

How our attachment style affects our job search behaviour



In today's labour market in the Netherlands people experience more job security than ever before. It is however hard to get a permanent contract, and people have to apply more often during their career. For many people, applying for a new job is a difficult process. It is a dynamic and complex situation that requires exploring new environments, learning new skills, holding positive attitudes and inoculating oneself against disappointment when an application is rejected.

Research on job search behaviour shows that, besides situational variables, individual differences also might play a role in a successful job search. Personality constructs of the [Five-Factor model](#), such as openness and conscientiousness, have been examined in this context. Until now, attachment, a psychological construct that affects job search behaviour, has not been investigated as an individual characteristic. In my research I investigated the relationship between attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety, and four variables related to job search: intention, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and attitude. Respondents in this study were employees of a technical organisation in the Netherlands who lost their job after a partial plant closing during the economic crisis that started in 2008.

What does attachment or attachment style mean? John Bowlby (1969/1982) developed attachment theory. An infant attaches himself to a primary caregiver, normally the parents. In the theory, a distinction is made between a secure and an insecure attachment style. Bowlby suggests that regular interaction with this caregiver provides a child with a sense of security, whereby the child learns to explore the environment and to trust other people, in times of need. For the insecure attachment style, a distinction is usually made between avoidant and anxious attachment. Avoidantly attached people were rejected or dismissed by earlier attachment figures and learned not to trust other people. These individuals tend to distance themselves emotionally from others by suppressing their need for closeness and intimacy. Anxious attachment develops when earlier attachment figures provided care that was mixed or inconsistent. Anxiously attached people fear being rejected by others and have a strong desire for closeness and protection. Research seems to support that a secure adult attachment is associated with increased personal competence.

The idea behind my research was to explore whether insecurely attached people (both avoidant and anxious) would experience difficulties with their job search. The job search process can be seen as a new situation to be explored. It is known that finding a new job, especially in times of uncertainty and tight labour markets, evokes stress for many people. One can assume that people with an insecure attachment style experience stress, for instance, because of having less confidence in their own capacities to find a new job. They may also find it difficult to adopt a positive attitude to this process because applying for a job involves a lot of uncertainty.

The results I found in the research were mixed. They showed a relationship between attachment avoidance and different job search variables. But contrary to my expectations, for attachment anxiety this relationship was not present. I also investigated whether the job search variables mediated the relationship between attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety and the intention to apply for a new job. I supposed that, for instance, people who are avoidantly attached have less belief that they can successfully search for a job and therefore have less intention of applying. In these analyses I found similar results as I mentioned earlier, namely that mediating effects were found between attachment avoidance, two of the three job search variables (job search self-efficacy and job search attitude, but not job search self-esteem) and the intention to apply for a new job. However, these mediating effects for attachment anxiety were not found.

According to the literature, both avoidant and anxious people avoid and fear new situations. Therefore it was difficult to find an explanation for the different results for these two attachment styles. Both styles are seen as insecure, but in the job search process for each style distinctive underlying psychological processes seem to be playing out. It is possible that people with attachment avoidance stay clear of social situations more than anxiously attached people, and that they are less convinced about their own capacity to be successful in this process. Anxiously attached people possibly might distract themselves from a negative mood and avoid being isolated from other people by trying to find another job as soon as possible.

The results of this study revealed different implications for people involved in the job search process, for instance career counsellors and vocational psychologists. They can enhance their knowledge about attachment styles and how these styles might affect the job search process, especially those people with an avoidant attachment style. They may use this knowledge to accurately identify signals or problems in the job search and in their guidance of those insecurely attached applying for a new job. Also awareness of the attachment style of career counsellors and vocational psychologists themselves may contribute to create a safe relationship in which insecurely attached people may benefit by exploring new situations and dealing with the stress of a job search.



- This post draws on the author's paper [Attachment Avoidance and Attachment Anxiety as Individual Characteristics Affecting Job Search Behavior](#), with Abraham P. Buunk and Kène Henkens, *Journal of Career Development*, Volume: 46 issue: 5, page(s): 487-501 (2019).
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Monique Leenders is working as a teacher at HBO Drechtsteden in Dordrecht, the Netherlands at the University of Applied Sciences Psychology.