-positivism emerged, which supported the notion that an objective reality existed, yet argued for a truth beyond knowing as a result of the uncertainties and biases characteristic of the human experience (Morrow, 2007). Although objectivity remained paramount, this shift in thinking allowed for the acceptance of truth as that which one believed, whereby research held the purpose of approximating a scientifically unverifiable reality. Knowledge therefore became tentative, such that the aim of research was not to prove hypotheses, but to simply not reject them (Creswell, 2009).

Although the post-positivist position managed to account for some of the limitations of positivism, many researchers still felt the human experience to be inaccurately represented. As a result, post-modern perspectives quickly materialized, shifting away from the notion of a singular reality towards a position of relativism, where the subjectivity of truth, rather than its approximation of objectivity, was of central concern (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). According to post-modernism, reality is individually constructed through systemic relationships and interactions

with others as well as the environment, rather than an external entity. This shift allowed for the existence of multiple realities and multiple truths, creating an understanding of the world dependent on a person's knowledge of it, rather than the other way around (Grix, 2004). Two viewpoints of the post-modern paradigm of increasing prominence within the field of psychology include constructivism and constructionism, both of which are socially embedded and emphasize the ongoing and active construction of meaning (Young & Collin, 2004).

According to these interpretive theories, people are responsible for understanding and shaping their own experiences, relying on individual interpretation of the construction of both life and career (Flum & Blustein, 2000). Despite being known for their similarities, and commonly used interchangeably in the literature as a result (Raskin, 2002), constructivism and constructionism most notably differ in the extent to which they emphasize social processes in the construction of knowledge. Constructivism tends to have a singular focus, such that individuals interpret lived experiences through the lens of their cognitive processes; constructionism more predominantly emphasizes social practices and institutions as forming the basis of knowledge, inviting a more interactional understanding of knowledge creation and meaning making (Young & Collin, 2004). Although the inner experience favoured by constructivism occurs independently from the external world, more moderate versions of this theory maintain that social interaction, context, and discourse play a role in shaping the self-reflection process (Bruner, 1990), leading to the development of what is commonly referred to as social constructivism.

Social Constructivism

For the past several decades, the career field has been moving towards an interpretive discipline (Savickas, 1993), with constructivism emerging as a prominent theoretical framework in psychology (Mahoney, 2003). As an extension and reflection of the key underpinnings that

form the basis of the constructivist theories (e.g., Career Construction Theory) adopted by the present study, a social constructivist framework directly informed this research. In fact, Savickas (2002) identified his Career Construction Theory as an example of the application of constructivist processes to career development. According to both Career Construction Theory and social constructivism, individual experience and knowledge construction within a social context is of greatest importance. Integrating social aspects into constructivism invites consideration of how contextual influences and social interactions shape the way people understand experiences and, in turn, how they construct knowledge of the world based on this understanding (Bruner, 1990; McMahon, 1997; Kim, 2008). With the perception that social contexts inform knowledge creation (Thomas, Menon, Boruff, Rodriguez, & Ahmed, 2014), people derive further meaning of their experiences from the external environment (e.g., their interactions with others).

This notion of and value for subjective experience brings individual perspective to the forefront of research. As a result, an appreciation for the job search process being socially embedded develops, inviting an awareness of individuals as actively perceiving, interpreting, and constructing meaning of his or her experience within the context of their environment. In the case of the present study, social constructivism provided a framework within which to identify how people interpreted their experience of finding work, through a consideration of both internal and external influences. Participants were viewed as directly shaping an understanding of their experiences, relying on cognitive processes to generate, interpret, and ultimately make meaning of this perspective. This philosophical position directly informed the design of the research study and the selection of research methods used by the researcher.

Design of the Research Study

One of the most critical decisions made when conducting research is the type of design used. The way in which the researcher designs a study directly informs data collection, analysis, and interpretation in the research process (Bordens & Abbott, 2002). A discussion of research design concerns the specific strategy employed to analyze and integrate separate components of a research study in order to most effectively and logically address the identified research problem. The most dominant approaches to conducting research are either quantitative or qualitative by design.

Guided by logical positivism, quantitative research utilizes experimental methods to test and substantiate predictive hypotheses through the controlled measurement and analysis of causally related variables (Golafshani, 2003). Alternatively, qualitative research aims to understand and explain the complexity of phenomenon within natural and context-specific settings, rather than through the use of statistical procedures (Patton, 2001). Hoepfl (1997) detailed this distinction well, by aligning quantitative research with prediction, determination, and generalization of findings, in contrast to the understanding, illumination, and extrapolation characteristic of qualitative research.

Historically, quantitative research positioned itself as the standard for research design. However, the relatively recent shift away from positivism towards a more speculative and unknowable view created skepticism about the utility of this approach (Ponterotto, 2005). In a world where multiple perspectives and meanings of a phenomenon began to emerge, qualitative research methods became recognized as a respectable means by which to approach and analyze data and psychological research. This shift in thinking invited people to make a determination for themselves about which method could best address the aims of their own research.

Selecting a Qualitative Approach

The present study sought to identify and understand the unique and complex experiences of recent university graduates in their process of finding meaningful employment. The selection of a qualitative approach allowed for an exploration of how and why this phenomenon occurred in such a way that embraced variability and context. In addition, qualitative research is particularly suited for studies examining the connection between processes and outcomes, such as an investigation of the influences on job search success, given the tendency for such an approach to rely on personal accounts of experiences by participants (Shaw, 2003). According to Malagon-Maldonado (2014), qualitative research works to enrich data and empower participants by giving voice to their experiences, rather than simply reacting to researchers' questions. By uncovering the meaning that people attribute to their experiences, a qualitative approach affords access to the participant's world in unique ways.

With the existence of numerous qualitative approaches to research, the process of selecting one over another is typically guided by a consideration of which method of data analysis best addresses the research questions identified by the study (Creswell, Handson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). According to Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005), the purpose of an ECIT study typically involves "looking at helping and hindering factors, collecting a functional or behavioural descriptions of an event or problem, examining success and failures, or determining characteristics that are critical to important aspects of an activity or event" (p. 476). This focus directly aligns with the aim of the present study to examine what helped and hindered the job search process of recent university graduates in order to create a functional description of the school-to-work transition and, in doing so, identify characteristics critical to ensuring a smooth transition process. Additional considerations when choosing a qualitative

approach to research include the researcher's training, background, and comfort level with a particular qualitative approach, as well as the preferences of his or her department and research supervisor (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). The specific research experiences and expertise in using the ECIT of the professor supervising the present study also further determined this method to be the most appropriate design from which to approach this study.

Suitability of the ECIT for the Present Study

With limited research available that discusses the school-to-work transition from the perspective of recent graduates (Bell et al., 2016), the researcher selected a methodological approach for the present study that was exploratory in nature, thereby inviting participants to describe their experiences in a way that allowed for the flexibility and freedom necessary to understand and appreciate their unique and untold stories. Focusing on the perspective of participants allowed for the expression of subjective understanding, an essential component in research that emphasizes the point of view of participants (Butterfield et al., 2005), such as the present study. According to Flum and Blustein (2000), exploratory research such as this lends itself well to constructivist approaches, which rely on individual agency as a way of explaining and interpreting the process of career construction.

Within the areas of counselling, education, and psychology, critical incidents are observed as an effective method of data collection, particularly among research projects that address practical problems (Flanagan, 1954), such as the issue of finding work in a distressed economic climate. In line with these values, the ECIT is able to extract rich and detailed information from participants (FitzGerald, Seal, Kerins, McElvaney, & Fitzgerald, 2008), providing data that may otherwise be left unanswered by other research approaches (e.g., quantitative methods). Following the ECIT framework, the present study aimed to uncover how

individuals cognitively engaged in the construction of meaning surrounding the job search process and, in doing so, attribute relevance to their experience of finding employment.

Given the nature of the ECIT method, a number of expectations necessarily follow that require discussion for the purpose of exposing the potential for these assumptions to impact the interpretation of findings of the present study. One such assumption is that there are helpful and hindering influences on the process of finding meaningful employment, and that participants have the capacity to accurately identify them. To do so involves a willingness on the part of participants to share their experiences, which requires a degree of openness and recall. This brings about the assumption that participants are willing and able to reflect on not only those experiences that supported their success, but also those that interfered with it. In addition, the use of WL items evoked an expectation that participants can account for events or experiences they believe would have promoted their ability to find work during the job search process. This reflective process requires a self-awareness of dual roles that inherently assumes participants have the capacity to consider the wider impact of their choices in hypothetical situations.

Origins and Evolution of the ECIT

First proposed by Flanagan (1954), the CIT originally served as a means of systematically observing specific human behaviours to allow for inferences and predictions about the person or the activity being performed. Originally implemented to assist in learning how to fly a plane (Flanagan, 1954), the CIT attempted to identify and account for errors or failures in performing particular functions. By conducting this type of research, improvements could be made to hiring techniques and processes, thereby enhancing performance in the long term. This sparked interest from industrial and organizational psychologists, among the first to

use the CIT as a method for understanding effective and ineffective human behaviours in the workplace (Woolsey, 1986).

Given its high level of specificity and systematization, the CIT served as a quantitative technique with the purpose of providing factual reports of behaviour (L. Butterfield, personal communication, March 30, 2016). However, Flanagan (1954) viewed the CIT instead as a flexible set of principles rather than a rigid tool, and argued for its ability to meet the needs of any given situation. As such, when the field of psychology began to move towards post-modern perspectives, the CIT evolved with it. At this time, CIT research began to move beyond the field of industrial and organizational psychology towards various other areas of inquiry, including counselling (McCormick, 1997; Woolsey, 1986) and education (LeMare and Sohbat, 2002). The CIT quickly gained recognition as an exploratory tool that allowed for the study of psychological experiences based on retrospective self-reports and has been applied in this way for the purpose of the present study.

Research Procedures

Research for the present study occurred at the University of Calgary, within the province of Alberta, Canada and received approval by the research supervisor and the Conjoint Faculty of Research Ethics Board (CFREB) prior to data collection. The following sections outline the research procedures implemented by the present study, providing a summary of participant selection criteria, participant recruitment, as well as noteworthy ethical considerations.

Participant Selection Criteria

The population of interest to the present study included meaningfully employed (i.e., individuals currently working in their field of study in a job deemed personally fulfilling) recent university graduates. The present study included several inclusion requirements, established to

further isolate the population in order to meet the research aims. Firstly, participants must have completed their program of study within the past two academic years. Not only did this minimize the potential for memory decay or recall errors, such as omission and confusion (Ayhan & Işiksal, 2004), but also ensured that all participants conducted their job search under similar economic conditions. Given that limited research exists on pre-employment outcomes that reflect the current economic state (Feldman, 2002), temporal consistency across participants allowed the researcher to draw contextually meaningful conclusions from the data.

Secondly, participation in the present study required participants' highest level of attained education to be at the undergraduate level (i.e., a Bachelor's degree). Given that most graduate programs offer highly specialized training within a particular field, individuals trained at this level not only conduct their job search in a distinctive way compared to job seekers educated at the undergraduate level, but also tend to experience higher levels of success finding employment in their chosen profession. This is due in part to the fact that growth in demand for a university education at the graduate level increased 61% between 2004-2014, compared to only 38% at the undergraduate level (Brain, 2015).

Given the focus of the present study on recent graduates with a Bachelor's degree, participation required individuals be under the age of 30 to be eligible. This upper age limit systematically selected out individuals who completed their post-secondary training as a mature student and, as a result, were more likely to have previous employment experience. Research suggests that job seekers entering the workforce for the first time typically endure a unique set of challenges and obstacles compared to others (Brown et al., 2006), often as a result of their limited employment and job search experience. By focusing exclusively on new-entrants to the

workforce, participants would likely demonstrate relatively similar levels of readiness, knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed in the job search process.

In terms of workplace experience, eligibility criteria required participants to have maintained employment with the same organization for at least the past 3 months. This timeline ensured that all participants successfully fulfilled the standard 90-day probationary period commonly employed within Canadian workplaces and would therefore be considered stably employed. Although numerous other experiences may motivate an individual to maintain employment, length of tenure and employment satisfaction are closely associated (Wyld, 2014). This supports the expectation of participants to be working in jobs they find meaningful or otherwise personally fulfilling given the high correlation between satisfaction and fulfillment in the workplace (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Finally, the present study necessitated that participants be sufficiently fluent in English (i.e., able to complete the study exclusive of assistance with the language). Implementing this criterion minimized any risk associated with miscommunication and misunderstanding in both the interview and data analysis process, which may have otherwise compromised the reliability of the data.

Participant Recruitment

The present study recruited a purposive sample of participants using media advertisements disseminated through online classified ad platforms and social media sites (i.e., Facebook). The recruitment advertisement provided an overview of the study and outlined the expected commitment from participants. This included details about eligibility criteria, study location, date and time, benefits to the participant, as well as contact information for the graduate student researcher (see Appendix A). Following the recruitment of several participants using this method, snowball sampling and word of mouth attracted all remaining participants, whereby

previous participants voluntarily circulated details of the study to other individuals interested in and eligible to participate. The researcher conducted all correspondence with participants via email and maintained responsibility for planning and scheduling interviews.

Overall, the research sample consisted of eight recent graduates (5 females, 3 males) of degree granting institutions across Western Canada. All participants graduated with a Bachelor's degree from various departments and specializations. A summary of participant demographics including details pertaining to participants' age, gender, degree name, job title, and industry of employment can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant Number	Age	Gender	Degree Name	Industry of Employment	Job Title
1	25	Male	Business Administration	Finance	Accountant/ Business Owner
2	21	Female	English	Education	Teacher's Assistant
3	24	Male	Applied Science	Technology	Geotechnical Engineer
4	25	Female	Medicine	Health Care	Veterinarian
5	25	Female	Nursing	Health Care	Registered Nurse
6	25	Female	Recreation and Health	Sports and Entertainment	Donor Relations and Foundations Coordinator
7	24	Female	Sociology/ Statistics	Professional Services	Research Assistant
8	25	Male	Kinesiology	Recreation, Education	Hockey Coach

In an effort to maintain anonymity, demographic details pertaining to participant ethnicity has been reported here in aggregate form. Specifically, all participants self-identified as Canadian, with a total of seven participants from Caucasian/European descent, and one participant from Asian descent.

Noteworthy Ethical Considerations

In order to determine the ethical suitability and appropriateness of the present study, the research supervisor as well as the CFREB reviewed and approved all research procedures and accompanying documents. Prior to data collection, the researcher informed all participants about the voluntary nature of the present study and explained that the CFREB deemed the incentives used to encourage engagement in the research exclusive of undue influence or manipulation. The researcher also educated participants on their right to remove themselves or their data from the study at any time up until the point of data analysis without penalty or loss of benefits. In order to further maintain anonymity, the researcher assured participants that their employers would not be made aware of their participation or of the answers they provided. Either participants or the researcher selected pseudonyms prior to beginning the interview, and participants had the option of removing their data from inclusion as direct quotes within the research.

Interviews took place in private settings that served to maintain the anonymity of participants and ensure confidentiality of the interview content. This involved conducting interviews over the phone or in-person at the place of participants' employment in a private office space. To maintain the anonymity of all documents, the researcher stored consent forms separate from the interview protocol in individual folders within a locked filing cabinet only accessible to her. Password-protected computers currently store all electronic data files associated with the present study including audio clips, transcripts, and scanned consent forms.

Five years following the completion of data collection, all data files will be permanently erased and paper files securely shredded.

Data Collection and Analysis

Consistent with the ECIT process (Butterfield et al., 2009), data collection and analysis followed five procedural steps as described by Flanagan (1954): (1) ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied, (2) making plans and setting specifications, (3) collecting the data, (4) analyzing the data, as well as (5) interpreting the data and reporting results. Following the shift of the CIT from its positivist roots towards a post-modern research paradigm brought about several enhancements to the basic CIT process, which advanced the method to its current form as the ECIT. These additions included the use of WL items (i.e., influences not present at the time of the participant's experience, but that the participant believes would have been helpful in the situation), extensive credibility checks for the purpose of enhancing the trustworthiness and robustness of the technique, and the inclusion of contextual questions, which served as background information for the data and as a way of orienting participants in the ECIT method (Butterfield et al., 2009). The section that follows provides a thorough description of how the present study incorporated each of these steps and accompanying enhancements into the data collection and analysis process.

Step 1: Ascertaining the General Aims of the Activity Being Studied

The first step of data analysis according to the ECIT identifies the objectives of the study and outlines what the research is to accomplish (Butterfield et al., 2009). As stated previously, the present study purposed to further an understanding of how recent university graduates approached the process of finding work in a distressed economic climate. Given the placement of the present study within the framework of social constructivism, attending to the individual

experiences and meaning-making of participants served to facilitate this process. In pursuit of these general aims, the research outcomes of the present study (a) inform how future workforce entrants will approach the job search process in order to maximize their success in finding meaningful employment, (b) provide key insights and career development strategies for professional practice and counselling interventions in support of career counsellors and practitioners working with clients during the school-to-work transition, and (c) encourage the expansion of educational materials and educational reform within post-secondary institutions.

Step 2: Making Plans and Setting Specifications

In preparation for conducting research, Butterfield and colleagues (2005) suggest first making a decision about what to observe and how to observe it. The present study included both CIs and WL items as part of the data collection process in an effort to ensure comprehensiveness in the investigation of events and/or experiences that played a role in the job search process. This included a consideration of helpful incidents (i.e., experiences that contributed to participants' ability to find meaningful employment or otherwise helped the job search), hindering incidents (i.e., experiences that hindered participants' ability to find meaningful employment or otherwise made the job search more difficult), and WL items (i.e., experiences that participants believed would have helped them find meaningful employment or that they would have done differently during the job search process if given the chance). In accordance with the ECIT protocol (Butterfield et al., 2009), the present study also requested supporting details from participants, including examples and an explanation of the importance for CIs and WL items, in order to substantiate the significance of each event.

To facilitate this process, the researcher generated a semi-structured interview protocol. Using an interview guide when conducting ECIT interviews is critical to maintaining consistency

across participants in terms of the level of detail explored within each content area (Butterfield et al., 2009). In the present study, this guide also served as a record of the interviews conducted, with notes providing a point of reference throughout the interview and acting as a partial transcript in the case that recording equipment malfunctioned. Additionally, having these questions offered structure in the interview to focus on the identification of CIs and WL items, as well as supporting evidence of these incidents (i.e., the importance and an example). This not only made it possible to verify the fulfillment of specific ECIT criteria throughout the interview, but also to preserve uniformity across participants in the interview itself.

Step 3: Collecting the Data

According to Butterfield and colleagues (2009), in-person interviews are the most appropriate means of collecting data when using the ECIT in psychological research. This is due in part to the fact that interviews allow for the exploration of individual experiences in such a way that participants are able to precisely describe what is meaningful or important to them, thereby enhancing the accuracy of the data. Data collection for the present study took place over a period of 10 months and concluded following the eighth interview. Consultation with the research supervisor determined that eight interviews constituted a sufficient sample size to adequately support the research aims of the present study, and therefore served as a satisfactory point at which to conclude the interview process. Intuitively, the researcher determined exhaustiveness of the data at this point (i.e., no new themes emerged), given the frequent recurrence of themes throughout the second half of the interviews. According to Flanagan (1954), this is a sign that the research topic is adequately covered. Following an in-depth review of the literature, previous research using a comparable design and method as the present study validly represented the topic of research with similar sample sizes (Snodgrass, Gervais, Corbett,

& Wilde, 2009). Temporal, financial, and resource constraints also played a role in determining the cut off point for interviewing.

Informed consent. The process of collecting data using the ECIT begins with obtaining informed consent from participants. To accomplish this, the present study provided participants with a consent form via email for phone interviews or at the start of the meeting for in-person interviews. The informed consent included an overview of the study, and provided participants with details about the nature of the interview. The informed consent also detailed the risks and benefits of the study, including how the researcher would handle the interview data following the interview (see Appendix B).

This process also required participants to make a decision about their willingness to grant permission for the researcher to audio-tape the interview, quote and refer to their data in the results of the thesis, and contact them via email to cross-check findings. As noted above, to maintain anonymity, participants had the option of either choosing a pseudonym for themselves or having one selected for them by the researcher. In the case that the researcher chose a pseudonym on their behalf, participants received their pseudonym during the cross-checking process. Following a comprehensive review and explanation of the consent form, the researcher encouraged participants to raise any questions or concerns regarding their participation in the study. Participants then provided their consent to continue with the interview both through verbal acknowledgment of their understanding of the study and through signing the consent form.

Demographic information. Prior to beginning the formal, semi-structured interview, participants completed a series of demographic questions in order to identify personal characteristics and background information deemed relevant to the present study (see Appendix C). Specifically, participants provided details about their age, gender, ethnicity, highest level of

attained education, degree name(s), job title, and industry of employment. This information offered insight into the distribution of demographic characteristics among participants and allowed for differentiation in responses based on these characteristics in the case that patterned variations existed. The process of collecting demographic information from participants took approximately 5 minutes to complete.

Contextual questions. Asked at the beginning of the interview, contextual questions focused on what it meant to participants to be meaningfully employed and in what way they found their work to be personally fulfilling. Structuring the interview in this way not only provided important background information to support data collection (Butterfield et al., 2009), but also invited participants to begin thinking and talking about their own experiences of being meaningfully employed. These questions served to confirm that participants found their work to be personally fulfilling and took approximately 10 minutes of the interview.

Semi-structured interview. Following completion of the contextual questions, each interview introduced an opening script, used to familiarize participants with the ECIT approach. Once participants acknowledged their understanding of the interview process, a precise interview guide informed the remainder of the interview, which featured a series of probes and question stems that stimulated discussion around participants' helpful, hindering, and WL experiences in relation to their ability to find meaningful employment. For a complete interview guide including a list of the contextual questions, refer to Appendix D.

Each interview concluded with a brief closing script (see Appendix E) and debrief form (see Appendix F), which reiterated the aim of the present study and provided further context in regards to the importance and implications of conducting the research. At this point, the researcher also reminded participants of next steps and to expect a request for a follow up

interview via email upon the completion of data collection and preliminary data analysis. Finally, the researcher invited all participants to connect with anyone in their network interested and willing to participate in the study. Each interview took approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete and the utilization of audio-recording during this process allowed for the confirmation of accuracy for transcribed data.

Step 4: Analyzing the Data

As prescribed by Flanagan (1954), the researcher at this stage of analysis is responsible for (a) determining the frame of reference, (b) formulating categories by grouping similar incidents, and (c) deciding on the level of specificity or generality in reporting the data. Detailed below is a complete description of how the present study approached each of these three stages of the data analysis process.

Determining the frame of reference. The frame of reference in an ECIT study is based on an understanding of the purpose that data serves. Positioning the research within this context directly informs the way in which data analysis unfolds. In the present study, findings from the data served the purpose of supporting recent graduates and current post-secondary students, career development professionals and practitioners, as well as post-secondary institutions and staff in better understanding how to approach the school-to-work transition. With this in mind, the researcher could approach the analysis process in a more purposeful and focused manner.

Formulating categories by grouping similar incidents. According to Butterfield and colleagues (2009), the process of formulating categories is one that requires "experience, judgement, and insight" (p. 271). In order to facilitate this, the researcher in this stage of the analysis process adhered to the following three steps: (a) organizing the raw data, (b) identifying the CIs and WL items, and (c) creating the categories.

Organizing the raw data. The researcher prepared transcripts for each of the eight audio-recorded interviews and saved them electronically in separate files in preparation for manual coding procedures. During an initial read through of each transcript, the researcher engaged in a preliminary coding and analysis process, whereby the inclusion of reviewer comments in the margins of the file allowed for the documentation of thoughts and ideas about data interpretation. Additional notes included the researcher's reactions to the data, such as ideas about how to improve the interview protocol going forward.

Identifying the CIs and WL items. Starting with the first interview, the researcher coded each transcript and began the process of identifying cases of CIs and WL items in the data, as well as any associated examples and/or explanations of importance. Participant numbers accompanied each identified incident to assist in the tracking of participation rates during the categorization process. Using this manual procedure of analysis, the researcher copied each extracted CI or WL item, the corresponding example, and/or importance from the electronic Word document and transferred this information to an excel spreadsheet that listed each incident along with the transcript line numbers. Utilizing separate spreadsheets for helping incidents, hindering incidents, and WL items based on each of the eight transcripts allowed for further differentiation and organization of the data.

Although the ECIT approach encourages researchers to remove from inclusion in the data CIs and WL items not supported by both an example and an explanation of importance given the rich description of participants' experiences that this affords (L. Butterfield, personal communication, March 30, 2016), an initial, non-discriminatory analysis of data from the present study retained all identified CIs and WL items. Upon further review, the researcher and research supervisor deemed it appropriate to keep those CIs and WL items that contained at least one of

either an example or importance, given the infrequency of these occurrences and the identified relevance of said incidents to the aim of the research.

Creating the categories. The process of creating categories involved the use of inductive reasoning to recognize similarities and differences in the data set (Butterfield et al., 2009), moving from specific incidents towards broader, inclusive categories through the identification of patterns, themes, and relationships. Starting with the first transcript, the researcher extracted and electronically placed each of the CIs and WL items into approximate groupings based on incidents that had a similar focus. After organizing and classifying incidents from the first transcript, the researcher created initial category names to reflect the incidents included. When CIs or WL items did not fit within existing categories, the category name either evolved or changed to be inclusive of this incident, or the researcher created a new category. In cases where categories contained a comparatively large number of incidents or incidents that could be further differentiated, the creation of sub-categories maximized the accuracy of incident representation within each category.

This process followed for each of the eight transcripts, until a total of 13 categories existed that accurately captured all of the CIs and WL items from the transcripts. A calculation of participation rates determined that each category met the minimum 25% threshold of viability (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). Following the conclusion of the categorization process, the researcher finalized category names and created descriptive operational definitions used to detail and define the type of incidents captured by each category.

Deciding on the level of specificity or generality. A number of factors determine the specificity or generality of data analysis, including financial and temporal considerations, the availability of human resources to assist in the analysis process, and the utility of categories

based on their level of specificity or generality (Butterfield et al., 2009). Another major

consideration for the present study included participation rates, such that each category required

at least a 25% participation rate to be viable (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). Therefore, the

researcher organized the data in such a way that allowed for specificity in the findings to the

extent that each category still exceeded this minimum threshold.

The researcher and research supervisor also made a decision to only analyze and include

in the findings results that pertained directly to the CIs and WL items from the interviews. This

decision resulted from a consideration of time constraints and feasibility for a project of this size,

as well as through a discussion of the purpose, scope, and aim of this research. As a result, the

researcher deemed any information from participant responses that did not directly contribute to

the development of an incident, and therefore facilitate a better understanding of the job search

process, to be outside the scope of the present study. Although this omitted from the findings

much of the content from the contextual questions, this portion of the interview served a distinct

and separate purpose to (a) support the assumption that recent graduates identified themselves as

meaningfully employed, (b) orient participants in the ECIT method, and (c) encourage a

discussion of CIs.

Step 5: Interpreting the Data and Reporting Results

According to Flanagan (1954), the practice of making sense of data is the most essential

component of a research study. This includes reporting results and interpreting the data, offered

here in Chapters Four and Five, respectively. In addition to this highly independent process

originally outlined by Flanagan (1954), the ECIT enhanced this practice by incorporating nine

credibility checks, which serve to strengthen the results and interpretations of research, as well as

reduce the likelihood of bias and researcher subjectivity (Butterfield et al., 2009). Detailed below is a description of how the present study incorporated each of these credibility checks.

Audio-taping interviews. The researcher audio-tapped each in-person and phone interview using a digital recording device. Maxwell (1992) suggested that audio-taping interviews allows the researcher to accurately capture participants' words and validly reflect their perspectives in the research. This also made it possible for the researcher involved in the present study to produce verbatim transcripts of the interviews, providing an opportunity for familiarization with the data from an early stage of analysis.

Interview fidelity. Given the researcher's inexperience with the ECIT process, having a second reader review the transcripts ensured the effective use of this method. To accomplish this, the research supervisor scanned 25% of the transcripts to made certain that interviews accurately followed the approved interview guide, as well as provide feedback on the researcher's interview technique and questioning style. The researcher then integrated this feedback into future interview sessions to enhance the reliability and accuracy of data collected.

Independent extraction of CIs. Research by Andersson and Nilsson (1964) determined that in order to establish reliability and validity of the CIT, it is necessary to randomly select 25% of the transcripts for independent coding of the CIs and WL items. Following this principle, the researcher invited a counselling psychology graduate student familiar with the ECIT method to identify what they believed to be the CIs and WL items within two of the eight transcripts. Initially, this resulted in a 91% agreement rate between the researcher and independent coder. To reconcile these discrepancies, the researcher and independent coder met to discuss differences in their interpretation of the data. The two approached this conversation from a curious stance, with incidents explored and explained within the context of each coder's individual analysis. This

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contributed to a rich conversation in which the coders co-constructed an interpretation of the data believed to most accurately capture the experiences of participants. A discussion of discrepancies in coding led to the achievement of a 100% concordance rate.

Exhaustiveness. Being the point at which no new themes emerge from the data, the present study achieved exhaustiveness after the fourth interview. Using a log similar to the one proposed by Butterfield and colleagues (2009), the researcher tracked and recorded new categories from each interview in order to determine the point of exhaustiveness. Although it is appropriate to cease the interview process at this point, since data analysis for the present study did not take place until after the scheduling and completion of all eight interviews, the researcher decided to include the CIs and WL items identified in the remaining interviews in the final results. Not only did this serve to honour the experiences of all participants, but also to enhance the richness of the data set.

Participation rates. The calculation of participation rates provided an opportunity for the researcher to further establish and substantiate the credibility of each category. Identifying the number of participants that contributed to the formation of a given category allowed for a determination about the relative strength of each theme. Following the advice of Borgen and Amundson (1984), the present study only included categories with participation rates of 25% or greater, which marks a baseline percentage of rigor within the category. This meant that at least two of the eight participants had to endorse a category for it to be considered credible. Each of the 13 categories from the data exceeded the recommended 25% participation rate in at least one of the helping, hindering, or WL item sections, with total category participation rates ranging from 38% to 100%. Table 2 presents these categories as well as summarizes the total number of CIs and WL items and overall participation rates in each.

Table 2

Overview of CI and WL Categories

Category	Frequency (n)	Participation Rate (%)
Previous Experience		
Academic	6	63
Occupational	14	100
Personal Learning	5	50
Perceived	3	38
Connections		
Network	16	100
Networking	6	50
Personal Qualities		
Concern	9	63
Control	15	63
Curiosity	17	88
Confidence	7	63
Unexpected Opportunity	5	63
Labour Market Conditions	7	63
Logistical Skills	21	100

Placing incidents into categories by an independent judge. Following the recommendation of Butterfield and colleagues (2005), the researcher randomly selected 25% of the CIs and WL items from each category and sent them in the form of a randomized list to another graduate student in counselling psychology with experience using the ECIT method. The category names and operational definitions also accompanied this list in order to orient the independent judge in the research. This independent judge placed each of the CIs and WL items into the category that they saw fit. A comparison of results from this initial categorization process produced a 90% agreement rate. Reconciliation of differences in the placement of incidents involved a mutual process of reformulating the operational definitions used to define each category in order to more accurately describe the incidents captured in each. This resulted in 100% agreement between the researcher and the independent judge.

Cross-checking by participants. Following initial data analysis, the researcher contacted participants via email to partake in the process of cross-checking findings. This further validated categories by garnering the support of those who contributed to the research (Butterfield et al., 2005). This check involved sending research participants a list of their CIs and WL items, as well as the category placement of these incidents. Participants then provided their input regarding (a) the accuracy of their CIs and WL items within the research, (b) the appropriateness of placement for these incidents and items, and (c) whether they felt that any critical information was missing from the data set or that otherwise required revision. In the original email correspondence with participants, the researcher noted that failure to respond to the request would result in assumed agreement with the data in its current state. A total of five participants responded to the request to complete the cross-checking process. Of the participants who replied to the request for cross-checking, all agreed with the placement of their incidents and the accuracy of the data, with no participant indicating that they felt pertinent information was missing.

Expert opinions. The ECIT requires researchers to seek out the opinions of professionals with experience in the area of study in order to confirm the congruency of categories with existing knowledge in the professional field (Butterfield et al., 2009). In the case of the present study, this involved contacting individuals experienced in the areas of career development and transition in a young adult population. Butterfield and colleagues (2009) recommend consulting with at least two experts, and note that although familiarity with the ECIT is an asset, it is not a requisite of this check. In accordance with this procedure, the present study enlisted the support of two experts to review the researcher's analysis of the data.

The first expert who provided feedback as part of this credibility check is a tenured full professor who specializes in the transition from post-secondary school to full-time employment.

This individual publishes extensively on the school-to-work transition and frequently conducts research using the ECIT method. The second expert consultant has worked extensively within the post-secondary education system, recently serving in leadership positions with both alumni and career services. This individual has been involved in the management and development of various projects and programs for students, recent graduates, and long-standing alumni.

The researcher asked each expert to provide their input on whether (a) they found the list of categories to be useful, (b) any of the conclusions drawn about the data surprised them, and (c) they felt the researcher missed anything based on their personal experiences in the field (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954). Following these conversations, both experts indicated they found the categories to be useful and in alignment with their own professional and investigative experiences with recent graduates. One of the experts identified a category to be too broad and vague to accurately represent the incidents captured, which resulted in a change to the category name. Both experts also made important recommendations for how to approach the discussion of these findings, incorporated by the researcher in Chapter Five.

Theoretical agreement. In order to establish theoretical agreement, identification of the researcher's underlying assumptions thought to impact the study is first required (Maxwell, 1992). To accomplish this, Chapter One provided an in-depth exploration of biases and assumptions formed by the researcher on the idea that (a) students pursue post-secondary for the purpose of employment, (b) participants have the capacity to self-identify as meaningfully employed, and (c) a variety of experiences play a role in helping and hindering the school-to-work transition and job search process of recent graduates. In reviewing the relevant literature and participant responses to the contextual questions asked at the beginning of each interview, the researcher found support for these assumptions.

The second and final part of this credibility check involved comparing the categories with existing scholarly literature in relevant disciplines. A comprehensive review of previous research determined the literature to support all 13 categories within the present study. Chapter Five provides a detailed discussion of each category and accompanying scholarly references.

Establishing Reliability and Validity

An exploration of reliability and validity is a critical consideration when determining the appropriate application of a particular method of data analysis in research. Whereas a determination of reliability and validity is common in quantitative research, given its roots in the positivist perspective, establishing and verifying these two terms in the qualitative research paradigm is a novel endeavour (Golafshani, 2003). Traditionally, reliability referred to "the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study" (Joppe, 2000, p. 1). In qualitative research however, where the value of representativeness or generalizability may not be of concern (Maxwell, 1992), debate surrounds the question of whether a discussion of such concept is misleading or even irrelevant (Stenbacka, 2001). The alternative suggests using the term dependability in place of reliability, which specifically emphasizes the accuracy of the process and product of research as its own entity rather than in comparison to a broader context (Hoepfl, 1997), a concept that more accurately represents the nature of qualitative research.

Marked by a range of definitions and terms in quantitative research, validity is perhaps most simply described in the literature as determining "whether the research truly measures that which it is intended to measure or how truthful the research results are" (Joppe, 2000, p. 1). In qualitative research however, validity instead represents the quality, rigor, or trustworthiness of a study to reflect the interpretivist foundations common to this form of inquiry (Davies & Dodd,

2002; Stenbacka, 2001). Adopting this definition encourages an understanding and appreciation of validity for its ability to recognize how existing biases impact research, such as through subjectivity and reflexivity (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

In order to test reliability and validity within qualitative research, triangulation has been established as an effective strategy for strengthening research claims and controlling for potential biases (Mathison, 1988, Patton, 2001). Triangulation occurs through various forms of cross verification, such as confirming theoretical agreement, consulting expert opinions, cross-checking by participants, and conferring with independent coders, all of which are methods of establishing credibility employed by the ECIT (Butterfield et al., 2009). Consistent with the social constructivist notion of multiple or diverse constructions of reality underlying the present study, triangulation means that researchers can acquire valid and reliable data from multiple sources (Johnson, 1997), allowing participants, the researcher, and outside sources to work collaboratively in developing the research data.

Evaluating Reliability and Validity in ECIT Research

Understanding the importance and relevance of both reliability and validity to qualitative research necessitates a discussion of these topics within the ECIT approach and its implementation as a method of collecting data within the present study. Early researchers typically used quantitative measures of reliability and validity when analyzing the CIT. In its original form, the CIT established itself as a reliable and valid technique of data collection (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964; Ronan & Latham, 1974). Andersson and Nilsson (1964) noted that the reliance of CIT on observable and objective behaviours directly accounted for by participants added to the perceived accuracy and test-retest reliability of results. The more recent use of the technique as a post-modern method encouraged the adaption of qualitative forms of evaluating

this approach (Butterfield et al., 2005). This change in focus spurred many of the recent enhancements made to the CIT, such as the addition of various credibility checks, which focused on strengthening both the robustness and the validity of this method (Butterfield et al., 2005). This added level of scrutiny places the ECIT among those qualitative research methods that demonstrate exceptional value and quality. However, Butterfield and colleagues (2005) acknowledged that standards and recommendations for establishing reliability and validity for the ECIT are currently lacking in the literature, and therefore suggest additional scrutiny to further establish the credibility of this method.

Summary

Chapter Three provided an overview of how the researcher determined an appropriate method of data analysis for the present study. This included an exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of research and the relevance of social constructivism as a way of positioning this particular study. The chapter then outlined the research study design, including considerations of the appropriateness of the qualitative approach and the ECIT as a method of collecting and analyzing data. Next, the research procedures used by the present study were introduced, which covered details pertaining to the participant selection criteria, participant recruitment, and ethical considerations. The data collection and analysis process was then reviewed, which incorporated both the five procedural steps and nine credibility checks characteristic of the ECIT protocol. Finally, the reliability and validity both within qualitative research and the ECIT was considered through an examination of guidelines for determining credibility and trustworthiness. In Chapter Four, a detailed review of the data collected by the present study will be presented, including a detailed analysis of how participants experienced the job search process.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Chapter Four contains the findings of the present study, based on an analysis of data using the ECIT method. The chapter begins with a brief overview of findings from the CIs and WL items, as well as a broad conceptualization of the categories that reflect this data. A detailed explanation of each category follows, including an analysis of the helping incidents, hindering incidents, and/or WL items within each. Select examples and direct quotations from the interviews further illustrate the conceptualization of these findings.

Critical Incident Findings

From the eight interviews conducted as part of this research, a total of 131 CIs pertaining to experiences or events that helped, hindered, or could have helped participants find meaningful employment were identified. Specifically, an analysis of interview transcripts generated 75 helping incidents (58%), 28 hindering incidents (21%), and 28 WL items (21%). After grouping the CIs and WL items, the researcher generated 13 categories from the data, organized into six distinct themes. Table 3 presents an overview of the generated categories and sub-categories, including the total number of helping incidents, hindering incidents, and WL items in each, as well as the number and percentage of participants who endorsed them.

All but two of the categories (i.e., perceived previous experience and labour market conditions) contained helping incidents, which made up more than half of the data collected. The representation of hindering incidents proved to be more limited, absent from five of the total categories (i.e., academic experience, personal learning, network, networking, and unexpected opportunity), although still predominant in several others (i.e., perceived experience, labour market conditions, and logistical skills). A similar trend emerged among the WL items, unrepresented in three of the categories (i.e., academic experience, perceived experience, and

unexpected opportunity), but prevalent in the logistical skills, networking, and curiosity categories. All other categories contained a range of helping incidents, hindering incidents, and WL items.

Table 3
Frequencies and Participation Rates for CI and WL Categories

| | Critical Incident | | | | | | Wish List Items (n = 28) | | |
| | Helping (n = 75) | | | Hindering (n = 28) | | | | | |
Category	PA *n*	PA %	In *n*	PA *n*	PA %	IN *n*	PA *n*	PA %	IN *n*
Previous Experience									
Academic	5	**63**	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
Occupational	8	**100**	10	1	13	1	2	**25**	3
Personal Learning	4	**50**	4	0	0	0	1	13	1
Perceived	0	0	0	3	**38**	3	0	0	0
Connections									
Network	8	**100**	14	0	0	0	2	**25**	2
Networking	2	**25**	2	0	0	0	4	**50**	4
Personal Qualities									
Concern	4	**50**	5	3	**38**	3	1	13	1
Control	5	**63**	13	1	13	1	1	13	1
Curiosity	6	**75**	7	3	**38**	4	4	**50**	6
Confidence	2	**25**	3	3	**38**	3	1	13	1
Unexpected Opportunity	5	**63**	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Labour Market Conditions	0	0	0	5	**63**	6	1	13	1
Logistical Skills	4	**50**	6	4	**50**	7	6	**75**	8

Note. Numbers in boldface type indicate categories with participation rates of 25% or greater. PA = participants (*N* = 8); IN = incidents (*N* = 131)

As stated in the previous chapter, the analysis only included categories that met or exceeded the 25% participation rate threshold suggested by Butterfield and colleagues (2009). This required at least two of the eight participants interviewed to mention experiences related to a given category under one or more of the helping incidents, hindering incidents, or WL items for it to be considered viable. A total of three categories (i.e., occupational experience, network, and logistical skills) contained incidents from all of the participants, resulting in a 100%

participation rate. At least half of the participants (i.e., four or more) endorsed all of the

remaining categories except for perceived experience, referenced by 38% of participants as a

critical experience influencing the job search process.

Category 1: Academic Experience

The academic experience category captured CIs and WL items pertaining to participants'

experience of or involvement in the academic environment. This category contained six helping

incidents and no hindering incidents or WL items, with a total of five participants (63%)

speaking to academic experience as a relevant influence in the job search process. In reflecting

on their experiences as students, recent graduates commonly discussed skills they developed in

their coursework and through applied training (e.g., research projects, field studies, and study

abroad opportunities) as particularly useful when looking for work. Participant 1 provided an

illustrative example of how his coursework helped him develop a skillset applicable to the

workforce:

> I think the biggest thing for me in my post-graduate career is my entrepreneurial skills…
> Honestly, I think my entrepreneurial skills and all those classes that I did was the reason
> that I am where I am now because the whole basis of those classes was to get you out of
> your comfort zone every week, you know? Every week I was coming up with business
> ideas and using creative techniques to solve everyday problems; and not just solving
> those problems, but going out and developing the idea of a business behind it and going
> through the steps of what all would make this business work.

> When probed about the impact of this positive academic experience on his search for

work, Participant 1 offered the following explanation:

> You're trying to get an application out of it and turn it into a real world thing, which is
> often times very difficult, especially when a lot of courses are all theory-based… I think
> that for me it has really helped me and my career because I am able to walk into a room
> of people and converse with them and not be intimidated and not look like the recent
> graduate who is still trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life.

Recent graduates who indicated that academic experience promoted their job search success explained that by applying themselves in their academic programs, and in taking advantage of opportunities to involve themselves in additional projects or tasks beyond the scope of their course requirements, they developed a more comprehensive set of skills and knowledge that would not only better prepare them for the transition to the workforce, but ultimately set them apart in the competition for a job. Participant 3 emphasized the importance of standing out from other applicants by having a strong academic background:

> I just assume that if the resume does get looked at and there's two people that they are kind of bouncing back and fourth between, if you have the higher grades and similar experience then I think it's just another advantage.

Among all of the participants who endorsed academic experience as helping them in the search for work, the need to stand out from other applicants emerged as a point of central concern. Although several participants mentioned that academic experience alone was not sufficient to secure meaningful employment, excelling in and applying oneself in the academic environment, whether by achieving superior grades or through involvement in research or other applied activities, proved to be an effective means by which to promote oneself professionally.

Category 2: Occupational Experience

This category captured incidents that pertained to any experience of or relating to participants' involvement in professional fields or occupations, whether paid or unpaid. All eight participants discussed occupational experience in the context of their job search, a category that contained a total of 10 helping incidents, one hindering incident, and three WL items. Although this category covered the full range of previous occupations held by a recent graduate (e.g., co-op or practicum experience, volunteering, paid employment), participants discussed

these experiences almost exclusively in the context of its relevance for their current field of employment.

Helping incidents. Whether within the post-secondary environment (e.g., co-op experience, practicum placements) or the broader community (e.g., volunteer work, previous employment), each participant interviewed for the present study indicated having some formal occupational experience prior to being employed in their current position. Participant 3 explained how his steady track record of employability helped him secure his current job:

> I always had references and experiences showing that I was stable and employable… I know people struggle with that. They come out of university and haven't actually had any job experience so then they have literally nothing on their resume.

In addition to the benefit of stability, Participant 4 shared how being employed previously allowed her to apply for jobs otherwise unavailable had she not sought out relevant work experience prior to graduating:

> I can now apply for those positions that want the two years of experience. There's no point even applying for those beforehand. So I think I have that opened up to me a bit more… I know better what I want out of a job now, and I don't think you can do that without already having a job. I don't know how else to figure that out without just working, but I know better what I want now and I can make sure that I look for those specific things I guess. I also know what's not as much of a priority anymore, so I can be less picky about that kind of stuff.

By having the experience of working in her field, Participant 4 broadened her qualifications and eligibility for future employment. Additionally, she identified for herself the types of work opportunities she would like to apply for, thereby allowing her to be more selective and intentional when looking for employment. For Participant 8, this intentional job search process began years before being formally offered a job, when he started volunteering for the organization he hoped to eventually work. In the interview, Participant 8 recounted the role

his previous volunteer experience played in supporting his eventual success in securing paid employment with the organization:

> When one of the coaches there quit and an opening came up they said, "This guy has been here for two and a half years already volunteering his time," so they interviewed me, but I was really the only one they interviewed… Since they knew me from before I already had that leg up, whereas everyone else might have seen [the job posting] through Kijiji or something and never got there, because I was already there.

Participants identified an ability to secure and maintain previous employment as evidence of having developed and acquired general characteristics, such as trustworthiness, consistency, and a strong work ethic, as well as job specific knowledge and expertise. In most cases these previous occupational experiences directly aligned with or otherwise related to one's current field of employment. However, many recent graduates also recognized any experience to be better than no experience, noting the credibility that maintaining employment established through building references, creating opportunities for networking, and making other connections that may prove useful in the future.

Hindering incidents. Only one participant identified previous occupational experience as a hindrance to their ability to find future employment in a preferred field. Whereas other recent graduates discussed the benefit of unpaid experiences that would eventually lead to paid work, Participant 5 explained how having previous practicum experience in an area with limited room for growth ultimately hindered her employment opportunities. In the interview, she expressed her frustration around this experience:

> I feel like I was at a large disadvantage because I knew they weren't going to hire me… They told me they would not hire a new graduate, so I knew that wasn't an avenue for employment. Whereas many nurses ended up getting hired where they did their final focus… if it's not going to set you up for employment, why is the university offering or placing students there?

Not unlike Participant 5, many of the recent graduates who participated in the present study indicated that they expected their previous occupational experience, particularly when related to their field of interest, to benefit or promote their employment success. Whether directly through paid employment, or indirectly through references or referrals, recent graduates trusted that previous employment would lead or otherwise contribute to future employment.

Wish list items. Recent graduates who mentioned wanting more occupational experience typically referred to volunteering, and particularly relevant volunteer work, as an area of interest. Unlike paid employment, participants recognized volunteer work as serving a unique function in not only providing them with an opportunity to gain experience, knowledge, and skills in their field, but also as a means by which to demonstrate their commitment to and passion for the work they pursued. Participant 7 illustrated this notion by stating:

> I would have been grateful to volunteer for something that was more relatable to what I'm studying instead of just picking up volunteer work… I think it adds credibility, it gets your name out, it gets your face out there… because that shows people what you want. You're not doing it for the money, you're doing it because you like it, right? And that goes a long way.

Several participants believed that potential employers viewed relevant volunteer experience differently from paid employment. That is, if the motivation to seek out volunteer work was not financially driven, employers would perceive the motivation to be internally driven, such that this experience more effectively demonstrated applicants' interest in and passion for the work compared to paid employment.

Category 3: Personal Learning

Critical incidents or WL items deemed suitable for placement in the personal learning category required a focus on experiences related to a participant's involvement in activities for internally motivated purposes. These included engagement in extracurricular activities (e.g.,

sports), professional development opportunities (e.g., certifications or training), as well as more general life experiences. For inclusion in this category, incidents must have been focused on activities pursued outside of one's academic or occupational roles. The personal learning category contained a total of three helping incidents and one WL item, and appeared in half of the participant interviews.

Helping incidents. Recent graduates agreed that in today's competitive job market, one needed to do more than attend school and gain relevant employment experience in order to be successful at finding work in their field. Not only did recent graduates believe these additional experiences to be helpful in increasing the competitiveness of their application, but also in showcasing their ability to manage their time while juggling multiple responsibilities. Participant 4 described how, in her highly competitive field, she felt it necessary to seek out opportunities for personal learning, in addition to her academic and occupational experiences:

> I think that was a big factor in them hiring me over someone else who just wanted to do regular stuff… Having that background and having that extra experience is going to make them more likely to pick me, and that kind of thing. Everybody goes through vet school, everybody graduates vet school, and they want to see that you can do more, that you didn't just kind of go through the motions. It's not just grades I guess that gets you hired or gets you an internship, they want to actually see that you could successfully do other stuff on top of the school work.

Whereas Participant 4 highlighted specific personal learning experiences she had sought out to remain competitive (e.g., joining clubs, participating in competitions), Participant 5 emphasized how personal learning in a more general sense (i.e., through life experience) helped her during the job search process:

> I'm a mature student… [I'm] a couple of years older and have a little bit more of a journey under my belt in terms of life experiences, so I think that maybe set me apart a little bit… I think it shows that you're well rounded to an employer, but I also think that it speaks to your ability to deal with adversity… In my interview I was able to speak to experiences not only in nursing school, but also from other avenues of my life. I could speak on my other employment experiences that I've had, I was able to speak about other

schooling experiences that I've had, but also other life experience that I've had that made me who I am as a person, but also as a nurse.

For recent graduates who considered personal learning to positively influence their ability to find meaningful employment, the focus tended to centre on the importance of these unique experiences in differentiating oneself from the competition. Often times participants mentioned personal learning experiences in the context of how it helped them develop skills and attributes not commonly learned through formal education or the workforce, but that they believed to be relevant to finding employment nonetheless. These included such capabilities as resilience, cooperation, and the ability to hold a conversation.

In addition to helping them remain competitive in the search for work, some recent graduates also discussed how personal learning experiences helped them narrow down their career options and, as a result, conduct a more targetted job search. For example, in the following quote, Participant 6 talked about how travelling and participating in activities related to her field helped her decide what direction she wanted to take in her career:

> I think a lot of it has to do with your extracurriculars. I kind of never would've known that I wanted to be this if I hadn't gone to Africa or done things at the university or been the president of whatever club… I wouldn't have known that I wanted to be that unless I was fully enthralled, like that was it.

In many cases, personal learning afforded recent graduates a new way of engaging in their field of work that not only allowed them to gain experience beyond the classroom and the workplace, but that also invited an exploration of self that provided clarity and direction in their careers. Although these personal learning experiences did not often relate directly to one's field of interest, they served as an opportunity to develop transferable skills, which participants' deemed to be difficult to learn through academic or occupational experiences alone.

Wish list items. In recognition of the importance of personal learning experiences, when asked about how she would approach the job search differently in the future, Participant 5 cited a desire to seek out additional opportunities for growth. Specifically, in an effort to avoid "being stagnant or not using my skills as a nurse," she mentioned:

> Even if I wasn't able to work in my field I would still want to personally grow and learn in my field… Maybe that would spark my interest in a new area, or maybe that would open up another avenue for growth… Not only would I be more qualified to actually do the work, but I'd have a better skillset and I think that kind of mindset speaks volumes. If I was a [hiring] manager I would want a motivated nurse ready for a challenge or open to new experiences, that's the kind of person I would want working for me.

In considering the impact of these personal learning experiences on the hiring process, Participant 5 recognized an opportunity to not only enhance her qualifications, but also to showcase to a prospective employer the personal qualities that seeking out such opportunities might highlight (e.g., motivation, ambition). In all cases, recent graduates who touched on the value of personal learning believed that such experiences served a dual purpose in enhancing both their job-specific proficiency and competitiveness, as well as their more broadly applicable, and presumably more difficult to develop, professional skills and capabilities.

Category 4: Perceived Experience

Consisting exclusively of hindering incidents, the perceived experience category encompassed those incidents that related specifically to the impressions that others (e.g., potential employers) held about participants' previous academic, occupational, and/or personal learning experiences. A total of three participants (38%) mentioned perceived experience, or lack of experience, as hindering their ability to be successful in finding meaningful employment, with three incidents forming this category. Participant 6 associated this perception with doubts others expressed about her being qualified for a position that interested her, in stating:

They don't know who you are, they don't know what you do… Like, "Is this person going to be able to do this? Are they well versed in what we do enough to hop in and be able to handle it?" that kind of thing… I think just preparedness was a challenge that I had to get over as well. It's like, "Do you actually know what's going on?"

Whereas some participants saw these negative perceptions as informed by a belief that they lacked knowledge or understanding about the work, others felt their age specifically created a bias in the opinions of others, regardless of their actual ability to perform the job. For example, Participant 2 reported her own struggle to find work in her field and how she felt disadvantaged because of her age, even when competing against other applicants with less experience than her:

Even if their profession was [unrelated to the field], but they were 40 years old, they would beat me, even if I would have more experience than them, because they were older… They kind of base it on age when you're working in childcare so people who had lost their jobs were now my competition.

A notion echoed by others, Participant 1 found he received a different reaction from potential clients when meeting them in person compared to on the phone or over email, an experience that prevented him from securing contracts for employment:

I get to an interview and at first they're kind of shocked that I'm so young and they say that I look so young. I think that they expect – just the way I articulate myself in correspondence – they picture someone who is late 20s early 30s kind of thing and then when they meet me face-to-face many times I've gotten a shocked look from them… One client turned me down simply because I was too young and they just perceived me as irresponsible and everything.

For many recent graduates, the perceptions of others about their previous academic, occupational, and/or personal learning experiences played a key role in the job search process and their ability to find employment. Unfortunately, for those who found these impressions to influence their experience, external perceptions consistently resulted in negative job search outcomes. Whether biased by age or not, this equated to almost half of participants indicating that, at some point, someone had called their competence into question to the extent that it interfered with their ability to secure meaningful employment.

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Category 5: Network

The network category captured the impact of personal contacts on the professional

growth or advancement of participants in terms of furthering their careers. To be a personal

contact, the participant must have had a pre-existing relationship with the person beyond the

context of said individual providing professional services or job support. In the discussion of

network connections, participants commonly referred to professors, friends, and business

contacts or previous employers as key sources of network support. With a 100% participation

rate, this category signified one of only three discussed in all eight interviews, and therefore

represented a key source of support for recent graduates. Characterized almost exclusively by

helping incidents, the network category contained a total of 14 helping incidents and two WL

items.

Helping incidents. In speaking about how their network encouraged success in the job

search, the majority of participants commented on how someone in their network found them

their job or recommended them for their current position. In fact, several participants mentioned

the unlikelihood of being offered or even knowing about the opportunity had it not been for their

network. Participant 6 described how a friend of hers already employed in the field

recommended her for the job she currently held before it became available to the public:

> Most of the time I always go with it's all who you know, it's your network… The job that
> I was applying for at the time hadn't been posted to the general public, so it was more of
> an internal thing that she knew was happening. So she passed [my resume] along… That
> was the only way it was going to happen. The thing is with our organization specifically
> is that unless you know someone you're not going to get a job. I hate to say it, but that's
> just how it is. It's all word of mouth with most of our positions.

Participant 8 shared a similar experience, who explained that having a good relationship

with someone in the organization helped him gain credibility among those responsible for

making hiring decisions:

I'm pretty sure [my connection] referred me to the CEO, I think he had a pretty strong recommendation… He didn't necessarily hire the staff, but he has a strong pull to who would get hired for the hockey department. He would definitely be somebody that they lean on for decision-making.

Although a number of participants experienced a network connection explicitly referring them to or for a job opening, many other participants relied on their network for job support in other ways. For example, Participant 4 talked about the role her network played in helping her find out about job opportunities and determine what settings would be a good fit:

Once I was kind of looking into this clinic I went to [my professors] and I asked them what their opinion of that clinic was, because they know most of the clinics in the area. I asked them a lot of questions to make sure that it would be a good fit for me before I even applied… It felt like I was getting inside information about a job before even applying. It was really helpful to make a decision ahead of time if it was going to be a good position and a good fit for me.

In a more general sense, Participant 5 explained how a network of friends and family helped her in the job search process by providing motivation and support. Although these networks did not have a direct connection with potential employers or her ability to find and secure employment, she considered them to be integral in allowing her to continue to carry out her job search during difficult and stressful times:

I was quite lucky I had so much support from friends and family… Having that positive messaging was key in me getting up the next day and going and applying again, just giving me that hope, you know? Restoring that there will be a job… When I was feeling down I knew I could lean on them and they would help to pick me back up, right? So when we talk about resilience I certainly didn't do it alone. It was fuelled by my support systems… That was therapeutic in so many ways, just being able to share with my friends and family how I was feeling.

For all of the recent graduates who participated in the present study, the network of people they relied on to inform their search for work served a variety of purposes. Network advantages included formal referrals by a contact within the organization, conversations about the field of work with those connected to it, or more general social and emotional support from

close friends and family. Thus, the network of people who participants surrounded themselves

with proved to be fundamental at each and every stage of the job search process.

Wish list items. Although many recent graduates had a clear and informed understanding

of how their immediate networks helped them in the job search process, participants commonly

referred to untapped potential in more distant networks that they failed to fully explore

previously. Upon reflecting on their experience of the school-to-work transition, recent graduates

believed that, had they taken the opportunity to reach out to more people during the job search

process, they would have benefitted from the additional support.

For many recent graduates, not broadening the scope of who they contacted in their

network often stemmed from a reluctance to seek out help from a lesser known acquaintance.

Participant 3 revealed hesitancy to connect with distant connections when conducting his job

search, but felt more confident about it now, justifying the act of reaching out because "at the

very least I would have gotten good advice." Participant 8 explained how he would have used a

distant connection if given the opportunity to go back and conduct his job search over again:

> I would just ask them if they know of people that are looking for somebody and then I
> would ask to be put in touch with them and then from there I would try and go on a
> similar path to see if there's anything to get my foot in the door… They could also share
> maybe a similar experience they had or maybe say something that helped them in their
> job search too… you want to call the contacts you've already made and find out who
> they're talking to and you want to make sure you're talking to those people that have the
> experience and learning from them.

Participant 6 also recognized the network potential of reaching out to a distant connection

in stating that, "You never know who they know and that's the thing. They might have a whole

other network of people and they could say, 'Oh – I can put you in touch with this person.'"

Despite recent graduates having more commonly sought out proximal connections as a source of

network support, hindsight allowed participants to appreciate the unique perspective and novel connections that more distant networks could offer.

Category 6: Networking

In contrast to the network category, networking encompassed those incidents related to potential contacts, or opportunities to make contacts, that participants sought out for the purpose of furthering their career through professional growth and advancement. In these cases, incidents focused on the possibility of establishing of a new professional contact, with the emphasis of this relationship being on the context of work. Participants who voiced that networking played a critical role in their ability to find meaningful employment commonly sighted networking events, networking websites (e.g., LinkedIn), and other methods of gaining face time with people working in their industry as key influences. In total, half of the participants discussed networking, with a total of two helpful incidents and four WL items forming this category.

Helping incidents. Many recent graduates found value in connecting with people beyond their immediate network, such as through professional events and activities. Unlike the personal recommendations and referrals made by existing contacts, new connections offered recent graduates a different type of support by providing them the opportunity to establish themselves among peers in their field. Participant 7 found networking to be key in her ability to build credibility for herself, beyond her identity as a student, as both an individual and a professional:

> I wanted something where I could network personally on my own. It shows [potential employers] that I'm confident in what I know and what I can do, and just to interact with them… When you do that you introduce references, you introduce credibility. And those are high up on the list when trying to find a job nowadays… If you branch out, then you have different people from other areas to give you support.

In acknowledging the limits of her own network, Participant 7 viewed connecting with people in her field whom she did not have an existing relationship as an opportunity to engage

with a group who could offer her specific and targetted career support. Participant 1 also found

networking to be a successful source of business for him. In the interview, he suggested that

although intimidating, networking situations tended to be highly rewarding:

> I was going to a lot of networking events and things on meetup.com, where there's a lot
> of business groups and entrepreneur groups, and just going to talk to business people. I
> was able to find a few clients that way… We were taught [in school] to put yourself out
> there and if you apply that it usually works… Putting yourself out there in scary
> situations is where you're going to see the highest reward.

For participants who engaged in networking, the outcome almost always directly related

to a job or job offer. Although networking did not have as high a rate of return as the support

from one's immediate network in terms of promoting employment and employability, the results,

when positive, tended to be more readily translated into tangible opportunities for work given the

specific focus of these connections on career promotion and advancement.

Wish list items. Similar to the desire to reach out more frequently to one's network,

recent graduates often talked about wishing they had done more to take advantage of networking

opportunities during their job search. Participant 1 expressed a desire to have spent his time

attending networking events as opposed to looking for work through other, more passive

methods. When asked about what he would have done differently given the chance to conduct

his job search again, Participant 1 responded:

> I would do more networking actually… That was something that I saw a really good
> return on and it was easier to do. For me going to a networking event for 2-3 hours
> wasn't nearly as mind numbing or boring as sitting in front of a computer for 2-3 hours
> going through job postings and sending replies.

Participant 3 voiced a similar sentiment, who shared that he would have liked to partake

in more one-on-one networking opportunities with people in his industry. He described this wish

in terms of a recommendation he would make to others currently in a position of looking for

meaningful employment:

I would definitely recommend trying to get face time with people. The very worst thing that could happen is you get advice from these people, and then the best thing that could happen is you learn a little bit about their company and get their experience and opinion on things… I would call it insider information, but just maybe some tips and tricks about how to stand out, and you can include some of that information on your cover letter and maybe it gives you a better shot.

Composed of fewer than half the CIs and WL items of the network category, networking proved to be a less familiar and less comfortable means of making connections for many recent graduates. However, following the job search, participants' reflections revealed that networking served a distinctive and often underutilized purpose in promoting job search success, particularly in terms of building job specific connections and career-related knowledge.

Category 7: Concern

The first of four categories representing personal qualities of new graduates, career concern defined any behaviour that demonstrated participants' ability to think about what their future would be like and, in doing so, prepare and plan for it. Comprised of five helping incidents, three hindering incidents, and one WL item, 63% of participants believed a concern for their future directly impacted the job search process. The incidents in this category focused on forward thinking and the proactivity that this instilled in participants. Whether they engaged in the practice or not, recent graduates frequently noted that critical components to their success in finding meaningful employment included starting the job search early and being purposeful in this process (i.e., having a plan for progressing their careers).

Helping incidents. Experiences that recent graduates deemed to benefit their ability to find meaningful employment centered on having a well thought out plan in place to pursue work and initiating the job search as early as possible in the school-to-work transition. Having the ability to engage in forward thinking allowed recent graduates to anticipate what they might expect from the job search. It also provided them with the opportunity to plan for what was to

come and, as a result, be more effective in their approach to finding work. The following quote

from Participant 1 outlines his approach to ensuring his preparedness for employment, and the

positive impact on his career from developing this level of career concern:

> I do think very much 6 to 12 months ahead at all times making sure that I know what's
> coming down the pipeline a month or two before it actually happens and being prepared
> for when it does happen… If I do that I can ensure I'm not looking for the next job after
> I've lost clients and only have 40 hours a month of work… and I can prioritize [my] time
> and what not to be successful in laying out a career plan to what I deem as successful.

Whereas Participant 1 found career concern to be a valuable quality in allowing him to

consider his potential future clients, other recent graduates recognized career concern for its

ability to motivate their job search. Driven by career concern, Participant 6 talked about how

thinking about the future encouraged her to set timelines and create a plan for how she

approached the labour market after feeling stagnant in her previous role:

> I just said to myself you have to move on, so what's next? And I knew by the end of the
> summer I needed to have that decision made and I had set a timeline for myself that you
> need to either have a full-time job or something at that point… If I hadn't said by the end
> of the summer I need a full-time job I don't think I would have been nearly as motivated
> to apply for as many things as I did or do whatever I needed to do.

Having an ability to visualize and plan for the future encouraged recent graduates who

were successful at finding meaningful employment to take action and work towards achieving

their career goals, often at an earlier point in time than their peers. Setting goals for oneself

typically demystified the job search process and, in doing so, provided recent graduates with

direction and determination. Many of the recent graduates who participated in the present study

discussed how having career concern made it possible for them to start looking for work earlier

than their peers, opening them up to a largely untouched market. Participant 5 spoke to the

benefit of her proactivity when looking for employment opportunities:

> I think the fact that I applied so early for the job helped because there wasn't a lot of
> other people looking yet. So that kind of got me out of the really intense job search times,

out of the thick of the competition. I was able to be picky because I had this time so I didn't feel time constraints and I didn't feel like I just had to take what was offered to me. I could make sure that it was actually the right job for me, because I wasn't in any rush.

Numerous benefits for recent graduates surfaced through having career concern and the propensity to plan for the future. Whether providing the luxury of time and the ability to conduct a more thoughtful and thorough job search (i.e., by seeking out opportunities that directly aligned with important career and personal values), or minimizing the competition that one faced from other applicants, career concern proved to be an effective means by which to enhance one's ability to secure meaningful employment.

Hindering incidents. Whereas planning for the future resulted in a number of positive outcomes for recent graduates, neglecting to engage in this proactive process tended to produce adverse results. For example, participants who did not demonstrate a high level of career concern often mentioned being hesitant about the school-to-work transition and unprepared for full-time work, an experience associated with unease and discomfort for the individual. Participant 6 conceptualized her lack of career concern as feeling like "pressure to get something going when I didn't necessarily want to."

When recent graduates lacked motivation to engage in career planning, they tended to enter the job search without a sense of direction of where to go, leading to confusion and uncertainty about their future. Recent graduates commonly associated failing to prepare for their career with an inability to imagine life after school, leaving them to question their preparedness for this transition. The following quote from Participant 5 illustrates how her lack of career concern while in school left her feeling unprepared to jump into a career after graduating:

> When I finished school I wasn't certain if I was ready to 100% commit to full-time work right away. And maybe that was a personal struggle and I guess this kind of goes back to the feeling of maybe being a little bit lost… There was a piece of me that wanted to obtain work, because that's what I've been working for my entire life is to get through

school and get a job, but another piece of me kind of thought once you get this job, that's it, that's your life and this is your new reality, are you ready for that? Are you okay to settle down and just be a nurse?

In addition to the hesitation expressed by Participant 5 to begin her career as a nurse, she also discussed the negative impact of this uncertainty on her job search and ability to find meaningful employment:

It made it hard for me to put my whole heart and soul into applying for these jobs. It's so hard to invest so much time and energy into something that you're not 100% set on and I felt at times in my job search that I wasn't 100%… It just made me think maybe I'm not ready, maybe this isn't right for me right now, maybe I need to take some time and really think about if full-time work is for me right now or if there was something else out there for me. So that was an internal struggle… I think because of that I definitely missed opportunities. If somebody handed me my dream job two weeks after I [graduated] I would have said no, I needed some time off.

A lack of career concern presented a number of challenges for recent graduates, perhaps most notably missed job opportunities due to a lack of preparedness to enter the workforce. Many participants believed that starting the process of preparing for work after graduation did not leave enough time to adequately formulate a thoughtful plan. As a result, students unwilling or unprepared to plan for their future often faced difficulties deciding what sort of path they wanted to pursue upon graduating, a cognitive state commonly associated with both professional (e.g., delays in finding employment) and personal (e.g., stress and self doubt) challenges.

Wish list items. Recent graduates generally explored career concern in a conceptual manner, where participants discussed preparing and planning for their careers in the context of thinking about the future, creating timelines, and setting goals for themselves. However, the single WL item in this category presented a more actionable approach. In this case, the participant expressed career concern in the form of proactively seeking out relevant experiences believed to promote one's success in securing meaningful employment. Participant 5 explained how she would have liked to "do things like volunteering, looking into positions, and finding out

what certifications are needed. Do [I] need to do this to obtain this position, you know? Just kind of getting ready for the application process."

By having the ability to envision the type of occupation that one would like to pursue, recent graduates had the ability to anticipate the opportunities and experiences that would best prepare them for a given role. Participant 5 continued to provide an explanation as to the effect these purposeful experiences could have on her ability to secure employment:

> I think it speaks volumes to show up to an interview with all of these pieces in place and ready to hand over to the manager, because it shows you're prepared. You're forward thinking and it shows that you're mature and organized, and that's really important to an employer.

Although recent graduates identified value in many of their previous academic, employment, and personal learning experiences, having the foresight to imagine and plan for a future career made it possible for them to seek out relevant professional and personal activities that promoted their success in this endeavour. Rather than driven by the experience alone, recent graduates who expressed a desire for greater career concern valued the process of seeking out specific and targetted experiences directly informed by their occupational pursuits. Recent graduates with clear ideas about their future careers therefore focused their energy and time on activities and experiences that meaningfully contributed to these plans.

Category 8: Control

The present study measured career control by an ability to make decisions and take responsibility for actions taken, often achieved by an expression of drive and determination towards one's career goals. Most incidents placed in this category focused on personal qualities such as perseverance, resilience, passion, and hard work. This shed light on the association between feeling a sense of control over the job search process and an ability to engage in self-determination and decision-making. A total of five participants (63%) discussed control in the

interview, largely in the context of how it benefitted their job search. The career control category contained a total of 13 helping incidents, one hindering incident, and one WL item.

Helping incidents. Participants who talked about control as a quality they displayed during the job search considered it to be a necessary trait for ensuring success in the highly competitive workforce in which they searched for employment. Recent graduates often referenced the job search process as a test of their control, where only the most determined prospered. As such, a number of participants acknowledged just how much time they devoted to the job search process as a testament to the commitment they made.

For example, Participant 8 explained how he showed his determination to a potential future employer by staying late at work during his practicum (i.e., "I was working so much and I would get home at 1:00am or 2:00am in the morning and I would always be at practice at 7:00am, and up until Christmas I didn't miss a single practice"). Participant 1 made a similar statement when he described his own level of drive (i.e., "I'm not afraid to work 14-16 hour days. Many times I would be up at 5:00am or 6:00am in the morning and on Kijiji or some other job site just passing along my resume to whatever is out there"). In both cases, participants viewed their ability to push themselves professionally as a means by which to enhance their success in finding meaningful employment. Participant 8 explained the impact he believed this behaviour had on his career:

> I did more than what was needed. I think I thought a little selfishly that if I stuck with it that might be the one way to get into a place and to get a leg up on people. So I think that it just shows that I'm determined… and they could see that I was passionate for it. I wasn't just doing it because I had to sort of thing.

Participant 1 shared a similar view when he clarified the importance of demonstrating control in his own job search:

If you just keep going, if you just keep doing it, something will go your way… I think a lot of times that kind of thing gets noticed, and once it gets noticed by the right people they realize that you're not just another employee, but that you're actually an asset to the company.

Barriers faced during the job search process proved to be one of the most commonly cited reasons recent graduates felt they needed to work harder than their peers to be successful in achieving meaningful employment. Whether due to a high level of competition, resistance expressed by potential employers and educators about the applicant's abilities, or one's own self-doubt, many participants believed their willingness to overcome adversity to be predictive of their job search success. In other words, recent graduates started the transition from school-to-work with the preconception that they had to fight for their place in the workforce. Those who found success in securing employment frequently recounted stories of these struggles during the interview process. The following quote from Participant 6 demonstrates the barriers she surmounted in order to be successful in a male-dominant profession:

I was not willing to stop at anything until I got it, I was pretty firm on thinking that this needs to happen… I remember walking into my co-op advisor's office on our first meeting and saying, "I want to work with professional athletes and I want to work in professional sports," and she said, "You're going to need to rethink that because that doesn't really happen." I kind of had always been told that you're not going to work with professional athletes because you're a girl… I am in the position I am today because I didn't really stop. If I can see it I'm going to go for it.

Recent graduates who acknowledged and used their ability to demonstrate control over their job search better managed and more effectively dealt with set backs when faced with them. In recognizing their ability to influence the job search, regardless of barriers faced, recent graduates became better equipped to deal with these struggles and experienced more success in finding meaningful employment as a result.

Hindering incidents. Recent graduates who struggled with unemployment for an extended period of time regularly experienced difficulty maintaining a sense of control over the

job search. The more time people spent without work, the harder it was for them to feel a sense of authority or influence in determining pre-employment outcomes. Participant 5 recalled experiencing her own internal conflict after five months of being unemployed post-graduation:

> I had gone to school for six and a half years and could not obtain work. I had worked so hard for so long, yet I couldn't find any work… There were some days when I just felt so discouraged and I would come home and try to talk myself up, but that was hard. Just trying to kind of continue with nothing in return was really hard, you know? When you apply for jobs and you don't hear anything back then it was really hard to get up the next day and apply for 15 more jobs. I felt completely inadequate, and I felt a bit hopeless.

Those recent graduates who lacked a sense of control or self-determination over the outcome of their job search quickly internalized this struggle. Whereas those individuals who expressed a high level of control generally saw barriers to their success as external to themselves, recent graduates with a low level of control attributed their inability to secure meaningful employment to personal deficiencies. This created a cycle of self-doubt that made it difficult for recent graduates to see themselves as capable of achieving meaningful employment, often discouraging their efforts to continue searching for work.

Wish list items. An important quality of having control over the job search process included the ability to recognize the benefit of engaging in self care to avoid burn out. Despite only being mentioned by one participant, an awareness of when one needed to prioritize his or her mental, emotional, and physical health proved to be an underappreciated and underutilized means by which to maintain control during the school-to-work transition. Participant 5 explained how she would engage in more self-care when looking for employment in the future:

> It would be really important for me to take care of myself. Like I talked about before you know, my support system would be a huge place where I would go. I would tell a new grad this as well, to make sure that you're taking care of yourself and doing things you love in this process.

Not only did Participant 5 see self-care as beneficial on a personal level, but she also believed that potential employers would value someone committed to taking care of themselves. She stated, "I think that also speaks volumes to a future employer is, when you were [without work] how did you cope with that? That life experience piece I think is important when looking for a job." From this perspective, Participant 5 conceptualized career control as broader than an ability to be deliberate in how one conducted the job search, but also as an ability to be deliberate in how and when to care for oneself throughout this process.

Category 9: Curiosity

One of only two categories where each of the helping incidents, hindering incidents, and WL items reached participant rates greater than 25%, the present study defined curiosity as an ability to observe and explore different ways of doing things by demonstrating flexibility in the job search. Participants who discussed curiosity in the context of their school-to-work transition focused on their willingness to broaden what they believed to be viable employment opportunities. This included being adaptable towards the type of work (e.g., part-time, temporary, entry-level), as well as the environment of work (e.g., location, time, space) considered acceptable. The most frequently discussed of the personal qualities, 88% of participants identified curiosity as contributing to the job search process, a category formed by seven helping incidents, four hindering incidents, and six WL items.

Helping incidents. Expressed through a general openness towards the job search, recent graduates who demonstrated curiosity found it to be helpful in terms of broadening their work opportunities and perceptions about what they considered to be acceptable employment. Many participants had the mindset that the only way to ensure not finding a job was by failing to apply in the first place, which therefore encouraged the mentality that casting a wide net served them

well. With respect to this notion, Participant 2 expressed how "sending out resumes everywhere" helped her keep an open mind and find more job opportunities:

> I guess if I hadn't done that then I wouldn't have found the job that I have. If I didn't take my chances, because – what was the worst thing that could happen? They wouldn't call me, then, whatever. But it's not like I'm being unprofessional. I'm sending my resume to them so if I wouldn't have done that then I wouldn't have gotten the job.

Recent graduates who demonstrated a curiosity towards the job search process uncovered various opportunities in the labour market only available to them as a result of their willingness to be adaptable and flexible in their approach. Whereas some participants discussed curiosity in terms of the variety of jobs they applied for, others expressed curiosity in terms of the variety of environments they applied to work in. As an example, Participant 3 described the following instance from his experience as a way to illustrate the role that his curiosity played in conversations with potential employers:

> I think that I was very flexible, and I made that known. If they needed a person to leave and go on a one-month project and just pack up everything and leave, then I'll be the guy to jump on it… That way they know they're not going to have to fight with you to get to do things, you're going to be enthusiastic.

In defining the impact this had in terms of his desirability as a potential candidate, Participant 3 offered the following explanation:

> It differentiated me from some of the other people who would literally only want to stay and work in an office. So then you just don't have as many people that you're competing against. If there's people who are being really picky about exactly where they want to work and exactly what they want to do, then it's pretty easy to compete against them.

Being able to demonstrate curiosity in the job search process allowed recent graduates to not only open themselves up to more opportunities, but also set themselves apart from other applicants. Participant 4 explained the concept in a statement she made by saying, "If you're flexible enough to go live in the middle of nowhere you have a lot more opportunities available to you." Broadening their search for work and taking on job prospects that others turned down

had the natural effect of decreasing recent graduates' competition for work and increasing their chances of success.

Hindering incidents. A lack of curiosity towards one's career typically resulted in an unwillingness to relocate or a general tendency towards being close-minded (e.g., only looking for jobs within high profile companies). Recent graduates found that being strict about the types of jobs they pursued quickly diminished their opportunities for employment. The following quote from Participant 6 conveys this notion, who found herself limited in both the location and the type of work she deemed acceptable:

> I was being really picky… I was dead set on working in professional sports, not amateur, and I probably should have opened myself up to a wider search… It's obviously such a small market and I just didn't know a lot of the other organizations existed at the time… and I didn't look at really any of those opportunities because I wasn't willing to go there, physically… It would've had to be a job that I really wanted to be in for me to move.

Recent graduates who held strict terms about the type of employment opportunities they accepted also tended to be less open to conducting an investigation into job availability. In neglecting to do so, participants noted that they missed job prospects otherwise of interest simply because they already had their mind made up about what would be an acceptable job or place of work. Entering the job search with pre-conceived, and often limited, beliefs about what constituted satisfactory work typically disadvantaged recent graduates and left them reflecting on the experience as limiting their possibilities for professional growth and advancement.

Wish list items. Although the majority of participants indicated being somewhat flexible in their job search, many recent graduates who participated in the present study expressed a desire to be less selective about the types of jobs they would accept coming out of school. Rather than refine their employment opportunities, participants shared that they would have liked to explore a wider variety of prospective jobs, particularly in areas not previously considered.

During the interview, recent graduates mentioned several ways they would have liked to demonstrate greater curiosity towards their career prospects, including (a) broadening the job search outside of their industry, (b) being willing to work with a different population, and (c) taking a job as a stepping stone to more desirable career opportunities. Participant 6 provided an example about how she would have expanded her job search to different industries and geographical locations if given the chance to conduct her job search over again:

> I think there's a lot of good opportunity out there, not necessarily in my industry. In any kind of community investment perspective, there's just a lot out there that you can do… Like just because I work for hockey doesn't mean I can't work for soccer in England, you know? It's still the same skeleton, it's just filling it in.

In her explanation of what benefit this expanded sense of curiosity would serve her in the job search process, Participant 6 shared:

> I think [having that experience] would bring a different perspective on how to do things… It's incredible what you can learn and what you can bring to the table, which I think people don't take advantage of enough… It just makes you a more well-rounded person. It shows you can adapt, it shows you can live somewhere else and still get on with it. You're learning so many different things from a different culture, different economy, everything. And it makes you that whole person.

Recent graduates who entered the job search process with a specific idea about what type of job they wanted to pursue tended to overestimate or overlook the benefits of broadening their employment prospects. However, many participants recalled times during the school-to-work transition where they had adjusted their expectations out of necessity. As an example, Participant 4 remembered struggling to find work for which she was eligible to apply upon completing her education. She explained how demonstrating increased curiosity towards the job search would have likely allowed her to find work sooner:

> Being less picky would've been easier… You just feel discouraged when every job you want you need to have two years of experience. And you're just graduating so there's no way that you could have that. I think it's discouraging when you're looking… Being open to maybe not getting what you want right off the bat, but that it's something you

could do in the future if you just put in your dues initially. I think that's all it would be, would be changing my expectations that way… It would have opened up the job market quite a bit.

Having realistic expectations about the job search process encouraged recent graduates to develop a more curious and flexible approach to finding work. However, many participants began the school-to-work transition with unrealistic or otherwise uninformed opinions about how quickly and easily it would be to find work. In these cases, participants often retrospectively recognized the benefit of being more curious towards the job search, both in terms of finding employment and enhancing one's competitiveness in the future as a well-rounded applicant.

Category 10: Confidence

The final of four categories focused on personal qualities, confidence included incidents related to participants' ability to efficiently perform the task of conducting a job search. Participants who demonstrated confidence in the job search typically exhibited capacities such as personal confidence and self-awareness, encouraging the effectiveness with which recent graduates carried out the process of finding meaningful employment. The confidence category captured a total of three helping incidents, three hindering incidents, and one WL item, gathered from 63% of participants. In the majority of interviews where confidence influenced the job search process, the conversation centered on topics of self understanding, professionalism, and certitude in what one offered potential employers.

Helping incidents. Having confidence required recent graduates to demonstrate trust not only in their skills and what they brought to a job opportunity, but also in their ability to perform and excel in the hiring process, particularly during job interviews. Participants explained that having confidence in what they could add to an organization meant that potential employers often mirrored that same level of confidence in them, being more likely to make a job offer as a

result. When interviewing for a position as a nurse, Participant 5 recalled how going into the meeting feeling comfortable and self-assured had a positive influence over the interviewer:

> There's various skills and situations in which you have to display confidence [on the job]. And it's not only confidence, but independence and professionalism… I think going into that interview and feeling at ease allowed me to show the manager the type of nurse I could be on the floor and on the unit. That I could be a confident, independent, and professional nurse.

Recent graduates like Participant 6 remembered numerous experiences during the interview process when they felt as though the interviewer used that meeting as an opportunity to determine whether they were a good fit for the position and the organization. Serving as a snapshot of how they might perform on the job, recent graduates identified the interview as a time when they had the opportunity to demonstrate important personal qualities and professional skills, such as confidence, to potential employers.

Proficiency in the professional competencies demanded by a job often fuelled recent graduates' ability to exhibit confidence during the interview. Participants proclaimed that employers received them best in situations where they could effectively demonstrate and speak to the parallels between their previous experiences and the qualifications of the position for which they had applied. Participant 6 shared how having relevant personal learning experiences through extracurricular activities permitted her to speak confidently about why she was a good fit for the job in which she is currently employed:

> You have to be confident in what you're doing. I think for the current job that I have I was confident in what I did already. I was still super involved with extracurriculars that I had enough to back it… People want to be around confident people. There's something attractive about someone who's confident in what they know, and I think everyone can stand by that and say, "You like this person because they're confident in this or they know this."

Recent graduates who had confidence in their skills and their capacity to succeed in the role for which they applied, as well as an ability to portray a general sense of belief in

themselves as an eligible candidate, found greater success during the job search process. In this way, recent graduates identified it as essential to confidently depict and present themselves to potential employers as having high levels of both self-esteem and self-efficacy when seeking out employment.

Hindering incidents. Participants who lacked confidence in their ability to find meaningful employment generally cited their age and inexperience as limiting their success. Similar to the perceived experience category, which focused on the negative perceptions of others towards recent graduates' ability to successfully transition into the workforce, hindering incidents in the confidence category touched on internalized negative beliefs and self doubt that participants held about themselves. Conveyed in the following quote, Participant 8 offered an example of how his lack of confidence and negative self talk limited his own potential to find meaningful employment:

> You don't see a ton of young people working as a coach or anything, because a lot of it is experience… I think people just can respect someone a bit more that has been there done that. They have more experience to rely upon in a difficult situation… I thought I didn't have enough experience or something. I looked at a few things when I was volunteering and I remember thinking, "I'm probably not ready for that." I guess you don't put yourself out there as much because you don't really think that you're ready.

Recent graduates who struggled to show confidence in their ability to successfully perform and compete in the job market often found themselves in situations of underemployment immediately after leaving school and left seeking out job opportunities for which they were overqualified. After completing her program, Participant 7 reported feeling that she still lacked enough experience to be effective in her field. The following quote captures the impact this lack of confidence had on her job search: "It was difficult, because when I finished my internship job as a junior technical writer I was just like, now what? I still didn't feel like I had enough experience… and that's how I landed my job at Starbucks."

Going on to say that she felt she was "supposed to move forward, not backwards," Participant 7 acknowledged how her lack of confidence and a perception of being inadequately prepared to make the transition to meaningful employment interrupted what she believed to be the natural progression of her career. Although recent graduates expressed having a preconception about the next step in their school-to-work transition, many felt ill-equipped to take that leap. Whether these negative beliefs proved to be real or perceived, having the perception of being unprepared or unqualified to work in their field effectively immobilized the job search of recent graduates and limited their ability to find employment.

Wish list items. In order to build confidence, recent graduates saw it necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what motivated them to pursue work in their field. Participants believed that if they understood the reason for their passion about the work they pursued that they could confidently and effectively communicate this knowledge to a potential employer, who would be more likely to hire them as a result. Participant 6 provided the following example of how she came to realize the true inspiration for her work and what drove her career interests:

> Ask yourself what drives you. What's your driving force behind everything you do? There's such a wide expanse of what people can do. I thought I loved sports more than anything, and I thought I was going to love working with the professional athletes and that's cool, it's great, I do love it. But you can have just as much of an impact with people who are in oil and energy companies than working for the Flames.

In recognizing that her work values resided in an ability to have an impact on the lives of others, Participant 6 explained the influence of this on her career and how it might serve to make her job search easier in the future:

> I think you just learn who you are as a person and I think once you know who that is, you're so much more confident in your skills and what you do… At that point it's going to make the job search so much easier for you to narrow down what you want to be and what you want to do.

In these cases, fostering an understanding of the career values and interests that inspired recent graduates to enter their field provided clarity into the types of jobs they found most fulfilling. This allowed for a more purposeful work search, where one pursued only those job prospects that most directly aligned with his or her personality. In taking this approach, recent graduates found that they received more employment opportunities as a result of their being genuine, authentic, passionate, and confident about the work they pursued and their ability to perform successfully on the job. When recent graduates found work that truly aligned with their personality, not only were they more confident in themselves, but so too were their potential employers.

Category 11: Unexpected Opportunity

Comprised solely of helping incidents, the present study defined unexpected opportunity as experiences outside of the participants' control or own actions. With a total of five incidents, 63% of participants discussed the topic of unexpected opportunity. Although not explicitly discussed in all of the interviews, a vast majority of participants used language to convey a sense of unexpectedness or serendipity when speaking about the job search process. When the researcher asked participants in the interview about how they got their job, many responded by stating they could not put their finger on it, or that it was something that happened without them doing much to influence the outcome. As a result, participants commonly referenced the impact of chance and luck on the job search process, with responses including: "I don't know… this [job] kind of just fell into my lap a little bit" (Participant 8), "Luckily, I wasn't really looking that much" (Participant 4), "She just hired me on a whim" (Participant 7), "The job just came about" (Participant 5), "I think I'm a bit of a phenomenon and I'm going to thank my lucky stars

because I don't know how it happened. I think it was just happenstance" (Participant 6), and

"Honestly, it's all just chance. In a lot of ways, I think I'm a lucky graduate" (Participant 1).

Recent graduates who described unexpected opportunities in more detail, and who

considered it to play a critical role in their job search success, discussed it in the context of

opening up opportunities not otherwise possible or foreseeable. In her experience, Participant 7

recounted how she unexpectedly met her current employer at a previous place of work:

> Meeting her at the right time, right place was huge… It was just surprising that [the
> hiring manager] went to that location that I worked at. She doesn't really go around that
> area type of thing. So it's just crazy how she travelled all the way there… And she was in
> limbo for two weeks where she was trying to find somebody, and she only hired one
> person, which was me. Even though I didn't even know [the job] was listed.

Although most of the participants talked about unexpected events as being favourable,

Participant 5 described how even unexpected negative life events (e.g., losing a loved one,

financial instability) led her to positive outcomes:

> Life hands you what you need. So I needed to go through that struggle and I needed to
> open myself up, and then once I did, this wonderful dream position came about and I was
> able to apply and achieve that.

Through her own personal struggle, Participant 5 felt the tumultuous and unexpected life

experiences that she dealt with provided her the necessary confidence to take on her dream job.

Despite participants' identifying unexpected opportunities as lucky and affirmative experiences,

those who encountered these coincidences or chance occasions during their job search also

recognized the important, and ultimately constructive, role the events played in contributing to

their ability to find meaningful employment.

Category 12: Labour Market Conditions

The labour market conditions category encompassed incidents pertaining to the economic

climate in which participants conducted their job search. In partial fulfillment of the eligibility

requirements for the present study, all participants completed their post-secondary training

within the past two years. Therefore, these findings specifically reflect perceptions about

Canadian's recent labour market conditions. Participants who discussed labour market conditions

(63%) did so almost exclusively in the context of it being a hindrance to their job search, with a

total of six hindering incidents and one WL item included in the category.

Hindering incidents. Participants who mentioned labour market conditions as making

their job search more challenging or difficult commonly cited a low level of supply and high

level of demand as a major barrier to their success. Recent graduates regularly discussed

competition in the interview, with participants expressing an active awareness of just how many

people they were competing with for any given position. Participant 1 explained this

phenomenon:

> The labour market is swarmed with people. It's an employers' market and they can have
> the pick of the best. For instance, I always keep an eye on Kijiji ads for job postings and
> such, and a year ago in the accounting/management section you'd see a post and by the
> end of the day it would have 50-100 visits maybe. But now, within three hours most
> postings have upwards of 200.

When asked about how these changes impacted his job search specifically, Participant 1

described feeling that potential employers did not notice him:

> The chances of your resume even being seen are slim. I must have applied to well over
> 200 jobs and I got an email or call back on five of them, and [my current] job was the
> only one that interviewed me… There are so many people looking for jobs that are well-
> qualified people. It's not a low skill labour market. You see engineers and chartered
> accountants and people with master's degrees looking for work, and so you're competing
> with very, very skilled people.

Participant 2 shared a similar experience, who opened up about facing competition in her

job search from skilled workers outside of her field. With limited access to jobs as a result of

current economic conditions, Participant 2 explained: "There's competition for any job because

of the economy. If you don't keep it, someone else is going to get it. People still have things to

pay for and so they just want whatever they can get." All of the participants who spoke to job

search barriers imposed by labour market conditions cited feelings of unease and frustration in

coming to the realization that the economy played an active role in increasing the competition for

work. Entering the workforce for the first time as a graduate also resulted in participants being

less certain in their own competitiveness as potential employees, leading to feelings of self-doubt

and uncertainty. The following quote from Participant 8 exemplifies how this perception

impacted his job search:

> I thought I didn't have enough experience or something. People in the workforce that hire
> people respect someone who has been there and done that – and it could have been in my
> head – but I guess I didn't put myself out there as much because I didn't think I was
> ready. I just kept thinking if maybe in three years if I wasn't where I wanted to be, then
> what? For someone who is looking for a job, that thought can be kind of debilitating.

Several participants expressed they experienced the world of work as being generally

unwelcoming and as hindering their job search. Concerns about the labour market included both

external challenges, such as high rates of unemployment and low rates of hiring, and internal

challenges, such as believing that one is less desirable as an employee due to his or her lack of

paid or professional experience. In other words, the conditions of the current labour market

presented a challenge to recent graduates, who commonly viewed these conditions as something

they needed to overcome in order to be successful.

Wish list items. One method used by recent graduates to address the challenging labour

market conditions facing them involved adjusting their expectations of the school-to-work

transition. In reflecting on his job search process, Participant 8 determined that being more

realistic about how long and how much effort it takes to find meaningful employment would

have been helpful to him when looking for work. The following quote conveys the potential

benefit of adjusting his mindset about the transition from school-to-work:

I wouldn't just go out of school and expect now that because I have a degree that I'm going to get a job. You've got to still want to do it… If you keep throwing your name out there and you keep not getting calls back you might feel rejected and feel like it's not the right path, even though it's probably just because you just started. You don't want to get discouraged before you get going… Just keep doing it until something happens. Because, you know, you have your degree and everything, you just need to stick with it.

By retaining a resilient attitude and establishing reasonable expectations about the job search, recent graduates developed an ability to endure the hardships of the school-to-work transition, which ultimately contributed to their successful employment. Recent graduates who found work not only acknowledged the difficulties associated with the job search, but also the importance of maintaining a positive outlook throughout this process.

Category 13: Logistical Skills

Composed of incidents pertaining to the job application and hiring process, the logistical skills category encompassed any process or practice that a participant engaged in related to the act of applying for a job. This included interview preparation, writing cover letters and resumes, conducting company research, having conversations about wage expectations and negotiations, as well as navigating job postings and applications. Being one of the more comprehensive categories, incidents related to logistical skills came out in 100% of the interviews, with the category containing more incidents than any other. Complete with eight helping incidents, seven hindering incidents, and eight WL items, the logistical skills category was also the most diverse and discussed among participants. This category was the second of only two with participation rates greater than 25% in all three of the helping incidents, hindering incidents, and WL items.

Helping incidents. Logistical skills that helped recent graduates find meaningful employment commonly centered around learning more about the organization or position to which they applied. Going into an interview situation with a foundational knowledge of the role helped recent graduates feel confident that a potential employer would perceive them as worthy

applicants. Participant 6 recalled a time during her job search when she connected with the

person conducting her interview in advance and the advantage that this meeting provided her:

> I literally set up a meeting with [the interviewer] to be like, "Hey, what are you looking for in this person?" and stuck my neck out there to say I want to work for you and I want to know what you're looking for and if it would be a good fit… I think she was looking for someone who would take initiative with it and I got that, I wanted to run with it, and I was super willing to go feet first into it.

> By making the first contact, not only did Participant 6 feel as though she set herself apart

from other applicants, but also that she had the opportunity to communicate to the interviewer

her interest in the role. Given the high level of competition in the job market, many participants

felt they needed a way to stand out from other applicants in order to be successful. When asked

about the effect she believed this had on her competitiveness, Participant 6 elaborated:

> I think it put a bug in her ear. It says, okay – here I am – I'm interested. I'm willing to sit face-to-face with you and ask you what you want out of this position, and I know she knew that I wanted it.

> When meeting someone in person was not viable or desirable, recent graduates found

other ways to familiarize themselves with the organization, such as through an online search.

Participant 3 illustrated how he used this strategy during his own job search:

> I researched the company and the division that I was applying for. I would even look up the managers or the people interviewing me on LinkedIn just to know the background of everything going on… When you do that you start to feel more comfortable… Knowing how to respond to interview questions without getting caught off guard was quite useful.

> For participants who engaged in this type of research, not only did they find it benefitted

their preparedness for a job interview, but it also allowed them to make informed and educated

decisions about their fit for a particular position. As a result, recent graduates going into an

interview situation who investigated the organization in advance naturally felt (a) confident in

themselves and their interest in pursuing the position, (b) they had a comprehensive background

knowledge about the job, and (c) comfortable speaking to aspects of the job during the interview.

Beyond researching the organization ahead of time, recent graduates also found preparing for the interview itself to be of benefit to them. Taking the time to practice interviewing in advance made it possible to anticipate questions and prepare common responses. During her job search, Participant 5 enlisted the help of a group of friends in the same field who had recently finished the hiring process and could help her prepare. She described how having this time to practice helped her to feel more professional and genuine in the interview:

> My other friends in nursing who had been through interviews and had been hired on the unit really helped me as far as the behavioural based interview… just to get me thinking of responses and preparing scenarios… I think being able to prepare my answers helped me to feel professional in the interview but also to really think of [my answers] and present them to [the interviewer] in a way that I felt I was being genuine was important to me in an interview. So I feel that I was able to present my best self through the preparation I had, which ultimately helped me to obtain the position.

Similar to Participant 6, other recent graduates mentioned presentation as an integral component to their success in receiving an offer for employment. Participants commonly discussed a need to not only present themselves as someone worthy of being hired, but for this to be a genuine act on their part. An understanding existed among recent graduates that potential employers not only recognized deception, but that pursuing only those opportunities for work of true interest would also benefit them as an applicant in the long-term. As a result, many recent graduates believed that being passionate about the job for which they applied would become evident in the hiring process, thereby increasing their chances of successfully becoming employed and experiencing lasting satisfaction with their employment conditions.

Hindering incidents. Although participants considered the interview itself to be daunting, recent graduates perceived the process of getting to that point in the hiring process as being of greatest burden, as many of them found the act of applying for jobs to be a tedious and cumbersome process. More than any other factor, recent graduates cited time as the greatest

logistical hindrance to their job search success. Whether due to a lack of time because of other

commitments, or a sense of time being wasted looking for jobs through ineffective means,

participants expressed feeling ineffective and inefficient in how they conducted their job search.

Participant 3 explained his rationale for applying for jobs online, even though he believed it to be

a less effectual means of securing employment than meeting with someone in person:

> It's easier to sit on a computer and send online applications with a resume that I already
> had built and a cover letter I could just adjust. That's easier than taking time out of my
> day and taking time off school to go drop off [an application].

Not unlike Participant 3, a large number of recent graduates successful at finding

meaningful employment began their job search while still in school. This meant that on top of

their academic commitments, they also assumed the responsibility of looking and applying for

work. In her experience, Participant 7 found balancing her roles as a student and as a prospective

employee challenging. The following quote highlights her thought process during this time:

> It was a time commitment… I'm trying to find a job and I'm hitting that barrier of not
> having time because I have to study. It was a struggle to say, okay – should I start
> focusing on a job now? And in my head I knew I had two more years of school left,
> right? It was just hard balancing those two.

In addition to not knowing when to start the job search, participants struggled to identify

where to start the job search. Not knowing how to find job opportunities often left recent

graduates to search for work themselves using methods already oversaturated with applicants

(e.g., online job postings). In reflecting on this process, Participant 5 remembered feeling

discouraged when applying for jobs online because of how easily someone could overlook her

application among the many others who likely submitted applications for the same position:

> The biggest obstacle was having to apply online. I felt like I wasn't going to obtain work
> because the process was tainted, you know? I couldn't show an employer why I would be
> a good employee… I just felt like a number. You submit your resume online and it goes
> into a pot of 200 other resumes and you just feel you're getting lost… and you never hear
> back; I applied to probably 75 positions online and heard back from none of them. I heard

back from not a single one regarding an interview, or a "Thanks for your application, we're not hiring."

When asked for the most difficult thing about not hearing back from potential employers, Participant 5 provided the following response:

> It was the mental state that I kind of got myself in when I didn't hear anything back, because I felt as though I was getting lost and I felt hopeless. If you're applying to 75+ jobs and you're not hearing back from a single person, well where's the hope that you're going to obtain work?

In cases when recent graduates became frustrated with the process of applying for jobs online, they looked to other strategies of finding work. Despite being generally more effective, these alternative methods often proved to be tedious and time consuming. Participant 3 recalled the frustration he felt when trying to find out if a potential employer was hiring by searching through their website:

> One of the biggest difficulties is just finding out what's available out there on the market. I did go to information sessions at the university to try and see who was hiring and searching online, but it was more about going to everyone's individual website and clicking through and making accounts. You would have to do your research on the company and know that they have people in your position. In my case it's like, okay – do they have geotechnical engineers? And then I could probably find that out by creeping through Glassdoor or LinkedIn just to see… It's just a very time intensive process and you have to throw yourself at it, that's probably the biggest challenge.

In regards to the logistics associated with applying for a job, recent graduates expressed frustration with the disorganization in hiring procedures. A general consensus existed among participants that easily accessible job postings quickly became saturated with applicants and that job openings not posted online, or that proved otherwise more difficult to find, required too much work to locate. As such, recent graduates became either discouraged from seeking out opportunities that did not lead to employment, or doubtful about their chances of job search success.

Wish list items. If given the chance to approach the job search differently, participants

noted they would spend more time tailoring their application to the job and being more

intentional in their search for employment opportunities. As previously noted, recent graduates

found the act of preparing a job application to be tedious and time consuming, particularly when

they began this process while still in school. However, participants also believed that potential

employers would recognize how laborious applying for a job could be, and favour applicants

who prepared tailored resumes and cover letters as a result. Participant 2 expressed how she

believed potential employers would receive a more thoughtful application:

> When [a job] says to submit a cover letter, it actually deterred me from wanting it. What I
> would do is give more time to actually writing a cover letter. Maybe I could have had a
> lot more job [opportunities] because a cover letter shows employers like, "We know that
> cover letters are a pain in the butt, so this person took the extra time."

Participant 1 agreed with this concept, who saw standing out from the competition as

essential to being successful in today's highly competitive job market. In considering how he

would approach the job search process differently given the chance, Participant 1 rationalized

why he would make more effort to customize his applications:

> If it got across the right eyes, seeing a cover letter and resume that was more tailored to
> their job posting might have grabbed their attention to set me aside in their interview pile
> rather than my generic cover letter, which maybe didn't specifically say key words that
> they had in their job posting.

Recent graduates saw a need to find ways to make a greater and more lasting impression

on potential employers than others competing for the same position. Beyond presenting what one

could offer the organization, participants expressed an acute awareness of the need to stand out

from other applicants, many of whom likely had similar if not superior professional experiences

and educational backgrounds. Participant 8 elaborated on how this strategy could be useful in

distinguishing himself from competing applicants when negotiating salary expectations:

I would want to be someone that would take less money for the same job. Just because then I'd know that I'd be working somewhere that I want to work. To me that's more appetizing than an extra, whatever, right now. Especially since I'm younger… I think if you have two people of the same sort of qualification and one is happy with this amount and the other says they want that amount, then if they're the same, [the employer] is probably going to go with the one that's [asking for] less just because [the employer] will be making more money then, right?

In this quote, Participant 8 identified wage as something he was willing to negotiate in order to secure employment deemed personally fulfilling. Recent graduates commonly cited how a clear understanding of what they valued from their work would allow them to approach the pre-employment process with more realistic expectations and defined goals, both of which inform and encourage a more intentional process of finding work. Participant 4 illustrated how these considerations would have served her in the job search:

We all think like, "Oh my gosh I've got loans and I have to pay them back immediately," which is true, I'm not denying that. But I do think I wouldn't be so anxious or I would encourage some of my classmates who were really anxious that it's not a big deal, you will find a job that fits you. Just because somebody else found a job doesn't mean that you won't have one… I think if I had been a little bit more patient I could've gotten a job that had more on my checklist.

For most new graduates, finding work in their field for the first time often came with competition, impatience, and financial instability. Each served to reinforce a sense of urgency and to foster the mentality that not finding employment soon after graduating equated to one being lesser than or inferior to his or her peers. A number of recent graduates who participated in this research remembered identifying with this sentiment at the beginning of their school-to-work transition. Yet, in reflecting back, they now expressed a desire to have taken an approach to the job search more appropriately directed by internal motivations, recognizing in hindsight the benefit to their long-term career success and stability.

Summary

The results presented in Chapter Four provided a comprehensive description of findings from the eight recent graduates who participated in the present study. The chapter described their experiences of the job search process through identifying incidents that impacted their ability to find meaningful employment. The ECIT data analysis process supported the identification of 131 unique incidents from the interviews conducted, comprised of 75 helping incidents, 28 hindering incidents, and 28 WL items organized into 13 distinct categories. These categories included: (a) academic experience, (b) occupational experience, (c) personal learning, (d) perceived experience, (e) network, (f) networking, (g) concern, (h) control, (i) curiosity, (j) confidence, (k) unexpected opportunity, (l) labour market conditions, and (m) logistical skills. The implications of these findings in light of current literature have been discussed in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

> As long as [we] fail to address the youth employment crisis, […] young people will struggle just to keep their heads above water, much less establish themselves in the adult world (Hoffman, 2015, p. 6).

The researcher set out to further an understanding of how recent university graduates approached the process of finding meaningful employment. The chapter begins with a restatement of the philosophical and career theories that informed the present study, with particular focus on how these theoretical orientations shaped an interpretation of findings from the present study. This is followed by a discussion of results, linking findings from the CIs and WL items to existing literature. Then, a consideration of implications of the research for relevant stakeholders is presented, including recommendations for students and recent graduates, career counsellors and practitioners, as well as post-secondary educators and staff. Discussion then turns to the strengths and delimitations of the present study, leading to a consideration of directions for future research. The chapter closes with personal reflections from the researcher about this study and a brief summary with concluding comments.

Relevance of Philosophical and Career Theory

The present study integrated social constructivism as its primary conceptual framework within which to investigate and interpret the job search experiences of recent university graduates. Relevant constructivist theories, including Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and Systems Theory Framework (McMahon & Patton, 1995), provided a lens through which to analyze results from this research. In taking this approach, the researcher prioritized the ways in which individuals experienced and navigated the social process of finding work. Although this approach prioritized the ability of recent graduates to make meaning of their own lived experiences, acknowledgement is given to the contextual complexities and social

influences of the modern world that actively play a role in shaping this understanding (Patton & McMahon, 2006). As such, knowledge construction as it occurred within the context of participants' lives was of greatest concern to the researcher (Raskin, 2011).

The present study highlighted interpretations made by participants about events related to the job search, using their meaning-making process to inform an understanding of incidents that contributed to meaningful employment. Borrowing from the work of Savickas (2015), the researcher recognized participants as experts in their own lives, trusting that the most accurate description of the job search process would come from accounts made by recent graduates themselves. In taking this perspective, the present study emphasized meaning derived by participants about their personal experiences as the most informative and explanatory means by which to gain insight into the complexities of career behaviour (Patton, 2008).

Discussion of Critical Incident Findings

The CI component of this research identified helping incidents, hindering incidents, and WL items that recently employed graduates recognized as having impacted their job search process and ability to secure meaningful employment. In analyzing the data from this framework, the researcher developed 13 unique categories. Consistent with the ECIT credibility check to establish theoretical agreement (Butterfield et al., 2009), the current section includes a discussion of these results within the context of relevant scholarly literature.

Previous Experience

A key premise of the job recruitment process is that past experiences provide an accurate indication of future behaviour. In fact, hiring decisions are based almost exclusively on a judgment of how applicants have performed in the past, determined through such practices as reviewing resumes, conducting reference checks, and asking interview questions. Research

indicates that inquiring about the past experiences and behaviours of an applicant tend to be the most valid indicator of future job performance (Taylor & Small, 2002). Among those experiences weighed most heavily when making hiring decisions include academic qualifications, work experience, and extracurricular activities. According to Cole, Rubin, Feild, and Giles (2007), each of these three factors interact to predict whether recruiters deem an applicant to be employable. The following section provides an overview of findings relevant to the recruitment process. This discussion unfolds according to the categories of CIs and WL items introduced in the previous chapter.

Connecting academic experience to employment. Perhaps the most salient finding from this category was the necessity of a strong academic background to succeed in the job search process. Recent graduates who participated in the present study agreed that obtaining a post-secondary education promoted their ability to find meaningful employment, with it contributing positively to their level of career preparedness and development. Donald (2018) found similar results among a sample of university and college students, who indicated that they chose to pursue post-secondary to increase their job opportunities. Not only do students see the added value of academic experience, but so too do employers. When making hiring decisions, employers increasingly expect young job seekers to enter the labour market with post-secondary credentials, and for good reason. According to the Council of Alberta University Students (2011), approximately four out of every five new jobs created within the next 10 years will require some form of higher educational training.

At the core of any post-secondary program are the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that students cultivate. Several participants of the present study indicated that their coursework allowed them to develop competencies directly related to their field of work. The literature also

suggests that a university education is fundamental to the development of abilities relevant for employment (Munro et al., 2013; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010), particularly in technical skill areas (Alley, 2010). Yet, participants of the present study found receiving a post-secondary credential to be insufficient in supporting a successful school-to-work transition.

Students gain the most of academic experiences when they are more than passive recipients of the education they receive. Tagg (2003) suggested that learners in higher education who assume an active role in their education are likely to see the greatest benefits for their long term academic and occupational ambitions. When students approach their education with career intentions, they expose themselves to a wider variety of opportunities and tend to see better labour market outcomes as a result (Bell & O'Reilly, 2008; Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011). Findings of the present study reflect this purposefulness, such that recent graduates commonly referenced their post-secondary education as a helping incident to the extent that it went beyond the basic program requirements, referring to special projects, study abroad, and experiences outside of the classroom as influential to enhancing their employability.

The value of previous employment experience. With all eight participants of the present study identifying involvement in the workforce as relevant to their employability, recent graduates deemed entering the job search with previous work experience to provide them with a substantial advantage over other applicants. Participants indicated that they not only benefitted personally from these occupational experiences, developing a stronger career identity and work appropriate skills, but felt as though employers would also see value in these experiences, thereby building the credibility of their application. Research consistently indicates that recent graduates who engage in work experience during their education subsequently experience shorter school-to-work transitions (Statistics Canada, 2010; The Organization for Economic Co-

operation and Development, 2010; Pegg et al., 2012). In fact, of all the previous experience that a job seeker brings to a potential job, employers consistently place the highest importance on work experience when making hiring decisions (Cole et al., 2007), considered to be the most accurate indication of work readiness (Andrews & Hisgon, 2008; Caballero & Walker, 2010). In a similar line of reasoning, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) found employers regarded work experience as providing more than just the intellectual qualifications that many applicants have, speaking directly to the development of other skill areas and key competencies (e.g., 'soft' skills), that are more difficult to acquire through formal educational training alone.

Recent graduates tend to hold similar perceptions about the influence of occupational experiences on their hirability. According to research by Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, and Cragnolini (2004), recent graduates perceived learning in the workplace to be most closely related to their subsequent employment. In fact, nearly 75% of individuals they interviewed agreed that the skills developed through previous work placements while in post-secondary had a significant impact on their career advancement following graduation. Recent graduates interviewed as part of the present study held similar beliefs, such that each of the eight participants referenced the positive impact of their previous occupational experience on their ability to find meaningful employment. Interestingly, the vast majority of recent graduates from the Crebert and colleagues (2004) research, as well as the present study, referred specifically to experiences deemed relevant to their field of interest, whether in terms of the job title itself or the skills learned. This suggests that the alignment between previous work experience and one's occupational aspirations play a key role in predicting career success.

Given that most new-entrants to the workforce have limited or unrelated work experience, those who begin the job search with familiarity in their field of interest are afforded a

substantial advantage over their competition. Recruiters of recent graduates are increasingly focused on the work experiences of applicants, and particularly the relevance of this experience to new work contexts (Blackwell et al., 2001). In their own investigation into improving the employability of recent graduates, Helyer and Lee (2014) determined previous work experience of entry level applicants to directly enhance employability in their chosen occupation. This is because employers are more confident in an applicant's ability to maintain employment, hone work-related skills, and be successful in a work context similar to their own if the individual enters the job search with previous occupational experience relevant to the field.

Beyond an academic and occupational identity. Half of the recent graduates who participated in the present study mentioned the positive effect of their personal learning experiences on the job search process. Their comments included either being thankful for the benefit it provided in terms of their ability to secure meaningful employment or wishing they had taken advantage of more opportunities to build up their experience beyond the contexts of work and school. In a labour market where over half of new entrants to the workforce have higher education credentials (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016), these graduates recognized the necessity of bringing more to a position than just academic experience.

Potential employers and students alike view personal learning experiences as adding unique value to a candidate's application. Researchers from the Royal Bank of Canada (2016) found that 93% of individuals approaching the school-to-work transition felt experiences outside of the classroom and the workplace provided them with both practical and meaningful knowledge directly applicable to the workforce. According to Helyer and Lee (2014), the development of career-related and transferable skills that recent graduates require to be successful in the workforce occurs mainly outside of the classroom, such as through

extracurricular activities (Alley, 2010; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010). Notably, employers often view personal learning experiences as being most closely related to the development of 'soft' or professional skills such as teamwork, communication, and conflict management (Chia, 2005), serving as the most important but least developed skillsets among new hires (Environics Research Group, 2013; Karasiuk, 2015).

Findings of the present study served to substantiate this view, with many of the recent graduates who participated indicating that personal learning experiences provided potential employers insight into aspects of their personality that would not have been evident from their academic or occupational experiences alone. Whereas professional experiences generally speak to the quantity of an applicant's skillset, personal learning experiences more directly speak to the quality of those skills by shedding light on an individual's character (Conway, 2009). Non-instructional experiences or leisure pursuits are therefore used by employers as markers of whether an applicant will complement the culture of an organization, a quality that commonly supersedes the importance of technical skills and training when making hiring decisions (Karasiuk, 2015; Rivera, 2012).

The power of perception in hiring decisions. Consistent with findings of the present study, the common perception among employers is that recent graduates lack real-world skills necessary to be successful in the workplace (DuPre & Williams, 2011). With one in five unemployed adults between the ages of 20-25 having never held a job (Tal, 2013), employers generally find new workforce entrants unprepared for the demands of employment. This results from the notion that job-specific or work-based skills are difficult to learn except for on the job (Global Agenda Council on Employment, 2014). Cognizant of this negative belief, participants who mentioned perceived experience spoke exclusively to the challenges it presented to their

employability. Although employers tend not to be confident in the abilities of recent graduates to make the transition from school-to-work, students often report feeling differently. For example, whereas less than half of employers (42%) believe that graduates possess the full set of skills they need to succeed in the workplace, the majority of students (74%) are confident in their abilities coming out of post-secondary (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Participants of the present study also expressed feeling as though they did not deserve these negative perceptions. This suggests that students approaching the school-to-work transition feel more prepared and better equipped with the skills to succeed in the workforce than their potential employers.

As a result of this disconnect, recent graduates who participated in the present study expressed an awareness of the perception that they were either inexperienced or unprepared to be successful in their field. Many participants felt this perception was directly influenced and potentially biased by their age, rather than a reflection of their actual ability or competence. However, debate within the scholarly literature surrounds the point about age bias. Consistent with the experiences of recent graduates interviewed as part of the present study, some authors advocate for the position that mature graduates have an advantage in the labour market; each year that an individual is older increases the chances of securing full-time employment by approximately 2% (Piróg, 2016). Others imply an inverse relationship, such that mature graduates encounter greater difficulties finding meaningful employment compared to their younger counterparts (Wilton, 2011), most likely as a result of discriminatory practices, such as ageism, among employers (Riach & Rich, 2007).

Regardless of whether applicants' age negatively influenced employer perceptions about their level of experience as new-entrants to the workforce, recent graduates in the present study highlighted their youth as a barrier to securing employment. As a result, many new-entrants to

the workforce began the process of looking for work already feeling at a disadvantage compared to other job seekers, and as though they would need to prove themselves to employers as worthy applicants in order to make up for their age. Through an investigation of this phenomenon, Alley (2010) found it possible to overcome negative perceptions from employers associated with age by appealing to one's level of maturity. In the aforementioned study, employers perceived recent graduates who engaged in activities that spoke to their development in a variety of life areas (e.g., volunteering, academics, personal growth) as more hirable. These activities may be perceived by employers as an indication of applicants' well-roundedness and depth of experience, characteristics that directly speak to the maturity of an individual.

Connections

In the changing world of work, where determining one's career direction is now a responsibility of the individual rather than the organization (Hall, 2002), the importance of establishing and maintaining career connections is critical to job search success. According to the Government of Alberta (2014), networking and network connections contribute to the successful appointment of 70-80% of all jobs. Effective connections not only offer strong career advice and guidance for job seekers, but are also instrumental in reputation building and providing insight into learning opportunities and job prospects. Given the numerous and varied roles that both networks and networking play in supporting the success of job seekers, the more ties one has, the greater the probability of gaining meaningful employment (Korpi, 2001).

The importance of strong ties. Consistent with literature that suggests a person's network plays a key role in job attainment (Korpi, 2001), findings of the present study indicated a direct relationship between personal contacts and employment. Whereas networking tended to be more helpful in providing job seekers with unique information about opportunities for work,

participants' network of personal contacts more closely related to specific job outcomes and offers. Recent graduates in the present study had only positive remarks to make about their network, either indicating that these individuals helped them find meaningful employment or that they wished they had made better use of their support when looking for work. In each case, participants deemed their network to play a valuable role in the job search process.

Professional network connections in one's selected occupational fields play a pivotal role in supporting job search success. These contacts are more easily accessible, and individuals in one's network may have a vested interest in helping because of the existing relationship with the job seeker. From the perspective of employers, these contacts not only have previous experience in the field, but previous experience working with the applicant, putting them in a trusted position to not only speak about the qualifications of a potential hire, but also his or her suitability for and effectiveness to excel in the role (Leonard & Onyx, 2003). As a result, both employers and job seekers alike often rely on professional network connections for building the reputation of and referring an applicant, and are therefore commonly credited for job attainment (Jack, 2005).

Interestingly, recent graduates who participated in the present study focused almost exclusively on the support of professional contacts from their field compared to other network connections, such as friends and family. Participants who did mention these other relationships focused on the benefit provided in terms of emotional support, such that family and friends played a secondary role in promoting their employability. In spite of their limited ability to promote positive pre-employment outcomes (Saks, 2006), family and friends serve an important role in supporting the wellbeing of job seekers so that they are able to remain positive and optimistic throughout the process of finding work (Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000).

Professional relationships may therefore have been the focal point of participants' experience of finding work as a result of their explicit and more tangible connection to the labour market.

The strength of weak ties. The field of career development has long advocated for networking as a critical component to success in the job search process. The value of connecting with new or unfamiliar contacts is perhaps more critical to career success now than ever before, particularly in developing and emerging fields of work (de Janasz & Forret, 2007). Despite its proven utility, new-entrants to the workforce tend to rely more heavily on their immediate network for career support. For instance, recent graduates who participated in the present study were two times more likely to discuss their personal contacts than potential contacts. Participants who discussed potential contacts during the interview also tended to do so in the context of a WL item, regardless of whether they engaged in networking during their job search, signifying a desire to have sought out more opportunities to connect with potential contacts. Higher learners who participated in the Royal Bank of Canada's (2016) Career Launch Program exhibited a similar tendency towards initially underestimating the usefulness of networking. When asked about effective means to address the challenges of transitioning from school-to-work, 41.9% of students identified networking as a useful strategy at the beginning of their program, compared to 89.6% of students at the end of their program.

Among the first to investigate the influence of potential or unfamiliar contacts on the job search process was Granovetter (1973), who identified 'weak ties' as playing a valuable role in employability. Weak ties provide job seekers with a unique perspective about opportunities for work, introducing novel network connections and access to otherwise unknown sources of employment information. As a result, participants of the present study regularly acknowledged the direct relation between weak ties and job opportunities, noting this type of relationship as the

job search strategy that contributed most tangibly to job prospects. Recent research into the impact of Granovetter's weak ties supports this notion; distant contacts (e.g., those developed through networking) lend themselves readily to opportunities for work, making it the preferred job search strategy (Tumen, 2016).

Despite its effectiveness as a job search strategy, connecting with potential contacts or weak ties through networking is predominantly recognized retrospectively as a viable source of support. The reason being that students generally do not seek out opportunities to develop professional relationships until after they have started their job search (Tumen, 2016). This trend was also evident among findings of the present study, with participants being two times more likely to identify networking as a WL item than a helping incident. This is due to the uncertainty that young job seekers have about their ability to engage in and add value to networking conversations (de Janasz, Dowd, & Schneider, 2006), making them less likely to participate in these opportunities until later in their academic and occupational journey. For students and recent graduates, networking can be an uncomfortable and intimidating experience, with young job seekers feeling unqualified to participate (de Janasz & Forret, 2007). As a result, many recent graduates, including those of the present study, are able to identify the importance of networking, but feel unable to utilize it as a strategy to support their school-to-work transition.

Personal Qualities

The transition to employment is increasingly a responsibility of the individual (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005), who is now tasked with managing his or her own career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Researchers have supported this shift in onus, noting that job seekers have the capacity to actively influence the outcomes of their job search (Holmes, 2013; Jackson, 2014). In other words, the personal qualities that individuals possess directly impact their ability to find

and secure meaningful employment. Paramount among these qualities is career adaptability. Generally speaking, the more adaptable a person is in their search for work, the better able they are to manage important career development tasks, such as the transition from school-to-work (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

In Savickas' (2005) Career Construction Theory, career adaptability is defined as an individual's capacity to cope with either current or anticipated life transitions, such as entering the workforce. When an individual makes the transition from student to job seeker, they draw on various personal qualities or capacities related to career adaptability in order to succeed. Savickas and Porfeli (2012) break these personal qualities down into four adaptability resources (i.e., adapt-abilities), referred to as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. The authors suggest that individuals are better able to deal with and successfully navigate career transitions when they (a) demonstrate concern about their future and prepare for what might come next, (b) assume control for shaping themselves and their environments, (c) exercise curiosity about and explore alternative scenarios or possible selves, and (d) display confidence in their ability to actualize their choices. Researchers have specified that developing and utilizing each of these qualities when looking for work contributes to greater success in finding meaningful employment (Koen, Klehe, & van Vianen, 2012).

The impact of concerning oneself with the future. In today's information driven and knowledge intensive economy, young job seekers must take a proactive approach to the employment process in order to successfully attain work after graduation (Bridgstock, 2009; Brown et al., 2006). The general consensus among recent graduates in the present study who demonstrated concern for their career futures was that actively pursuing career goals and plans while in school contributed to an ability to secure employment upon graduating. Being proactive

and concerned with one's career not only prompts reflection on potential future options (Fouad & Bynner, 2008), but also encourages the creation of realistic and suitable career plans (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). According to Savickas (2005), when people are able to contemplate and envision a possible future for themselves, they are more likely to work towards and engage in activities that promote the achievement of that outcome. Thus, when students express concern about their careers they are better able to anticipate and prepare for the future, achieving more favourable outcomes as a result (De Vos, De Clippeleer, & Dewilde, 2009).

Despite the positive outcomes of expressing concern for a future career, a number of participants in the present study explained they felt unable to focus on their professional lives as students, which ultimately made it difficult for them to develop a clear sense of what they wanted from their careers after graduating. For these recent graduates, the concept of working towards career goals while preoccupied with their education was unrealistic or otherwise unconsidered. As a result, when students and recent graduates prepare career plans, they tend to be short-term and focused on the immediate future (Tymon, 2013). Selingo's (2016) research substantiates these findings through a survey of young adults who recently completed their post-secondary training. Results revealed that two-thirds of graduates did not start purposefully planning for their careers until after finishing school. This lack of proactive engagement with employability-related development contributes to career indecision and restricts career plans, as noted by participants of the present study. If not addressed, new graduates may experience both prolonged unemployment and underemployment as a result (Feldman, 2002).

Career control and pre-employment outcomes. Participants of the present study spoke almost exclusively of an ability to express control over their career direction as contributing positively to their ability to find meaningful employment, particularly in reference to the

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perseverance and determination that it instilled in them. In light of the many hindrances that participants faced during their search for work, a belief in their ability to exert control over the job search process provided both hope and reassurance. According to McKeown and Lindorff (2011), many graduates find employment based on characteristics of career control rather than specific job search skills, such as career management. When job seekers feel as though they have control over their career direction and decision-making, they are more motivated to take a directive approach to the job search process. Given that career control is closely associated with a sense of responsibility, job seekers are encouraged to be accountable for not only initiating the job search, but also for producing effective results.

Perhaps the most common word that participants paired with control when speaking of the impact on their employability was resilience. Aware of the many barriers posed by the job search, recent graduates who participated in the present study recognized the importance of being resilient, regardless of whether they possessed this quality. The relationship between career control and qualities related to resilience has been well-established in previous research. In fact, authors commonly use career resilience interchangeably with career control, defined in the literature as a belief in one's perceived influence over career events, regardless of external influences (Chen & Lim, 2012). Based on this notion, individuals who are able to recognize the control they have over their circumstances (e.g., finding employment) tend to enact more purposeful strategies of coping with situation, particularly during times of adversity (Benabou & Tirole, 2002). For example, participants of the present study commonly referenced their willingness to do whatever it would take in order to be successful in their chosen field. According to Bezuidenhout (2011), the impact of career control and resilience is particularly

influential among recent graduates, who tend to be more reliant on feeling in control of their career in order to remain optimistic about achieving favourable occupational outcomes.

Taking a curious stance towards career development. The need to adapt to a rapidly changing workplace has been widely discussed within the literature and permeated the discussion of participants in the present study. Surfacing in interviews more frequently than any other personal quality, the relationship between curiosity and pre-employment outcomes played a central role in the job search processes of recent graduates. Participants who demonstrated curiosity towards their careers commonly referenced the expanded work opportunities afforded to them, contributing to an interest in observing diverse ways of finding work and engaging in the workforce. This mentality naturally invited a sense of flexibility and adaptability towards employment well-suited to the workforce of today.

Whereas careers traditionally progressed along a linear path within a single organizational structure, the career development process of today tends to be much more dynamic (Arnold et al., 2005). As a result of changes to the economy such as globalization, increased competitive pressures, and ongoing advancements in technology, the most successful job seekers are those who are curious about career opportunities and willing to be both mobile and adaptable to the rapidly changing workforce (Baruch, 2004). Among the most impactful forms of career curiosity in terms of securing employment is spatial flexibility. Mentioned more than any other form of career curiosity among recent graduates in the present study, participants found a willingness to commute or migrate for work to be closely associated with their ability to find meaningful employment. However, not all participants expressed a readiness to move, a decision they found to hinder their ability to secure work. As a result, many recent graduates voiced a desire to have been more flexible in their job search. In their own research, Büchel and

van Ham (2002) also found that job seekers who limited their search for work to the regional labour market severely restricted their access to job opportunities.

Although incidents of career curiosity predominantly focused on spatial flexibility, participants also discussed other ways they demonstrated adaptiveness in their job search, such as expanding the types of jobs for which they applied, adjusting their wage expectations, and accepting jobs that did not directly align with their career goals in order to get their foot in the door. Van de Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, and De Witte (2010) suggested successful pre-employment outcomes relate to all types of flexibility in the job search process, whether in negotiating salary expectations, accepting an undemanding job, or becoming underemployed in the short-term in order to secure more fulfilling work in the long-term. Generally speaking, having higher levels of curiosity towards one's career and greater flexibility in the job search process translates into more job opportunities and less time spent looking for work.

The centrality of confidence to the job search. Participants who demonstrated self-confidence and self-efficacy in their search for work commonly referenced drawing on previous experiences to corroborate their eligibility for a given job opportunity. In their own investigation of self-efficacy and work attitudes among youth, Lim and Loo (2003) also found that individuals who had high levels of confidence in the job search process tended to believe they possessed the necessary skills and abilities to perform well in their future place of work. As an added benefit, participants of the present study who expressed confidence in their employability also mentioned the positive impact of this mentality on employers' perceptions, who tended to mirror a similar level of confidence in applicants who possessed this quality. Koen and colleagues (2012) found similar outcomes in their research, explaining that participants high in career confidence tended

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to approach the job search more assertively and with greater success as a result of the desirability of this quality among employers.

However, recent graduates who participated in the present study cited a struggle to perceive themselves as worthy candidates, often lacking confidence in their skills, experiences, and preparedness to enter the workforce. Half of the participants who mentioned confidence during the interview explained how feeling unsure about their career direction or unprepared to enter their field of work served as a barrier to finding meaningful employment. Consistent with the present study, research suggests that despite the direct relationship between confidence and constructive pre-employment actions of new workforce entrants, it is not uncommon for young job seekers to enter the school-to-work transition feeling uncertain about themselves and their ability to be successful (Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008). Although recent graduates who lack confidence in their employability find themselves in good company, failing to demonstrate this quality not only limits action taken to find employment, but also negatively impacts hiring decisions made by potential employers (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke & Knight, 2007).

To explain the reason why recent graduates struggle with career confidence, the literature suggests that as the need to find employment becomes more imminent, an individual's belief in his or her ability to succeed tends to decrease. In their study of career confidence among university students throughout their undergraduate training, Qenani, MacDougall, and Sexton (2014) found that as students approached graduation, they became less certain about their ability to find work, feeling as though they lacked the necessary skills to start their career. Various other authors have replicated this inverse relationship, suggesting that as students progress in their education, their confidence in gaining employment decreases (e.g., Beaumont, Gedye, & Richardson, 2016). Given the instability of today's economic climate, it is reasonable to assume

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that as the realities of the workforce become more tangible and apparent to students moving towards the school-to-work transition, they begin to call into question their confidence in the future and their ability to be successful in entering the workforce.

Taking Advantage of Unexpected Opportunities

For participants of the present study, unexpected opportunities played a major helping role in their job search. Even when not explicitly discussed as a contributing component to their employability, participants commonly considered luck to play a role in their transition from school-to-work. Notions of unexpected opportunity, including change and chance events, are central to many of the contextual and constructivist models that form the foundation of post-modern career theories. From this perspective, individuals, as well as the environments in which they build their careers, are both complex and dynamical, making it difficult to predict or plan for the future as a result of the uncertainty that characterizes the systems in which people live and work (Pryor & Bright, 2014). Recognizing the disorder or 'chaos' typical of the lived experience, Krumboltz (1998) observed the impact and importance of unplanned events in the trajectory of life, such that chance plays a crucial role in the developmental process of careers. In fact, evidence from empirical studies suggests that over 80% of people report that chance events have played a role in their career development (Bright, Pryor, Chan, & Rijanto, 2009).

Recent graduates in the present study who spoke of the role unexpected opportunities had in their job search tended to externalize the influence of these events. Yet, personal agency likely played a critical role in both encountering and acting on these chance occurrences. Bright and Pryor's (2011) Chaos Theory of careers refers to this phenomenon as 'luck readiness,' or the openness an individual has towards change and the associated outcomes of potential future events. Individuals who display a readiness for luck typically possess a combination of the

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following eight characteristics: flexibility, optimism, risk-taking, curiosity, persistence, self-efficacy, strategy, and luckiness (Bright & Pryor, 2005). According to Bright and Pryor (2011), encountering chance events is no accident, but rather an outcome of behaviours that involves creating and transforming otherwise unplanned events into career opportunities. When job seekers conduct their search for work in a way that embodies these characteristics, they open themselves up to the opportunity of experiencing and benefitting from chance events. Although individuals often overlook the connection between unexpected opportunities and the personal qualities they possess that may have encouraged these events, participants of the present study who mentioned unexpected opportunities as contributing to their job search success commonly identified with a number of these characteristics at other points during the interview.

Part of the reason that recent graduates in the present study may have struggled to recognize their role in bringing about unexpected opportunities is that they chose to use externalizing language when speaking about their job search experiences. In doing so, participants likely made an attribution of these helping events to something beyond their control (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005). Individuals with an external locus of control (i.e., those who see environmental events as being outside of their power) are also more likely to discuss chance events in a way that positions themselves as passive recipients of change (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000). Given that the ECIT approach encourages participants to recount past events as they experienced them, the fact that recent graduates in the present study attributed their job search success to unexpected opportunities likely speaks to an externalization process, whereby participants attributed these successes to outside influences.

Navigating Difficult Labour Market Conditions

Circumstances surrounding the climate of modern economies contributed to a negative

perception among recent graduates about their ability to succeed as new-entrants to the workforce. For those participants who discussed labour market conditions within the context of their ability to find meaningful employment, the impact was almost always negative. Although employment outlooks following the global financial crisis continue to pose challenges to any job seeker, recent graduates in the present study expressed feeling particularly disadvantaged as new-entrants to the workforce. Unfortunately for those embarking on the school-to-work transition, this perception is not without cause. Since the great recession of 2008, unemployment among young adults remains at a rate approximately double that of the national average (Statistics Canada, 2017). Currently, one in five university graduates are without work (The Lang & O'Leary Exchange, 2014), with 40% of employed Canadian graduates aged 25 to 34 overqualified for the work they do (Lao & Scholz, 2015).

Recent graduates are also noticing the effects of credential creep and the depreciating value of their education, particularly those who completed post-secondary with a Bachelor's degree. Participants of the present study commonly admitted to feeling at a competitive disadvantage because of their comparatively inferior credentials. Despite being qualified for the job opportunities they applied to, participants often found themselves in competition with more experienced and more highly educated applicants as a result of labour market conditions that imposed increased competition for available job opportunities. As participation in higher education surges and the demand for skilled workers rises, employers increasingly seek out applicants with more advanced qualifications (Haberl, 2017). The literature clearly articulates this trend, identifying a polarization effect in the labour market between low skill/low pay jobs and high skill/high pay jobs (Cranford & Vosko, 2006; Graham, Jones, & Shier, 2010). As a result, job seekers trained at the undergraduate level find it increasingly difficult to successfully

transition to the workforce.

Although recent graduates have little power to change labour market conditions, becoming informed about the realities of the labour market might allow young job seekers to approach the job search process with greater success. In the single WL item from this category, one participant from the present study identified the potential value of entering the job search process with more accurate expectations about the school-to-work transition. This supports the notion that one of the reasons recent graduates leave post-secondary unprepared for the labour market is due to a lack of knowledge about the reality of this transition. Students often perceive their degree as directly translating into employment (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2010; Roy Morgan Research, 2009), stunting any further exploration into what is required to effectively transition from school-to-work. Based on this perspective, recent graduates' lack of knowledge about the current economic climate and its impact on the job search process may exacerbate the impact of labour market conditions on pre-employment outcomes.

Preparation for the Hiring Process

Given that the ways in which job seekers pursue their search for work is rapidly changing, participants commonly expressed feeling unfamiliar with and unprepared to navigate the logistical elements of the job search. Among the most frequently discussed hindrances included difficulties that participants encountered during the application process, with recent graduates being frustrated and discouraged with the online submission systems used by many organizations. Although the introduction of online job postings effectively increased the convenience with which applicants are able to find opportunities for work, participants identified ease of access coupled with high rates of competition as barriers to the effectiveness of this job search method. Specifically, participants indicated that despite easily finding opportunities for

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work online, they experienced difficulty in getting through to potential employers after submitting an application.

According to Boyce and Rainie (2002), part of the reason that job seekers may struggle to find work online is because both applicants and recruiters are generally unaware of how to effectively utilize online platforms to find and advertise employment opportunities. To corroborate this concept, Capelli (2001) discovered that despite 90% of large companies in the United States posting job vacancies online, only 52% of the hits from related online job searches returned relevant results. This suggests that although both recruiters and job seekers utilize online platforms for work, neither reach the full potential of this method, often leaving both parties discouraged and apathetic about the process (Jansen, Jansen, & Spink, 2006). As a result of this struggle, job seekers commonly internalize the difficulties faced in the job search, such as the recent graduates interviewed for the present study; many of who expressed feelings of being ill-prepared to approach and effectively navigate the transition from school-to-work.

Once job seekers have identified opportunities for work, the final stage of the pre-employment process involves the submission of an application. Participants of the present study regularly emphasized the importance of a strong cover letter, resume, and/or interview in supporting their ability to secure employment. In fact, all but one participant indicated that having an application that allowed them to stand out from the competition helped or would have helped them in the job search process. Unfortunately, the scholarly literature has paid little attention to how recent graduates present themselves to employers, with previous research often overlooking how this stage of the recruitment process influences applicants' employability (Watts, 2006). One of few studies investigating the hiring process identified the quality of preparation (i.e., the investment a job seeker makes in preparing an application) to be among the

most critical components impacting whether graduates secure employment (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). These results suggest the need for further investigation into how job applications factor into the job search process and employment decisions.

Implications of the Research Findings

Findings from the current study can be used to enhance an awareness of and appreciation for how recent graduates have been successful in finding meaningful employment within the current economic climate. There are implications for both professional and academic practices, as well as individual decision-making regarding the job search process. The results of this research connect to several important suggestions for (a) students and recent graduates, (b) career counsellors and practitioners, and (c) post-secondary institutions and staff about improving how young job seekers approach and navigate the school-to-work transition. In order for recent graduates to be successful in transitioning to the workforce, each of these stakeholders must work collaboratively to better support this process.

Although recent graduates are most directly influenced and affected by the school-to-work transition, it is important to consider the role that multiple other stakeholders have for ensuring success in this transition. In order for any real change to occur in the employability of young adults and new workforce entrants, there must be accountability at all levels (Bell et al., 2016). Implications of the present study address recommendations for several key stakeholders, however, many other parties (e.g., employers, partners, government) would benefit from better understanding their role in supporting this process. For recent graduates leaving school and entering the workforce to be truly successful these stakeholders must work in collaboration, taking a collective approach to facilitating this transition (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016).

Recommendations for Students and Recent Graduates

Based on a review of findings from the present study, it is clear that students and recent graduates are not simply "victims of the system" (Holmes, 2013, p. 549); rather, they maintain a great deal of control and autonomy over the outcomes of their job search. Similar to conclusions drawn by Bell and colleagues (2016), the present study found that job seekers have the capacity to play a central role in addressing both unemployment and underemployment. Students and recent graduates must therefore take an active, informed, and self-directed approach to the job search process, both leading up to and during their school-to-work transition. Research suggests that the sooner students begin preparing to enter the workforce, the greater their chances of finding meaningful employment (Salas-Valasco, 2007). Therefore, findings of the present study are applicable not only to recent graduates, but may be extrapolated to support students currently enrolled in undergraduate degree programs.

One of the most tangible implications of the present study pertains to shaping how future graduates conduct their job search, make career decisions, and ultimately improve their career prospects. According to Piróg (2016), the types of job search strategies used and the extent of involvement in this process predicts with 73% probability whether job seekers find suitable employment. For those embarking on the transition from school-to-work, this research effectively clarifies how to successfully conduct a job search and approach the job search process in a modern economy, serving as a resource to support students and recent graduates throughout the transition from school-to-work. In learning from the successes and struggles of those who recently entered the workforce and found meaningful employment, students and recent graduates are better equipped to navigate the job search process themselves.

Recommendations for Career Counsellors and Practitioners

Career counsellors and practitioners within university settings are well-positioned to play a central role in preparing post-secondary students for the transition from school-to-work. As findings of the present study suggest, the process of preparing for employment begins long before graduation. This means that students are likely to benefit from career support from an early stage in anticipation of and preparation for the transition process. Although existing services primarily emphasize the logistical components of finding employment (e.g., resume writing, interview preparation, and job search strategies), students commonly express a desire for more diverse supports and resources from career professionals (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). As such, career counsellors and practitioners in higher educational institutions who implement the following practices will presumably be better equipped to facilitate the school-to-work transition.

Present a realistic image of the job search process. Many recent graduates expect to find work soon after completing their studies (Perrone & Vickers, 2003), with the image that receiving a degree will also come with immediate offers for employment. However, research suggests that the search for work can extend over a long period of time, with the average length of time for youth in Canada to transition from high school graduation to full-time employment being eight years, including post-secondary education (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2014). Career counsellors and practitioners can serve as an important source of information, educating students and recent graduates about what to expect from the job search process. Students who have accurate expectations about the school-to-work transition generally have a more positive experience, not only in terms of finding suitable employment, but also in the job search process (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Having an accurate perception of the transition

effectively promotes hope and encourages resilience in the face of challenges or barriers that new-entrants to the workforce are likely to encounter.

When students and recent graduates are hopeful about their career outcomes, they tend to develop a stronger career identity (Bell et al., 2016), contributing to an ability to endure resistance faced during their search for work. Alternatively, when job seekers are not able to accurately anticipate the realities of the job search, they tend to become discouraged with the process and doubtful of their ability and competence, internalizing their struggle as a personal fault. As a result, these individuals often resort to utilizing less engaging job search methods (e.g., relying on other people to find jobs for them) that ultimately decrease their chances of entering the workforce (Piróg, 2016). If career counsellors and practitioners are able to dispel common myths about the labour market, not only will their clients benefit from improved career confidence and a solidified career identity but, as a result, they will also experience enhanced resilience and momentum throughout the job search process, encouraging their success in attaining meaningful employment.

Acknowledge the intersection between career and personal counselling. Although debate continues to surround the relationship between career counselling and personal counselling, as well as the responsibilities of those providing each service, it is increasingly understood that "career is personal" (Savickas, 1993, p. 212). This intersection is perhaps most undeniable among those struggling with unemployment or underemployment. The research resoundingly identifies the personal costs of career instability, with job seekers often internalizing career rejection as a form of personal rejection (Creed, Hood, & Hu, 2017). These personal costs manifest in diminished levels of self-efficacy, motivation, and optimism (Cassidy & Wright, 2008; Jalles & Andresen, 2014), and can result in more serious mental health concerns

such as self-harm, depression, suicidality, and anxiety, if the experience persists (Fryer, 2001; Goodchild, 2012; Pharr et al., 2012). This relationship also works inversely; individuals who present with mental health concerns tend to experience difficulty finding employment as a result of their diagnosis, with one of the most significant contributing influences to mental health costs being the impact on employment (Huxley, 2001).

For career counsellors and practitioners to provide the most meaningful and appropriate support for their clients, a holistic approach to helping that disengages the false-dichotomy between career and life is necessary (Brott, 2001). To accomplish this, those providing career services can conduct regular check-ins with clients about changes not only in their employment status, but also in the status of their mental health. Acknowledging the dual-relationship between career concerns and personal concerns orients career counsellors and practitioners for building success through supporting clients in both of these areas.

Take a holistic approach to the career counselling process. A contextual perspective invites an appreciation for the various and systemic influences on career decision-making and development. In many ways, people make career decisions based on the ways in which they relate to, interact with, and find meaning through previous life experiences (Brott, 2001); such as education, prior employment, and personal learning (e.g., involvement in extracurricular activities). In this way, a career is "interwoven with all aspects of [a person's] life" (Scott, 2002, p. 215). With a recent move towards constructivist understandings of career, counsellors and practitioners must now provide a service that acknowledges clients within their broader life roles and societal systems (Patton & McMahon, 2014). By approaching career conversations in consideration of these contexts, career counsellors and practitioners have the opportunity to engage in more meaningful discussions with clients, leading to a comprehensive understanding

of the client as a whole person. Given that life roles beyond work tend to inform the career decisions that people make (Brott, 2001), taking this approach invites clients to articulate themselves in a holistic way and, as a result, allows career counsellors and practitioners to better serve those with whom they work.

Recent graduates who participated in the present study also referenced the influence that various other life roles and experiences had in their ability to secure meaningful employment. Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon, and May (2011) reported similar findings, with alumni indicating that participation in extracurricular activities improved their graduate employment prospects and pathways. Given that a large number of recent graduates are unlikely to have extensive occupational experiences prior to beginning their job search, taking the time to explore other life roles and to identify transferable skills will naturally increase the competitiveness of new-entrants to the workforce.

Recommend flexibility in handling job opportunities. Employers look to hire individuals who actively demonstrate a readiness and willingness to be adaptable and work under a variety of different employment conditions (DeBell, 2006; Savickas, 2005). Demonstrating flexibility in one's employment can take various forms, including both psychological mobility (i.e., an ability to envision diverse career options; Forret, Sullivan, & Mainiero, 2010) and job flexibility (i.e., the willingness to accept a job that deviates from expectations; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). This may involve job seekers exploring opportunities in different geographical locations, looking for work outside of a preconceived area of interest, accepting job offers below one's asking wage, or taking a job as a stepping stone to a career that more directly aligns with one's interests or skills.

When individuals are able to envision a variety of viable career options for themselves,

they tend to engage in a more exploratory job search process, opening up previously unidentified opportunities and ultimately enhancing their job search success. Collaborating with clients to identify and explore these more flexible job prospects not only increases job search intensity, but also leads to more job offers (Koen, Klehe, van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010). By working with clients to increase their flexibility in the search for work, students and recent graduates are able to open themselves up to a wider variety of job opportunities and, in doing so, bolster their competitiveness in comparison to other applicants who may not express such high levels of adaptability towards the job search.

Recommendations for Post-Secondary Educators and Staff

For post-secondary institutions to better prepare students and recent graduates for the workforce first requires a paradigm shift within the education system itself. This involves not only acknowledging, but also valuing and even prioritizing, the application of learning beyond the academic environment. With the majority of university graduates seeking employment outside of academia, particularly at the undergraduate level, post-secondary institutions must attend to the ways in which their services and curriculum prepare students for the contexts in which they can expect to work. For the school-to-work transition process to be truly seamless demands that all relevant stakeholders, including post-secondary, commit to understanding and adjusting to the changes taking place in the world of work (Bell et al., 2016; Nicholson & Cushman, 2000). The following recommendations provide an overview of steps that post-secondary institutions and staff may take to provide more deliberate and purposeful career support to students.

Expand opportunities for formal career development education. According to Bell and colleagues (2016), students who receive career education and training in school tend to

experience improved pre-employment outcomes, even during times of economic decline. In a study published by the Royal Bank of Canada (2016), the majority (62%) of undergraduate students expressed a desire for career courses during their education, recognizing the potential benefits to their future employability. Despite a demand among students for either mandatory or optional courses on career development (Piróg, 2016), post-secondary programming continues to undervalue and therefore underutilize career training in its curriculum.

To integrate this material into the academic environment, staff might consider designing specific classes dedicated to career development (e.g., mandatory courses preparing students for job seeking [Piróg, 2014]), updating existing curriculum so that it is more directly relevant to and aligned with work environments (e.g., incorporating applied assignments into coursework [Royal Bank of Canada, 2016; Sattler & Peters, 2013]), as well as offering practical occupational sessions and workshops through career services on campus (e.g., teaching students what to expect from the job search process and supporting them through it, even after graduation [McKeown & Lindorff, 2011]). Given the strong role that personal qualities, such as career concern, play in supporting the job search process of meaningfully employed graduates, on campus services may also consider offering workshops and training interventions that enhance proactivity, a learnable personality trait (Kirby, Kirby, & Lewis, 2002).

Provide information on the pre-employment outcomes of graduates. In learning from the experiences of others, students and recent graduates have a model from which to approach their own school-to-work transition, alleviating uncertainty and providing much needed direction. Unfortunately, information about the employment of previous students is currently hard to come by and, if available, generally inaccessible to current students. According to the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2014), although a National Graduates Survey exists that

tracked how graduates from the year 2009-2010 faired in the labour market as of 2013, the data is only available in raw data form and at a cost to the user.

To increase the accessibility and user-friendliness of this information, post-secondary institutions are encouraged to develop internal databases for their graduates, tracking the post-education careers and willingness of these individuals to engage and network with students currently enrolled at the institution. Despite the demonstrated relevance of formal networking to the employment process, many graduates who participated in the present study indicated a reluctance to make connections in their field. Having this data available will not only increase the circulation of relevant employment information, but also promote the accessibility of potential networking connections in a safe and welcoming environment. In doing so, meaningful career conversations and possible mentorship relationships can develop, which support not only the employability of new-entrants to the workforce, but also their long-term career success both externally (e.g., salary) and internally (e.g., satisfaction) (Royal Bank of Canada, 2016).

Offer work integrated learning programs to all students. Lack of relevant experience is a key deterrent in hiring new entrants to the workforce (Global Agenda Council on Employment, 2014). Therefore, workplace training (e.g., co-ops, internships, practicums) is critical to addressing high unemployment and underemployment among university graduates. Since job-specific skills are difficult to learn outside of the work context, recent graduates are ill-equipped to enter the workforce with just an education. Work integrated learning offers the greatest opportunity for career preparation and provides students with job specific skills, professional skills, and a network of contacts (DuPre & Williams, 2011). Students are also cognizant of the value practical experience provides in promoting their employability, with it being the most frequently demanded educational reform among undergraduate students (Royal

Bank of Canada, 2016).

To meet this need, higher education providers must ensure that work integrated learning is not only available to all students, but that these opportunities provide educational value and promote career potential (Stirling et al., 2014). However, with less than half of all students in Canadian universities receiving work integrated learning (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2014), post-secondary institutions must work collaboratively with employers and government to increase the accessibility of these services. This may involve directly incentivizing employers to offer work integrated learning experiences, such as by supplementing income or marketing the benefits to business of hiring a student. For example, organizations that participate in career training programs profit from enhanced reputation and improved workplace morale (Stirling et al., 2014), heightened productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness among staff (International Labour Organization, 2012), and can complete outstanding or special projects at a reduced cost (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2014). In developing partnerships with both employers as well as government, higher educational institutions are able to ensure that students leave post-secondary with the skills and experiences to successfully navigate the school-to-work transition.

Strengths and Delimitations of the Present Study

Taking an informed and authentic approach to research requires an exploration of both the associated strengths and delimitations. This process situates findings within a broader context, allowing for a meaningful discussion about the present study from this perspective. The researcher first discusses strengths of the study, with a focus on how it accomplished the overall research objectives and addressed gaps in the existing scholarly literature. An overview of the delimitations associated with the study follows, which allows the reader to scrutinize the legitimacy of findings and invites the identification of areas for future research.

Strengths

Among the most notable strengths of the present study was the use of a recent graduate sample to inform the research. Employer preferences and perspectives regarding the hiring of new graduates saturate the existing literature regarding the school-to-work transition. Limited information exists about how meaningfully employed graduates themselves have navigated this process. The Canadian Career Development Foundation recently identified a need for additional research to investigate the experience of recent graduates in finding meaningful employment in order to more fully support an understanding of (a) the main issues that recent graduates face, (b) where they are finding opportunities for work, and (c) what they see as solutions to making the school-to-work transition more seamless (Bell et al., 2016). The present study serves as a starting point from which to investigate these topics and explore ways in which to better support students and recent graduates in the transition from school-to-work.

The present study not only engaged alumni in a discussion about finding meaningful employment, but the sample consisted exclusively of individuals who completed their studies within the past two years. This resulted in a sample of graduates who could speak personally about how the current economic climate informed their job search. Although research previous to the 21st century minimized context as influencing the job search process, constructivist and other post-modern career development theorists have emphasized environmental and circumstantial factors as integral components to shaping pre-employment outcomes. This has created a demand for research that reflects current economic conditions in order to better understand the influence on employability (Feldman, 2002). With limited research on the topic of pre-employment outcomes since the recession of 2008 (Purcell et al., 2013), the present study informs a contemporary understanding of and appreciation for how recent graduates navigate the job

search process.

Taking a qualitative approach to this investigation also allowed for an exploration of perspectives about the school-to-work transition of recent graduates that may not have surfaced in the quantitative approaches that traditionally dominated research. With a demand for research that encourages a comprehensive exploration of how recent graduates are approaching the job search (Biggeri et al., 2001; Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008), the present study implemented a qualitative approach to the investigation of helping and hindering incidents, as well as WL items. This stimulated a more thorough exploration, and arguably more accurate depiction, of the job search by reflecting both the successes and struggles that recent graduates encountered. In taking this perspective, the present study provided a representation of the job search process in its entirety, offering those concerned with it (e.g., students, graduates, educators, career practitioners) an opportunity to learn from the various triumphs and tribulations of recent graduates with firsthand experience transitioning from education to employment. In asking about WL items and attending to the events and influences that participants' believed would have been helpful to them during the job search process, the present study also provided insight into the retrospective learning of participants, from which recommendations were designed.

Delimitations

The researcher has identified several delimitations of the present study as possibly influencing the research findings. First, there is potential for qualitative interviews and, specifically, the presence of the researcher during the process of data collection, to influence both the study and the participants (Anderson, 2010). Despite efforts made on the part of the researcher to remain objective, it may be the case that personal biases, reactions, or other idiosyncrasies that became evident during the interview process informed participant responses.

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Secondly, qualitative studies using the ECIT as a method of inquiry typically require only small sample sizes (Butterfield et al., 2009), limiting the generalizability of said research to the larger population. Participants involved in the present study were self-selected alumni from educational institutions in Western Canada, and represented only a small portion of meaningfully employed graduates. Although the intention of this research was not to be representative of this population, it is worth noting that findings are not generalizable and that the experiences of other recent graduates may vary from perspectives representative of the present sample. Not only that, but previous research has identified the influence of context on an individual's ability to find meaningful employment (Feldman, 2002). A lack of attention to diversity within the sample therefore limits the application of findings of the present study to broader contexts. However, this research will likely generate future investigation into this area of study.

Another potential risk associated with using the ECIT is the reliance on memory and recall in the process of data collection. According to Butterfield and colleagues (2009), research using this method should focus on events that have occurred within the past six months in order to avoid the potential for memory decay or distortion. Given that the present study required participants to have completed their program of study within the past two academic years, it is likely that some participants conducted their job search more than six months prior to the interview. Although the researcher explored each incident in great depth to reduce the impact of memory recall errors, the extended time may have influenced the recollection of participants.

Finally, the retrospective nature of participant reports may have further limited the reliability of knowledge claims made in the following ways. Research suggests that people who are in positive life positions (e.g., those who are meaningfully employed) tend to view their past more favourably (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). As such, there is the possibility for graduates to

inadvertently bias their reports towards a 'rose-coloured' recollection of how the job search

unfolded. Not only that, but there is also the potential for self-serving attributions to exist in the

accounts of participants. Research by Sheppard, Malone, and Sweeny (2008) demonstrated that

people tend to take responsibility for positive outcomes in their lives and externalize negative

outcomes. This tendency might explain the large proportion of incidents that alluded to agentic

action and personal qualities compared to those that concerned contextual or otherwise external

influences. Future explorations of this topic should consider implementing a longitudinal

approach, beginning with students still enrolled in education, to eliminate potential biases in

retrospective reports.

Recommendations for Future Directions in Research

Based on findings of the present study and a consideration of the aforementioned

limitations, the researcher proposes the following recommendations for future investigations of

the topic. Above all, the literature requires additional inquiry into the school-to-work transition

of job seekers, and new-entrants to the workforce in particular. In a newly improving economy,

the time is ripe to conduct research that accurately reflects today's unique economic climate.

With recent investigations highlighting the relevance of contextual influences in the job search

process (see Brown et al., 2006; Johns, 2001; Ross, 2012), the need for this research is both time-

sensitive and of high priority. Whereas the present study offered a broad overview of pre-

employment outcomes among recent graduates, future investigations might consider approaching

this process with more specific topics of interest.

Future research in the area of school-to-work transitions may also assess recent graduates

who received alternative forms of training. All participants of the present study completed their

post-secondary training at the undergraduate level within a degree granting institution, meaning

that the education received likely focused on a theoretical approach to both teaching and research. According to the Canadian Information Center for International Credentials (2009), other post-secondary institutions (e.g., colleges or technical schools), and more advanced programs (e.g., graduate school) tend to focus on professional designations and skills training, resulting in a more career-oriented curriculum. As a result, students in these programs receive learning opportunities more directly applicable to the field in which they plan to enter upon graduation, often resulting in a smoother transition process.

Another way that future research can further explore the relationship between job search behaviours and pre-employment outcomes is through an investigation of the range of occupational experiences representative of the 21st century. With an increasingly diverse and flexible labour market, it is important to consider the behaviours of job seekers who are looking for alternative forms of employment, such as contracted work, part-time jobs, and self-employed positions (Bridgstock, 2009). This may also include an analysis of the job search processes of laid off individuals or those who have otherwise been involved in the workforce previously. Research by Kanfer and colleagues (2001) found that job seekers who entered the job search with prior experience tended to encounter greater success in finding employment compared to new-entrants, suggesting that job search behaviours and pre-employment outcomes may differ among job seekers.

To further extend this inquiry, future research may also consider exploring the job search processes of a more diverse sample or through a specific demographic of job seekers. According to Bell and colleagues (2016), certain individuals are more likely to face challenges during the transition from school-to-work, such as vulnerable populations, groups who are marginalized in society, and international students. In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how

new-entrants to the workforce conduct a successful job search, it is imperative that a conceptualization and assessment of this process consider a wide variety of perspectives in order to account for the numerous and varied influences on pre-employment outcomes.

Personal Reflections

Given my involvement in the present study as a researcher, it is worthwhile to share my experience of conducting this study as well as consider the impact on myself as an academic, a professional, and a person. In acknowledgment of my positionality throughout this investigation, I recognize the potential for me to influence participants, and have them influence me, as part of this process. In an effort to remain transparent about my engagement with this research, the following section outlines my personal reflections and opinions on this experience.

As a counsellor and researcher, I had a unique and privileged perspective from which to approach this study. Fuelled by a passion for the topic and a personal investment in my own impending transition from school-to-work, at times I felt conflicted between a desire to connect with my participants on a personal level as a counsellor, and a need to maintain the conservative curiosity of a researcher. At many points throughout this journey I experienced being in awe of my participants, inspired by their determination and success. Perhaps most surprising to me was the extent to which participants underestimated their own role in the process of finding meaningful employment. As a researcher, I often recognized qualities in my participants that they seemed to overlook in themselves, such as fortitude, grit, and passion. Even in cases where the discussion centered on external influences related to the job search process, I could not help but notice the ability of my participants to overcome challenges and approach opportunity. I often left interviews feeling a renewed sense of hope and optimism for recent graduates embarking on the transition to employment.

Unfortunately, the media too often portrays a less than positive occupational outlook for new graduates, instilling a sense of fear and uncertainty about the future that makes an already difficult transition even more daunting. A recent Washington Post article referred to Millennials as "the most publically denounced generation of all time" (McClennen, 2015). In conducting this research, I aspired to attend instead to the accomplishments of recent graduates, in both achieving success and effectively dealing with adversity. By shifting this focus, it is my hope to inspire a more productive dialogue about career development and career transition among recent graduates and within the larger community. In learning from the successes and struggles of those who have effectively navigated this transition process in the past, we open the door to better understanding how to create a more hopeful future for those to come.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study sought to explore and better understand the process by which recent university graduates approached and navigated the job search, including an investigation of successes and struggles associated with this endeavor. By utilizing the ECIT to investigate experiences of meaningfully employed graduates, the results of this study included critical incidents associated with pre-employment outcomes during the school-to-work transition. Recent graduates who shared of their job search experiences as part of the present study contributed to a breadth of knowledge and insight into what helped, hindered, or could helped job seekers find work in their field. Collectively, participants identified 131 CIs and WL items that directly impacted their ability to secure meaningful employment, which formed a total of 13 unique categories. The themes drawn from this research directly informed concrete strategies for how students and recent graduates, career practitioners and counsellors, as well as post-secondary educators and staff approach and effectively navigate the school-to-work transition.

Although there is an abundance of literature on the topic of employability and pre-employment outcomes related to job search behaviour, the perceptions of government, employers, and higher education often overpower and effectively silence the voices of students and recent graduates themselves (Tymon, 2013). Despite having the intention to identify strategies for approaching the school-to-work transition, few authors have investigated the job search process from the perspective of those engaged in it, limiting the extent to which previous research can directly and effectively inform pre-employment outcomes of students and future graduates. The qualitative nature of this study and its focus on the lived experiences of graduates who recently found employment provided a detailed and comprehensive view of key influences associated with the job search process that accurately reflects the economic climate of today.

The transition from school-to-work is increasingly non-linear and unpredictable (Tomlinson, 2013). Yet, the findings of the present study highlight the positive experiences of university graduates who continued to persevere in the face of these challenges. Although no group is homogenous, including university graduates, the researcher offered participants' stories of success and struggle in the hopes of inspiring others to achieve similar results as they embark on the transition from school-to-work. My hope is that the present study will serve as a story of strength and success amongst narratives about the failures and deficits of youth, demystifying the job search process and offering a perspective that both provides hope and demands action.

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- Applicants must have graduated with an undergraduate degree within the past 2 years
- Applicants must be under the age of 30
- Applicants must be meaningfully employed (i.e., working in one's chosen field of study in a job that is deemed to be personally fulfilling)
- Applicants must have been employed with the same organization for more than 3-months
- Applicants must be fluent in English

Details:
- **Date/time**: details to be negotiated with participant
- **Location**: at your place of employment or through the Integrated Services in Education, Education Tower 408, University of Calgary
- This study has been approved by the Conjoint Faculty Research Ethics Board (CFREB)

Benefits:
- Upon completion of the interview session, participants will be awarded a $20.00 gift card to Cadillac Fairview malls in recognition of their time and participation

If you, or anyone you know, may be interested and considered eligible to participate in this study please contact April Dyrda by email at: ajdyrda@ucalgary.ca to apply or for more information.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:
April Dyrda, BA, MSc Student. – University of Calgary (Researcher)

Dr. Nancy Arthur, Professor, Associate Dean – University of Calgary (Supervisor)

Title of Project:
Beyond generation jobless: How recent university graduates are finding meaningful employment

Sponsor:
The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this research study is to further an understanding of how recent university graduates are approaching the process of finding work in an economic downturn. Specifically, by focusing on the experiences of graduates who have obtained meaningful employment (i.e., work related to one's chosen field of study deemed to be personally fulfilling), critical factors and events associated with success in finding employment can be better understood. This research will inform how future school-leavers approach the job search process, providing key insights and strategies that will inform professional practice and counselling interventions, educational materials oriented towards career development, and ultimately the career decision-making of students transitioning from academia to the workforce. In doing so, the occupational and psychological wellbeing of new-entrants to the workforce can be enhanced.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?
You will be invited to participate in a 60-75 minute in person semi-structured interview session that will focus on questions pertaining to your job search process, with a focus on helpful factors, hindering factors, and wish list items (i.e., factors that would have been helpful in the situation) that contributed to your ability to find meaningful employment. This session will be audiotaped so that any information collected during the interview can be reviewed and transcribed at a later date by the researchers involved.

After data from interview sessions are analyzed, you will be contacted via email by the researchers and invited to crosscheck findings. This will require you to review a document containing categories of critical incidents and wish list items derived from your interview and confirm the appropriateness and accuracy of interpretations made.

Your participation in this interview session and participant crosschecking process is completely voluntary. You may decline to participate in parts of or all of the present study. You may also withdraw from the study at any point up until the completion of participant crosschecking without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be otherwise entitled.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?
Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym to which your data will be ascribed. Additional information about your age, gender, level of education, degree name, job title, and industry of employment will be collected. Your session will be audio taped and transcribed in order to gather qualitative data from interviews. Access to audio files will be restricted to the researchers and authorized research assistants. This information will be kept private by the independent third-party researchers on password-protected computers in an encrypted file for a period of five years before being permanently removed from the hard drives and destroyed. Published interview data will be associated with the pseudonym provided, and will not be connected with personal or identifying information.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ___ No: ___

You may refer to and quote me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

I grant permission to be emailed to crosscheck findings: Yes: ___ No: ___

The email address I would like to be contacted at is: _____

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?
There are no perceived risks associated with your participation in this research. Any risks in the research will be similar to those encountered in everyday life. Given the nature of semi-structured interviews, there is the potential for unforeseeable sensitive information to be disclosed. If concerns related to your career emerge as a result of the interview process, please contact the University of Calgary's Career Services by email (csstdnt@ucalgary.ca) or phone (403-220-8020). This service is free to you as recent alumni of the University of Calgary.

A benefit of this study is that it will contribute to an understanding of factors that contribute to impede the ability of recent university graduates to find meaningful employment. Findings of the research will have direct implications for students and recent school-leavers seeking fulfilling employment in their field of study. Research findings will also benefit professional practice and career development theory, informing the ways in which counsellors and career practitioners approach the career decision-making and development needs of university trained clients transitioning from academia to the workforce.

By participating in this study, you will be awarded a 20.00 gift card to Cadillac Fairview Malls. If you choose to withdraw from the interview or decline to participate in any part of this study, you are free to do so without penalty or loss of the above-mentioned benefits.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?
Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study without penalty or loss of benefits. Due to the nature of the study and the use of audio taped recordings, any information you may have provided up until your leaving will be recorded and accessible to the researchers involved, but will not be used as part of the research. No one except the researchers (Dr. Nancy Arthur and research team members/assistants directly connected to the data) will have access to this confidential information, including audio files. This data will be kept private by the independent third-party researchers of the University of Calgary on password-protected computers for a period of five years before being permanently removed from the hard drives and destroyed. Data will be used to contribute to research presentations and research papers. There will be no names or employment information associated with the information that you provide. Any individual information to be used as part of the present study from the interviews will be associated only with the pseudonym provided and will not include any identifying information. Your employer will not be made aware of your participation in the present study or the answers that you provide.

Signatures
Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns
If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent for

Appendix C: Demographic Form

1. How old are you? _____ years old

2. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other

3. What is your ethnicity? _____

4. What is your level of education?
   a. Bachelor's degree
   b. Master's degree
   c. Doctoral degree

5. What is your degree name? _____

6. What is your job title? _____

7. What industry are you employed in?
   a. Financial (banking, insurance, investment banking)
   b. Professional services (legal, accounting, consulting)
   c. Communications
   d. Education
   e. Health care or social services
   f. Manufacturing
   g. Natural resources/energy
   h. Retail
   i. Technology
   j. Transportation
   k. Public Administration
   l. Other (please specify): _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Contextual Questions: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview about your experience of finding meaningful employment. During the first part of the interview I'm going to ask you some contextual questions to just get a better understanding of you and your experience.

1. In your opinion, what does it mean to be "meaningful employed?"

2. In what ways is your work meaningful or personally fulfilling?

Critical Incident Questions: Before we get started with the rest of the interview I want to point out that this will not be like a normal conversation, and I'm probably going to be asking you a lot of specific questions about your experience. I do want to acknowledge that your experience is going to be much bigger than what we talk about today, but I want to focus on those specific experiences that align with my research question and the purpose of this study. You'll notice I will be asking questions in a certain style and that I will often ask for you to provide an example to support your answers. This can start to feel repetitive, but it is part of the structure of the technique that we are using. Do you have any questions at this time?

Helpful Incidents Script: The first thing I would like to ask you about are those factors, events, or experiences that you feel *contributed* to your ability to find meaningful employment or otherwise *helped* your job search. Does that make sense to you?

Question: In your opinion, what helped you find or secure your current job?

Alternative: What was beneficial or positively affected your ability to find employment?

Probe: What else do you attribute your job search success to? What do you think set you apart from other people applying for this same job?

Final probe: Now we've talked a little bit about factors that helped you find your job. You mentioned [list factors]. Can you think of anything other factors that might have contributed to your success in getting this job?

Helpful factor	Importance	Example
• What do you mean by…? • Could you elaborate on that?	• How did it help/impact you? What was it about … that was so helpful?	• Can you give me an example of a time when… helped you in your job search? • What was the outcome of that?

Hindering Incidents Script: Next I'd like to focus on those factors, events, or experiences that you feel *hindered* your ability to find meaningful employment or otherwise made your job search *difficult*, and how you overcame those challenges. Does that make sense to you?

Question: What challenges or obstacles did you have to overcome in the job search process in order to get this job?

Alternative: What other barriers did you face or come up against during your job search?

Final probe: Now we've talked a little bit about factors that hindered your ability to find your job. You mentioned [list factors]. Can you think of anything other factors that might have negatively affected your ability to get this job?

Hindering factor	Importance	Example
• What do you mean by…? • Could you elaborate on that?	• How did it hinder/impact you? • What was it about … that made it difficult for you to find work?	• Can you give me an example of a time when… hindered you in your job search? • What was the outcome of that?

Wish List Items Script: Finally, I'd like to ask about any factors, events, or experiences that you believe *would* have helped you find meaningful employment or that you would have done *differently* given the chance. You can also think about things that you believe would help your job search process in the *future*. Does that make sense to you?

Question: What do you wish you had done during the job search process that you think would have been helpful in finding meaningful employment?

Alternative: What would you have done differently if you could do it over again? What would you do differently in the future?

Probe: What is one piece of advice you would give a university graduate looking for employment in their field of study?

Final probe: Now we've talked a little bit about factors that would have helped you in finding your job. You mentioned [list factors]. Can you think of anything other factors that might have been helpful in your ability to get this job?

Wish list item	Importance	Example
What do you mean by…?	How would it help/impact you? Tell me what it was about … that would be so helpful?	Can you give me an example of a time when… would have helped you in your job search? What would the outcome be?

Those are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else reflecting back on the interview now that you feel was missed or that you would like to add?

Appendix E: Closing Script

"I'd like to thank you for participating in this interview. The aim of the study was to further an understanding of how recent university graduates are approaching the process of finding work in a distressed economy. It has been noted that unemployment and underemployment rates among university-educated populations are uncharacteristically high, with these individuals often suffering negative psychological and occupational effects as a result. By conducting this research, we hope to further an understanding of critical factors and events that are associated with success in finding meaningful employment, thereby informing how the job search and career development process is approached by both practitioners and students. In doing so, findings from this research will contribute to improved wellbeing and employment outcomes of university graduates transitioning to the workforce. Once the interviews are completed I will be reaching out to you again with the analyzed data to confirm the information I've pulled from this interview is consistent with and accurately reflects your experience.

"If you have any questions or concerns about the present study, please feel free to approach me or the principle investigator, whose contact information has been included in the debrief form provided. Finally, if you know of anyone else who might fit the criteria for this research please let me know and I would be happy to connect with them. Once again, thank you for participating in this study. Your compensation will be issued momentarily."

Appendix F: Debrief Form

The aim of the present study was to identify factors and events perceived to be associated with success in finding meaningful employment among recent university graduates. It has been noted that unemployment and underemployment rates among university-educated populations are uncharacteristically high, with these individuals often suffering negative psychological and occupational effects as a result. By conducting this research, we hope to further an understanding of critical factors associated with success in finding meaningful employment, thereby informing how both practitioners and students approach the job search and career development process. In doing so, findings from this research will contribute to improved wellbeing and employment outcomes of university graduates transitioning to the workforce.

The present study aims to address these issues as directly as possible by talking to recent university graduates themselves about their personal experiences of finding meaningful employment and those factors that are perceived to contribute to the success and struggles faced throughout this process. Limited qualitative research has been conducted on the job search process and behaviours of university graduates, particularly in our current economic context.

One major benefit of this study is that it will provide insight into the job search process of university graduates, contributing to an understanding of factors that enhance or impede the ability of school-leavers to find meaningful employment. Research findings will have direct implications for students and graduates seeking fulfilling employment in their field of study, encouraging these individuals to engage in behaviours shown to align with employment success and fulfillment. The present study will also benefit professional practice and career development theory, providing guidance and structure to the ways in which counsellors and career practitioners approach the career decision-making and development needs of university trained clients who are transitioning from academia to the workforce.

We are grateful for your participation in this study as it would be impossible to carry out without individuals such as yourself. We also hope that your participation in this study has been a useful educational experience. If you are interested in learning more about the results of the study and the current research on career development and employment among university graduates, or if you have any questions, comments, or concerns you would like to share, please feel free to contact the principal investigator (Dr. Nancy Arthur, Werklund School of Education, 403-220-6756, narthur@ucalgary.ca).

If your participation in this study has raised any concerns related to your career, please contact Career Services at the University of Calgary main campus (403-220-8020, csstdnt@ucalgary.ca) or visit them in person at MacEwan Student Centre 188. This service is free to you as recent alumni of the University of Calgary.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.