



# Applying Behavioral Insights to Inform Job Search: Evaluating Effects of a Behaviorally Informed Intervention on Job Search Online in West Michigan

## SUMMARY

In 2017, the Chief Evaluation Office (CEO) funded contractor Mathematica and its partners, American Institutes for Research, the Urban Institute, the W.E. Upjohn Institute, and ideas42, to assist with CEO's Behavioral Interventions (BI) work, including developing rigorous impact evaluation design options for studying innovative program improvement strategies. In 2019, in partnership with the [Employment and Training Administration](#), the BI team began investigating behavioral barriers to successful online job search. The BI team partnered with West Michigan Works! (WMW), a local workforce agency, to conduct the study "Applying Behavioral Insights to Inform Job Search: Evaluating Effects of a Behaviorally Informed Intervention on Job Search Online in West Michigan" from August 7, 2021 to March 3, 2022. The randomized controlled trial aimed to answer:

- How might applying insights from behavioral science lead people to expand their job search?
- Does providing job seekers with salient information about job postings lead them to engage with a larger number of postings or wider range of industries?
- What were the key features of the context in which this intervention was implemented?
- How did website visitors interact with the new web page? What were their perceptions about benefits and drawbacks of the new design features?

Building on prior research that has demonstrated the potential for behavioral interventions to improve the rate at which job seekers find jobs, DOL partnered with Michigan to test how changes to their online job search portal might help job seekers broaden their job search, particularly early in the COVID-19 pandemic when unemployment rates spiked.

By the time the study launched, however, the local labor market was strong. Contrary to researchers' hypothesis, online job seekers clicked fewer job listings when they were provided with supplemental, behaviorally-informed information added to each listing, intended to show the transferability of skills and experience to different jobs and industries. This key finding indicates that the additional information provided narrowed job seekers' searches, perhaps due to increased job search efficiency (they found what they needed right away) or decreased job finding rates (for example, due to information overload). It suggests practitioners and researchers working to understand how to improve job search for workers should pay close attention to what information is provided, how it is framed, and how it might interact with behavioral factors.

Future research could iterate on the behavioral intervention tested and tease out the most effective approaches to facilitate job search for different people seeking to meet different goals in various economic contexts. Evidence on how job seekers use information they encounter online to decide which opportunities to pursue is important for the continuous



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improvement of Federal employment assistance resources such as the [CareerOneStop](#) and those managed by state and local workforce development agencies, as well as to help job seekers conduct job searches more efficiently and effectively.

This Department of Labor-funded study was a result of the learning agenda process. It contributes to the labor evidence-base to inform the use of [Behavioral Interventions](#) in Labor programs and policies and addresses Departmental strategic goals and priorities.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Informed by existing evidence, the study team hypothesized that providing a short list of relevant occupations alongside each job listing on a webpage would lead job seekers/website visitors to broaden their search by viewing listings they would have otherwise passed over based on the job title.

- In contrast to researchers' hypothesis, the study found that this behavioral intervention led website visitors to be 4 percentage points less likely to click on a job listing and to click on an average of 0.1 fewer listings.
- The intervention showed no meaningful impact on the number of industries a website visitor browsed in, nor did it affect their likelihood of making return visits to the site.
- Qualitative results from interviews with five website visitors suggest this small sample of West Michigan Works! customers found the new information helpful in searching efficiently and considering job descriptions they might have overlooked. They also reported using the new information to quickly focus their attention on what they believed to be the most promising openings. This suggests that job seekers may have used the new information to refine rather than expand their search.
- A small sample of four WMW staff felt that the research partnership complemented and supported their organizational culture of continuous improvement.
- This study demonstrates the potential of using web-based experiments to test behavioral interventions that could help job seekers, while the job market was recovering from unemployment spikes due to COVID-19. Further research could help distinguish between interventions that promote efficient search and those that narrow search without improving efficiency, in different labor markets and contexts.

[SEE FULL STUDY](#)

**TIMEFRAME:** 2017-2023

**PARTNER AGENCY:** Employment and Training Administration,  
Office of Workforce Investment

**SUBMITTED BY:** Mathematica

**SPONSOR:** Chief Evaluation Office

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# Behavioral Interventions in Labor Programs Evaluation

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