SENSE-MAKING OF EMPLOYMENT: 
ON WHETHER AND WHY PEOPLE READ EMPLOYMENT ADVERTISING

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SUMMARY

This paper suggests a process of sense-making of "employment" and identifies employment ads to be useful agents in this process. It is suggested that individuals read ads in surveillance of the employment market in addition to reading them to search for employment vacancies. Employment ads are suggested to be a forum for organizational self-presentation that offers current information about the employment exchange as it is viewed by employers. Two exploratory studies are presented to support the thesis. Study 1 is an inductive survey of people's reading of employment ads, showing that people read ads even if they are not looking for a job because they view ads as a source of insight about the employment environment. Study 2 reviews the content of employment ads, showing them to convey prevailing elements of the idea of employment, namely that employment is an exchange of employee skills and responsibilities for organizational intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Recognizing the individual need for sense-making of employment, and identifying employment ads as a source of information about employment, opens up a new area for research and practice on recruiting, organizational self-presentation, and sense-making.
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People are not born with the knowledge of what it means to be employed, what are the skills, abilities or behaviors required to be employed, or what rewards employment can offer. They have to somehow acquire this knowledge – that is, to develop a mental model of employment as an exchange. This acquired mental model of employment can then serve as a frame of reference for employment behavior and decisions, such as what education, training or job to pursue, what job offer to accept, or what career changes to make. The development of this mental model likely relies on experiences in childhood (Gottfredson, 1981; 2002). However, to maintain an accurate mental model requires continuous updates and revisions to accommodate changes and developments in the employment arena (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000). This paper identifies this process as "sense-making of employment" and posits employment advertising as one source of information for this sense-making process.

An updated understanding of employment requires information about skills or professions currently sought, or how they may be rewarded. Specific incentives to search for this information may be a need to decide on an employment route, to find a new job, to accept or reject a job offer from an employer, or to negotiate with an employer. People involved in hiring or managing others may also engage in active sense-making, in order to keep abreast of appropriate behaviors vis-à-vis their employees. Conceptions of employment that are formed at some point may be retained, (Rousseau, 1995), but given the rapidly changing modern employment environment, the sense-making process cannot end. A perception of stable employment would likely slow or tone down the intensity of the process, but such stability is increasingly rare (Barley & Kunda, 2004).

Sense-making requires surveillance of up-to-date sources of information (Weick, 1995); employment advertising is suggested in this paper to be one such source. Seeking to enrich rather than dispute the current assumption that employment ads are vehicles for recruiting employees, I suggest that employment ads are read not strictly and not primarily by people looking to find employment, but rather as part of a broader search for current information about employment. Ads are suggested to perform two functions in addition to posting vacancies: (1) provide individuals with information about current aspects of
employment; and (2) provide information about how employment is conceived by various employers, including information about alternative skills and responsibilities, alternative rewards, and alternative cultural environments. Ads are therefore suggested to present information about prevailing terms of the employment exchange (as well as being a vehicle for posting employment opportunities), and to be read as part of sense-making of employment (as well as a part of a search for employment opportunities). Specific ads are less the focus in the sense-making process; rather it relies on an integration of information from multiple ads about multiple conceptions of employment by multiple employers. This integration converges into an updated mental model of employment.

Below, I first review the individual reading of employment ads as evidence for the suggestion that ads are read as part of an effort toward sense-making of employment. I then review available research on employment advertising, with the aim of suggesting that ads are sources of organizational-level information about conceptions of employment by different employers. Two empirical studies then further refine these analyses. A survey of people's reading of employment ads shows that individuals report reading employment ads in a "surveillance" mode, motivated by the desire to keep their mental model of employment up to date. An inductive study of the content of employment ads from different parts of the world then analyzes the information about employment that ads convey. Differences between ads from different organizations and different parts of the world are adduced to show how ads can drive a sense-making understanding of employment.

**Individual Sense-making of Employment through Employment Ads**

Contrary to product ads, which can be found in or around almost every public space, people have discretion over whether they view employment ads, which typically appear in separate sections of the media. Employment ads are known to have very low yield ratios in recruiting employees (Arthur, 2001; Vecchio, 1995; Saks, 1994; Williams, Labig & Stone, 1993; Gannon, 1971; Ullman, 1966). So do people read employment ads? Are they read only by desperate people who have no other way of finding a job?

The idea of sense-making of employment advanced here suggests that reading employment ads is a useful venture not only when or because one is looking for a job. People looking for work may be more likely to read employment ads, but this is not necessarily because they view ads as notices about vacancies. Rather, it is because they consider
employment ads to be an important source of information about employment. Employment ads, along with other forums that present employment opportunities, such as the Internet, offer valuable information: What are the skills or abilities that employers are currently seeking, or the rewards that employment can offer? What type of work environments can one expect? **Sense-making of employment involves developing personal answers to these questions; the result of such sense-making is an updated mental model regarding employment in the current employment market.** Proposition 1 in this paper suggests that people read ads as part of an effort toward developing or refining their mental model of the employment arena. Proposition 2, below, will posit employment ads to be a public forum of information about employment as it is currently conceived by different employers.

**Proposition 1:** Individuals read employment advertising as a way of gathering information for their mental model of employment.

Proposition 1 -- that employment ads help people make sense of various aspects of employment and organizational culture -- can be viewed as an extension of the idea that product advertising helps people make sense of various aspects of products and consumption (Aaker, Batra & Meyers, 1992; Campbell, 1987; Schudson, 1984). Research on product marketing finds that advertising does not directly impact consumer purchases (Schudson, 1984), but may have an important role in the generation of consumer understanding and in guiding individual expenditures (Aaker et al., 1992). Campbell (1987: 18), for example, explains:

> Consumers do not automatically use surplus income to satisfy new wants. Indeed, only the modern consumer does this. The traditional consumer [is] more inclined either to save or to translate extra wealth into leisure.... Advertising teaches them otherwise.

Research on product advertising further argues that the aggregate of all product advertising generates an understanding of what, how and why people can consume, even though individual ads usually do not lead to specific purchasing actions (cf. Aaker, 1994; Marchand, 1985). To illustrate, ads for Levi jeans may not lead individuals to go out and buy a pair of Levi’s. But ads make known the different types of jeans that exist, and the different reasons that people may seek out jeans. Ads can, for example, make consumers see jeans as representations of youthfulness, charm, or comfort (Fiske, 1985). Thus, product advertisements appear to be vehicles for **sense-making of product consumption.** Littlejohn

Likewise, employment advertising can be viewed as a unique form of advertising that informs people about, or helps them make sense of, employment. Proposition 1 does not preclude the idea that individuals view employment ads as vehicles for learning about employment opportunities. Rather, it suggests that reading employment ads promotes an additional goal: learning about and making sense of the employment scene. What are the skills and abilities that organizations seek and reward? What are the rewards that employers and employment can offer? Employment advertising is suggested by Proposition 1 to inspire mental models of employment, just as product ads generate mental models of consumption (Campbell, 1987; Williamson, 1978). Much as product advertising helps consumers make sense of the goods available in the market, employment advertising helps current or future workers make sense of the employment arrangements available in the labor market.

Sense-making is not a one-time only activity, but an ongoing process. Childhood socialization, before individuals actually join the labor force, likely influences conceptions of employment (c.f. Gottfredson, 1981; 2002; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000). Experiences in a specific employment environment are also likely to shape people's understanding of employment (Wanous, 1992). However, these experiences do not offer an up-to-date or complete picture of current employment arrangements. The rapidly changing nature of modern employment requires continual updates, and employment ads are one forum that can inform this ongoing revision. The process is of course particularly essential for newcomers to employment, since they need to develop their mental models of employment almost from scratch. But the process is likely to be relevant for all individuals of working age, whether currently employed or not – for instance, people trying to decide if they are doing well in their
current job, if they could do better, or what to expect should they move to a new job or organization.

Employment socialization is also distinct from anticipatory socialization, which has been suggested as the process wherein people develop expectations regarding a specific job they are about to accept (Feldman, 1976; Louis, 1980; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Anticipatory socialization regards sense-making of a specific organizational culture. Sense-making of employment is a broader process that transcends the boundaries of a specific job or organization, to encompass an understanding of available employment opportunities and arrangements in different organizations or in society at large. The sense-making process depicted by Proposition 1 could, for example, generate a framework for comparison between alternative employment options. It could motivate people to pursue certain employment or career options rather than others, or to develop particular ideas about what they can expect from their job or their employer (as part of organizational socialization; see Allen, 2006; Louis, 1980, 1990; Feldman, 1976). Similar to other sense-making processes, sense-making of employment requires information seeking and meaning ascription (Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993), involving the interpretation and integration of various stimuli (Weick, 1995). In other words, to make sense of employment at large requires the collection, interpretation and integration of information about multiple employment arrangements. Proposition 2, presented below, will suggest that employment ads offer this type of information.

Various types of data would provide support for Proposition 1. First, the proposition would be supported if people can be shown to read ads not only when or because they are actively looking for a job, or despite anticipating that ads will not help them find a new job. Second, the proposition would be supported if people are shown to view reading ads as a way of refining their understanding of employment: perhaps enhancing their sense of the current labor market, or the skills or professions currently valued by the market; or testing their confidence in their own employment value – their sense of fit with the market. Third, given the increasing trends toward impermanence in employment, Proposition 1 would also be supported if people are more inclined to engage in sense-making of employment today than, say, 10 years ago. In a different vein, since sense-making requires information integration, Proposition 1 would be supported if the information presented by multiple employment ads can be shown to add up to prevailing conceptions of employment in different contexts. The
next section develops this claim regarding employment ads as a source of information about current conceptions of employment.

**Employment Advertising and Organizational Self-Presentation**

Available research on advertising has focused almost solely on consumer (product) ads, paying little or no attention to employment advertising. However, employment advertising has occupied organizational scholars, primarily in research on recruiting sources (Herman, 1994) and surveys report that up to 90% of organizations post employment ads (cf. Mason & Belt, 1986; Bureau of National Affairs, 1992; Inland Press Association, 2005). The assumption in organizational research is that ads are vehicles for recruiting employees to fill job openings. Yet organizationally posted employment ads present more than a listing of available vacancies; this is suggested by the elaborate text of many ads, which provides more information than a notice about an employment opportunity would require (Rafaeli and Oliver, 1998). Consider the following text taken from an ad posted by the Ernst & Young consulting firm, announcing an opening for an information technology consultant

> We empower the people who power the world. The power to move. The power to solve. The power to apply leading-edge technology and business expertise that keep top global Fortune 500 industries on target with aggressive goals and strategies. That's the power of a world leader – the power of Ernst & Young, the fastest growing professional services firm….There Isn't a Business We Can't Improve.

This text advertises aspects of the posting organization as an employer and an organization that far exceed the notice of a vacancy: that the organization is founded on power, that it is financially successful (one of the Fortune 500 group), that it is aggressive, fast-growing and professional, and that it is a services firm. A vacancy for a technology consultant could have been posted without this information. This ad makes available information about the way this employer views employment – in particular, information about the organizational culture that an employee is expected to embrace.

This and similar texts in other ads are not uncommon, and may be viewed as organizational marketing of its cultural identity, perhaps in the face of institutional pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). Other texts common in ads can be interpreted as displays of organizational compliance with the social order (Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1977). Satisfying legal demands is clearly one incentive for posting employment ads,
as evident in the U.S., for example, with text indicating compliance with equal employment opportunity requirements (e.g. "We are an equal opportunity employer" or “An EEO employer”). However, ads include far more than would be necessary to satisfy legal requirements, typically offering a rich set of information about the organization and its conceptions of employment. This is a critical foundation for the claim posited in Proposition 1 – namely, that individuals use employment ads to make sense of employment. Proposition 1 suggests that people view the ads they read – which generally are placed in groups; it is rare to find an employment ad in isolation – as a survey of alternative conceptions of employment. Proposition 2, below, suggests that, at the organizational level, ads provide pertinent information about employment at a given time. Since ads are clearly planned rather than spontaneous, Proposition 2 refers to ads as presenting organizational conceptions of employment, rather than actual employment:

**Proposition 2**: Employment advertising offers organization-level self-presentation of how employment is conceived by the posting employer.

As with Proposition 1 and job-seeking, Proposition 2 does not try to argue that ads do not serve to attract candidates for employment with an organization. However, it does make the case that beyond this traditional purpose, employment ads serve as a forum for organizational self-presentation (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989), with a particular focus on self-presentation of organizational conception of employment. As such, multiple ads can provide information about alternative conceptions of employment by different employers.

For example, the employer cited above, which presented itself in an employment ad as powerful, aggressive, growing and successful, suggests to readers that these organizational culture values can be integral to the employment experience. Alternately, an organization may present employment as involving nontraditional thinking and focusing on the future. For instance, ads by an Indianapolis manufacturer of electronic goods featured a work of modern art and the inscription “The future belongs to those who can go beyond the obvious.” Likewise, a series of ads by Intel Corporation featured headings like "Does your life offer enough variety?" and "Is variety really the spice of life?" followed by the challenge "Answer the Question." Extrapolating from these ads, readers might presume that variety and challenge can be features of current employment.
The organizational self-presentation in employment ads referred to in Proposition 2 is distinct from self-presentation of the organization as, for example, a producer of goods, as found in product advertising (Aaker, 1994; Aaker, Batra & Myers, 1992). Employment advertising may include elements related to the product, but would more likely focus on issues related to requirements from employees, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from employment, psychological climate and organizational culture (Rousseau, 1995; McFarlane-Shore & Tetrick, 1994; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Note that just as product ads do not necessarily describe the item being touted accurately and fully, employment ads may not accurately and fully represent the employment experience in the posting organization. But since ads are paid for and clearly associated with the organizations that post them, they can be viewed as organizational artifacts, similar to logos, brand names, uniforms or office design (Rafaeli & Pratt, 2005; Trice & Beyer, 1984; Gagliardi, 1992). The involvement of advertising agencies in posting employment ads, and the use of corporate logos, slogans, and colors in employment ads, further suggests ads to be related to the posting employer's image and identity (Elsbach & Glynn, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Rafaeli, 2000).

Several empirical observations could constitute support for Proposition 2. The proposition would be qualitatively supported if ads were shown to convey accepted components of the idea of employment. Most basically, ads should convey the idea that employment is an exchange between employers and employees (Greenberg, 1990; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982; Rousseau, 1995), identifying possible rewards to be provided by the former for the skills and abilities of the latter. Additional support would be if ads convey differences between professions and societies in elements of the employment exchange. Mental models of employment are unlikely to be idiosyncratic but rather are likely to be shared by communities, and so elements of these shared assumptions, and of cultural variations between societies, should be evident in employment ads. For example, Proposition 2 would predict a heavy emphasis on equal opportunity in employment ads in North America, but not in other countries where equal opportunity is not a major value. Further support for Proposition 2 would be ads that include information about the context and culture of employment and organizations but do not specify a particular job vacancy.

In sum, Proposition 2 -- that ads are instances of organizational self-presentation of their conception of employment – is a foundation for Proposition 1, that the reading of
employment ads facilitates individual sense-making of employment. The two propositions together lay the ground for a theory of the evolution of communal conceptions of employment. Individual participants in the job market, as they engage in sense-making toward continually refining their mental model of the idea of employment, turn to information about alternative employment arrangements. Such information is offered by organizational employment ads. Organizations therefore influence individual sense-making of the idea of employment through their self-presentation in employment ads. The two propositions suggest that the influence of employment ads follows the dramaturgical process described by Goffman (1959) and Brisset & Edgley (1990): The reality depicted in advertising may become a reality assumed by people who read advertising. Employment advertising becomes a pivotal connection not only between new hires and vacant employment slots, but also between individual sense-making and organizational self-presentation.

Two studies, as described next, offer initial support for the two propositions. Study 1 maintains an individual level of analysis, reporting on when and why people read employment ads. Study 2 reports on an ad-level of analysis, interpreting the information about employment disseminated by employment advertising.

**Study 1: Why do people read employment advertising?**

Study 1 is a survey of people's habits of reading employment advertising. The intent was to show that individuals read employment ads independent of whether or not they are looking for employment, because they turn to ads as a source of information for their mental model of employment.

### Context of Study 1

#### The Environment

**Israel** is a parliamentary democracy with a population of approximately 7 million people. It has a technologically advanced market economy with substantial government participation that depends on imports of crude oil and gas, grains, raw materials, and military equipment, but has an intensively developed industrial sector. Diamonds, high-technology and military equipment, and agricultural products (fruits and vegetables) are leading exports, and the internal service industry is well developed. Israel is dependent on economic and military aid provided by the U.S. but has an active and viable labor market and economy. The unemployment rate in Israel was 6.8 in 1995 and 8.4 in 2006.

#### The Sample
Data were collected twice, in both cases using a survey distributed to both students and the general public (people riding a commuter train). The 1995 sample comprised 298 people (average age 38, 65% male). The 2006 sample comprised 176 people, average age 32, 60% male). The goal of the surveys was to obtain a picture of people's habits in reading employment ads.

Study 1 – Methods

A brief survey was designed to test the claim that people read ads regardless of whether they are looking for a job, and to help ground the claim of Proposition 1 that ad reading is intended at sense-making of employment. The survey included open-ended and multiple choice questions about participants' reading of employment ads, as well as exposure to other sources of employment information.

The survey included the following questions: (1) Do you think that at the moment, there is a good supply of job offers? What are the current "hot" professions in the job market? On what did you base your answer? (2) Are you currently employed? If so, how did you find your current job? (open) (3) Do you intend to move to a new job in the next few months? (4) Regarding the following sources (newspaper employment advertising, placement firms, Internet employment advertising, and Internet organizational forums¹): (i) How frequently do you visit these sources? (never, rarely, occasionally, once a week, every day) (ii) Do you believe they can lead you to find a job? (no chance at all, low probability, moderate probability, high probability, very high probability) (5) If you read employment ads at all, why do you read them? (open) (6) What information can reading employment ads provide? (open) (7) Do you think employment ads give an accurate picture of an employer? (5 point scale from 'not at all' to 'very accurate')²

Study 1 – Findings

The surveys provide a window into people's reading of employment advertising. The two samples were surveyed 10 years apart; a global trend toward less permanence in employment suggests an increasing need for sense-making of employment in 2006 as compared to 1995. Proposition 1 would suggest that (1) in both surveys a significant percentage of people will report generally reading ads even if they are not looking for a new job, and (2) there will be more ad-reading in a mode of sense-making in 2006 compared to 1995. The survey data support these implications of Proposition 1. Below, first the
quantitative findings in the two surveys are briefly summarized. The qualitative data are then summarized as additional inductive grounding for Proposition 1, suggesting that employment ads are read as surveillance for sense-making of employment.

**People Read Employment Ads**

The quantitative responses indicate that people read employment ads even if they are not looking for a job, and even though they do not consider ads to be good sources for finding a job. Responses further support the idea that people view ads as sources of information about employment.

Most respondents reported that they do, at least occasionally, read employment ads. The median and mode of readership of ads was 'occasionally' both in 1995 and 2006. Responses regarding all other sources were consistently lower (with Internet ads and organizational web sites, the median was 'rarely' and the mode of visiting was 'never'). Moreover, in 2006, the pattern of reported ad-reading was the same for people both looking and not looking for a job. In 2006, 68% of individuals who explicitly stated they are not likely to move to a new job reported occasionally reading ads – essentially the same as those who said they were job-hunting (69%). Visits to Internet sites did not emerge in the 2006 data as replacing employment ads. Only 20% reported visiting Internet placement sites or organizational sites more than rarely. Thus, the Internet emerges in this survey as filling some of the functions of employment ads, but it does not replace the sense-making function described in Proposition 1.

Among the 1995 participants, those who were anticipating moving to a new job reported reading employment ads more frequently than those not looking for a job ($t_{(df=276,2)} = 6.67, p <.0001$). And individuals currently employed reported reading ads less frequently than those not employed ($t_{(df=276,2)} = 4.52, p <.001$). However, these differences did not occur in 2006 ($t_{(df=176,2)} = .272, p >.10$). Given the increasing temporariness of employment in 2006, the more active surveillance that we observed in 2006 over 1995, among both employed and unemployed participants, lends further support to Proposition 1.

Nonetheless, the perceived effectiveness of the different sources did not vary between 1995 and 2006, and in both surveys most respondents reported employment ads as having a low probability of leading to a job (69% in 1995 and 67% in 2006 assumed little or no chance of finding work through ads). Here as well, whether or not people said they were looking for a
new job did not connect to whether or not they saw employment ads as effective. The correlation between ads' perceived effectiveness and whether people read them was not significant in both surveys (in 1995 $r=0.135$, $p>.10$; in 2006 $r=.136$, $p>.10$). Thus, both surveys find that people read ads regardless of whether they view them to be useful tools for finding a job.

The open-ended question "On what did you base your answer" (which followed questions about whether the labor market is currently good and what are the current "hot" professions) also offered support for Proposition 1. Responses were coded 1 if only employment ads were cited, 2 if they were cited along with other sources and 3 if they were not cited at all. A striking 85% of the respondents cited employment advertising as one of the sources of information, and 72% described it as their only source. Thus, without probing, respondents identified employment ads as a key resource used to develop their understanding of the labor market.

The other qualitative questions help further ground Proposition 1 by identifying why people read employment ads. The inductive analysis of these responses followed the recommendations of Straus and Corbin (1990) that prevailing themes in the data be identified and analyzed and that responses be coded along these themes. The prevailing themes in both the 1995 and 2006 data were similar, and clearly suggested surveillance and sense-making as a primary motivation for reading ads.

**Reasons for Ad Reading**

Only 7% of respondents left the open-ended question "Why do you read employment ads?" blank, which suggests that people do not have a problem relating to the question. Even cryptic responses were consistent with the sense-making argument, as their typical tenor was "to know what's going on." Responses were typically more elaborate, and reflected four elements of sense-making of employment: (1) information gathering, (2) assessing personal value and person-employment fit, and (3) managerial learning for more effective hiring.

1. **Employment Ads as a Source of Information.** The most dominant theme in the qualitative data was the use of employment ads for surveillance of employment. This affirms the connection drawn earlier between employment ads and product ads (Weick, 1995; Marchand, 1985). Respondents identified ads as sources of information about employment, the professions and skills that are in demand and the rewards that can be obtained. As noted
earlier, this does not rule out the idea that people sometimes read ads as part of a goal-oriented "job-finding" activity. Rather, it adds a broader, non-specific motivation for reading ads. For example, a respondent who is employed and not looking for a job noted, "I read them to follow the demand for my profession so I have an opportunity to change jobs if I need to."

Additional responses to the question "why do you read employment ads" included:

- To know what the hot professions are, and who the employers are.
- To know what is going on in the business world. To see if there are interesting opportunities.
- To see what professions are in demand. What does the market need?
- I can see what opportunities are out there. What types of work there are.
- I want to understand what is happening in the labor market.
- It offers information about what firms are like or at least how they present themselves. Information about employment and study options.

Some responses went into even greater detail, referring to the requirements or rewards that employment can entail:

- [Ads give] information to understand the situation in the labor market. Up to date requirements from employees.
- What are the current job requirements? Qualities of people, types of knowledge sought, types of position offered, scope of employment.
- Supply and demand, opportunities for employment, information about firms, information about required skills and abilities for different jobs, education required, etc.

Thus, readers regard ads as a general source of information about the labor market -- the opportunities and prospects available as well as demands and expectations.

2. Sense-Making and Personal Assessment. A second theme that came out strongly in the data is that people use the information in ads to assess their employment choices and their own value within the current employment market. Two responses to "Why do you read employment ads" illustrate:

- I read ads to check the labor situation. What are the requirements? What are the offerings? I test if I am in the right direction. Am I in the right professional direction? Will there be demand? In what should I specialize?
They give a perspective about the labor market and about my academic studies. What are some potential directions I can take?

Similarly, responding to the question "What information do employment ads provide," a respondent noted:

Specific information for each person and what fits him. Also gives information for what is required of you for a job. Like as far as education. It gives you a sense of what is required in order to work in a particular area. Each person and what fits him.

Others described reading ads as a way to identify options or alternatives that may have been overlooked, or that may be useful in the future:

I want to learn … is there something interesting out there? Am I missing anything?

It helps me test my potential for maximizing my abilities more than currently. I can check up on myself and what I can learn.

I can see where I might turn. Maybe I'll change what I do?

I can see if my area is "hot" in the labor market. What are the options out there? I can check whether future directions in my career choices are worth while.

[Ads offer] information about the labor market. Supply or demand market? Can I negotiate about my salary? Can I consider looking outside, going to another employer? The knowledge that there are alternatives out there allows me to negotiate more forcefully inside.

I want to see if there are any special offerings. What interesting stuff is going on? I can compare to where I am. How am I doing?

Thus, surveillance of ads offers individuals a way to anchor their own choices and decisions, and serves as a source of insight into alternative choices and possible future paths. Such insights can enhance a person's confidence about his or her own value in the job market.

3. Managerial Sense-Making of Employment. Typically, those responding to the survey were interested in understanding their own fit within the labor market. But the sample of commuters also included managers responsible for hiring employees, and who, as such, also reported relying on ads to make sense of the employment market:
I need to hire people. So I want to learn about the labor market. What is in demand? What opportunities are out there? It's like a market survey of the labor force.

I need to keep in touch with the employment market. Ads give me information about what is in demand and who is hiring. This can help me in my own hiring.

These responses recall the use that labor economists make of employment ads as indices of unemployment (Abraham, 1987; Cohen, Dickens & Posen, 2001). In these studies, ads are considered as indicators of societal level phenomena such as unemployment or demand for particular labor types. In the current data individuals employ ads in a similar way. While most people review ads with a goal of maximizing what they themselves can get out of a job, managers seem to suggest a sense-making of employment that is motivated at promoting the good of a firm (and simultaneously, the success of the individual manager or employer). Managers appear to be saying, “I use employment ads as a source of information about what my competitors may be doing as far their notions of employment.” Here are additional examples:

I want to be updated on the labor market. I want to know what is going on in other firms, what type of people they recruit, what are their requirements, or what they tell them. Maybe we need to change our policies?

I read to get an impression of the type of requirements, the type of qualifications requested. So I know what we are up against when we try to hire.

In short, reading ads emerges in these surveys as a process of learning about employment, rather than, or in addition to, looking for employment. The formal role played by ads – the role of posting vacancies (as presumed by the organizational and human resource management literature) – does not constrain how people actually read them: as a way to find and understand information about prevailing features of employment, as suggested by Proposition 1.

It is important to note that sense-making of employment can have a strong emotional overtone, as evidenced by many of the responses to our survey questions – something that is not surprising, given that emotion has been shown to be a powerful component of sense-making in other realms (Weick, 1995; Louis, 1980). Emotion was apparent even in cryptic
responses to the survey, as where respondents reported reading ads "to support my feelings" or "to help my self-confidence." In some cases, the emotional effect was negative:

Ads have a depressing effect, in that there is no employment and when there is employment there is also a requirement for 5 years experience. No one gives you a chance.

But in most cases, the emotion evoked was positive:

[I read ads to] reinforce what I have done.

[Reading ads] produces a good feeling about my chances of finding a job in my area.

This positive, calming effect was eloquently summarized by one of our respondents:

It calms me to read them. It is like reading reviews of books or movies even if I haven't seen the movie. It's a way of being there, and keeping in touch with the world, even though I'm still working in the same place.

An important qualification of our findings is that the text of ads may not be a valid presentation of the employment reality in the posting organization. This issue was included only in the 2006 survey. Responses to the question "Do ads give an accurate picture of an employer" suggest that people do perceive ads as providing a more or less accurate picture, with the mean response 4.2 on a 5 point scale; of the 2006 respondents only 6% of respondents saw ads as having little to do with the employment reality in posting organizations. The correlation between the perceived accuracy of ads and the extent to which people report reading them was low and insignificant (r=.10, p>.10). Thus, frequent reading of ads is not correlated with a belief that ads present an accurate depiction of reality. Ads are read because they are viewed as providing useful information about employment in general, as evidenced by our qualitative data.

**Study 2: What can employment advertising tell about employment?**

Study 2 was designed to compliment Study 1, as an inductive analysis of the messages that employment ads can convey about the idea of employment. The results of Study 1, as reported above, suggest that people do engage in sense-making through the information provided by ads. Similar to Williamson’s (1978) inductive analysis of commercial advertisements, Study 2 intends to show how employment ads can inspire individual sense-
making of employment. In this vein, ads can be considered as instances of sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

The level of analysis of Study 2 is employment ads, the goal being to capture the mental model of employment that a reading and interpretation of ads can help construct. Given its qualitative approach, the results of Study 2 are intended to provide inductive grounding, rather than support, for Proposition 2.

Context of Study 2

The Environment

Employment advertising is a medium used in all countries in the Western world. Ads generally appear in dedicated sections of newspapers, typically in proximity to sections covering business and economic issues, except for ads for specific professions, which may appear in other sections (e.g., ads posting employment in medical professions may appear in newspaper sections dedicated to medicine). The number of ads at a given time is considered a key indicator of unemployment rates and degree of economic viability (Abraham, 1987; Cohen et al., 2001). Historically ads have appeared in hard-copy newspapers, but Internet job postings are increasingly common, both in designated sites (e.g., http://www.totaljobs.com/ or http://www.jobsavailableoverseas.com/) and in organizational web sites.

Ads are typically paid for by the posting organization, which may be a primary employer, a recruiting firm or a placement agency. They can be designed by anyone using ordinary word processing tools, but are often designed by marketing or public relations firms as a means of promoting a certain organizational image. Newspaper and Internet employment advertising can be general (e.g., New York Times, http://www.monster.com) or focused on particular professions (e.g., Accounting Today, http://www.yacht_crew.htm). The cost of employment advertising is significantly lower than of product advertising, though cost ranges widely, depending on the size of the ad (square inches), its design complexity (e.g., with or without color, logo or images), and the status and market reach of the newspaper.

Ads vary in textual elaborations, and in visual elements such as fonts, logos, decorations and borders. Ads are usually in the language of the community in which they appear, though English often makes appearances in ads around the world, whether for technical terms (e.g., 'Pascal' or 'Windows'), for the names of US-based firms (e.g., McDonald's), or for general PR ('A World Leader').

Samples and Time Frame

The following analysis deals only with hard-copy newspaper ads. Ads appearing in newspapers from 6 countries (Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, UK, and US) were collected in 1995 and 2006. In 2006, ads from India were also collected following the entry of India into the global employment market over the previous few years. A total of 900 ads were collected, 650 in 1995 and 250 in 2006.
Study 2 – Methods

Ads were cut and pasted on blank white cards, along with other text or information appearing in proximity (i.e., other ads on same page as). These materials were analyzed using pragmatic analysis for a separate project (Blum-Kulka, 1997; see also Rafaeli & Oliver, 1998), and interpreted inductively for the current project (Straus, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal was to identify the information about employment that employment ads can convey both as a general genre and in particular countries (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

Study 2 – Findings

Employment may be loosely defined as individuals performing tasks prescribed by an organization and its representatives (managers) with the expectation of being compensated for adequate performance. Specific features – what tasks are performed; how, where, when, or why they are performed; and what compensation is awarded for their performance – make up variations on this fundamental core of employment. Employment is presumed to be an exchange between "employee" and "employer" (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982; Greenberg, 1990) which is captured in a contract (Rousseau & McLean-Parks, 1993; Rousseau, 1995).

Ads can help advance sense-making of employment in two ways: by communicating that employment is an exchange between employees and employers, and by communicating prevailing terms of this exchange. These are the bits of "information" about employment that – as described in Study 1 – people obtain by reading employment ads.

The similar structure of ads world-wide helps sustain the idea of employment as an exchange and an implied contract (Rousseau, 1995). In all ads, regardless of geographical location, type of position or type of organization posting the ad, certain elements – requirements from employees and promised rewards by employers – are always described. Beyond this common structure based on the idea of exchange, however, a survey of ads worldwide reveals numerous differences in how they conceive of and describe employment. These differences between employers, professions and countries are integral to the idea of sense-making of employment because they help identify alternative features of employment. A qualitative analysis of ads reveals differences in the elements of the exchange maintained by different employers in different parts of the world. As briefly elaborated next, employment ads can help inform readers about 3 elements of employment: (a) the skills, abilities and
responsibilities employment can require; (b) the rewards employment can offer; and (c) the organizational or cultural context in which employment occurs.

(a) Skills, abilities and employee responsibilities in employment

Employee skills, abilities and responsibilities are one foundation of employment, defining what employees can bring to an employment relationship. Consider the following sample text from an employment ad:

TELLERS. Perform teller duties to assist in branches in the operations area. Minimum 6 months of cash handling and customer service orientation. Type 25 wpm preferred & 10 Key-by-touch. To apply call 1-800-336-7569.

This text is unique to this ad, but its focus on the skills and abilities required to perform a posted job is not unique. As an individual cue, this text may remain meaningless. But along with other texts, it can convey the important idea that employment relies on employee qualifications. For example:

Qualifications include at least two years of college training in computer science with two years experience in programming and hardware or four years experience in programming and hardware. Individual must be able to analyze problems, organize and prioritize responsibilities, and poses excellent interpersonal written and verbal communication skills. (From an ad for a data processing assistant)

The successful candidate will be a Registered Nurse with a minimum of three years of occupational health experience with a certificate in Audiology and WCB claims management experience. Strong communication skills are essential as is a detail orientation. Computer literacy with both Word and Excel is a must. (From an ad for an occupational health nurse)

As these examples illustrate, the specific types of skills needed vary between jobs. Multiple ads together convey that people need skills in order to gain employment – the skill to handle cash and customers, or the skill to handle data, analyze problems and prioritize responsibilities. The type of skills required for employment may change with time, country, region, or profession. For example, multiple ads in India in 2006 refer to language skills

Speak any one Gujarati, Marathi, English, Hindi? Come Interview.

Required urgently *Hindi / Marathi / English / Gujarati speakers.

Such ads would be confusing and unclear in other contexts; in India they can contribute to people's sense-making of current employment as frequently being in call-center work and requiring language skills (Friedman, 2005). Thus, ads for nurses define the skills
required by organizations employing nurses, ads for engineers identify the abilities required of engineers and ads for call center agents define the skills call center work requires. From ads that appear – whether for engineers, call center agents, nurses or any other profession – people can identify the **skills and qualities currently sought** in a specific employment market of profession or place.

Moreover, ads identify criteria for mastery of skills, and distinguish between skills that can be quantitatively mastered (e.g. "Type 25 wpm") and skills that rely on qualitative judgment (e.g., "excellent communication skills"). Ads also suggest the existence of various standards for mastering skills (e.g., "two years experience," "a Registered Nurse," "a certificate in Audiometry"). Out of context, skill specifications may appear meaningless, as in the following ad from India that refers to state examinations passed: "Required English & S.S., I.C.S.E. and State Level VIII, IX, X." Reading employment ads can thus help people identify the skills that could be required in an employment exchange, and how they might acquire or prove mastery of these skills.

That the text of employment ads communicates assumptions about employment is most evident in cross-cultural differences regarding demographics. Demographics are **not** legitimate requirements for employment in North America and Israel, for example. This is conveyed by elements of ads that can vary in text and style, but that convey prevailing conceptions that employment must be characterized by equal opportunity and lack of discrimination. This commitment is conveyed through text that is taken for granted in such ads, such as "E.O.E", "An Equal Opportunity Employer M/F/D/V [Male, Female, Disabled, Veteran]", "We are an Affirmative Action Employer," "We are an equal-opportunity employer and value diversity," or "We rely on diversity to fuel innovation." In Israel, employment sections of the newspaper contain separate ads placed by the newspapers that contain the exact language of the equal employment opportunity law.

In contrast, consider the following excerpts, all taken verbatim from the same Hong Kong ad:

Sales Manager (Export) Charming lady aged below 30 …
Sales Executive (local) Male, aged below 25 …
Shipping clerk (Sundries) Male, aged below 30
Requirements regarding applicants' age and sex are very common in Hong Kong ads, and constitute legitimate requirements for employment in specific jobs in Hong Kong.

In a similar vein, ads can convey accepted practices in employee screening. To illustrate, Hong Kong ads routinely ask applicants to send a photograph as part of their application, and ads in Israel frequently ask people to apply in handwriting (rather than through typed letters). Such requirements and requests would be shocking in the U.S., where they would violate normative and legal standards. But they are regular and legitimate in Israel and elsewhere in the world (Klimoski & Rafaeli, 1983).

These elements of information in ads suggest different assumptions about employment: Age and sex differentiation in employment is "discriminatory," and strongly prohibited, in the U.S., while it is a fundamental and legitimate aspect of employment in Hong Kong. Requests regarding personal appearance are prohibited in the U.S. while legitimate in Hong Kong. Using handwriting analysis in the screening process is common and legitimate in Israel, while it is unheard of in the U.S. and Hong Kong. People can learn these cultural assumptions, and can sustain their understanding, by reading employment ads.

Ads also convey that, in addition to skills and abilities, employment requires that employees fulfill certain responsibilities. The use of the word "responsible" and its derivatives is frequent in employment ads, though the specific responsibilities may vary even when the skills and abilities mentioned are similar. The responsibilities of a mechanical engineer, for example, were described in one ad as follows:

Responsibilities will include design and development of plastic and metal parts; thermal analysis; circuit board level coordination of mechanical packaging and manufacturing requirements; on site-support and evaluation during sample builds; 3D CAD modeling; tracking/coordination or par approvals; analysis and evaluation of mechanical and safety testing.

Again, this particular text is meaningless for building a mental model of employment, except in comparison to other ads. Witness, for instance, another ad for an engineer that specifies a completely different set of responsibilities:

The ideal candidate will maintain and enhance our exchange inventory management system. The individual will be responsible for providing effective reports and data analysis, indicating past and current travel trends, space inventory utilization and projections used in support of marketing efforts.
The two ads, one for a mechanical engineer and another for a "planning and development consultant", together convey a complex model of employment, one where similar skills and abilities can be required for different jobs and responsibilities. In this way advertising can help inform readers that employment may require acquisition of specific skills, but that skills are only one determinant of what individuals can end up doing.

(b) How is employment rewarded?

The employer's responsibility in an employment exchange is providing rewards for employment. That employment is rewarded may be fundamental in the modern era, something that everyone knows whether or not they read employment ads. But reading employment ads can help readers refine their understanding of the types of rewards employment can offer. For example, rewards can be extrinsic (e.g., "competitive salary plus 401K") or intrinsic (e.g., "excellent opportunity for growth, challenge, involvement and success;" "a career of growth and learning").

Mentions of rewards in ads can be brief and cryptic (e.g., "competitive salaries and an excellent benefits package"), but can also offer information on alternative aspects of rewards. For example:

- Competitive salary and benefits package including 4 weeks annual vacation.
- A competitive salary and a premier array of benefits, including child care subsidy plan, discounted rates on bank cards, medical, dental, group life insurance, profit sharing, tax shelters, holidays, paid vacations, retirement plans, and other benefits.

Consistent with prevailing theories of motivation, many ads convey that employment can be rewarded by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Hertzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959):

- Have Fun! Make Money!
- A very competitive salary, participation in our comprehensive benefits package and opportunities for growth and advancement.
- Excellent salaries and benefits, plus exceptional opportunity for professional growth with a global leader in consumer electronics technology.

A central tenet conveyed by ads is that employers compete among themselves with regards to rewarding employment – especially in ads for certain professions (engineers,
consultants, financial consultants), but not for others (teachers, nurses). This kind of competition appears to be common in North America far more than elsewhere (terms like "competitive salary" are rarely mentioned in ads in India, for instance). Sense-making reading of ads would therefore suggest employment to be competitive in certain occupations or locations, but not in others.

Ads also convey normative employer behavior regarding salary. Where salary is assumed to be a private matter between employers and employees – one that can be negotiated, for example, with a focus on values such as "merit-pay" (e.g., in United States or Australia) – ads contain indirect references to salary (e.g., "competitive salary plus benefits"), but rarely specify salaries explicitly. In the large set of ads reviewed from these countries, few cited explicit sums. In contrast, in the United Kingdom and India, salaries are explicitly mentioned in ads: e.g., “compensation 30,000 UK Pounds + Car" (UK) or "salary 7000-15000PM" (India). These differences suggest that under the prevailing model of employment, rewards may be pre-determined and public knowledge in one context, negotiable and a private matter in another. Explicit specifications of salaries are a form of public commitment. Vague references to "competitive salary" suggest room for employer slack and employee negotiation.

(c) Organizational-culture context of employment

Variations in the messages and emphases in ads also suggest that employment can occur in different organizational environments, and that this is significant above and beyond the direct rewards of an employment exchange. An ad declaring "We are a prominent downtown law firm," for example, highlights the issues of location ("downtown) and relative success ("prominent") of an employer. Aspects of workplace climate are made salient through statements such as "Our people and our team environment are the primary reasons for our success," or through pictures of happy, smiling individuals identified as employees. Ads can also suggest that extrinsic issues, such as occupational health and safety, are elements of employment; in the following example, this is a lead-in to organizational self-presentation of other features:

The Natural Floor Covering Center is a progressive company with a commitment to occupational health and safety. It is a market leader in natural floor coverings in the southern hemisphere.
Values of occupational safety and health were rare in all the employment ads surveyed, suggesting them to be peripheral elements of the idea of employment around the world. In contrast, almost universally ads suggest that employment may be concerned with advancement, awards and progress:

We're at the top of the charts. We've always known that our award-winning and trend-setting fax software products like WinFax PRO would drive us higher than the rest. Now we have the numbers to prove it. But we don't rest on our laurels. We're constantly advancing our technology and entering new markets. With innovative products we're poised to launch off the charts.

Similar to skills, organizational success is suggested by ads to be defined and quantifiable in different ways. The above ad connects success to new markets and innovation. This ad illustrates an important tenet of desirable employers – that they are active, innovative leaders, with certificates of success. The following is another example

We are THE LEADING PROVIDER OF EMBEDDED COMMUNICATIONS SOFTWARE. We are an Inc. 500 Company, developing Voice over IP software, in one of the hottest industries today. Telogy Networks is leading the way with embedded software solutions enabling voice. Fax. Data integration. [Emphasis and grammar in original.]

Success and innovation is similarly conveyed in an ad placed by General Electric (GE) which proclaims "The innovative spark flashes daily at GE":

Thomas Edison's innovative spark led to the creation of General Electric more than 100 years ago. The same spark is alive and thriving today. The results are astounding. GE holds more patents than any other U.S. company and is a global leader in each of its twelve businesses.

As these examples illustrate, ads also convey that employment is connected to the process (technology) and product (outcome) that define an organization. The particular job posted in the above GE ad (an accountant) most likely will not have anything to do with patents and GE global leadership. However, these attributes of GE as an employer are conveyed in the ad because the organization considers these accomplishments to be attributes of a desirable employer. To readers this information can suggest that employment in such accomplished organizations is desirable.

Employers may be attractive because they are successful, but also because they offer employment that is pleasant or “fun.” Ads may make employment seem like summer camp, like one that asks: "Could you endure sunshine and golf everyday? That's what it's like when
you work for Intel." The focus on a pleasant environment may paint otherwise banal employment in highly attractive colors. Consider the following ad for grocery store clerks:

> All your life you've been surrounded by terrific people. Kroger continues the tradition. The Kroger Co. is the perfect place to work if you want to join a family of conscientious, dedicated individuals. For over 100 years, we've prided ourselves on excellent customer service, delivered by friendly cashiers and clerks. Though food service is our industry, people are our business and we reward them with respect, openness and honesty. If you need to fill your days with a full or part time job, your pockets with some extra cash, or your heart with a new sense of community, consider Kroger.

A similar message about employment being fun appears in the following ads for wait staff:

> "Tastiest Opportunities West of Brooklyn". Noah's Bagels is bringing our taste of old New York to Santa Monica and Brentwood. We're fun-loving, hard working people who make a difference in the community we serve. And we're looking for experienced people (deli, cafe...) for our new stores. .... Be proud of where you work, just say Noah's.

> Be part of the greatest team around – join the Olive Garden! Our Hospitaliano service style has made us the #1 Italian dinner house and a great place to work. The atmosphere is fun, casual and friendly … for our guests and for YOU. (Emphasis in original.)

Cynics may argue that this text merely seeks to make a good impression on potential job applicants. Even if an ad suggests "fun," individuals are unlikely to assume that people hired for the specific job posted will play all day. People applying for a job at Intel, for example, will not likely assume that they will spend all their work time playing golf. Nonetheless, such texts convey that employment is not only about skills, responsibilities and financial compensation and benefits, but can incorporate elements like fun, friendliness, and pride. Even if the language in an ad is trite or clichéd, the choice of this language communicates potential elements of employment – an organization's family spirit, concern for the feelings and attitudes of employees. These elements are lauded in other contexts where employment is described, such as in surveys of the "100 Best Places to Work For," and stand in contrast (or in addition) to competition, drive, and advancement.

Two additional grounds for Proposition 2 are offered by a subset of the large sample of ads surveyed in Study 2: these are ads that did not include a notice of a specific job vacancy, but did include information pertinent to sense-making of employment. First is a set of ads that described the employment experience offered by a particular employer, along with
the qualities sought in potential employees, but without any details about a specific job.

Following is the complete text of one such ad:

You were always different. Something is happening out there. The most rapid creation of wealth in the world is being generated by software, by young, intelligent people without regard for conventions or corporate ladders. You can make a difference here. You can change the world here. If you're looking for an elite experience, this is it. Smarter. At Plumtree we don't care if you majored in physics or computer science or math – or plant history for that matter. We just want intelligent people with a passion for what they're doing. Driven. We'll give you all the things you need to do well: The highest paying job out there, ownership of a compelling project, a group of people you can call your friend, and a learning experience that will keep you right on the edge of high technology—all good to have, no matter where you end up in life. Highly individualistic. You will send out lots of resumes. Send one to us at ….

A Plumtree Software kind of person. (This is the complete ad.)

This ad promises an exchange of education ("majored in …") and personal qualities ("intelligent people with a passion for what they are doing") for both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (high pay, a compelling project, work peers who are friends). Consistent with Proposition 2, this ad lays out a conception of employment that is highly relevant for sense-making, despite the fact that it does not mention a particular job.

The second group of ads that suggest a sense-making role without offering specific job postings are those for tools for finding employment (e.g., through the Internet) or for evaluating one's value in the employment market. For example, in Israel in 2006, regular employment ads were joined by half-page ads for www.mit.co.il, which is identified as "A Manpower Company." The ad urges readers to access this web site:

Only at www.mit.co.il will you receive constant updates to your mail of all the positions that fit your profile. Want to follow the handling of your CV? Go to the site and receive updates in real time about the status of your candidacy for every position. Appropriate employment offers flow to you. Want to keep up to date? Go to the site and receive constant updates of all the positions that fit your personal and professional profile. Want to know how much you are really worth? Go to the site and receive an evaluation based on your personal information. (This is the complete text of the ad.)

This ad does not include a posting of any specific employment opportunity. But it does inform readers of where they can find such information. In addition it suggests explicitly that people can evaluate "how much they are worth in the employment market," suggesting that there is room for personal evaluation as part of sense-making of employment.
Thus, the qualitative analysis in Study 2 has shown that, consistent with Proposition 2, employment ads provide ample information about alternative employment arrangements, and that this information is consistent with the societal premise of employment as an exchange – individual investments (skills and responsibilities) are exchanged for organizational rewards (intrinsic and extrinsic), in the context of larger organizational culture, structure and process.

**Summary**

Study 1 provides evidence that people read employment ads in a search for information about employment. As expected, and in support of Proposition 1, respondents reported reading ads not only when or because they were actively looking for a job, and despite their awareness of the low likelihood that ads would lead them to a job. Also consistent with Proposition 1, respondents connected their reading of ads to understanding and keeping up-to-date on the labor market, and the professions, skills or abilities valued by it. People viewed ads as a source of information about their personal value in the current market. And the tendency to engage in sense-making of employment by reading ads increased in 2006 as compared to 1995, which would be predicted by the trend toward less permanence in employment in 2006.

Study 2 offers evidence about the types of information about employment that ads offer. As Proposition 2 would suggest, employment ads convey accepted elements of the idea of employment. They present the idea of employment as an exchange, and identify the elements of this exchange – skills, abilities and responsibilities of individuals in return for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards provided by organizations. And ads convey the important issue of organizational context and culture with regard to employment. Also supportive of Proposition 2, elements of the employment exchange taken for granted in different cultures are evident in employment ads. Studies 1 and 2 cannot fully support Propositions 1 and 2, since they rely primarily on qualitative data and are therefore inductive rather than deductive studies. Nonetheless, both offer empirical grounding for the two propositions, and for the idea that people read ads as part of their sense-making of employment.

**Discussion**

This paper suggests a process of sense-making of employment in which individuals develop an understanding of the currently prevailing employment exchange. People must
acquire and update their knowledge of the current employment market to sustain their successful participation in this market. The process involves surveillance of information by reviewing alternative conceptions of employment in employment ads. Sense-making of employment is focused on employment per se, and is therefore distinct from organizational sense-making which involves learning about a specific employer (cf. Allen, 2006; Louis, 1980, 1990). Employers (organizations) are suggested to contribute to individual sense-making of employment through the self-presentation of their employment concept in employment ads. Alternative employment options within a given society are conveyed through the broad body of ads that individuals read in their surveillance effort.

The idea that people read ads in a surveillance (rather than or in addition to job-seeking) mode paints a picture of employment advertising as a medium that helps disseminate messages about employment, and helps inform people about prevailing conceptions of employment, perhaps more effectively than it accomplishes its formal purpose of attracting new employees. Ads, known to be ineffective recruiting vehicles (Arthur, 2001; Herman, 1994), are suggested here to be agents that help structure the societal abstraction of employment into its separate elements (individual skills and responsibilities, organizational rewards and cultural context) (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). This custom, now routine, whereby organizations post ads and members of the labor market read them, therefore helps disseminate shared understandings about employment elements and arrangements (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002).

The sense-making process is not limited to people looking for a job. The audience of ads is therefore not only job seekers but also people currently employed and other constituents, such as suppliers or competitors. An empirical question, to be unraveled in future research, regards variables that may predict whether, when and why people are more or less committed to this sense-making process. Variables such as career orientation or job security, for example, may influence the extent to which people engage in surveillance through reading ads. Older people or people who consider their work to be a "job" rather than a "career" may also be less inclined to engage in employment sense-making (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin and Schwartz, 1997).

Further research is also needed regarding additional sources of information for sense-making of employment. Sense-making – in the employment arena as in other realms – is not
fully under the control of any one agent, but relies on cues gleaned from multiple sources. Identifying these sources is an important research goal, as is untangling how individuals integrate or weigh information from multiple sources. Likewise, how do individuals integrate contradictory messages about employment, such as competition and friendliness or leadership and subordination? Verbal protocol analyses of people reading employment ads, as described by Barber and Roehling (1993), for example, could be useful venues for future research, perhaps with a focus on cross-cultural differences in the integration process.

The sense-making process depicted here begins to unpack the evolution of socially constructed shared assumptions about employment which appears to involve multiple levels of analysis. For example, how did the idea that employment should be "competitive" and that employers should be "global" develop? No one person or organization can be held accountable for this idea. Rather, it likely developed through mimicking and one-upmanship among employers who depicted their competitiveness and global expansion as key qualities (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). The resulting sense-making motivated people to behave in what they perceived to be "competitive" and "global" ways, which in turn helped drive organizations toward competitiveness and globalization. In this recursive process, individuals engaging in sense-making (Proposition 1) and organizations engaging in self presentation (Proposition 2) jointly produce shared societal realities.

Other as-yet unresolved questions concern the reasoning behind decisions made by organizations that post employment ads. That ads facilitate individual sense-making of employment does not explain why organizations invest in the costly medium of employment advertising (Rafaeli, Simons and Hadomi, 2005). Mimicking, a quest for legitimacy and other institutional forces may offer better explanations (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Rao, 2002; Suchman, 1995). But given that ads exist, unique or elaborate ads can enhance an organization's influence over the sense-making of employment (Rao, 2002). Similar to product advertising, which helps educate the public about behaviors related to specific products (Littlejohn, 1983), employment ads produce shared understandings of employment. Organizational investment in elaborate advertising may therefore be justified by the increased attention to the organization, which may help recruit job applicants but might also increase the influence of organizational conceptions of employment on societally shared assumptions about employment. Building on Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson (1992:373),
employment ads may be media images that help shape a socially constructed reality of employment (see also Goffman, 1974).

The inductive insights provided by Study 2 show a universal similarity in many elements of ads, but also some differences that are argued to represent unique cultural conceptions of employment. These insights suggest various additional directions for future research. For example, what differences between professions, organizations and societies manifest in employment ads? Are there differences that do not manifest, and if so, why? Can the reality of employment evident in ads be connected to empirically observed differences between cultures, such as the differences in individualism-collectivism and power distance described by Hofstede (1991)?

At the organizational level this analysis raises questions regarding the tension between the self-presentation and impression management motive in ads and their accuracy in describing the employment reality in an organization. Study 1 suggests that people more or less consider descriptions of employment in employment ads to be accurate. But do organizations indeed paint an accurate picture in their employment ads? Are people able to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate descriptions? What does this mean for the set of expectations that people develop as a result of their sense-making through ads? What is the influence of accurate versus inaccurate pictures? The current data cannot begin to address these questions, but do suggest them to be exciting venues for future research.

In sum, the focus of this analysis is on how people come to learn what work and employment comprise, an essential lesson in an era when psychological contracts prevail over formal contracts (Rousseau, 1995). Labor economists have relied on advertising as a source of information about the economy in general and specific labor demands in particular (Abraham, 1987). Zhizhong (2004) shows ads to be a tool for understanding current employment requirements. Psychologists and organizational theorists are encouraged here to consider the process of sense-making of employment and how it may unfold, and to consider employment advertising as a source of cues about employment standards and assumptions. As long as the criterion of new hires is used, employment ads may continue to appear as ineffective sources. But as long as organizations around the world continue in the practice of posting ads, ads should be examined as factors that educate members of the workforce.
Employment ads -- posited here as a form of organizational "self-presentation," appear here to be a form of "organizational talk" that follows Goffman's (1981) analysis of "Forms of Talk:" they reach various members of the environment, including but not limited to their intended audience of individuals seeking employment. Like other forms of communication, ads deliver an immediate message (about a vacancy) but also have other forms of influence. In a way, employment ads appear to be organizational contributions to helping educate members of society about employment. Organizational investments in employment advertising may not be consciously motivated toward sense-making of employment, but may make more sense if this contribution is taken into consideration.
REFERENCES


1 Questions about the internet were included only in the 2006 survey.

2 This question was included only in the 2006 survey.