Alternative Job Search Strategies in Remote Rural and Peri-urban Labour Markets: The Role of Social Networks

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Policy makers continue to search for more effective ways to place unemployed people into work through formal job matching services. In the UK, the introduction of more client-centred job search counselling services by the public employment service, 'Jobcentre Plus', has sought to ensure an increasingly tailored approach to matching unemployed people with vacancies. Meanwhile, Internet and telephone-based job search systems have been developed to supplement (and in more remote areas, substitute for) the network of local Jobcentre offices operated by the agency. Yet it has been suggested that informal search methods, and particularly social networking, can play an important role in linking job seekers with vacancies. This may particularly be the case in rural areas, which tend to be characterised by small pools of opportunities, informality in labour market relations and weak public service infrastructures on the ground.

This paper examines the importance of informal job search methods (especially social networking) to the search strategies used by unemployed people. The paper investigates job seekers' most frequently used and most effective search methods (with effectiveness defined in terms of vacancy identification rather than job entry), and compares the attitudes and experiences of unemployed job seekers in remote rural and peri-urban labour markets. The analysis is based upon two distinct phases of research conducted in three areas in Scotland: 'Wick', a remote rural, town-based travel-to-work-area (TTWA) in the northern Scottish Highlands; 'Sutherland', a much larger, more sparsely populated, rural TTWA that neighbours Wick; and 'West Lothian', a peri-urban, industrialised labour market located in the 'central belt' of Scotland, near major economic and population centres. The first phase of the research involved survey research undertaken with 490 unemployed job seekers across the study areas. Emerging issues were then followed up during twelve focus groups, involving a total of 72 participants.

Following this introduction, Part 2 of this paper discusses the context for the research – the potential importance of social networks to the job search process, especially in remote and rural communities. Part 3 provides a brief description of the study areas and methodology for the research. Part 4 presents a comparative analysis of survey findings, and Part 5 discusses the results of the focus group research. Finally, conclusions and implications for policy are considered.

Social networks, job seeking and the geography of labour markets

Social networks and the job search process

Previous studies of job seeking have specifically stressed the importance of social networks in providing information about jobs, particularly where opportunities are limited (Anxo and Storrie 1998; Hodge et al. 2002). There is some evidence that social networks can facilitate effective job seeking. Hannan (1999) showed that while duration of unemployment, the use of formal job search facilities and a range of other factors impact upon exits from unemployment, access to social networks significantly affects job entry rates. Holzer (1988) had earlier suggested that personal contacts and direct approaches to employers were more often associated with successful job seeking. Boheim and Taylor (2001) similarly identify an association between direct contact between job seekers and employers and successful search outcomes.

However, it was perhaps Granovetter's (1973; 1974; 1982) groundbreaking work that highlighted the crucial role of social networks within job seeking (in this case with reference to the job search strategies deployed by higher skilled workers). More importantly, Granovetter noted the importance of the 'strength of ties' to job search success, arguing that 'weak ties' (acquaintances, colleagues) provide more 'non-redundant' job information than do 'strong ties' (kin and close friends). Networks of acquaintances or weak ties tend to be less 'dense' and closely knit, and therefore offer a wider range of contacts, with important consequences for the dissemination of information about job opportunities: "individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends" (Granovetter 1982, p. 106).

Research conducted since Granovetter introduced the idea of the importance of the 'strength of weak ties' has similarly concluded that that the range and diversity of job seekers' personal networks affect their ability to locate employment (see Lai et al. 1998 for a review). Diverse and heterogeneous networks of weak ties, it is argued, lead to 'better' contacts who in turn bring more successful outcomes. Individuals with access to diverse networks are more likely to locate a resource-rich contact person with greater potential to positively impact on job search outcomes. Network diversity and the heterogeneity of contacts is therefore important to job search success and labour market participation, and can be crucial to the integration of potentially excluded groups, such as ethnic minorities (Ooka and Wellman 2005), young people (Holzer 1988) and women returners (Chapple 2002). Furthermore, Levesque and White (2001) have argued that the range and diversity of social network resources available to long-term unemployed people can be the defining factor determining successful transitions to work (with a broad range of weak, but high value, social network resources 'validating' the human capital of job seekers by providing access to references and providing good quality vacancy information).

There are counter-arguments to this hypothesis. As Brown and Konrad (2001) note, strong ties have the potential to be more useful to job seekers seeking to move between industries (although referring to a largely urban context, this argument is also pertinent to rural labour markets which have witnessed the decline of traditional agri-industries). For those seeking to leave declining industries, and move to entry-level

posts in other sectors, connections with lower status employees in other industries are often more effective – and these connections are more often linked to the 'strong' ties of the job seeker (as an individual's family members are relatively less likely to have shared their occupation). In an uncertain economy, with job seekers changing occupations on a regular basis, strong cross industry ties may be more important than the weak, high status ties that were useful in the more economically stable times when Granovetter formulated his approach (Brown and Konrad 2001).

In more general terms, the overall effectiveness of informal methods as a means of linking job seekers and employers has been questioned. Adams et al. (2000, 2002) have noted the potential for 'information mismatch' problems when employers and job seekers each use inappropriate or different search channels when looking for staff or jobs respectively. An over-reliance, by employers in particular, on informal practices can therefore further exclude disadvantaged groups already more prone to unemployment, and 'lock out' long-term unemployed people, who tend to have more limited access to social networks (Adams et al. 2002). Furthermore, Urwin and Shackleton (1999) have used UK Labour Force Survey data to illustrate that those relying primarily on informal methods are generally less likely to make the transition to work. They suggest that the selection of informal methods as an approach to job seeking is more often a result of a lack of appropriate job search skills, rather than a reflection of the perceived benefits offered by such methods.

Social networks and the rural context

The debate over the importance of social networks to the job search process has particular relevance in rural areas. Despite apparent recent changes in the character of the countryside due to gradual industrialisation and commuter belt expansion, it has been argued that social relations within rural communities have retained a distinctive culture and dynamic (Halfacree 1994). Certainly, it would appear that informal networks continue to play a particularly important role in rural economic life, especially in very remote areas (Reimer 1997; Hofferth and Iceland 1998).

Informal approaches to sourcing staff have also been identified as playing a vital role within employers' recruitment strategies in rural labour markets (Hodge et al. 2002; McQuaid et al. 2004). Lindsay et al. (2003) found that SMEs located in the remote rural labour markets discussed in this paper often did not use Jobcentre services to advertise vacancies, relying instead on a combination of limited newspaper advertising and word-of-mouth. Even many larger employers and public sector bodies saw the Jobcentre network as a means of communicating vacancies, while relying on personal recommendations and social networking to ensure that an 'appropriate' candidate was identified and selected. There may, of course, be other factors affecting the use of informal networking within the recruitment process. Geddes et al. (1993) suggest that informal methods tend to be more commonly used in local labour markets characterised by high unemployment, as employers seek to avoid being swamped by applicants, and eager job seekers seek to maximise the competitive advantage that can be provided by 'inside knowledge' or personal contacts.
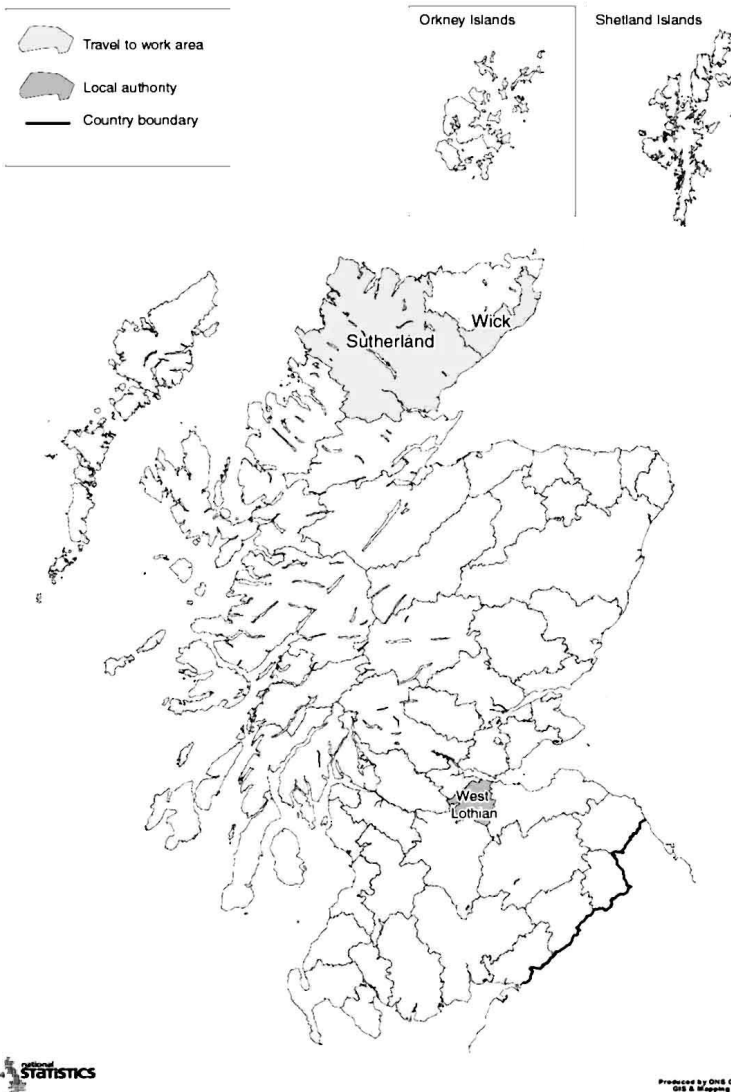
Returning to the issue of the operation of individuals' social networks, Beggs et al. (1996) argue that rural settings are – in broad terms – distinguished by a number

of distinctive features. Social networks in rural areas tend to be small, dense and homogenous, involve less frequent contact, and are more likely to be based on kinship and neighbourhood than loose friendships. Social networks also tend to be characterised by multiplexity, in terms of the multiple roles played by participants and different forms of social resources exchanged within relationships. The density of rural networks (i.e. their strong inter-connectedness) and their resulting homogeneity can, according to Beggs et al. (1996, p. 321-322), contribute to exclusion: "Granovetter's (1982) macro-level extension of the 'strength of weak ties' argument suggests that areas with a predominance of strong ties and a relative paucity of weak ties will be characterised by fragmented social structures, poor information diffusion, and persistently high poverty rates". It may therefore be hypothesised that disadvantaged groups in rural areas (such as the long-term unemployed, young people and others with limited experience of, or few other ties to, the labour market) will particularly struggle to identify job opportunities.

This paper does not seek to specifically address the importance of the 'strength of ties' in the job search process. Exit information was not gathered from interview respondents, all of whom remained registered as unemployed at the time of contact. A range of factors may have impacted on the outcomes eventually experienced by these job seekers, including the attitudes and recruitment methods of local employers (Adams et al. 2000; Brown et al. 2001). However, if policy makers are to develop services for the unemployed that provide access to accurate and up-to-date vacancy information, while also potentially allowing job seekers to expand their social networks, it is important that they have a clear idea of the role of both formal and informal methods of job seeking, and the relationship between the two. Accordingly, the analysis below seeks to test the perceived importance of informal social networking and other job search methods from the viewpoint of the unemployed job seeker. Crucially, we analyse the different role that informal methods play across remote rural and peri-urban labour markets, and the extent to which rural areas are a 'special case', where social networks are particularly significant within job seekers' search strategies.

The study areas in context and sample information

The first two study areas were contiguous travel-to-work-areas (TTWAs) in the remote northern Highlands: Wick and Sutherland. Caithness (the area in which Wick is located) and Sutherland are the most northerly counties of mainland Britain, and are particularly remote from major centres of economic investment and industrial activity (see Map 1). Wick is a small town (population approximately 8000) struggling to cope with the impact of the restructuring of traditional agricultural and fishing-related industries, whilst the sparsely populated Sutherland TTWA (population approximately 13000), covering an extensive geographical area (5,865 square km) has also been highly dependent on now declining primary sector employment. The areas are also among the most sparsely populated in Europe (14.8 persons per square km in Caithness and only 2.2 persons per square km in Sutherland). Both areas have recently been affected by persistently high rates of unemployment and long-term unemployment.

Travel to work area

Local authority

Country boundary

Orkney Islands

Shetland Islands

Wick

Sutherland

West
Lothian

It should, however, be noted that the services available to job seekers in these two rural areas differ markedly. The Wick TTWA is dominated by the town of Wick, which has its own public employment service Jobcentre facility. The much larger Sutherland TTWA hosts a number of very remote settlements, but has no Jobcentre facilities. As a result, unlike their counterparts in the Wick TTWA, many of Sutherland's job seekers are excused from the fortnightly routine of appearing in person at a Jobcentre to 'sign on' as actively seeking work, instead contacting Jobcentre staff (based at Wick)

through a 'Freephone' telephone number to receive information and confirm their availability for work. This distinction is important. In most parts of the UK 'signing on' forms the basis for regular, compulsory attendance at Jobcentres by unemployed job seekers. The absence of regular contact with public employment service professionals at Jobcentres is likely to impact on the job search strategies deployed by unemployed people, and may result in their readiness to adopt alternative methods, including social networking.

The third study area provides a strong contrast. West Lothian is situated in the 'central belt' of Scotland, between the country's two largest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Its largest town, Livingston, is 15 km from Edinburgh, Scotland's rapidly expanding capital. The area is a major centre of manufacturing activity (and has therefore recently experienced job losses as a result of adverse sectoral conditions). Despite these problems, unemployment remained below the national average. The area's main towns of Livingston, Bathgate and Broxburn are all served by Jobcentre facilities, and the vast majority of unemployed job seekers in West Lothian are required to appear in person at one of these offices to 'sign on' as actively seeking work.

The first part of the research reported in this paper involved surveys of registered unemployed people carried out between November 2000 and May 2001 in the three areas. The vast majority of responses across all study areas were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (424), supplemented by a small number of postal questionnaires deployed in remote areas (66). In total, 300 responses were gathered in West Lothian, 107 in Wick and 83 in Sutherland. The second part of the research was designed to follow up the issues raised by the quantitative data analysis. Retaining the original study areas, a series of focus groups were convened with job seekers who had experienced, or were at risk of, long-term unemployment. Twelve focus groups were held (six in West Lothian, and three each in Wick and Sutherland). Each focus group involved 3-10 participants, with an average of 6 participants-per-group. Discussions centred on participants' attitudes towards the current public employment services for the unemployed, and the relative importance and effectiveness of a range of alternative methods of looking for work.

Survey findings: social networks and job seeking

Profile of the sample

More than one-third of respondents across all the survey sample groups were 'long-term unemployed' (using the 'ILO definition' of unemployed and available for work for twelve months or more), and the majority in all sample groups had been unemployed for at least six months. The educational attainment of the sample groups was also fairly similar, despite the presence of a higher proportion of long-term unemployed people in the Wick cohort. The vast majority of all respondents had fairly limited qualifications – over 70% in all three areas were not qualified to Scottish Higher Grade/Vocational Qualification Level 3 or equivalent, the level of qualification generally required for admittance to higher education in Scotland (Table 1). Only around 42% of the general Scottish labour force are similarly unqualified.

Table 1: *Level of qualification attained by respondents, by study area (%)*

Level of qualification	Sutherland	Wick	West Lothian	Combined study areas	Scotland
None (a)	29	44	37	37	25
SCE 'O' Grade/ equivalent (b)	42	33	42	40	17
SCE 'H' Grade/ equivalent (c)	14	10	13	13	30
Higher education qualification (d)	12	9	5	7	12
Degree/ equivalent	4	4	4	4	16
Total (rounded)	100	100	100	100	100

a ' None' includes those naming vocational qualifications not recognised in the Labour Force Survey.
b 'O Grade or equivalent' includes SCE Ordinary and Standard Grades, GSVQ, RSA diploma level and SVQ 1-2.
c 'H grade or equivalent' includes SCE Higher Grades, GSVQ advanced, RSA advanced diploma, SVQ level 3.
d 'Higher Education qualification' includes HND, HNC, SVQ 4 and professional qualifications.

Source for 'Scotland' figures: Futureskills Scotland.

These job seekers may struggle to compete in local labour markets where higher levels of qualification are the norm – Labour Force Survey estimates for the period in question, reporting only formal academic qualifications rather than vocational awards and apprenticeships, suggest that 39-40% of the workforce in the relevant local authority areas of 'Highland' (covering Wick and Sutherland) and 'West Lothian' held SCE Higher level qualifications, in line with the Scottish average. Previous research carried out in the Sutherland TTWA also suggests that this area's labour force tends to mirror regional (i.e. 'Highland') and Scottish national averages in terms of educational attainment (System Three 2000). Yet less than 15% of respondents in all three study areas held SCE Higher level academic qualifications. Clearly, the limited educational attainment of these unemployed job seekers will have implications for their job search targets and strategies, the range and status of their social network relations, and their more general competitiveness in the labour market.

Job search methods used by respondents

The job search methods currently used by unemployed people in these very different labour markets clearly reflected issues of rurality, the accessibility of public employment services and the importance of social networks. The importance of newspaper advertisements as a means of finding out about job opportunities was similar across all the study areas. However, take-up of formal job search services, delivered through public employment service Jobcentres, varied considerably. As Table 2 illustrates, Jobcentre notice boards were a source of vacancy information on a regular (weekly) basis for a clear majority (77%) of job seekers in West Lothian, where there are a number of accessible

Jobcentre offices. The town-based Wick TTWA also hosts one Jobcentre office, but here far fewer job seekers used these facilities on a weekly basis (59%). Meanwhile, less than a third of respondents (31%) in the remote communities of Sutherland travelled to Jobcentres elsewhere to use their facilities.

Table 2: *Percentage of respondents using selected job search methods on a weekly basis*

Job search method	Sutherland	Wick	West Lothian	Combined study areas
Newspaper advertisements	94	96	92	94
Jobcentre notice boards	31	59	77	66
Advice from Jobcentre staff	47	43	69	60
Social networks	73	74	42	54
Direct approach to employers	51	68	25	39
Internet	28	9	18	18

The different approaches job seekers adopted to the use of social networks was striking. As Table 2 shows, whereas over 70% of job seekers in both the rural, town-based Wick TTWA and the remote rural Sutherland reported using social networks to look for work on a weekly basis, this was the case for only 42% of West Lothian job seekers. (Unemployment duration had little impact on the importance of personal contacts for rural job seekers – over 70% of both long-term unemployed and non-long-term unemployed respondents in the Wick and Sutherland areas used social networks on a weekly basis.)

   While making direct approaches to employers was generally a weekly routine for only 25% of West Lothian job seekers, over half of those in Sutherland (51%) and more than two-thirds of Wick-based respondents (68%) regularly used this largely informal method of looking for work, perhaps partly reflecting the greater level of knowledge of opportunities with the relatively small number of local employers in the two labour markets. Table 3 provides further detail on job seekers' use of social networks to look for work. It is clear that, for many of those in peri-urban areas such as West Lothian – where Jobcentre facilities are easily accessible and the use of personal contacts may be a less established part of job seeking, at least on a day-to-day basis – social networks are of only marginal importance to the search process.

   Finally, job seekers were asked about the method used to identify the vacancy for which they had most recently applied (Table 4). Although the methods used to identify job seekers' most recently pursued vacancies were rather more similar across the three study areas, respondents in Sutherland's remote rural communities were once again more likely to have relied upon social networks (46%, compared to 30% of Wick-based respondents and 23% of those from West Lothian). It is again clear that formal methods of job seeking have a far greater impact in areas where there are Jobcentre facilities on the ground and where there are larger numbers of local employers. In West Lothian and Wick (both areas served by Jobcentre offices) 43% and 38% of respondents respectively had used either Jobcentre staff or notice boards to identify the last opportunity for which they applied. This compared with only 13% of Sutherland respondents.

Table 3: *Percentage of respondents using social networks as a job search method*

Regularity of use of social networks to look for work	Sutherland	Wick	West Lothian	Combined study areas
At least weekly	73	74	42	54
At least monthly	16	10	22	18
Less than monthly	7	6	21	15
Never	4	10	16	13
Total (rounded)	100	100	100	100

Table 4: *Job search methods used to identify most recently pursued job opportunity*

Job search method	Sutherland	Wick	West Lothian	Combined study areas
Social networks	46	30	23	28
Jobcentre notice boards	4	22	32	25
Newspaper advertisements	23	20	17	18
Advice from Jobcentre staff	9	16	11	12
Direct approach	5	7	5	6
Community bodies/facilities	9	2	4	4
Internet	1	1	0	1
Other	4	2	9	7
Total (rounded)	100	100	100	100

Nevertheless, it should be noted that other factors affect the ability and inclination of job seekers to use networks of personal contacts as a means of looking for work. Table 5 compares the use of social networks across a range of job seeker characteristics. Taking the sample across all the study areas as a whole, there is evidence that long-term unemployed people were significantly less likely (5% level using the chi-squared test) to use social networks for job seeking on a weekly basis (47%) than those unemployed for less than one year (58%). This may reflect these job seekers' initial lack of social network relations, or a decline in access to contacts resulting from the experience of long-term unemployment. There is some evidence of a 'discouraged job seeker' effect – other informal methods such as directly approaching employers were also less well used by the long-term unemployed (33% across all study areas, compared to 44% of those unemployed for less than one year who used this method regularly).

However, the perceived importance of informal networking within local labour markets appears to have substantially affected job seekers' responses to the experience of long-term unemployment. The decline in networking as a job search tool among the long-term unemployed noted in Table 5 masks variations between the study areas. While the long-term unemployed in West Lothian were less likely (significant at 1% level using the chi-squared test) to use social networks to look for work on a weekly basis (27%, com-

pared to 44% of West Lothian job seekers unemployed for less than one year), the differences between the long-term and short-term unemployed were far less pronounced, and not statistically significant, in the rural town of Wick (77% and 71% respectively using social networks weekly). In the more remote rural area of Sutherland, the long-term unemployed were actually more likely to use social networks at least weekly to look for work (79%, compared to 71%). It may be that long-term unemployed job seekers in Sutherland, already more dependent on informal networking to access job information due to the remoteness of their location, have become increasingly frustrated at the apparent irrelevance of more formal information sources to the recruitment process. Of course, the generally lower skills profile of long-term unemployed job seekers – who are also less likely to have the skills, for example, to use Internet-based job search tools (McQuaid et al. 2004) – may also contribute to their particular reliance on 'alternative' job search strategies.

Broader measures of labour market attachment also reveal a degree of difference. Respondents were asked to characterise their labour market experience in qualitative terms, and those who described a work history involving 'mostly stable employment' were more likely (significant at 5% level) to regularly look for work by social networking (60%, compared to 49%). Those aged over 25 (and potentially with longer-standing relationships in the labour market) were similarly more likely to use social networks, as were higher skilled job seekers (significant at 5% and 1% level respectively). However, residence in rural areas remains the factor most strongly associated with the use of social networks for job seeking – Table 5 again illustrates the differences between the Wick and Sutherland sample groups and those from West Lothian (in both cases the differences are significant at the 1% level). Other differences, according to gender, income and household circumstances were not statistically significant.

The findings are less clear when it comes to methods used to identify the last job pursued by respondents. Here, job seekers in Sutherland's remote rural communities were significantly more likely (1% level) to have used social networks than those from peri-urban West Lothian (46% compared to 23% in West Lothian). Although Wick job seekers were more likely than those in West Lothian to have used personal contacts to identify their last pursued opportunity (30% compared to 23%) the difference between the two groups was not significant. Men, those with shorter unemployment durations and those with more stable work histories had a higher incidence of using social networks, but the differences here were not statistically significant.

Accordingly, age, work history and labour market status may all be associated with the ability and willingness of job seekers to use social networks as a means of looking for work, although these factors were less significant when the methods used by job seekers to identify recent opportunities were considered. However, in both cases rurality emerged as a key factor. Whether explained by the traditions and established practices within rural communities, the absence of formal Jobcentre services 'on the ground' or a combination of these factors, many unemployed people in rural areas (and especially the more remote Sutherland TTWA) appear to consider the use of social networks an essential part of the job search process – a view not shared by the majority of those looking for work in our peri-urban study area.

Table 5: *Use of social networks on weekly basis and to identify last opportunity pursued, by selected job seeker characteristics*

Respondents' characteristics	Used social networks weekly to look for work		Used social networks for last job pursued	
	Percentage	Sig.	Percentage	Sig.
Wick (Sutherland)	74 (73)	1.000	30 (46)	0.106
Wick (West Lothian)	74 (41)	0.000**	30 (23)	0.111
Sutherland (West Lothian)	73 (41)	0.000**	46 (23)	0.000**
Unemployed <1 yr (1 yr or more)	58 (47)	0.038*	36 (29)	0.128
Mostly stable work history (other)	60 (49)	0.028*	37 (30)	0.143
Aged 25 or older (<25)	57 (44)	0.023*	33 (35)	0.773
Semi-skilled or skilled (unskilled)	61 (49)	0.010**	35 (33)	0.758
Male (female)	55 (48)	0.188	35 (29)	0.295
Living with partner/other (alone)	52 (57)	0.455	32 (35)	0.550
Income at least £150 (<£150)	53 (54)	0.857	34 (33)	0.894

** Significant difference at 1% level (Chi squared test).
* Significant difference at 5% level.

Focus group findings: attitudes to social networks and job seeking

Formation and profile of the focus groups

Twelve focus groups were convened (six in West Lothian and three each in Wick and Sutherland) involving a total of 72 participants. Although not necessarily statistically representative of the full client population, these in-depth discussions provided a number of useful, qualitative insights. In particular, the focus groups again threw into sharp contrast the manner in which social networking – a relatively marginal job search activity in peri-urban areas such as West Lothian – provided the main method of looking for work for unemployed people in remote rural communities.

In West Lothian, specific client groups were targeted with separate focus groups held for: long-term unemployed people (duration over 12 months) aged 25 and over; young people (aged 16-24); job seekers aged 50 and over; and 'women returners' (with young children). These clients were targeted to provide an insight into potential barriers to effective job seeking faced by groups who can particularly struggle to gain access to work, due to a lack of recent and relevant work experience, age-based barriers or caring responsibilities. While focus groups held in Wick and Sutherland were designed to draw a more 'general' membership, reflecting the limited pool of potential participants, three groups were composed entirely of long-term unemployed people aged 25 and over. The remaining three groups were mixed in terms of the age, gender and unemployment duration, with participants randomly selected. Table 6 provides a summary of the characteristics of those attending focus groups (70 of the 72 participants completed short personal information questionnaires).

Table 6: *Characteristics of focus group participants, by study area*

Participant group	Sutherland	Wick	West Lothian
All participants	15	14	41
Male	13	12	30
Female	2	2	11
Aged 16-24	1	2	18
Aged 25-49	6	7	16
Aged 50+	8	5	7
Qualified to SCE H Grade/SVQ3	6	4	5
Qualified to SCE S Grade/SVQ2	5	3	20
No qualifications	4	7	16
Long-term unemployed	7	11	19
Not long-term unemployed	8	3	22

Attitudes to social networking

Focus group participants in all the study areas acknowledged the potential importance of social networks in job seeking, but there was a clear divergence of view between the majority of West Lothian job seekers and those from both the Wick and Sutherland areas. For those from peri-urban West Lothian, social networking was viewed as one potential search method, but was often not vital to job seekers' efforts to obtain work. Participants in the West Lothian focus groups for young people were particularly unlikely to view social networks as an important way of looking for work. Many reported that the majority of their friends and family were in work, but that they did not wish to use these connections. In some cases, young job seekers had no desire to follow friends into low quality factory or service jobs. Indeed, there was some evidence of social networks acting as a means of discouraging job seekers from pursuing certain job vacancies, as friends and family warned of low pay and poor conditions.

> Most of my friends are in work. But what's the point of working in a factory or a warehouse all your life? No danger. It's boring and you'll get no qualifications out of that. There's no way I'm going for that. Barry, 19, unemployed six months, West Lothian

Many young people also expressed concerns that 'using' friends to look for work might damage relationships that were essentially social in nature. Having only recently left full-time education, few of these job seekers had continuing relationships with former colleagues. Participants in focus groups for women returners and 'adult' long-term unemployed job seekers were more conscious of the potential value of social networks. Yet there remained a reluctance to fully exploit contacts. As was the case with young people, social networks more often operated as a mechanism warning job seekers to avoid low quality occupations in which friends and former colleagues now found themselves, while the clash between 'using' contacts to look for work and the value of personal friendship was again an issue for some.

> I agree that personal approaches and using people you know is often the best way. But for me it somehow doesn't feel right to use friends or people you used to work with just to look for work. Mary, 48, unemployed one year, West Lothian

Long-term unemployed people in West Lothian also tended to view the operation of social networks as a factor contributing to their continued unemployment, rather than as a means of finding their way back into work. There was a general consensus that informal networks were more difficult to maintain as unemployment duration lengthened, and job seekers lost touch with former colleagues and struggled to finance social activities. This view was shared by long-term unemployed people attending focus groups in Wick and Sutherland. However, in these areas the importance of informal recruitment and job search methods was continually stressed by job seekers who saw the operation of social networks in isolated rural labour markets as fundamentally challenging the effectiveness of any formal employment services for job seekers. A number of focus group participants in both Wick and Sutherland stressed the importance of personal reputation – 'of being a known quantity' – and suggested that the long-term unemployed, young people and 'incomers', faced particular problems in (re-)establishing themselves within the local labour market as a result. Job seekers attending focus groups in Sutherland were even more convinced that informal social networks, rather than interventions by public agencies, governed the allocation of jobs in their local communities.

> It's about getting yourself established and getting to know people, to know where the jobs are. There are jobs, but word of mouth goes a long way. If you know people, you can get a job. It's not what you know, it's who you know. It's as simple as that. Andrew, 63, unemployed seven months, Lairg, Sutherland

It was suggested that as a result of the strength of social network relations in these communities and the tradition of recruitment by word of mouth, many job vacancies were not communicated to the Jobcentre or advertised by any other formal means. Yet although many long-term unemployed people who participated in focus groups acknowledged that they faced particular problems in accessing informal networks, there was a general acceptance that these traditions were part of rural life, and could be effectively exploited given a combination of good luck and sound judgement.

> In smaller communities, if there's anything going people know about them. Some jobs are just sort of arranged beforehand - the person who is going to get the job has already been decided before the vacancy even occurs. These things don't get advertised. George, 54, unemployed two years, Lochinver, Sutherland

> It's always been like that here. You'll not get away from word of mouth, because everybody knows everybody. Tom, 55, unemployed two years, Bonar Bridge, Sutherland

> Yes, some jobs never make it to the Jobcentre - it's all word of mouth. But if you get in there early and speak to someone you can have a good chance. Alex, 45, unemployed five years, Helmsdale, Sutherland

For some Sutherland job seekers, there was clear value in the operation of informal networks of job seeking and recruitment, even if they as individuals had not

benefited recently. Social networks were seen as a way of gathering more anecdotal, broad-ranging information about the local labour market, information which could nonetheless be vital in identifying job opportunities. Discussions with personal contacts (friends, neighbours and former colleagues) would often touch on current job opportunities, but also more general changes in the local labour market, companies and families moving in and out of the community, and potential future vacancies.

> Everybody knows everyone else and if any vacancies crop up word gets around. If there's something you've missed then somebody will mention about it. There's a sort of an informal job seekers' network. When you talk to people, it's not just a case of finding out what jobs are available. You can find out if someone's leaving their job because they're pregnant or relocating, you can get advance information on companies that are expanding - it's handy to know in advance sometimes. George, 54, unemployed two years, Lochinver, Sutherland

An obvious problem associated with the important role played by informal social networking in rural job seeking relates to the marginalisation of formal services for the unemployed, delivered through Jobcentres. Participants in our Sutherland focus groups often saw their use of the telephone and Internet-based services provided by Jobcentre Plus as largely symbolic and ineffective – 'going through the motions' – or at best as a potentially useful supplementary activity (particularly for those able to travel substantial distances or considering leaving the area). The general view was, however, that the majority of job opportunities were not advertised through the Jobcentre network. It was also suggested by a number of job seekers that those opportunities that were advertised via the Jobcentre still tended to be allocated through personal contacts, with the notification of vacancies to Jobcentres reflecting some employers' formal acknowledgement of equal opportunities legislation, rather than a real attempt to open up the recruitment process.

> If a local job comes up you're not going to see it on a website, you're not even going to see it in a Jobcentre. If somebody knows the right person, then they'll get the job. Rod, 36, unemployed six months, Lairg, Sutherland

In summary, job seekers across all the study areas acknowledged, to a greater or lesser extent, the potential importance of social networks to job search success. However, whereas young people, and even some more experienced job seekers, in West Lothian were reluctant to follow their friends into low quality employment, and sometimes balked at 'using' personal relationships, social networking once again emerged as a crucial element in job seeking in the rural town of Wick and, particularly, the more remote communities of Sutherland. The vast majority of job seekers in remote rural areas accepted the informality of local job allocation processes as 'the way it has always been', a long-standing practice from which one might benefit or lose, but it was also acknowledged that 'outsiders' – such as young people and the long-term unemployed – tended to struggle more than most to establish or re-establish themselves within these informal networks. Those excluded from informal, social networks may have to rely on formal services provided by Jobcentre Plus as the main element in their job search activities. Given the apparently dominant role of social networks in job seeking and recruitment in remote communities, and the weakness of service infrastructures

on the ground, these disadvantaged job seekers may face considerable additional barriers in identifying appropriate opportunities and so making the transition to work.

Discussion and conclusions

Alternative job search strategies and rural labour markets

Given the importance granted to social capital building as a means of responding to exclusion in rural areas, it is unsurprising that policy makers are increasingly seeking to combine measures to promote local networks of co-operation alongside more traditional approaches to providing access to employment and stimulating economic development (Shucksmith 2000; Nel and McQuaid 2002). The above findings highlight the need for such an approach to inform policies for job seekers in remote rural labour markets.

Young people, the long-term unemployed, the low-skilled, and those with less stable work histories appeared less able to access social networks for job seeking. These findings tend to support the conclusions of earlier research, that for those who do use social networks it may be 'weak ties' (often established through work) rather than strong, family-based contacts that provide the focus for informal job seeking. The research further concurs with studies that have noted the difficulties faced by groups with fragmented links to the regular labour market in building and maintaining networks of personal contacts (Calvo Armengol and Jackson 2004). In this sense, the findings to some extent also support previous research suggesting that those primarily using Jobcentres to look for work tend to be lower skilled and more prone to long-term unemployment (Holzer 1988), and may rely on these formal services due to a lack of success in using other job search methods, including informal networks (Thomas 1997).

However, it is clear that location (and particularly geographical remoteness) remains a crucial factor. Those in the rural town of Wick and particularly Sutherland's more remote communities were significantly more likely to use social networks to look for work. For unemployed people in the peri-urban West Lothian area, social networking was of some marginal importance to job seeking, but had far less status than the formal services provided via the Jobcentre network. Conversely, in both Wick and especially Sutherland (where there is a smaller pool of prospective employers and Jobcentre services on the ground are less accessible) social networking was used far more regularly than Jobcentres, and formed a central element in many job seekers' search strategies.

Our focus group findings provided further evidence of the distinctive role of informal social networking in rural employment relations. Focus group participants in both Wick and Sutherland acknowledged and accepted the importance of personal contacts in rural recruitment and job seeking. While some job seekers in West Lothian expressed a reluctance to 'use' their social networks to find work (or used them primarily to identify jobs that they did not want to pursue), unemployed people in Wick and Sutherland continued to call upon personal contacts as a key element of their job search, and (even though many may have been disenfranchised by these informal practices) remained convinced of the value of informal networking. Job seekers in these rural areas who did use formal services provided through Jobcentres

saw these activities as largely symbolic, rather than of practical value.

Implications for policy

There are important lessons for policy makers. Effective job search services for unemployed people in remote rural areas need to address the problems faced by many disadvantaged job seekers, who are currently caught between their lack of strong network relations and the absence of public employment service facilities on the ground. Of course, the provision of public employment service facilities (in rural or urban areas) is not a panacea for labour market exclusion, particularly given the increasingly marginal role played by the Jobcentre network in many local labour markets. Indeed, recent national-level research with employers has suggested that less than one-third (31%) of all vacancies are now notified to Jobcentres (Sanderson and Johnson 2002). It would appear that employers' recognition of the value of alternative recruitment channels, and the increasing importance of commercial employment agencies, may be resulting in a gradual decline in Jobcentre usage (Hogarth et al. 2003).

However, just under half of employers (48%) still report using the public employment service Jobcentre network as a recruitment method (Sanderson and Johnson 2002) – it is the single most popular method of recruitment named by employers, followed by local newspapers (used by 44% of employers) and word-of-mouth/networking (42%). It seems that the Jobcentre network, while being used less frequently by employers and rarely by those recruiting to skilled posts, has retained a role as one recruitment method among many – but it would also appear that informal networking, private agencies and newspaper advertising have all emerged as more efficient methods of recruiting staff (Hales 1995; Adams et al. 2002; Devins and Hogarth 2005).

Yet, as Hasluck (1998) notes, the impact of the public employment service within the jobs market may not be fully reflected in its efficiency as an employer recruitment tool. It is not surprising that the Jobcentre network has been identified by employers as a less effective recruitment tool in terms of the efficiency of job matching – the fact that the service is free to employers ensures that it is fairly widely used, whether recruiters expect to fill specific vacancies through this channel or not. Moreover, Jobcentres have an obligation to attempt to place all of their clients (many of whom will face severe barriers to work) without the luxury of the more rigorous selection and client-screening processes enjoyed by commercial employment agencies. Jobcentres also have an important role to play in encouraging job seekers to use a variety of other job search methods, as well as their own services.

The reality is that strong service infrastructures are likely to be required to support vulnerable job seekers even (or arguably especially) in those rural areas where informal networking apparently dominates the job search and recruitment processes. Policy makers will have to be realistic about the extent to which they can, or should seek to, combat the informality that characterises labour market relations in remote rural communities. One way forward may lie in the provision of local, community-based facilities in rural labour markets that deliver formal job search services, while also providing job seekers and recruiters with a space to interact on a more informal basis. Local community-based facilities, offering job search training and advice alongside an emphasis on peer support and motivation, may be able to combine the best

elements of informal networking, so important in rural labour markets, with formal services for the unemployed. A partnership-based approach to providing such local community services, drawing resources and expertise from a range bodies, may offer the possibility of overcoming the problems faced by many disadvantaged job seekers, who lack strong social network relations and struggle to access formal job search and information services in remote communities. While informal networking may be accepted as a defining feature of job seeking in these communities – 'the way it has always been' – there is a need for formal service providers to both acknowledge and engage with these 'alternative' job search strategies, ensuring that all job seekers have the chance to identify and pursue opportunities in remote rural labour markets.

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