



More Than a Résumé

Four Lenses on Career Evidence

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Abstract

Career preparation is filed under productivity, and it is measured in documents. A résumé written, a workshop attended, a profile updated. This paper argues that the filing is wrong and the measurement follows it into the wrong place.

Four separate research literatures, using different methods on different populations, converge on the same variable: the **duration** of a career transition, and the degree of control a person has while it lasts. Earnings losses begin before the separation and are set by the market someone happens to land in. Mortality and mental health track the period of uncertainty rather than the income drop. The contacts most likely to help are the ones who worked with you and have since forgotten the specifics. Effects on children appear to travel through a parent's distress rather than through the household budget.

None of those levers is a document. All of them are shortened by the same thing: having a usable record of your own work before you need it.

For institutions that serve people through these transitions, this reframes what is worth teaching and what is worth counting.

1. The framing problem

Ask a workforce program how its résumé workshop went and the answer is usually attendance. Twenty-two people came, nineteen finished a document, satisfaction was high. Those are honest numbers and they describe the service accurately.

They are also not what the program is assessed on. Under [WIOA section 116](#), every state and local area is measured against six primary indicators, and not one of them counts a service delivered. Five are measured after the participant has left, the earliest two quarters after exit. The results are [published by state and program year](#) against negotiated levels.

So there is a gap between the thing produced and the thing funded, and it is not a reporting quirk. It is a signal that the document was never the point. What the funder is buying is a shorter, better transition. The document is one instrument for that, and on the evidence below, not the decisive one.

2. Finances: the loss begins before the announcement

The standard mental model puts the clock at the letter. Everything before it is the job, everything after it is the search.

Jacobson, LaLonde and Sullivan matched administrative earnings records to firm-level data and followed workers separating from firms in distress. High-tenure workers sustained [long-term losses averaging 25 percent per year](#). That figure is widely cited. The finding beneath it is not: **the losses begin mounting before the separation**, and they remained large even for workers who found new positions at comparable firms.

This is intuitive once stated. A firm in difficulty stops giving raises before it stops giving jobs. Discretionary budget goes first, and discretionary budget funds the work that makes a career legible: the migration, the pilot, the initiative someone would have led. By the time the letter arrives, a year of evidence has already not been created.

The size of the eventual bill is then set by conditions the individual does not choose. Davis and von Wachter, using Social Security earnings records from 1974 to 2008, found that men displaced in mass layoffs lose about [1.4 years of pre-displacement earnings](#) when national unemployment is below 6 percent, and about 2.8 years when it exceeds 8 percent. Both figures are present-value, discounted over twenty years.

Same worker, same history, twice the loss, decided by the month.

3. Health: the mechanism is duration, not effort

Sullivan and von Wachter linked administrative earnings records to mortality records and followed workers who lost long-held jobs in mass layoffs. In the year following displacement, [mortality ran 50 to 100 percent above expectation](#). A 15 to 20 percent elevation persisted for two decades, which the authors translate into roughly 1.5 years of life expectancy for a worker displaced at forty.

That study covers high-seniority male workers in a specific administrative dataset, and the limit should be stated rather than left implied. A second literature, using an entirely different method, addresses the wider population. Paul and Moser pooled [324 studies of unemployment and mental health](#), 237 cross-sectional and 87 longitudinal. Among unemployed people, 34 percent showed psychological problems, against 16 percent of employed people. The longitudinal studies are the load-bearing ones, because they follow the same individuals across the transition.

The instinctive response to this evidence is urgency: apply harder, network faster, treat the search as an emergency. That reading misidentifies the mechanism. What the literature describes is the effect of a prolonged period of uncertainty, not of insufficient effort. Anything that shortens that

period is protective. Anything that lengthens it is not, including advice that increases activity without increasing progress.

4. Association: the useful contact has forgotten the specifics

Granovetter established the direction in 1973, surveying 282 men on how they found their jobs: [the useful contact is usually not a close friend](#), because acquaintances occupy positions you do not and carry information you would not otherwise reach.

That is a claim about direction. A survey cannot establish slope, because it can only show which ties the people who found jobs happened to have. For fifty years the finding hardened into a strategy anyway: weaker is better, therefore accumulate distant contacts.

In 2022 Rajkumar, Saint-Jacques, Bojinov, Brynjolfsson and Aral ran the experiment that settles it, randomizing the ties offered to more than 20 million people across two billion new connections and 600,000 job changes over five years. The result is [an inverted U](#). Weaker ties transmit more opportunity than strong ones up to a point, past which returns to weakness diminish. The strongest effect came from moderately weak ties.

The practical consequence is not a larger network. A contact too distant to say anything specific about you can forward a posting but cannot answer the question that decides an outcome, which is what you are actually like to work with. A moderately weak tie can, and that is somebody who worked with you and has not spoken to you in a year or more.

Whose memory of your work has decayed on the same curve as your own. Murre and Dros, replicating Ebbinghaus in 2015, reproduced [the same steep early loss](#) first described in 1885. A former colleague remembers that you were good. They do not remember what you did, which means their advocacy is a warm generality unless somebody gives them the particulars.

5. Family: the channel is not the budget

Stevens and Schaller followed families through a parental job loss and found the probability of a child repeating a grade rose by [0.8 percentage points, about 15 percent](#). Comparing the same child before and after showed no rise ahead of the job loss, and the effect concentrated in households where parents had a high school education or less.

Oreopoulos, Page and Stevens followed children of displaced fathers into adulthood and found sons whose fathers lost work when they were eleven to fourteen earned about [nine percent less](#) as adults.

The obvious explanation is income. Rege, Telle and Votruba tested it directly, using Norwegian register data covering entire plant closures, and found [the effect was largely not the income](#). It did not track the father's earnings loss, his time out of work, the mother's employment response, relocation, or marital dissolution. Their interpretation is that what reached the children was the distress itself.

That finding is from one country in one era, and the paternal and maternal asymmetry they report is their interpretation rather than a settled result. It should not be generalized into a claim about men and women. The central point stands on its own and is the one that matters here: **if the channel is not the budget, an emergency fund is not the countermeasure**. What reduces transmission is a shorter transition and a person who retains some sense of competence while it lasts.

6. What the four have in common

Read separately, these are four warnings. Read together, they identify one variable.

LENS	WHAT IS ACTUALLY DECISIVE
Finances	The erosion starts before the announcement; the bill is set by the market on arrival
Health	The duration of uncertainty, not the size of the income drop
Association	Whether somebody who saw you work can still describe it
Family	The parent's distress, which tracks duration rather than income

Every one of them is a function of how long the transition takes and how much control the person has inside it. And the length is not principally determined during the search. It is determined by what exists when the search begins.

Most of what makes a search long is reconstruction. A person sits down to account for eight years of work and finds the specifics are gone: what the budget was, how many sites, what the number moved from and to, who would confirm it. The first month goes on archaeology rather than applications, at exactly the moment concentration is scarcest and every week is expensive.

Someone with a record does not start there. They start at the part requiring judgment, which is which evidence answers this posting, what is missing, and how to say it.

7. Why the document is not the record

Two findings clarify the difference between a résumé and a record.

The first concerns what happens when someone reconstructs under pressure. Phillips and colleagues verified the publications listed on 180 academic CVs. Of the 141 claiming at least one publication, [56 percent listed something unverifiable or inaccurate](#) in a self-promoting direction. The asymmetry is the finding: 193 errors flattered the applicant against 27 that did not. This is a population whose claims are unusually checkable, in a field that runs on citation, and the drift still ran one way. Memory does not fail neutrally when there is a document to fill and nothing to fill it from.

The second concerns what a stated requirement actually is. Harvard Business School and the Burning Glass Institute tracked employers who publicly removed degree requirements and found the change in who was hired amounted to [fewer than 1 in 700 new hires](#), with only about 37 percent of firms altering behavior at all. The text of a posting and the filter being applied are separate objects maintained by different people.

Together these say something practical. A document is a claim, and claims drift toward the claimant when the underlying material is missing. A record is what a claim survives contact with.

8. What follows for program design

For institutions delivering career services, three implications follow.

Teach capture, not composition. A workshop that produces a document produces one artifact for one moment. A workshop that establishes a capture habit produces the input to every future document, including the ones the program will never see. The habit is short: what the work was, how big, what changed, and how you know.

Measure what you are funded on. The WIOA indicators are outcome measures, and the interval between service and measurement is at minimum two quarters. A program that counts documents is counting the one thing that is neither measured nor decisive. If a workshop is worth running, it is worth asking which of the six indicators it is expected to move, and by what mechanism.

Do not sell the health and family evidence as a warning. It is aimed at people before a transition, not during one. Presented to a cohort already out of work it is cruel and it is useless, because none of it is actionable retrospectively. Presented to people who are currently employed it is the strongest available argument for a habit that otherwise ranks below everything else on a Friday afternoon.

9. The habit

Writing down what you finished this quarter is dull. It competes with everything and wins against nothing.

The case for it does not rest on résumés. It rests on this: the damaging version of a career transition is the long, disorienting one; the length is substantially determined by what you can produce on demand; and what you can produce on demand is settled months or years earlier, on ordinary days when nothing is wrong and there is no reason to think about it.

That is five minutes at the end of a piece of work, against outcomes measured in years of earnings, months of uncertainty, and effects that reach the people you live with.

It is the cheapest intervention in this paper, and on the evidence assembled here it is not only a career habit.

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