Designing to Provide Social Support to Job Seekers After Prison Release

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Abstract

Job seekers with criminal records face job eligibility and stigma challenges on top of education and segregation challenges faced by other marginalized workers. To aid in the transition from incarceration to employment, technology can help assist people in goal-setting, information seeking, and social support. Towards social support, we are beginning to explore the design needs of an online community. In this position paper, we propose that such a community needs to provide emotional support alongside informational support, set appropriate social norms for people with few prior online experiences, and encourage sharing of setbacks alongside sharing of successes.

Author Keywords

Job seeking; criminal records; justice-involved; online communities; social support; goal-setting.

CSS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing~ Human computer interaction (HCI)**; *Social Media*

Introduction

The experience of prison and reentry is a common life transition among marginalized groups in the United States. For African American men, the lifetime risk of imprisonment is higher than other common life

transitions, including serving in the military or going to college [18]. After release from prison, people face numerous and substantial barriers to employment. In addition to challenges that marginalized workers often face such as spatial segregation, low education, and shifting industries, job seekers at reentry also confront occupational restrictions and criminal record stigma which restrict job eligibility and add emotional burden [2]. Approximately 60% of job seekers give up their job search within a month after release from prison out of frustration [17]. Because reentry is such a challenging time period, with 44% of people re-arrested within a year since release [1], better support during this critical life transition can have substantial impact on society.

Our research team is beginning to explore opportunities for online social communities to provide informational and emotional support during the job search process. We build on recent design explorations into assisting marginalized job seekers in goal-setting and resume creation [6,7] as well as our own work on job seeker's foraging practices [17] and designing online communities for support around self-tracking goals [9,11]. In this article, we point to specific opportunities for social technology to assist job seekers and outline our future plans for exploring the design space.

Background
Designing social systems for job seekers at reentry builds on prior work on the practices of job seekers and systems for facilitating support towards self-improvement goals.

Job Seeking Practices of Marginalized Communities
Although the majority of job seekers with criminal records are officially jobless, they often cobble together temporary positions, self-employ, or take off-the-books positions [8]. These foraging tactics are survival strategies, with the hopes of someday achieving long-term employment [17]. However, these tactics are often financially inadequate and may increase strain, leading back to crime. Social service organizations often work with job seekers to support their search efforts and with employers to curate information such as felon-friendly job postings for job seekers.

Recent work has examined how technology can help marginalized communities search for employment. Although these groups frequently look online to assist in job prospects, these searches rarely lead to opportunities [19]. People often do not have social connections capable of providing feedback on job materials [6]. On reentering to society from being incarcerated, job seekers often need to obtain digital literacy with the help of friends and family [16]. In designing DreamGigs [7] and ReviewMe [6], Dillahunt and colleagues demonstrate approaches for technology to assist in identifying work and providing support.

The job search process parallels self-tracking domains where people set goals, reflect on their practices, and often lapse prior to achieving them [10]. Wheeler & Dillahunt suggest job seeking tools could follow similar design strategies as self-tracking tools, facilitating goal-setting and reflection as well as features for social support [19]. Though little work has specifically examined how to design online communities to marginalized job seekers, such designs can be informed by effective communities in self-tracking domains.

Online Support Towards Self-Improvement Goals
Self-tracking or personal informatics refers to domains where people monitor various aspects of themselves
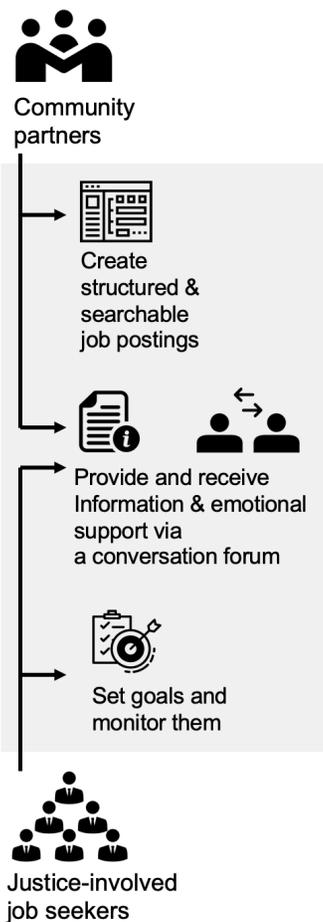
Figure 1. Features of Job Ready, a platform to support justice-involved job seekers that we are beginning to design and develop.

with a goal of self-understanding, often with a goal of self-improvement [13]. In these domains, particularly those related to health and wellness, people often turn to online communities for both informational and emotional support [9]. However, people often find their problems too personal to share with broad audiences, such as multi-purpose social networking sites like Facebook [15]. People often find smaller communities within the larger network focused around the issue they are interested in [4] or tools support connecting with strong ties only [12].

Although successful communities around self-tracking topics can provide both emotional and informational needs, people often struggle to receive the support they desire [9,15]. Communities therefore often involve moderators to drive conversation on a topic [3] or use daily or weekly challenges to promote social involvement [5,11]. People often follow these system-supported interventions with further conversation, encouragement, and advice.

Challenges and Opportunities
Our team is beginning to design and develop a platform to help justice-involved job seekers search for job leads, set and monitor job search goals via self-tracking, and converse with others in an online discussion board (Figure 1). Within the online community, we plan to evaluate the influence of a moderator's role in the community to understand whether a moderator who provides discussion prompts facilitates more support, further conversation, or improved outcomes from job searching than a moderator who provides minimal oversight.

In designing our online community, a number of challenges and opportunities emerge. Many of these relate to online communities at large, but the needs of the reentry transition point to additional design needs.

Emotional Versus Informational Support
Most research studies on justice-involved job seekers focus on informational support from community partners, friends, and family such as job leads and resume advice. However, there is increasing awareness about the critical role that emotional support can play in encouraging and sustaining job search [14]. We plan to encourage moderators to be supportive of job seekers as well as provide information, learning from online health communities where people often seek both styles of support [20].

Sharing Setbacks and Successes
Many people who use online communities to share aspects they are tracking about themselves only share their successes [9]. Although this practice can help people celebrate their accomplishments, it can also come across as bragging or minimize the accomplishments of others. Facilitating a community where people feel open to sharing their setbacks and struggles is crucial given the high rate of job search abandonment. We aim for moderator prompts to encourage this kind of discussion and create understanding that the community is a safe space for sharing setbacks.

Setting Appropriate Social Norms Online
Since job seekers at reentry often feel isolated [19], we aim to facilitate support among the job seekers as well as from the moderator. However, facilitating this peer support can be challenging as people on release from

Belongz	You guys treat this like it's a social media site it's not it's the Look for work
Boss Game	What's wrong with you
Monica Santana	Nothing
Boss Game	Ok
Princess 143	None
Teto	Yes is to look for work but who says you can't use it for other things, it's a phone I don't know I'm just saying
Boss Game	Like that
Belongz	How would parole feel knowing that all of us are communicating on a social media page
Teto	It's a cool phone man enjoy it
Belongz	Just think about the long haul of all of this if it ends up working and we get it taken away because were communicating with one another will be sick
Boss Game	It a club da
Belongz	You might want to fuck it up for yourselves but I don't want to fuck this up is the only chance I've had in five years to look for work
Monica Santana	That a cute picture and to tell you the truth you look handsome
Boss Game	Sorry u feel like that

Figure 2. A conversation excerpt from a deployment of an early mobile prototype of a job club. Participants used the platform to find work, discuss implications of community involvement on parole, and even flirt with one another.

prison need to learn the norms of online communication as they re-integrate into society. For example, in a prior deployment of an peer community prototype, participants used the job forum the community to attempt to sell items and even flirt with one another. Although participants appreciated some amount of casual conversation within the community, many expressed concern that the platform emphasized general-purpose social networking over job seeking (Figure 2). Given that many job seekers at reentry have limited experience communicating online, it is important to set community norms around conversation topics and inform job seekers of those norms.

Conclusion
As we explore designing social systems for the life transition from prison to workforce engagement, we run into many common challenges present in other online support communities. We would be excited to learn from the experiences of other researchers and designers of social support systems at the workshop. We would look forward to learning how social systems for other life transitions have approached mixing informational and emotional support, educating newcomers on norms and digital literacy, and sharing challenges as well as successes.

Daniel A. Epstein is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. His work examines how the design personal tracking technology can better integrate into people's everyday lives and practices. He studies and designs tracking tools to better facilitate goal-setting and social support, such as towards healthy eating and increased physical activity.

Naomi F. Sugie is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine. Her work examines how technology can serve the job seeking needs of justice-involved communities, contributing theoretical understanding of the job seeking and employment practices of these groups and demonstration of technology's effectiveness.

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