CHAPTER 4

Increasing Client Engagement with Job Search: Asian Human Services in Illinois

One of the primary goals of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is to increase participants' self-sufficiency through work, and receipt of benefits is often contingent on job-related activities. Job search assistance is a key component that TANF offices use to reach this goal. This chapter reviews the application of the behavioral diagnosis and design framework to the job search program provided by Asian Human Services (AHS),[1] a social service agency in Chicago that holds a contract with the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) to provide employment-related services for Illinois's Work First program (described later). The chapter provides an overview of the policy relevance of job search assistance, describes the behavioral diagnosis work conducted, and concludes with a few key insights that have broader applicability to other job search programs. Throughout the chapter, terms from behavioral science appear in bold when they are first mentioned. These terms are explained in greater detail in the Appendix.

Policy Relevance of Job Search Assistance for TANF Recipients

Job search of some type is nearly always needed to secure a job and, therefore, is an important precursor to employment.[2] As a result, most states fund job search programs for participants in safety net programs such as TANF. These job search programs — which tend to be short term, relatively low intensity, and low cost — are designed to help increase participants' work-readiness, the number of job applications they submit, job offers received and accepted, or, in cases where participants cannot find employment in the regular labor market or have more significant barriers to overcome, engagement in subsidized employment.[3] All of these activities may increase the likelihood of employment, which in turn may increase hourly wages and earnings. In addition to providing job search programs, states sanction participants by reducing their benefits if they fail to participate in the required work activity.[4]

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1   Chapter 2 of this report discusses the framework. In summary, behavioral diagnosis and design is a process for systematically developing behavioral interventions. It consists of four phases: defining the problem to be addressed, diagnosing all potential behavioral bottlenecks, designing behaviorally informed interventions to address the identified bottlenecks, and testing whether the interventions work using random assignment.
2   This section is based on Klerman, Koralek, Miller, and Wen (2012).
3   Subsidized employment provides income support to disadvantaged groups and is intended to improve their employability by placing them in a temporary work activity until they can find a regular, unsubsidized job.
4   In 2011, 16 states withheld the entire family benefit for the first sanction and 45 states either withheld the entire family benefit or closed the entire case in the most severe sanctioning situations (Kassabian, Whitesell, and Huber, 2012, p. 118).

Despite both the "carrots" and the "sticks" that provide incentives to participate and disincentives for not participating, engagement in job search programs is often quite low. Yet job loss among low-skilled, low-wage workers is high — leading to economic instability among low-income families, particularly those attached to the TANF system.[5] When TANF recipients do not satisfy their job search requirements, states risk missing annual work participation rate targets mandated by the federal government under the TANF block grant.[6]

Through mutual agreement with AHS and Illinois DHS, the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) team focused on increasing client engagement with job search because it offered an opportunity to consider psychological issues such as client perceptions and attitudes (rather than issues related to financial costs and benefits), and how these issues could be addressed through behaviorally informed changes. The BIAS team hypothesized that increasing client engagement with job search could lead to outcomes among clients such as becoming job-ready more quickly, attending a higher percentage of mandatory job search sessions, applying to more full-time jobs, and, ultimately, finding unsubsidized employment at a higher rate than would be possible otherwise.

Behavioral Diagnosis and Design

The AHS Work First program promotes employment-related outcomes through an individualized approach of one-on-one case management and independent job-search activities. Figure 4.1 shows this process in a simplified form.[7] The process begins when a client meets with a DHS caseworker, develops a service plan, and is assigned to AHS or another independent training and job search assistance provider. The client receives a child care subsidy immediately (if needed and available) to make child care arrangements before the intake appointment. Intake at AHS begins with an orientation session for new participants every Wednesday. During the one- to two-hour group orientation, clients are given a packet of forms to complete on site. Clients are also assigned to one of two case managers and instructed to return the following Monday for an initial meeting with their case manager and an assessment of their job-readiness.

The following Monday, clients who meet certain criteria (such as having a complete résumé) are deemed job-ready and immediately begin their search for full-time employment. This consists of applying for jobs found through online search engines, classified ads, and postings that are e-mailed by AHS's job developer. Clients who are designated as "not job-ready" are responsible for *becoming* job-ready, which may include completing tasks such as preparing or updating résumés or securing transportation and child care.

These activities — both job search and job-readiness preparation — are conducted at AHS. Clients meet with their case manager once a week for the first month and once a month thereafter. They persist in job search until one of several outcomes occurs: they are placed in a subsidized work experience, they find an unsubsidized job, they are terminated for noncompliance, or the contractor requests reassignment to a different service provider because they have missed meetings or failed to achieve their mandatory hours of job search.

Hypothesized Bottlenecks and Behavioral Concepts

The review of program procedures and materials, as well as discussions with program administrators and clients, yielded one bottleneck outside of the realm of AHS, and three behavioral bottlenecks that apply to AHS's services and staff.
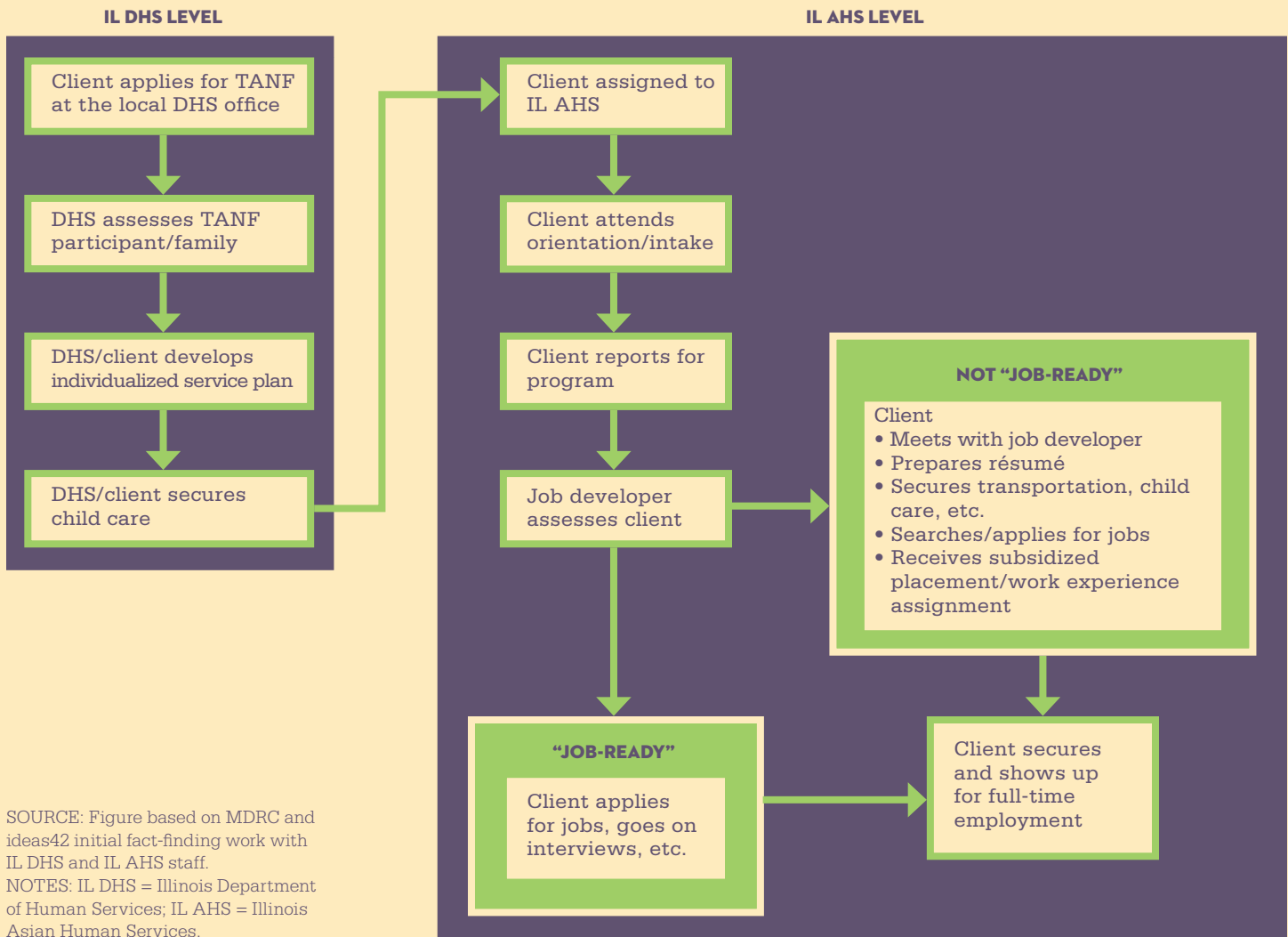
The bottleneck outside of AHS involved securing child care. During the team's site visit, many of the observed clients did not have a secure child care placement. DHS caseworkers inform clients when they need to obtain child care, but this process is largely the responsibility of the clients, with little assistance provided by DHS or AHS staff. The absence of a stable, secure child care arrangement could certainly interfere with participant engagement with the program and willingness to find full-time work, but

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5   Hamilton et al. (2001); Michalopoulos and Schwartz (2000); Navarro, Azurdia, and Hamilton (2008).
6   As of 2011, 50 percent of a state's single-parent caseload was required to participate an average of 30 hours a week. Two-parent families were required to participate at a rate of 90 percent for an average of 35 hours a week (Kassabian, Whitesell, and Huber, 2012, p. 97).
7   Figure 4.1 is a "process" map and not a "behavioral" map because particular behavioral concepts are not attached to the process.

IL DHS LEVEL

IL AHS LEVEL

Client applies for TANF at the local DHS office

DHS assesses TANF participant/family

DHS/client develops individualized service plan

DHS/client secures child care

Client assigned to IL AHS

Client attends orientation/intake

Client reports for program

Job developer assesses client

NOT "JOB-READY"

Client
• Meets with job developer
• Prepares résumé
• Secures transportation, child care, etc.
• Searches/applies for jobs
• Receives subsidized placement/work experience assignment

"JOB-READY"

Client applies for jobs, goes on interviews, etc.

Client secures and shows up for full-time employment

SOURCE: Figure based on MDRC and ideas42 initial fact-finding work with IL DHS and IL AHS staff.
NOTES: IL DHS = Illinois Department of Human Services; IL AHS = Illinois Asian Human Services.

since child care referrals were considered to be outside the scope of the work with AHS (as the issue was the responsibility of the DHS caseworker), it was not considered a bottleneck that the BIAS team could address.

The three hypothesized behavioral bottlenecks within the realm of AHS that the team considered are explained below and shown in Table 4.1.

▶ **Bottleneck 1: Clients may think of AHS and the welfare system on the whole as punitive and uncaring.** Clients may enter AHS with negative beliefs and feelings about welfare agencies. If true, this perception could color their interpretation of the interactions they have with AHS staff because of **confirmation bias**, or people's tendency to understand or perceive information in a way that confirms their own preconceived beliefs. Client perception is further shaped by **framing** — whereby subtle aspects of the way information is presented can have an outsized influence on perception and behavior. Here, the concern is whether messages to clients contain positive or negative framing cues. Compare these two messages:

(1) You must meet your hours or you will face termination from the program.

(2) It is important that you meet your hours so you can work toward your goal of finding full-time employment.

TABLE 4.1

HYPOTHESIZED RELATIONSHIPS OF BOTTLENECKS, BEHAVIORAL CONCEPTS, AND COMPONENTS OF THE INTERVENTION

ILLINOIS ASIAN HUMAN SERVICES

HYPOTHESIZED BOTTLENECK AND POSSIBLE BEHAVIORAL CONCEPTS	PROPOSED INTERVENTION COMPONENT[a]		
	Change Identity Priming Elements	Simplify and Modify Program Processes	Use Reminders
1. CLIENTS MAY THINK OF AHS AND THE WELFARE SYSTEM GENERALLY AS PUNITIVE AND UNCARING.			
Confirmation bias	✔	✔	
Framing		✔	
2. CLIENTS MAY SEE JOB SEARCH AS A PASSIVE ACTIVITY AND NOT EXPECT A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME.			
Anchoring		✔	
Confirmation bias	✔		
3. CLIENTS MAY NOT HAVE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES TO FULLY ENGAGE WITH THE INFORMATION PRESENTED DURING THE ORIENTATION.			
Limited cognition		✔	✔

NOTES: As discussed in Chapter 2, behavioral concepts cannot be definitively identified, but rather are hypotheses derived from the behavioral diagnosis and design process that may explain behavioral bottlenecks. This table is based on the framework described in Chapter 2 and depicted in Table 2.1.

[a] Following are examples of proposed intervention components that could be implemented in Illinois:
   Change Identity Priming Elements: Alter orientation approach to emphasize clients' strengths; emphasize clients' goals to obtain full-time employment as a positive aspiration.
   Simplify and Modify Program Processes: Reduce unnecessary paperwork and identify which information in the orientation is the most important, or which to focus on first.
   Use Reminders: Distribute reminders for upcoming events, such as scheduling appointments.

While the information regarding program termination is important and must be communicated to clients, if the former type of message is dominant, clients are more likely to have negative feelings about their job search.

Alternatively, the first statement may invoke **loss aversion**, a phenomenon in which people tend to react more strongly to a perceived loss than to an equivalent gain.[8] Research has shown that even if the eventual outcome is the same in both cases, framing a change as a loss rather than as a gain makes the option about twice as potent.[9] If the consequence was presented as a loss of valued program services (such as, "If you do not meet your hours, you may miss out on opportunities available as part of the Work First program"), the message might be even more effective.

Bottleneck 2: Clients may see job search as a passive activity and not expect a successful outcome.
Clients must understand that job search is an active, purposeful process that involves developing application materials, seeking out job opportunities, submitting applications, and following up with employers. Clients need this view of the process immediately because **anchoring** effects cause people

8   Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1990).
9   Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1990).

to become attached to the first information they receive, and confirmation bias leads people to differentially notice information that confirms their first impression. As already noted, clients begin AHS's Work First program by attending an orientation on Wednesday, but they do not begin program activities until the following Monday. A four-day break after orientation is likely to anchor clients to passivity in their impression of Work First participation.

Only clients who have "been unsuccessful in other employment and training programs" are eligible for Work First.[10] If clients see AHS as an extension of previous programs, they may anchor on those experiences and expect to fail again. Finally, based on their previous lack of success, clients may decide that self-directed job search requires a lot of effort on their part but offers no reasonable chance of leading to a good job, and they will maintain that impression if staff do not persuade them otherwise.

▶ **Bottleneck 3: Clients may not have the psychic resources to fully engage with the information that is presented during the orientation.** Behavioral science has shown that all human beings have **limited cognition** — a bounded capacity to process, understand, and recall information. Research into the **psychology of scarcity** shows that the pressure of negotiating life under conditions of poverty places a particularly high toll on cognitive resources, as people often need to make many trade-offs to manage their lives with limited financial resources.[11] These effects are likely to be especially acute during program orientation, but can affect other aspects of AHS's program.

Clients with limited cognition may not understand which information in the orientation is the most important, or even which to focus on first. The bottleneck may be that clients use their attention resources in a way that is less than optimal and may miss important information during this session. If information is conveyed in complex ways, people need time and further attention to understand it, and clients' limited understanding of rules or procedures may contribute to their failure to engage in job search. Even if clients pay attention to all the right information and understand it, they may not be able to remember all of it, or may fail to recall it at the time when it is necessary, a problem called **prospective memory** failure. For instance, a client may not remember to schedule an appointment to get a bus pass. If clients do not remember important information altogether, or do not remember the information when it is useful, they are less likely to succeed in job search.

Implications for Intervention Design

A number of behavioral interventions might address the hypothesized psychological bottlenecks that keep people from participating in an AHS program. The intervention ideas discussed with AHS fell into two categories: (1) operational modifications related to forms that need to be completed and submitted, the content of meetings, and the timing or ordering of tasks, and (2) staff training to insert a different tenor and set of messages into interactions with clients. Because the operational changes are the closest to **nudges** (relatively quick, easy, and low-cost, behaviorally informed changes),[12] this section presents a discussion of two of them: (1) priming successful identity, and (2) overcoming cognitive scarcity and limited cognition with the use of agendas and reminder handouts.

Priming Successful Identity

Every person has a number of overlapping and conflicting identities. The way people feel and act depends on which identity is active — and any given situation has a strong influence on the identity that manifests itself.[13] Staff can encourage desired behavioral outcomes by drawing on **identity priming**, which occurs when one identity in particular is made salient in order to influence an individual's response to a stimulus.

Research shows that asking clients to think and talk about a time in their lives when they succeeded can activate identities that inspire and motivate them to take action toward their goals.[14] In this way, altering

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10 See the Illinois Department of Human Services Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Work First Web site (www.dhs.state.il.us/page.aspx?item=31775).
11 Mullainathan (2005, 2011); Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir (2012); Shafir and Mullainathan (2012).
12 Thaler and Sunstein (2008).
13 Ross and Nisbett (1991).
14 Hall (2008), Part 3.

the orientation procedures and other key components of the program to underscore a client's strengths could, in turn, have a positive effect on program engagement. For instance, before clients sit down for a job search session, staff could present them with the following quick exercise:

> Think about something you did this week that made you feel successful. Write down what happened and how you felt afterwards.

This type of confidence priming can be powerful, but the effect is relatively short-lived. It would be wise to incorporate it at a point in the process when an immediate and important action follows, or to do it on an ongoing and regular basis during the program. This same insight can be applied to the design of written materials and forms to make them more positive in frame, and avoid activating client identities related to dependency or inadequacy.

Using Agendas and Reminder Handouts

An important strategy for overcoming a person's limited cognition is to simplify processes, incorporate agendas that provide a roadmap to upcoming events, specify next steps in clear and attainable goal statements, and use **reminders**. These devices serve to direct attention to the information and action steps that are most important, and are relatively easy to incorporate into the orientation and client meetings with caseworkers.

For example, during the orientation, staff could hand out and refer to a meeting agenda, which lists the topics of discussion. Clients might receive one folder labeled "Forms to Fill Out During Orientation" and another labeled "Program Information for Later Use." Then orientation staff could ask clients to take out the first folder, so each client has the same forms in the same order. Clients may find it easier to focus on one document at a time and devote their full attention to that, rather than being asked to make sense of a large packet. This might also help clients keep track of handouts later if they forget information. Clients may not notice when deadlines and responsibilities are announced verbally, or may not remember them even if they do notice, so written handouts summarizing this information might be helpful as well.[15]

Key Insights

One overall insight from this work is the power of human beings' natural tendency to think of behavior as driven in a consistent way by their character, rather than by the situation.[16] This tendency, called the "fundamental attribution error," is pervasive despite research in social psychology that convincingly shows that this interpretation of behavior is incorrect. In fact, studies have shown that features of a given situation determine as much as 70 percent of behavior.[17] Awareness of the fundamental attribution error is useful for practitioners, as they have a great deal of influence through their ability to change the situation or the environment in small ways that could have meaningful effects on participant behavior. For example, starting job search activities immediately, establishing goals during the first session, and emphasizing positive identities in materials and verbal communication may all matter in ways that are currently overlooked.

The work with AHS and Illinois DHS also demonstrates how complex behavioral interventions can be for job search programs. Many factors can contribute to participants' lack of engagement. For example, jobs can end unexpectedly and the time frame to receive public assistance can be long. Therefore, parents may be worried about having unstable resources. Or parents may simply be concerned about taking a job too soon at a wage that is too low. Nonetheless, a behavioral approach may have the potential to improve outcomes and complement traditional approaches geared to induce bigger changes in client outcomes.

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15 While the intervention ideas could help improve program engagement, the BIAS project will not be able to evaluate whether they work at AHS because of limited sample size for a study and difficulty in acquiring the needed data. Since job search assistance is decentralized in Illinois (as in many states), contractors such as AHS serve a relatively small proportion of the county caseload. In addition, since each contractor operates its Work First program differently and collects different outcome measures (and data sets are not integrated within providers or between providers and DHS), it would be difficult to evaluate the implementation of these ideas at low cost. In general, availability of administrative data on the measures of primary interest is very important in this work, as such data minimize evaluation costs. (See Chapter 2 for the discussion of gathering data.) While the BIAS team was not able to continue a pilot with AHS, the lessons learned from this process can be applied to TANF programs in other states, and can inform other employment programs.

16 In fact, the word "character" comes from a Greek word meaning "an engraved mark: something permanent."

17 Ross and Nisbett (1991).