

Networks of “Weak” Ties of Padua University Graduates Searching for Employment¹

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Summary. In this paper, we apply a model for the analysis of job search effectiveness through the so-called “weak ties”, i.e. the personal links through which the attainment of a work position may be favoured. We analyse weak ties with reference to the first job research by the University of Padua graduates through family, friendship and university links. To obtain a work position more coherent with a graduate’s educational investment, we analyse, too, the information about job opportunities that colleagues communicate to employed graduates. By hypothesising that graduates use their personal links in different portions, we segment, by means of a multivariate method, the sample of graduates according to the faculty and, within faculty, according to the curricular and social characteristics of graduates.

Keywords: Weak ties; Job Search; Parental links; Educational links; Professional links; Graduates; Padua University.

1. “Weak” tie networks

To return to the felicitous formula coined by Granovetter (1973), “weak ties” are those informal or extra-institutional ties that an individual is able to make use to get a job. The term covers both the acquaintances to which the individual knows he or she can turn and those effectively called upon to get a job regardless of the outcome.

¹ The four authors designed and realised jointly this research work. However, A. Boaretto wrote Sections 3 and 4 of the paper, whereas G. Rota wrote Section 2, I. Silvestri Section 5, and L. Fabbri the other sections.

That an individual's social network of acquaintance is a vehicle of opportunities towards the world of work is certainly not a recent discovery, nor is the phenomenon isolated to one part of the world (Katz, 1958; Lin *et al.*, 1981; Smelser & Swedberg, 1994). Such ties have been elevated to the status of respectable job-hunting channel since labour economists and economic sociologists have highlighted their relevance as alternatives or complements to the traditional pathways of job-hunting (Flap & De Graaf, 1986; Fevre, 1989; Watanabe, 1994; Bian & Ang, 1997). It is now commonplace to find that informal ties can generate or support opportunities, and that they are "weak" only insofar as they are less apparent (or less openly admitted to) than formal or institutional ties.

Graduates who apply for a job appear to the prospective employer - or selector acting on the employer's behalf - as a set of knowledge-driven, malleable abilities and wiliness to work in the context for which they are applying. If graduates also manifest their range of personal ties, these ties become part of how they present themselves. A recommendation from a person, of consequence, is perceived as a node in the network of relationships the person or institution evokes. Thus, when employing a graduate, not only do employers know that they are linking their network of acquaintance to the candidate's, they are also aware of gaining credit in the eyes of the person who made the recommendation.

Weak ties are not considered as socially negative; rather they are perceived as providing opportunities for the individual and results for the system of production as a whole. Of course, recommendations, which aim to place those candidates who benefit from them at the top of any shortlist regardless of their abilities, are exposed to individual moral considerations.

In the following, ties are evaluated in relation to the potential of obtaining their first job for new graduates from Padua University, and to the potential of changing jobs for those already in work who want to improve their position. What we seek to know is:

- i) if there are groups of graduates looking for work who rely heavily upon these ties and whether the use of weak ties is exclusive, that is, the only job-hunting channel used, or if such ties are used to complement, perhaps in the wake of failed attempts, searches which followed traditional channels;
- ii) if such ties are more effective in job-finding than formal or institutional channels, or whether they are effective only when used to defend positions obtained with other means, or, again, whether they facilitate low-level jobs, or high-profile positions (Granovetter, 1974). In other words, we want to understand the very nature of ties because it is quite different if they help to gain a low-level job, which present no substantial risk for the employer, instead of a high-profile position, which require total empathy between the new hire and the company.

In Section 2, we examine a number of hypotheses concerning individuals who make use of informal ties in their job-hunting. We analyse the acquaint-