

Accepting a job below one's skill level can adversely affect future employment prospects

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Accepting a job below one's skill level can be severely penalizing when applying for future employment because of the perception that someone who does this is less committed or less competent, according to new research from a sociologist at The University of Texas at Austin.

To make ends meet in the short term, many workers may accept part-time positions, seek work from temporary agencies, or take jobs below their [skill level](#). But a study by UT Austin sociologist David Pedulla, which was published online today and will appear in the April print issue of the *American Sociological Review*, shows that some of these [employment](#) situations could be penalizing when applying for jobs in the future.

"We've learned a lot about how unemployment affects workers' future employment opportunities," said Pedulla, who is also a research associate of the university's Population Research Center. "Even though millions of workers are employed in part-time positions, through temporary agencies and at jobs below their skill level, less attention has been paid to how these types of employment situations influence workers' future hiring outcomes."

To examine the issue and measure how outcomes may vary by gender, Pedulla submitted 2,420 fictitious applications for 1,210 real job openings in five cities across the United States and tracked employers' responses to each application. All applicant information was held constant, including six years of prior work experience, except for gender

and applicants' employment situation during the previous year. Job histories involved full-time work, part-time work, a temporary help agency position, a job below the applicant's skill level ("skills underutilization"), or unemployment.

The study found that about 5 percent of men and women working below their skill level received a "callback," or positive employer response—about half the callback rate for workers in full-time jobs at their skill level. Similarly, less than 5 percent of men working part time received callbacks. However, part-time employment had no negative effect for women, and temporary agency employment had little effect for either gender.

"The study offers compelling evidence that taking a job below one's skill level is quite penalizing, regardless of one's gender. Additionally, part-time work severely hurts the job prospects of men," Pedulla said. "These findings raise important additional questions about why employers are less likely to hire workers with these employment histories."

Using similar worker profiles as before, Pedulla conducted a complementary survey of 903 hiring decision-makers in the U.S. on their perceptions of applicants with each type of employment history and the likelihood that they would recommend someone be interviewed, given his or her work history. Results indicated that men in part-time positions were penalized, in part, for appearing less committed, and men employed below their skill level were penalized for appearing less committed and less competent. Women employed below their skill level were penalized for appearing less competent, but not less committed.

"When it comes to thinking about the opportunities that are available to workers, unemployment is only one piece of the puzzle," Pedulla said, adding that the Bureau of Labor Statistics monthly employment report, scheduled for release March 4, will spark discussion on current

unemployment trends in the U.S. "Men who are in part-time positions, as well as men and women who are in jobs below their skill level, face real challenges in the labor market, challenges that deserve broader discussion and additional attention."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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