CHAPTER 4

Procrastination in outplacement situations

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Abstract

In this study we investigated the relationship between several personality aspects and procrastination in an outplacement situation when people have to apply for a job. A total of 134 employees from different organizations, who had lost their job because of closing the company or reorganization, filled out a questionnaire. The analyses showed that procrastination was more likely among those employees with an external locus of control and who had low levels of achievement motivation. After a four-month outplacement period, however, employees high on procrastination were not less successful in finding a job compared to those who procrastinated less. It is possible that other aspects play a role, for example, the specifics of the labour market in particular industries.

Introduction

The economic crisis has brought greater job insecurity, meaning that it is currently more common for employees to lose their job than in normal times. When this occurs, outplacement is often offered to help people to find new work. In these trajectories, professionals support employees in the development of job search skills to avoid long-term unemployment. For many employees, however, applying for a new job is a difficult process. A problem that often becomes apparent during the outplacement process occurs where candidates delay or fail to comply with agreements and do not take the actions required to find another job, despite the fact that they have sufficient confidence in their own competencies at work. Research on this topic is timely and important, because employees are increasingly either forced to apply, or voluntarily apply, for jobs several times during the course of their career.

There has been a marked contraction of the economy in Europe (including in the Netherlands and Belgium) since the 1990s. Restructuring, mergers, takeovers, downsizing, and business closures today dominate the economic news (De Witte, Van Hoof, & Vos, 2007). Globalization has produced an intensification of work, more reorganizations, and increasing levels of job insecurity (Houtman & Van den Bossche, 2010). In 2009 and 2010 in the Netherlands 105.000 and 122.000 people respectively were faced with forced lay offs. A total of 465.000 people were unemployed at the end of 2011 (CBS,
and at the end of 2012 this figure was 507,000 (CBS, 2013a). In the first quarter of 2013 the number of unemployed people increased by a monthly average of 24,000 (CBS, 2013b). Information from the Social and Cultural Planning Office (Vlasblom, Josten, & De Voogd-Hamelink, 2013) reveals that there has also been a shift in internal labour mobility. Within organizations, employees change jobs more frequently than they used to. In comparison with the period 1992-1994 this mobility nearly doubled between 2008 and 2010 to 18%. Moreover, it appears that in 2008 approximately about 17% of workers were in temporary employment, and consequently, these employees are likely to have to apply for a job more often.

Relatively little attention has been paid in the scientific literature on procrastination in adults and even less to postponement in relation to applying for a job. Much of the research on procrastination focuses on students, because it is assumed that with age people tend to procrastinate less (Steel, 2007; Van Eerde, 2003). Extension of the research on procrastination to other domains, such as outplacement, can broaden our knowledge and understanding of this behaviour and can help career counsellors to develop more personalized methods of intervention.

Procrastination has long been a recognised problem but its prevalence seems to be on the rise in Western societies (Steel, 2007). According to Harriott and Ferrari (1996), 20% of adults engage in this behaviour when carrying out daily tasks such as paying bills, for example. For students the percentage ranges from 70 to 95%. Ferrari, Johnson, and McCown (1995) assume that this difference is related to different forms of procrastination, wherein the behaviour in students is an example of situation-specific procrastinating of tasks (namely delaying study tasks) and the behaviour in later life seems to be a rather chronic form of procrastination, related to one’s personality. This does not preclude the fact that in specific situations a similar form of procrastination, analogous to that seen in students occurs also in adults.

The English word ‘procrastination’ is derived from the Latin procastinare which literally translated means ‘putting off until tomorrow’. It is the tendency to postpone actions that are necessary to achieve a certain goal (Lay, 1986). Procrastination is the behaviour of postponing according to Burka and Yuen (1983). Every individual sometimes procrastinates, but what makes the behaviour a problem is the extent to which one perceives it as cumbersome/
troublesome for oneself. The effects can affect both the person and his or her environment or circumstances, contributing to, for example, the loss of a job or a divorce. Procrastination can be beneficial in the short term, but in the long term it is detrimental (Steel, 2007; Van Eerde, 2003) and can be harmful to the well-being and health of the individual (Wohl, Pychyl, & Bennet, 2010).

There are different explanations of procrastination: people who exhibit procrastination are often less likely to undertake unpleasant or difficult tasks than those who do not exhibit the behaviour, while these tasks are nevertheless necessary for achieving a particular goal (Lay, 1986). Procrastination can reflect a fear of failure or a fear of success, or can even derive from the need for rebellion (Burka & Yuen, 1983). Moreover, it is irrational because people know that the behaviour is not to their advantage (Steel, 2007).

Procrastination is seen as an inability to self-regulate (Baumeister & Heatherthon, 1996). Self-regulation means: 1) setting goals, 2) monitoring one’s own behaviour in relation to these goals, and 3) changing one’s attitude and environment to be able to achieve these goals (Carver & Scheier, 2000). If people are not able to coordinate or to perform these activities, it is assumed that self-regulation fails (Renn, Allen, Fedor, & Davis, 2005). People who display procrastination seem to have more trouble managing these different components than those who do not.

The aim of this study is to examine what individual difference variables are related to procrastination in adults in an outplacement situation. We consider in the first place the role of a personal characteristic (locus of control), as well as self-evaluation variables (professional self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy), and use two variables that represent motivation (achievement motivation and positive fear of failure) and their relationship with procrastination. Next, we examine the relationship between procrastination and finding a job in the context of outplacement.

**Literature review**

In research on the relationship between personality and job satisfaction, Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997) adopted a higher order construct, which they referred to as ‘core-self-evaluations’, and delineates a broad personality characteristic consisting of four more specific features of self-esteem, neuroticism, locus of control, and self-efficacy in general. This structure has
been the starting point for the different variables in our research. In addition to locus of control we examined more task-specific forms of self-efficacy, namely professional self-efficacy and confidence in one’s own skills when it comes to applying for a job (job search self-efficacy).

**Locus of control**
Research on the role of different personal characteristics in relation to procrastination until now has largely focused on dimensions of the Big Five. Relatively little attention has been paid in the literature to other characteristics such as locus of control (LOC). **Locus of control** is the extent to which people feel that they have control over their own destiny (Ng, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006). Rotter (1966) made a distinction between people with an external LOC and people with an internal LOC. Those with an internal LOC believe they are the agents of their own destinies and can thus influence their own futures. They often perceive a strong relationship between their actions and the consequences of those actions (Rotter, 1996), and attribute personal successes to their own efforts. When people with an internal LOC fail, they attribute that failure to insufficient effort on their own part (Miner, 2002). On the other hand, people with an external LOC believe that they will not be able to control their fate. Usually they attribute personal success to luck or chance and failure to other (external) factors (Grimes, Millea, & Woodruff, 2004; Miner, 2002). Rothblum, Solomon, and Murakami (1986) found in their research that students with an external locus of control show more procrastination than those with an internal locus of control. This means that people with external LOC make less effort and procrastinate more often, because they experience less personal control (Lowman, 1993). Our first hypothesis is based on this.

**Hypothesis 1:** Employees with an external locus of control engage in more procrastination than employees with an internal locus of control.

**Professional self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy**
**General self-efficacy** refers to the confidence that someone has in themselves to finish tasks that have to be accomplished, to maintain their behaviour, and to be able to improve the quality of their performance to achieve a goal (Bandura, 1977; Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). It is known that there is a relationship between self-efficacy and procrastination (Steel, 2010). Professional self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy are more task-specific forms of self-efficacy and have a narrower focus (Caska, 1998). **Professional self-efficacy** refers to the extent to which someone has confidence in his or her
own qualities. It is assumed that procrastination occurs less often in relation to tasks that someone knows that he or she has mastered (Lay & Brokenshire, 1997; Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau, & Blunt, 2000; Senécal & Guay, 2000; Steel, 2010; Van Eerde, 2000). Watson (2001) believes that a possible age-related change occurs in perceptions of averseness to tasks: as one gets older one builds up a larger repertoire of (work)experiences from the past. It can be assumed that employees during their working lives have built up experience in their own competencies at work and have sufficient confidence in these competencies. This leads to our next hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Professional self-efficacy has a negative relationship with procrastination. As employees experience more professional self-efficacy, the less they procrastinate.

**Job search self-efficacy** is the belief that one can successfully perform specific job search behaviour and consequently know how to acquire (new) work (Saks & Ashforth, 1999). People who have less confidence in themselves might experience applying for a job as demanding or threatening, causing behavioural problems such as procrastination (Cole, 2006). Specific research on the relationship between job search self-efficacy and procrastination is rare. There are, however, several studies that have been conducted on the relationship between a person’s job search self-efficacy and whether or not (s)he finds a job (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Krantowitz, 2001; Zikic & Saks, 2009). People with more confidence in their own job search skills found a job more frequently. In research on job search intentions and job search behaviour, Lay and Brokenshire (1997) found that unemployed people who had lower estimations of their job search competences procrastinated over a period of two weeks more than those who felt themselves more competent. Furthermore, the first group had less intention to start job search activities. This results in the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Employees with more job search self-efficacy will procrastinate less than those with less job search self-efficacy.

**Achievement motivation and positive fear of failure**

Motivation plays an important role in procrastination (Van Eerde, 2000; 2003). It can be viewed as the driving force behind the actions of individuals (Rabideau, 2005). **Achievement motivation** is the extent to which an individual is focused on achieving results (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953) and has the will to perform well (Hermans, 1970). People with high achievement motivation
usually set higher standards for themselves (McClelland et al., 1953) and seem to enjoy work more from self-interest than people with lower achievement motivation (Steel, 2007). In a meta-analysis Steel (2007) found an effect of $r = -.35$ between achievement motivation and procrastination. Senécal and Guay (2000) found in research with students that procrastination mediated the relationship between self-determined job search behaviour (= the extent to which someone is motivated from the inside to search for a job) and feelings of hopelessness. Motivation had a positive relationship with procrastination and more procrastination led over a period of six months to more feelings of hopelessness. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**Hypothesis 3a:** Achievement motivation has a negative relationship with procrastination. The more people focus on achieving successes, the less they procrastinate.

**Positive fear of failure** can become active in situations that are relatively unstructured (i.e., situations that involve a lack of oversight, or are complex, new, and unclear) and which have in some respect a significant character for the person. In such situations a positive fear of failure might bring a person to an optimal stress condition wherein (s)he will function better than under normal circumstances (Hermans, 1970). Employees in an outplacement situation have to complete many actions in an unknown and unstructured process, because it is not always clear which requirements have to be met in order to secure work. Such a situation may lead to feelings of anxiety, which may cause people to prepare better for a difficult task or situation they fear. On this basis, one may expect that people with a positive fear of failure should be less likely to postpone their activities. Therefore, we test the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Positive fear of failure has a negative relationship with procrastination.

**Procrastination and finding a job**

Kanfer et al. (2001) define job search behaviour as a dynamic and goal-directed process that begins with the identification of a goal. On the one hand, looking for a job is a long-lasting and uncertain process because it is not always clear which requirements have to be met or what the outcome will be. On the other hand, the process is simple, in the sense that the purpose is clear and concrete: finding a new job (Knaus, Klarreich, Grieger, & Knaus, 2010). In order to achieve this, a certain degree of self-regulation is necessary. Self-regulation strategies may involve making particular effort, and developing persistence and
emotional control in the face of disappointments and rejections encountered during the job search process. A candidate often has to consider alternative strategies when it becomes clear that the activities they have engaged in are not leading to the desired result (Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009). To find another job successfully, people generally have to learn different (new) skills. For example, it is expected that people will present themselves well in job interviews, which involves qualities that not everyone possesses to an equal extent. This may explain why procrastination becomes visible in outplacement situations.

There exist few studies on the relationship between procrastination and finding another job. However, it is known that people who engage in procrastination are more often unemployed than those who do not procrastinate (Steel, 2011). Wanberg, Zhu, and Van Hooft (2010) investigated the dynamics of the job searches of unemployed individuals. They examined action-state orientation as an index of self-regulation. Action-state orientation indicates the ability to initiate actions and set priorities for tasks, and in effect is the opposite of procrastination. When action-state orientation was more present in job seekers these individuals were more actively looking for work over the study period of three weeks. More active job search increases the likelihood of finding suitable job opportunities or attracting employers and therefore enhances the chance of finding another job.

The specific relationship between locus of control, self-evaluation and motivation variables, procrastination, and finding a job, however, is unclear. On the one hand these variables may affect finding a job, in the sense that people who have more of these characteristics will be more successful than people who possess fewer of these characteristics. Those with more of these characteristics might, for example, possess the required self-esteem to move successfully through the job search process. On the other hand, it is possible that someone who has less confidence in his/her own job search skills might procrastinate and consequently needs more time to find another job. Therefore, procrastination would mediate the relationship between the different variables studied and finding a job (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This might involve, for example, a candidate spending less time searching for suitable vacancies and/or writing a cover letter just before the expiry of the deadline that might as a result be of lesser quality. These various relationships are shown in Figure 1.
Figure 1  The relationship between the various variables and job status and the mediating role of procrastination between these variables and job status

To investigate the mediating role of procrastination the different variables should be associated with each other. There must be a relationship between procrastination and finding a job, a relationship between the different variables and procrastination, and between these variables and finding a job (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Therefore, our final hypotheses are as follows.

Hypothesis 4a: Employees who exhibit more procrastination will less often find another job than those who procrastinate less.

Hypothesis 4b: People with an internal locus of control, a greater degree of professional self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy, a stronger achievement motivation, and more positive fear of failure will more often find a job than people who exhibit these characteristics to a lesser degree.

Hypothesis 4c: Procrastination will mediate the relationship between the different variables (locus of control, professional self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and positive fear of failure) and finding a job.

Control variables
Control variables in this study were: age (measured as a continuous variable); gender (measured as dummy variable: male = 0, female = 1); and education (measured as two dummy variables with the reference category: lower level of education (lower level of education = 0, intermediate level of education = 1 and lower level of education = 0, higher level of education = 1). There has been a great deal of research on the relationship between the various dimensions of the Big Five and procrastination. Therefore, emotional stability ($M = 3.66, SD = .58$) and extraversion ($M = 3.51, SD = .45$) were included in this research as control variables (Hoekstra, Ormel, & Fruyt, 2007).
Method

Participants and procedure
Between 2009 and 2011, 225 workers were approached, having lost their jobs due to a reorganization or business closure, and having been offered an outplacement trajectory by their organizations to support them to find new work. The participants worked in eight different organizations and were employed in both profit and non-profit sectors. Ultimately, 134 employees participated in the study.

Participants were approached by e-mail with an invitation to participate in the study. The employees could fill out the questionnaire online. After two weeks a reminder was sent once again by e-mail with a request to participate in the study. In addition to demographic background characteristics of the employees, information was collected on locus of control, professional self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy, achievement motivation, positive fear of failure, and procrastination, as well as on whether or not participants found a job during the period of assistance. Because an outplacement trajectory of a maximum of four months was agreed in one of the organizations, we choose to explore whether or not candidates found a job during a four-month period in the research. A client tracking system of a career consulting firm specializing in outplacement assistance was used to gather data on whether candidates secured a new job. A total of 59.5% of employees, or 134 of the 225 employees, completed the questionnaire. The final study group consisted of 109 men (= 81%) and 25 women (= 19%), 36% had no education or a low level of education, 42% an intermediate level of education, and 23% a higher level of education. The mean age was 49 years (SD = 7.7).

Methods and scales
Procrastination. For this scale a shortened version (eight items) of the General Procrastination Scale from Lay (1986) was used. Some items did not apply to this research group and were therefore excluded from the final questionnaire. The items were translated into Dutch. The scale consisted of the following items: (1) ‘I often find myself performing tasks that I had intended to do days before’, (2*) ‘I usually make decisions as soon as possible’, (3) ‘I generally delay before starting on work I have to do’, (4) ‘In preparing for some deadline, I often waste time by doing other things’, (5*) ‘I often have a task finished sooner than necessary’, (6*) ‘I usually
accomplish all the things I plan to do in a day’, (7) ‘I am continually saying “I’ll do it tomorrow”, and (8*) ‘I usually take care of all the tasks I have to do before I settle down and relax for the evening’. The range of answers varied between (1) = ‘totally disagree’ to (5) = ‘totally agree’. The scores of four items were reversed for this scale (items 2, 5, 6, and 8). A higher score implied more procrastination ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .55$). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .88.

**Locus of control.** For this scale a validated questionnaire derived by the IPIP (International Personality Item Pool) was used. The IPIP was developed to make research into personality characteristics more accessible to scientists. The IPIP is in part based on 1252 to more than 2000 existing items that measure personality characteristics. New items are added to the pool each year. About 750 items were originally derived from the Dutch (Goldberg, Johnson, Eber, Hogan, Ashton, Cloninger, & Gough, 2006). In total, the scale locus of control consisted of twenty items. Examples of these items are: ‘I believe that my success depends on my skill rather than luck’, ‘I believe that the world is controlled by a few powerful people’, and ‘I believe some people are born for happiness’. The answer category ran from (1) = ‘totally disagree’ to (5) = ‘totally agree’. The scores of some items were reversed for this scale. A high score on this scale meant an internal locus of control ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .43$). Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$.

**Professional self-efficacy.** This scale consisted of eight items that originated from an Impulse and Incentives Scan (Construct, 2009). Examples of items are: ‘I feel comfortable in a discussion about any subject’ and ‘I would feel confident about myself if I had to explain to my manager how I do my job’. The answer categories ran from (1) = ‘extremely uncharacteristic of me’ to (5) = ‘extremely characteristic of me’. A high score meant a high degree of professional self-efficacy. The average on this scale was $M = 3.48$ and the standard deviation $SD = .68$. Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .88. (Appendix A).

**Job search self-efficacy.** This scale was developed specially for this research and included twenty items. Examples of these items are: ‘I do not know how I should apply for a job’, ‘I am convinced that I will get the job I want’, and ‘Whether or not I find another job is out of my hands’. The answer category ran from (1) ‘totally disagree’ to (5) ‘totally agree’. The scores of some items were reversed for this scale. A high score meant a high level of self-efficacy ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .45$). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was 82. (Appendix B).
Achievement motivation. For this scale the Achievement Motivation Test of Hermans (1970) was used in the questionnaire. In total, twelve questions were asked. The number of answers per question ranged from two to four. The score was calculated using a table of transposition. A high score implied a strong achievement motivation ($M = .56$, $SD = .14$). Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .80.

Positive fear of failure. For this scale the Achievement Motivation Test was again used (Hermans, 1970). In total 42 questions were asked. The number of answers per question ranged from two to four. The score was calculated using a transposition method. A high score meant that someone functions better than under normal circumstances ($M = .65$, $SD = .20$). Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$.

Job status. Data from a client tracking system were used to determine which employees had found a job four months into the outplacement. This item was measured as a dichotomous variable: no job = 0, job = 1. In total 44 out of 134 employees (= 32.8%) found a job (39 men and 5 women).

Results

Correlations between age, gender, education, job status, emotional stability, extraversion, locus of control, professional self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy, achievement motivation, positive fear of failure, and procrastination are shown in Table 1. Significant relationships were found for procrastination with emotional stability ($r = -.44$), extraversion ($r = -.41$), locus of control ($r = -.54$), achievement motivation ($r = -.38$), and positive fear of failure ($r = -.22$). The less emotionally stable a person feels, the less extravert they are, the less they are motivated to achieve, and the less they experience positive fear of failure, the more they exhibit procrastination. Also, people with an external locus of control procrastinate more often than those with an internal locus of control. In terms of whether or not participants found another job, significant relationships were found for age ($r = -.29$) and job search self-efficacy ($r = -.20$). Younger workers had, after a four-month period, more often found another job than older workers, and respondents with higher job search self-efficacy had also more often found another job.
A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to investigate which factors in an outplacement situation are related to procrastination. In Model 1 the control variables were age, education, emotional stability, and extraversion as independent variables, and procrastination as the dependent variable. In Model 2, locus of control, achievement motivation, and positive fear of failure were added as independent variables. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 2. There was no relationship between professional self-efficacy and procrastination, or job search self-efficacy and procrastination. Therefore, these variables were not included in the regression analysis. Prior analyses were conducted to test assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, linearity, and multicollinearity. None of these assumptions were violated.

The analysis shows that the first model with the control variables was significant ($F(6, 110) = 7.97$, $p < .00$). In step 1, gender, age, education, emotional stability, and extraversion together explained 30% of the variance. In this model, education (respectively, $\beta = -.27$, $p < .05$ and $\beta = -.26$, $p < .05$ for the two dummy variables), emotional stability ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .01$), and extraversion ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .05$) were significant predictors of procrastination. In the second model, in addition to the control variables, the variables locus of control, achievement motivation, and positive fear of failure were added to the model. This model was also significant ($F(3, 107) = 9.45$, $p < .00$). Significant effects were found for gender ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$), education (respectively $\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$, and $\beta = -.27$, $p < .01$), locus of control ($\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$), and achievement motivation ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$). Higher educated people were more motivated to achieve and showed less procrastination. Respondents with an internal locus of control also showed less procrastination. In this model the significant effects of education on procrastination remained the same in contrast to the effects of emotional stability and extraversion. Model 2 explained 15% of the variance on top of the variance of Model 1. The explained variance of the full model accounted for 45%. This is high in comparison to similar studies.
Table 1
Correlations between the variables

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</table>

Note: Because of missing incidental values N varies between 120 and 134.
*p < .05, **p < .01
To determine whether there was a relationship between the different variables, procrastination, and whether or not a candidate found another job, a logistic regression analysis was performed with job status as the dependent variable and the other variables as predictors (Table 3). The full model predicted significantly finding a job, \( \chi^2 (12, N = 110) = 27.32, p < .01 \). The full model explained between .22% (Cox and Snell R square) and .30% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance of job status and 71.8% classified the cases correctly. The results show that there were no significant differences in finding another job between employees who procrastinated and those who did not. Job status is predicted by age, gender, and job search self-efficacy. Younger and male employees more often found a job than older and female workers and those who had more confidence in their job search skills more often found a job than employees who had less confidence in their job search skills.

The results show no significant relationship between procrastination and finding another job and also no relationship between the different variables and job
status (with the exception of job search self-efficacy). The hypothesis in which it was assumed that procrastination would mediate the relationship between the different variables and finding a job was not confirmed. Procrastination did not mediate the relationship between the different variables and job status.

### Table 3

**Logistic regression analysis of the variables that can predict job status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.19</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>6.86</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.98</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>25.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education intermediate</td>
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<td>.73</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>11.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education high</td>
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<td>.68</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>16.65</td>
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<td>Procrastination</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stability</td>
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<td>.61</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>1.68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
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<td>.76</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>18.44</td>
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<td>Locus of control</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>8.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional self-efficacy</td>
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<td>.56</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job search self-efficacy</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>41.37</td>
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<td>Achievement motivation</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive fear of failure</td>
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<td>.62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Discussion

**Main results**

In this study we examined the relationship between locus of control, professional self-efficacy, job search self-efficacy, achievement motivation, positive fear of failure, and procrastination in 134 Dutch employees in an outplacement situation. The results extend our knowledge of and insight into the processes that play a role in procrastination for employees who, due to job loss, need to apply for another job. People are required now to apply for jobs more frequently than was previously the case, as a result of changes in
the labour market in recent decades, including increases in the numbers of employees who are laid off and in the flexibility of the labour market. However, the process is not universally straightforward, which can lead to procrastination when undertaking job search activities. The aim of this study was first to examine what relationships exist between procrastination and different personal characteristics of people in outplacement situations, and second whether and what relationship exists between procrastination, these characteristics, and finding a job (Figure 1).

The results show that there exists a positive relationship between locus of control and procrastination, which is a confirmation of hypothesis 1. People with an external locus of control procrastinate more often. This finding is in line with the idea that procrastination involves an inability to self-regulate. People with an internal locus of control are aware of the fact that the omission of necessary actions to reach goals ends in procrastination. They take responsibility for the consequences of their actions more than those who allow their lives to depend on fate and luck, which implies a more passive attitude and the tendency to procrastination. A feeling that they have no control over their environment may lead in people with an external locus of control to fear of failure and eventually to procrastination.

In this study, professional self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy do not seem to be related to procrastination. Therefore, hypothesis 2a and 2b are not confirmed. However, the findings of the logistic regression analysis show that employees with more job search self-efficacy more often find a job than those who are less confident in their job search skills. Wanberg, Kanfer, and Rotundo (1999) examined the relationship between job search self-efficacy and the intensity of job search, and found a significant relationship. The greater a person’s confidence in his/her own skills, the more intensively (s)he looked for work and the more likely (s)he was to find work sooner. An interesting finding in their study was that the sole variable that significantly predicted the intensity of job search for employees who were still unemployed after three months was motivation. People who were more motivated searched for work after a period of three months more intensively than people who were less motivated. For job search self-efficacy no effect was found. On the basis of these results, these authors suggested that building self-regulatory skills, such as setting goals, making plans, and developing the cognitive skills that keep people motivated to apply for jobs, are possibly more important than strengthening job application skills.
In practice, however, career counsellors regularly encounter procrastination in people who find it difficult to apply for jobs. One reason we found no relationship between job search self-efficacy and procrastination in this study might be that we examined procrastination in general. In a theoretical analysis and review, Azjen and Fishbein (1999) show that more association in search results is found if there are specific attitudes to be measured in relation to the specific behaviour being investigated. The expected effect in this study could possibly be found in a future study if procrastination with regard to applying for a job is investigated, rather than procrastination in general.

Another finding from this study is the significant relationship between achievement motivation and procrastination, in contrast to the non-significant relationship between positive fear of failure and procrastination, which is a partial confirmation of hypothesis 3. An explanation for the fact that we found no relationship between positive fear of failure and procrastination could be that people possibly begin to work harder to escape the unpleasant feelings that accompany positive fear of failure, and consequently procrastinate less or not at all even though they may otherwise be inclined to do so.

Contrary to our expectation, we found no relationship between procrastination and finding another job (hypothesis 4a). This may be related to the way in which job status was operationalized in our study. However, such an effect may be found if a future study were to investigate more exactly within what timeframe candidates found new work. In future research, this could be expressed as the time between the start of the outplacement trajectory and the moment the employment contract is signed. Another possibility would be to follow people for longer than the period of four months that was used in our study, for example, over a period of a year. For the hypothesis in which it was assumed that the different variables were related to finding another job (hypothesis 4b), a significant relationship was found for job search self-efficacy only. Apparently, confidence in one’s own application skills plays an important role in being able to advance successfully through the job search process.

No support was found for the mediation hypothesis between procrastination, the different variables, and finding a job (hypothesis 4c). There are several possible explanations for this. For example, it could be that other factors may play a role in whether someone finds another job, such as the state of the labour market, or one’s financial position or family status. A shortage of
specialists in certain specific occupational groups increases the likelihood of finding work in a short time, even when a candidate has a tendency to postpone job search activities. The relatively small sample might be another reason that we found no mediation between procrastination, the other variables, and finding a job. It is likely that with a larger number of respondents the relationship between procrastination and whether or not a candidate finds another job would become more visible.

The short period that we took as our unit of measurement (four months) might also explain why we found no mediation effect. On the one hand, the current state of the labour market means that there are fewer jobs available and unemployment is still increasing. In addition, organizations seem to take more time and space to select the right candidate because there are enough appropriate candidates for most available jobs. Procedures often last longer than previously, which means that it is now more difficult to secure work in a (relatively short) period of four months than it was several years ago. This may explain why the number of respondents who had not yet found a job within the study period was relatively high. On the other hand, it could be that employees feel a degree of urgency as a result of the current state of the labour market, and therefore feel the need not to delay applying even though they might suffer from procrastination. Such an explanation is also given by Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, and Blonk (2005). They examined the mediative role of procrastination on the relationship between implementation intentions and job search behaviour over a longer period, but also found no effect.

Notable in our study are the significant effects of the level of education. More highly educated people procrastinate less than lower educated people. These results are not in line with research by Hammer and Ferrari (2002) on the occurrence of different forms of procrastination in unskilled employees and professionals. According to these authors, unskilled employees experience more job insecurity than skilled employees and therefore procrastinate less. In our study group, however, we were dealing with employees who had all lost their job. It is not easy, therefore, to provide a simple explanation of the differences. Possibly, people who have a lower level of education experience more difficulties in applying for a job, simply due to the fact that they tend to have fewer computer skills and may have less access to the internet, both of which are indispensable today in finding appropriate vacancies. Further research could usefully be conducted to consider the differences found in this regard.
Limitations

This present study has some limitations. First, because this is cross-sectional research, we must exercise caution in establishing causal relationships. A second limitation is the generalizability of the results to employees in individual outplacement situations. Only employees were approached who in large numbers at the same time lost their jobs. A third limitation is, as mentioned above, the relatively short period of four months in which participants had to find another job, and the operationalization of job status that served as the starting point for whether procrastination would affect finding a job. Possibly, differences might become more visible if employees are followed over a longer period (than four months). Finding a job may then be taken as a quantitative variable and it could be specified more exactly how many days it took for a job seeker to secure a job, rather than using just a dichotomous variable that simply measures whether or not someone has found a job. In a subsequent study this could be further examined by taking, for example, the start of the outplacement trajectory as the starting date for the study period and the date of signing the employment contract as an end date. Finally, the relatively high age of the research group perhaps played a role. It is well known that older workers currently take longer to find work than younger candidates. It may be interesting in a future study to compare and examine different age cohorts and whether procrastination influences the finding of a new job within these groups.

In summary, we can conclude that procrastination is a problem not only among students but also among employees in an outplacement situation. However, the results of the present study relate particularly to the effects of locus of control and achievement motivation on procrastination. We did not find a relation between procrastination and job search self-efficacy. Our research revealed job search self-efficacy to be the only non-demographic variable that influenced finding a job. For career counsellors who support outplacement candidates, these are interesting findings. On the one hand, there are people who suffer from procrastination, but for whom this behaviour does not affect whether or not they are able to find another job. On the other hand, people with more confidence in their job search skills more often find a job than those who have less confidence in their skills.

The results of our study show that procrastination occurs in employees in outplacement situations. Procrastination costs money and can reduce
productivity and health (Steel, 2011). Career counsellors can learn to recognize this behaviour, discuss it explicitly, and determine interventions applicable to the individual, subsequently one can apply these skills to a new position. We expect that in the future outplacement trajectories will be more frequently focused on, for example, strengthening job search self-efficacy and self-regulation. Teaching more practical skills, such as how to prepare a letter or a resume, is likely to become of secondary importance.

**Practice Box:**
What do the results of the present study mean for the practice?
- If, at the start of an outplacement trajectory, professionals try to ascertain whether someone engages in procrastination and what problems underlie the behaviour, this might help professionals to establish adequate support.
- Strengthening a candidate’s sense of control over situations can help to avoid procrastination.
- Procrastination may be reduced by dividing long-term goals into smaller goals (Lowman, 1993).
- Procrastination may be prevented by providing implementation intentions (Owens, Bowman, & Dill, 2008). This means that in addition to the establishment of goals, it should also be recorded when certain activities will be carried out, how they will be addressed, and how they will be evaluated. It is important to reflect on (small) successes and what steps contributed to those successes.
- Ascertaining the extent to which a candidate has confidence in his or her own job search skills as soon as possible may also contribute to a personalized applied counselling service.
- Professionals should develop and implement appropriate interventions in employment searches in order to strengthen and maintain the motivation and coping skills of candidates (Vinokur, Price, & Schul, 1995; Wanberg et al., 1999).
Appendix A: Professional self-efficacy

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1. I feel comfortable in a discussion about any subject.
2. I am able to design new approaches to and procedures for my work.
3. I can handle most problems and assignments at work.
4. I know what I’m worth and doubt little about myself.
5. I would be able to contribute to building good relations between my organization (company) and others, such as customers, vendors, or managers.
6. I would feel confident if I had to represent my work group or my manager in a meeting.
7. I could create a good project proposal about something we need to investigate in our organization or department.
8. I would feel confident about myself if I had to explain to my manager how I do my job.

Appendix B: Job search self-efficacy

1. I do not know how I should apply for a job*.
2. Showing my enthusiasm about a job in a job interview would be no problem for me.
3. I would only dare to accept a new job if I was quite sure that it suited me*.
4. I am convinced that I will get the job I want.
5. I find applying for jobs boring and uninteresting*.
6. I have the skills to convince a potential employer of my qualities.
7. I am flexible about finding another job.
8. I find it difficult to prove myself in job interviews*.
9. Whether or not I will be appointed depends on the employer*.
10. Whether or not I find another job is out of my hands*.
11. I am confident that I will find another job, regardless of how long this takes.
12. I am valuable to a potential employer.
13. I do not think I will successfully find another job in the short term*.
14. A new employer must accept me as I am.
15. I experience my age as an obstacle in finding another job*.
16. I enjoy looking for a job.
17. I do not have enough qualities to find another job*.
18. I am qualified enough to find another job soon.
19. I cannot allow myself to make mistakes in a job interview*.
20. It makes me uncertain that it is unknown when I find a new job*.

* Reversed items (1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20)
References


Procrastination in outplacement situations
