

## Global Visions

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# Getting Unemployed Job Seekers Back to Work: The Development of a Process Model of Employment Counseling Behavior

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The aim of this study was to propose a tentative model of employment counseling based on 31 critical incident interviews with supervisors, employment counselors, and unemployed job seekers. The incidents ( $N = 599$ ) mentioned in the interviews were inductively used to develop a category framework describing behaviors of employment counselors. On the basis of the interviews, categories, and incidents within these categories, the authors proposed a 4-phase preliminary model of the employment counseling process. Findings suggest that employment counseling is a complex and dynamic process involving several distinct and consecutive steps focused on clients, governmental funding agencies, colleagues, and employers.

Job loss is one of the most important career changes in people's working lives (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2008) and one of the top 10 traumatic life experiences (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). Unemployment has large psychological and health costs for the unemployed individuals as well as large economic costs for these individuals, their families, communities, and nations, including individuals' loss of earnings, reduced national productivity, and costs of social security programs and employment services.

Accelerated reemployment could yield significant benefits for national economies as well as for individuals' finances and well-being (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Previous research has shown that specific reemployment training programs are effective in speeding reemployment. For example, participating in reemployment programs has been shown to result in more time spent on job seeking and a greater likelihood of reemployment (e.g., Van Hooft & Noordzij,

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2009). Studies have also been conducted to examine the perceived effectiveness of employment counseling (e.g., Butterfield & Borgen, 2005). However, these studies have focused exclusively on a small selection of client-directed behaviors (i.e., support or training). Moreover, coping with job loss and finding a new job are complex tasks requiring various skills and behaviors (e.g., Saks, 2006). They are also tasks that are relatively novel and ambiguous for most job seekers. Furthermore, setbacks and negative experiences are abundant during job seeking, making it a highly stressful task (Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). Thus, to deal with the difficulties of job seeking, many job seekers get assistance from employment counseling agencies (also called *career centers*, *employment centers*, *reemployment agencies*, *outplacement agencies*, or *job services*). Employment counselors operate within employment counseling agencies, helping job seekers overcome emotional barriers to reemployment and supporting them in their job search (e.g., Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999; Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Savickas (2011; see also McAdams & Olsen, 2010) differentiated between three basic services that can be provided by career counselors, depending on clients' needs: (a) vocational guidance, in which counselors help clients find a matching job (i.e., client as actor); (b) career education, in which counselors help clients develop new competencies for a job (i.e., client as agent); and (c) career counseling, in which counselors help clients construct their career (i.e., client as author). In the current study, the focus is on vocational guidance and career counseling of unemployed job seekers. Therefore, we define *employment counseling* of unemployed job seekers as the process of vocational guidance and career counseling that helps job seekers to construct their career and find a job and *employment counseling effectiveness* as the degree to which counselors' behaviors result in their clients getting reemployed in the right kind of jobs.

Upon review of the limited body of research on employment counseling, it becomes apparent that all counselor behaviors identified as effective are behaviors directed toward clients. Client satisfaction is commonly used as a criterion for identifying effective client-centered behaviors (e.g., Wooten, 1996). However, as stated by Wooten (1996), client satisfaction represents only one level of evaluation of employment counseling and is mainly based on direct benefits perceived by clients, such as the quality of the client-counselor relationship or the provision of job search training courses. As demonstrated by the present study's findings, this exclusive focus on the client represents a rather narrow conception of employment counselors' behavior, because effective functioning was found to include behaviors toward other stakeholders, such as governmental agencies, colleagues, and employers. Therefore, the extant literature on employment counseling behavior notwithstanding, understanding of effective counselors' behavior is still limited. Thus, the present study was designed to establish a comprehensive overview of employment counselors' behaviors that are perceived as effective by unemployed job seekers, employment counselors, and their supervisors, thereby broadening the focus to other stakeholders and further specifying the client-centered behaviors. In addition, we sought to integrate the counseling behaviors into a tentative process model of employment counseling. The acknowledgment of employment counseling as a process

is well known in theory as well as in practice (e.g., Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999; Westaby, 2004). Yet, to our knowledge, the phases of distinctive behaviors of employment counselors and their relevance to counseling effectiveness have never been systematically examined, raising the question, "What are effective behaviors of employment counselors, and how are these behaviors related to the phases of employment counseling?"

The present study aimed to contribute to the literature by proposing a dynamic process model of employment counseling effectiveness. Model development was informed by an extensive field study based on Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique (CIT) that was designed to generate a comprehensive overview of effective work behaviors of employment counselors. In addition to the theoretical contribution, the results of our study also contribute to the practice of employment counseling. For example, employment counseling agencies can use our findings for the development of training and education programs for employment counselors, coaching, and performance management systems. That way, we aim to contribute to the improvement of current techniques of assisting unemployed individuals to go back to work.

## Method

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We conducted an inductive theory-building study that focused on behaviors of employment counselors perceived to be effective and ineffective, using the CIT technique developed by Flanagan (1954). CIT is suitable for our purposes for a number of reasons. First, CIT is an exploratory method enabling depth and breadth of insight into little known phenomena by collecting direct and detailed information of human behavior (Creswell, 1998). Second, the technique has been applied successfully in explorations of management and psychology processes, indicating that it is versatile (e.g., Motowidlo, Dunette, & Carter, 1990). Third, CIT in general has been shown to generate both reliable and valid descriptions of observable work behavior (Anderson & Nilsson, 1964; Motowidlo et al., 1992). Finally, CIT allows researchers to capture the complexity of job behavior, can yield a complete description of job content, and can help distinguish between effective and ineffective job performance (Campbell et al., 1990; Motowidlo et al., 1992).

CIT consists of a set of procedures for collecting and analyzing incidents. Flanagan (1954) defined an incident as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (p. 327). Critical incidents should be collected from subject matter experts, that is, individuals who are aware of the aims and the objectives of the job (Latham & Wexley, 1994). In the current study, we defined *incidents* as descriptions of either effective or ineffective work behaviors of employment counselors. CIT comprises five steps: (a) general aim, (b) plans and specifications of the situation and the subject matter experts to be interviewed, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, and (e) interpreting the data and reporting the results. Following Druskat and Wheeler's (2003) study on effective leadership and Duriau, Reger, and Pfarrer's (2007) study, we analyzed the data and answered the research question by using content analysis to develop a category framework of behaviors of employment counselors and process analysis to reveal the process of

effective counseling, resulting in a phase model of employment counseling behaviors.

### **General Aim, Plans and Specifications, and Participants**

The general aim was defined as identifying the activities that employment counselors use in the process of offering vocational guidance and career counseling to help unemployed job seekers to construct their career and find a job. The study was conducted in one of the largest employment counseling agencies in the Netherlands. The agency comprises 12 offices at different locations, employing almost 180 employment counselors, who together counsel more than 10,000 clients per year. The 12 offices operate almost completely independently concerning policy, cooperation with other parties, and counseling practices.

In this study, employment counselors, clients (who were unemployed job seekers), and counselors' supervisors were interviewed. We used stratified random sampling and invited one client, one supervisor, and two employment counselors (or 48 total) from each of the 12 offices to be interviewed. Because of scheduling conflicts and time constraints, our final interview pool was 31. Of these participants, eight were supervisors (four men and four women), 18 were employment counselors (13 women and five men), and five were clients (four men and one woman). The mean age of the interviewees was 41.4 years ( $SD = 9.0$ ). The average tenure with the employment counseling agency was 44.5 months ( $SD = 34.4$ ) for supervisors and 45 months ( $SD = 31.2$ ) for employment counselors. The mean duration of counseling that clients received by the agency was 18.4 months ( $SD = 8.9$ ). The counselors and supervisors whom we interviewed did not differ from the entire employment agency staff with regard to age,  $t(184) = 1.09$ ,  $p = .31$ , or tenure,  $t(164) = 1.10$ ,  $p = .27$ . The clients whom we interviewed did not differ from the entire population of clients who received counseling in the interview period with regard to age,  $t(791) = 1.18$ ,  $p = .24$ , or duration of counseling,  $t(791) = 0.54$ ,  $p = .59$ . Therefore, the counselors, supervisors, and clients whom we interviewed can be considered representative for the employment agency's staff and clients.

### **Data Collection**

Structured interviews were conducted with all participants. The interviews were conducted by the first author (15 interviews) and the fourth author (16 interviews). Both were familiar with the topic but not with the interviewees. The interviews started by asking counselors, supervisors, and clients about a specific incident in the past 6 months in which the behavior of an employment counselor was effective in helping people to find the right job. To clarify and specify the incident, interviewers continued by asking four questions about every incident: (a) "What exactly did you (or the employment counselor) do that was effective?" (b) "What was the result of this behavior?" (c) "Was this behavior an example of effective behavior of employment counselors?" and (d) "Was there anything you (or the employment counselor) could have done to be more effective?" The same procedure was used for ineffective incidents.

Prior to data collection, we performed a pilot to verify that the interview protocol indeed generated incidents of specific employment counselors'

behavior and to ensure that the two interviewers conducted the interviews in the same way. To this end, both interviewers interviewed two staff members of the employment counseling agency. These interviews were audiotaped and listened to by the two interviewed staff members as well as the two interviewers. Inconsistencies between the two interviewers were clarified and resolved, and the interview protocols were revised. Finally, the two interviewers interviewed each other to familiarize themselves with the interview protocols.

Before the interview, interviewees were informed about the aim of the interview and were asked for permission to conduct the interview and audiotape it. During the interview, clients as well as employment counselors and supervisors were asked to describe at least two examples of effective and two examples of ineffective behavior. All interview tapes were fully transcribed.

## Results

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### **Content Data Analysis and Developing a Category Framework**

We analyzed the manifest content of the transcripts with the objective of developing a category framework that describes the data in a useful and valid manner. A category framework is a model that organizes identified critical behaviors into meaningful categories and subcategories. We based our procedure for this step on the guidelines and reliability checks offered by Flanagan (1954); Latham and Wexley (1994); and Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005).

First, from the 31 interview transcripts, we identified 599 critical incidents, reflecting effective (409 incidents = 68.3%) as well as ineffective behaviors (190 incidents = 31.7%) of employment counselors. We identified incidents based on three criteria (cf. Butterfield et al., 2005; Patrick, Scrase, Ahmed, & Tombs, 2009). Incidents had to involve (a) specific behavior of employment counselors, (b) a specific episode, and (c) behavior with a positive or negative effect on helping people find a job. Although Flanagan (1954) stated that 1,000 incidents are usually required to establish comprehensive coverage of critical behaviors for a skilled job, most CIT studies concluded that 300 to 500 critical incidents are sufficient to reach saturation (e.g., Butterfield & Borgen, 2005). Before developing the category framework, we randomly removed 10% of the incidents ( $n = 60$ ). These incidents were used in a later stage to examine the content validity of the category framework (see Latham, Fay, & Saari, 1979). The content validity check is reported later in this section. It supported our conclusion that 599 incidents were sufficient to establish comprehensive coverage of critical employment counseling behavior.

Second, the remaining 539 incidents were categorized in three substeps. In the first substep, two raters (the second and third authors), who are familiar with the CIT, independently sorted the incidents into meaningful categories. This analytic induction process consists of careful reading and repeated sorting of the incidents and continually refining and redefining the categories. There was no restriction on the number or type of categories. Finally, the two raters compared the categories that they both had defined independently and discussed differences. They

solved discrepancies by rearranging and combining incidents until they decided on a framework that fitted the incidents best. On the basis of Flanagan's (1954) criteria for category frameworks and Boyatzis's (1998) recommendations, the two raters decided on five clear and distinct main categories with concise and well-defined category labels and definitions, plus one "undefined" category containing ambiguous incidents. The five main categories were divided into 33 subcategories.

In the second substep, three raters (the first and fourth authors and an experienced psychologist not familiar with the aim of the study) independently classified all 539 incidents into the category framework. This procedure represents an external validation of the framework, a step that is often omitted in CIT studies (Patrick et al., 2009). The three raters also allocated incidents that they believed did not fully describe specific behavior or were beyond the scope of the study to the undefined category. Because CIT provides no solution for an undefined category, we added a third substep to our procedure.

In this third substep, the two raters from the first substep and one rater from the second substep (the first author) examined and discussed all items that were allocated to the undefined category by one or more of the first or second substep raters. On the basis of this analysis of the undefined category, we dropped 63 incidents (11.7%; 27 ineffective and 36 effective incidents), either because they did not describe specific observable behavior or because they described multiple behaviors. This resulted in 476 remaining incidents (12.4% incidents from clients, 31.3% from supervisors, and 56.3% from employment counselors) divided into five main categories and 33 subcategories describing effective and ineffective behaviors of employment counselors. A chi-square analysis confirmed that the distributions of effective versus ineffective incidents across employment counselors, supervisors, and clients did not differ significantly,  $\chi^2(2, N = 476) = 2.16, p = .34$ .

Finally, we checked the credibility and trustworthiness of the category framework by calculating the interrater reliability and establishing the content validity. We calculated interrater reliability for the assignment of the 476 incidents to categories by the three raters in the second substep. Interrater reliability is an important criterion of qualitative research and represents an essential step in validating coding schemes (Neuendorf, 2002). The percentage of overall agreement between the three raters was 80% for the five main categories and 56% for the 33 subcategories.

Furthermore, we computed Fleiss's (1971; see Randolph, 2008) kappa as an index of agreement beyond what could be expected by chance. Fleiss's kappa is an extension of Cohen's (1960) kappa for three or more raters. For the five main categories, kappa equaled .76, indicating adequate agreement between the three raters above chance. For the 33 subcategories, kappa was .55, indicating moderate agreement. Given the adequate agreement for the five main categories and the moderate agreement for the 33 subcategories, we concluded that the reliability of the category framework was satisfactory. This means that it was very likely that any other rater would decide on the same category framework. The content validity of the categorization was established based on the 10% ( $n = 60$ ) incidents that were removed from categorization before the categorization process. Content valid-

ity refers to the extent to which the measure reflects the full domain of the concept being measured (Shippmann et al., 2000). In the CIT procedure, content validity is considered adequate if the 10% incidents describe no behavior that had not yet appeared in the previous incidents (Latham et al., 1979). This is an important check, given our purpose of generating a comprehensive overview of effective and ineffective behaviors. No new categories were needed to accommodate the additional incidents; the 10% incidents all fitted the existing categories in the framework. Moreover, the 10% incidents were evenly distributed among the 33 categories. These findings support the content validity of the category structure, indicating that a sufficient number of incidents were collected and that conducting more interviews would most likely not result in a different category framework.

Our final category framework included five main categories and 33 subcategories (see Table 1). The five main categories were (a) behavior toward governmental agencies, (b) behavior toward colleagues, (c) behavior toward employers, (d) behavior toward clients, and (e) general behavior. Categories, definitions, and number and examples of effective and ineffective incidents, along with the number of participants reporting these incidents, are shown in Table 1. (A more elaborate description and interpretation of the categories is available upon request from the first author.)

### **Process Data Analysis and Developing a Tentative Process Model**

I keep in contact with this organization, they know me and I know them. A few weeks ago they had a vacancy; the manager phoned me and asked me if I had a candidate. I had a client very suitable for this job who had told me that he is too anxious to do job interviews. So, I arranged that this client could start immediately. This week I phoned the employer and the client. Both are very satisfied, as am I. That is effective counseling.

As indicated by this quote, the interviews with employment counselors, supervisors, and clients clearly showed that employment counseling is a complex and dynamic process with consecutive phases requiring distinctive behaviors. The categories of the framework shown in Table 1 reveal all sorts of counselor behaviors. However, these categories in isolation do not show the process of employment counseling because they do not directly reveal the antecedents or consequences of these behaviors and they do not always directly indicate the purpose served by this behavior. For example, networking with employers is indicated as effective behavior: "I keep in contact with this organization, they know me and I know them." However, this incident by itself does not reveal the purpose of this behavior or why it is effective. In the next sentence, the purpose for keeping in contact is explained: "A few weeks ago they had a vacancy; the manager phoned me and asked me if I had a candidate." Then, the following information is provided: "I had a client very suitable for this job who had told me that he is too anxious to do job interviews." Thus, this counselor did an assessment and knew that it was not effective to let the client do an interview and helped the client by making a match between the organization and the client:

**TABLE 1**  
**Category Framework of Behaviors of Employment Counselors**

Category	Examples of Effective Incidents	Examples of Ineffective Incidents
Behavior toward governmental agencies <sup>a</sup>		
1. <i>Behavior directed at governmental agencies:</i> Discussing problems, asking for information, and defending clients with governmental agencies (n = 22).	"I contacted the governmental agency because this client had so many problems. First, we have to deal with these problems before starting the job search" (n = 15).	"I should have contacted the governmental agencies. Then, I would have known that this client had a chronic disease" (n = 7).
Behavior toward colleagues <sup>b</sup>		
2. <i>Behavior directed at colleagues:</i> Sharing information with, giving support to, and asking for support from colleagues (n = 25).	"You have to work as a team. In that way you are able to share your emotions about clients who are very annoying" (n = 18).	"When I told my colleagues about this angry employer, they said that I should have asked them for information about this employer" (n = 7).
Behavior toward employers <sup>c</sup>		
3. <i>Networking:</i> Keeping and managing contact with employers and motivating them to cooperate (n = 19).	"Although I knew there was no vacancy, I made an appointment with this employer to keep in contact" (n = 18).	"When we started this project, we did not know employers. We should have started with building a network" (n = 1).
4. <i>Matching:</i> Searching for jobs and getting in touch with employers to look for jobs (n = 28).	"She [employment counselor] asked me [client] if I was interested in this job" (n = 25).	"This client had been in jail. My behavior was not effective because I let him search for a job on his own instead of contacting an employer to explain the situation" (n = 3).
5. <i>Coaching and counseling:</i> Coaching employers when they employ difficult clients (n = 13).	"I told this employer about the things this client had to learn. You have to be honest" (n = 11).	"I told this employer that he was not fair to my client, then a conflict arose" (n = 2).
Behavior toward clients (n = 331) <sup>d</sup>		
6. <i>Assessing:</i> Assessing clients and their problems (n = 35).	"I sent her job openings because I estimated that she was able to react to these vacancies" (n = 18).	"Because of his work experience, I overestimated this client" (n = 17).
7. <i>Recognizing and taking away barriers to work:</i> Identifying work barriers and helping to solve these barriers (n = 21).	"She [employment counselor] arranged everything so I [client] could get my driver's license" (n = 17).	"This client was not a native speaker and I should have applied at the governmental agency for a language course. Months were lost" (n = 4).
8. <i>Confronting:</i> Responding to clients' behavior and setting boundaries (n = 17).	"I asked this client [who could start in a new job] why he was reluctant and told him that he was moving backwards instead of forwards" (n = 14).	"I confronted this client with her behavior, and she started to cry. As a result, she reported me to the governmental agency" (n = 3).

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Category Framework of Behaviors of Employment Counselors

Category	Examples of Effective Incidents	Examples of Ineffective Incidents
Behavior toward clients (n = 331) <sup>d</sup> (Continued)		
9. <i>Identifying needs and possibilities:</i> Investigating needs and possibilities of clients (n = 15).	"I offered this client a career test" (n = 13).	"This client wanted a particular job, and I helped him find one" (n = 2).
10. <i>Managing expectations:</i> Clarifying expectations and giving information about the employment counseling process (n = 11).	"During the intake, I asked the client about his expectations about me and I clarified my expectations about him" (n = 7).	"I did not set clear boundaries for this client, such as I expect this and you have to do that. So he blamed me for his failures" (n = 4).
11. <i>Providing self-insight:</i> Providing self-insight to clients (n = 9).	"I tried to make this client aware of her skills and abilities" (n = 7).	"I should have said to this client that perhaps his problem was due to his own behavior" (n = 2).
12. <i>Goal setting:</i> Setting goals for or with clients (n = 6).	"I set small goals for this client" (n = 6).	—
13. <i>Giving assignments:</i> Giving assignments to clients (n = 10).	"I said to this client, 'Here is the phone. You can call this employer now'" (n = 8).	"I gave him the assignment to look for jobs by himself, but that turned out wrong for him" (n = 2).
14. <i>Making agreements:</i> Making agreements about job search activities (n = 11).	"We [client and counselor] made specific agreements" (n = 6).	"I thought I made clear agreements; however, sometimes he showed up, and sometimes he did not" (n = 5).
15. <i>Direct assistance with job search:</i> Conducting job search activities with or for a client (n = 20).	"We [client and counselor] practiced the interview, and because of that I could give direct feedback to this client" (n = 12).	"I pointed this client at an interview training, because I could not think of anything that could help him" (n = 3).
16. <i>Training for job search:</i> Training and exercising job search activities with a client (n = 15).	"It was very important for me [client] that she [counselor] was present during my interview" (n = 17).	"I was working very hard for this client. However, he just only said every time I showed him a vacancy, 'No, this is not my cup of tea.' I should have had him take the initiative" (n = 3).
17. <i>Giving tips and advice in job search:</i> Giving instructions about job search activities so that clients themselves can perform these activities (n = 12).	"I advised this client to look on the Internet for vacancies" (n = 12).	—
18. <i>Motivating:</i> Stimulating, convincing, and making clients enthusiastic for a job (n = 18).	"This client did not like the job I offered her, but I said to her, 'Try. You have nothing to lose'" (n = 12).	"There were moments that I [client] could not motivate myself, for instance, when I got a rejection. At these moments, I could have used some motivation by my counselor" (n = 6).

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Category Framework of Behaviors of Employment Counselors

Category	Examples of Effective Incidents	Examples of Ineffective Incidents
Behavior toward clients (n = 331) <sup>d</sup> (Continued)		
19. <i>Empowering</i> : Giving confidence and showing strong sides of clients (n = 10).	"When she did something well, I gave her compliments" (n = 7).	"It took only a short while to find a job for this client; however, there was no time to give him confidence that he could do the job, so I'm not sure he will manage this job" (n = 3).
20. <i>Pushing</i> : Being directive and sticking to one's own plan (n = 11).	—	"I lost a lot of time to convince this client that he had to find a job and it failed because he wanted to start a training" (n = 11).
21. <i>Monitoring job search activities</i> : Checking how the client is keeping up with appointments and asking for feedback about job search activities (n = 8).	"After 2 weeks, I called this client and asked if he had found any vacancies" (n = 4).	"This client acted as if he had found a job and I believed him; however, there was no job and no employer. It was a fake. I should have checked on him" (n = 4).
22. <i>Mobilizing clients' environment</i> : Contacting family, friends, and caretakers of clients and asking them to help (n = 8).	"I got in touch with the family of this client [with an autistic disorder] so they could help me and could call me when there were problems" (n = 7).	"This client was treated by a psychologist. Maybe it would have been wise to get in touch with this psychologist" (n = 1).
23. <i>Explaining the content of jobs</i> : Giving information about the content of jobs (n = 7).	"Because this client was not a native speaker, I explained everything about the job in English" (n = 6).	"I explained [to] this client everything about the job; however, it did not do any good. This was not effective" (n = 1).
24. <i>Providing follow-up services</i> : Monitoring and checking clients in their new jobs (n = 19).	"I occasionally visit his workplace and check if everything is okay [client is a hooligan]" (n = 14).	"I only visited this client once at his workplace. At that moment, he was satisfied; however, at one point in time, he resigned" (n = 5).
25. <i>Communicating</i> : Listening, asking questions, being sensitive, and being empathetic (n = 28).	"I listened and asked this client every time if I understood him well, but I also asked critical questions" (n = 21).	"[client] told my counselor that I was abused. Her reaction was not helpful" (n = 7).
26. <i>Building and maintaining good relationships</i> : Making clients feel at ease, being kind, and having a respectful and open attitude (n = 20).	"I [client] like this counselor because she talks about all kinds of things and not only about jobs" (n = 16).	"There was no connection between the employment counselor and I [client]. There was no communication, no trust, nothing. You have to stop it and hand me over to another employment counselor" (n = 4).
27. <i>Maintaining contact</i> : Having regular contact with clients and keeping up contact (n = 17).	"This client performed the job search activities on her own, but I kept regular contact with her" (n = 9).	"[client] think that the frequency of contact between the counselor and me should have been higher" (n = 8). (Continued on next page)

**TABLE 1 (Continued)**  
**Category Framework of Behaviors of Employment Counselors**

Category	Examples of Effective Incidents	Examples of Ineffective Incidents
Behavior toward clients ( $n = 331$ ) <sup>d</sup> (Continued) 28. <i>Being available</i> : Being approachable and available for clients ( $n = 3$ ).	"I [client] can always visit her [counselor]" ( $n = 2$ ).	"There was an acute situation for this client. Unfortunately, I was not available" ( $n = 1$ ).
General behavior ( $n = 38$ ) <sup>e</sup> 29. <i>Self-reflecting</i> : Asking for feedback and reflecting on one's own behavior and results ( $n = 10$ ).	"Sometimes you have to recognize that you are wrong, and you must have the courage to admit that this is the wrong way for this client" ( $n = 3$ ).	"I should have asked this client what kind of job do you like but instead he laid back and I looked for the jobs" ( $n = 7$ ).
30. <i>Regulating own emotions</i> : Coping with feelings toward employers, clients, colleagues, and agencies ( $n = 9$ ).	"It was a difficult client, but the employment counselor always stayed calm" ( $n = 1$ ).	"The client was very compelling and sometimes even aggressive, and then I got angry. That is not smart" ( $n = 8$ ).
31. <i>Planning and organizing</i> : Planning, preparing, and organizing one's own job ( $n = 5$ ).	"Right now, I am busy with an Excel sheet, putting all my clients on a list with all the information needed" ( $n = 3$ ).	"My work administration is not perfect at this moment, so I only react to clients with problems and do not have regular contact with the clients who are doing well" ( $n = 2$ ).
32. <i>Keeping job knowledge up to date</i> : Keeping the knowledge about rules, procedures, and syndromes up to date ( $n = 7$ ).	"This employer knew nothing about labor costs, etc., so we all figured it out for him, and, as a result, he was willing to employ my client" ( $n = 3$ ).	"This client committed suicide. Maybe when I would have had more expertise I could have helped him" ( $n = 4$ ).
33. <i>Keeping agreements</i> : Keeping agreements with employers, colleagues, clients, and governmental agencies ( $n = 7$ ).	"When I [client] called her [employment counselor], she said, 'I'll call you back in a few hours,' and indeed, she called me back in time" ( $n = 3$ ).	"She [employment counselor] was always late" ( $n = 4$ ).

Note.  $N = 476$ .

<sup>a</sup>For behavior toward government agencies,  $n = 22$  total incidents, 4.6% (effective incidents,  $n = 15$ ; ineffective incidents,  $n = 7$ ). <sup>b</sup>For behavior toward colleagues,  $n = 25$  total incidents, 5.3% (effective incidents,  $n = 18$ ; ineffective incidents,  $n = 7$ ). <sup>c</sup>For behavior toward employers,  $n = 60$  total incidents, 12.6% (effective incidents,  $n = 54$ ; ineffective incidents,  $n = 6$ ). <sup>d</sup>For behavior toward clients,  $n = 331$  total incidents, 69.5% (effective incidents,  $n = 226$ ; ineffective incidents,  $n = 105$ ). <sup>e</sup>For general behavior of employment counselors,  $n = 38$  total incidents, 8.0% (effective incidents,  $n = 13$ ; ineffective incidents,  $n = 25$ ).

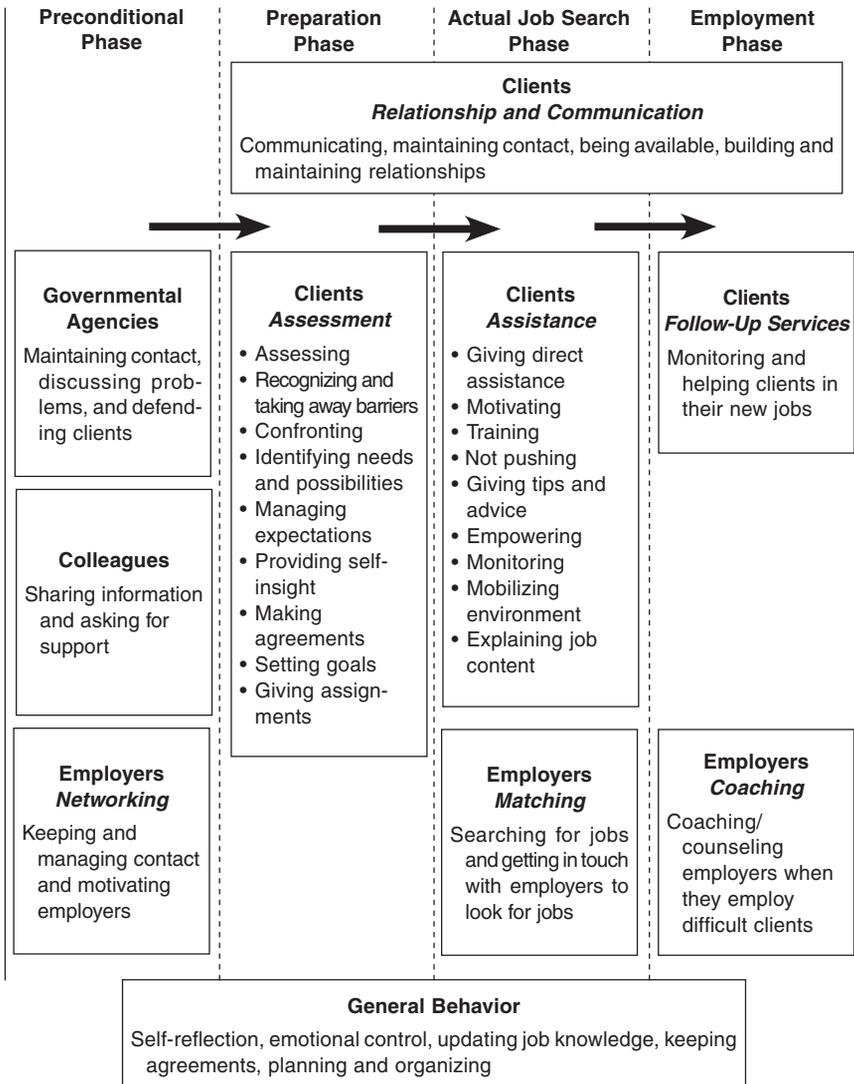
“So, I arranged that this client could start immediately.” Finally, this counselor provided aftercare by phoning the client and the employer of the organization: “I phoned the employer and the client. Both are very satisfied, as am I. That is effective counseling.”

At this point, we decided to analyze the process of employment counseling by examining the incidents and rereading the interviews to find the deeper meaning embodied in the text. We used guidelines recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to find the deeper meaning in the interviews. We looked for interactions between clients and employment counselors, sought to identify the function of each behavior, looked for general patterns in the data, and identified conditions that contributed to the effectiveness of behavior and the purpose and consequences of behaviors. In doing so, we hoped to uncover the process of employment counseling. After several discussions about the purpose of the behaviors described in the interviews, we inductively distinguished four phases of employment counseling behaviors: (a) the preconditional phase (behavior of counselors aimed at setting the stage and creating the preconditions for clients' job search and reemployment), (b) the preparation phase (behavior of counselors aimed at enabling clients to start searching), (c) the actual job search phase (behavior of counselors aimed at assisting clients during their job search), and (d) the employment phase (behavior of counselors aimed at successful long-term employment for clients).

We then returned to the category framework with its categories and subcategories and focused on how these categories interact according to the four phases of employment counseling to describe the employment counseling process. Therefore, we simultaneously examined the incidents, the interviews from which they were derived, and the category framework, guided by questions suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to uncover processes. These questions are as follows: “What behaviors connect one sequence of events to another?” “Are behaviors aligned or misaligned?” and “How do the consequences of one set of behaviors play into the next sequence of behaviors?” For example, the data show that when clients enter the employment counseling agency for the first time, it is crucial that counselors evaluate clients' physical and mental states, identify their resources, determine their needs and possibilities, and recognize potential barriers to work. From the data, it became evident that such evaluation is important because much time can be lost (sometimes almost a year) when counselors fail to make an adequate assessment of clients' mental and physical states and resources. In that case, counselors are not sufficiently aware of potential reemployment barriers, and clients start searching for jobs and counselors start matching employers and clients with little chance of success.

Finally, during the process analysis in which we continually tested and retested our ideas about the process of employment counseling on the incidents, the interviews, and the category framework, we developed a tentative process model of employment counseling. To further validate the model, we asked five employment counselors from different employment counseling agencies how well the model fits the process of counseling and if they could identify themselves with the model. The counselors believed that the model with its distinct phases and behavioral categories was a good description of the process of counseling. There was some

discussion about the behavior toward governmental agencies category. Two employment counselors were working at a governmental agency counseling unemployed people. However, they recognized behavior toward governmental agencies as very important for employment counselors working at employment counseling agencies. Therefore, we proposed a tentative process model of employment counseling as displayed in Figure 1, which shows that the process of employment counseling includes four distinct phases of counseling in which behaviors have to be directed to different stakeholders. (A more elaborate justification of the model phases and proposed linkages is available upon request from the first author.)



**FIGURE 1**

**Proposed Tentative Phase Model of Effective Employment Counseling Behavior**

## Discussion

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### Theoretical Contributions and Propositions

Despite the widespread and increasing use of employment counseling for unemployed job seekers, relatively little is known about the process of employment counseling and what behaviors make employment counseling effective, raising the question, "What are effective behaviors of employment counselors, and how are these behaviors related to the phases of employment counseling?" To answer this question, we inductively developed a category framework, and, on the basis of this framework, we proposed a tentative four-phase model of the employment counseling process. Our findings are depicted in Table 1, showing the behaviors perceived as effective for employment counseling, and Figure 1, showing the proposed phase model of employment counseling. The present study extends the literature on employment counseling and the understanding of the process of employment counseling in several ways. In listing these contributions, we arrive at four propositions based on the current study's findings that provide directions for future research on employment counseling.

First, we specifically probed for both effective and ineffective behaviors in the interviews. Although at times failing to perform effective behavior represents ineffective behavior (e.g., failing to regulate your own emotions), some incidents describe behavior that is inherently ineffective. Pushing clients, for instance, was always considered ineffective. Furthermore, incidents in the assessing subcategory included many ineffective behaviors, often related to the misjudgment of clients. This suggests that properly assessing clients is a crucial but complex job requirement that is susceptible to mistakes and misunderstanding. Therefore, our study identified behaviors that are perceived as facilitating effective job performance of employment counselors as well as behaviors that are perceived to obstruct effective performance and should be avoided.

Second, our framework captures specific, well-defined behaviors of employment counseling. Previous theoretical work on employment counseling (e.g., Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999) mainly emphasized broadly defined themes (e.g., supporting clients), paying relatively little attention to the specific behaviors involved in implementing these themes. Sanchez and Levine (2009) emphasized the importance of identifying both the broadly defined themes in a job and the translation of these themes into day-to-day behaviors in directing and influencing employee behavior toward the accomplishment of organizational goals. Thus, our framework of broad categories and well-defined specific behaviors provides a solid base for developing or adjusting job descriptions for employment counselors. Our CIT approach resulted in detailed behavioral definitions of themes that were broadly identified and defined in previous research in employment counseling. For example, previous research highlighted the importance of the relatively broad theme of supporting clients (e.g., Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Our findings suggest that rather than representing a single broad category of counselors' behavior, support consists of multiple behaviors dispersed across all phases of the counseling process. Informational support was found to be important during the actual job search phase and included, among other things, giving tips and advice,

training, and giving direct assistance. Emotional support was found to be important during the entire process.

Third, whereas the main focus of previous literature in the area of employment counseling (e.g., Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999) and also of the job description for rehabilitation counselors in the Occupational Information Network (Peterson, Mumford, Borman, Jeanneret, & Fleishman, 1999) is on behavior toward clients, our findings clearly show that behavior toward other stakeholders, such as governmental agencies, colleagues, and employers, is also perceived as being important for the effectiveness of employment counseling. This finding demonstrates that employment counseling likely should not be limited to client-centered behavior. Apart from assisting clients in their job search process, counselors are also required to maintain good connections with governmental agencies, network with employers, share information with colleagues, match clients and employers, and coach employers. For future research to investigate, we therefore tentatively propose the following:

*Proposition 1:* Employment counseling effectiveness will be enhanced when employment counselors involve governmental agencies, colleagues, and employers in the counseling process by means of working together, consulting, asking for information, and giving information.

Fourth, our findings also add to existing knowledge about client-centered behavior. Previous empirical studies in this domain mainly focused on client satisfaction as a criterion for effectiveness (e.g., Wooten, 1996), identifying counselors' behavior, such as job search training and keeping up relationships, as predictive of client satisfaction. These are all behaviors that are directly visible to clients, and such behaviors are most likely to contribute to client satisfaction (Wooten, 1996). Our findings are consistent with previous research in confirming the importance of several counselor behaviors that are directly visible to the client. Such behaviors include, for example, taking away barriers, providing direct assistance in job searches, providing job search training, keeping in touch with clients, and maintaining a good client–counselor relationship. Extending previous research and theory, our results demonstrate that in addition to these more visible behaviors, behaviors such as assessing clients; exploring their needs, resources, and possibilities; setting goals; and mobilizing clients' environment are also perceived as crucial for effective employment counseling. It is interesting that such behaviors were mentioned by counselors and supervisors rather than by clients, confirming the lower visibility and salience of such behaviors for clients and demonstrating the added value of incorporating multiple parties in investigating employment counselor behaviors. On the basis of these findings, we tentatively suggest the following:

*Proposition 2:* Effective employment counseling requires client-centered behaviors of counselors that are directly visible to clients (e.g., providing training) and behaviors that are less visible to clients (e.g., assessing clients); therefore, multiple parties are needed when investigating employment counselors' behaviors.

The fifth contribution is reflected by the presentation of a comprehensive model of employment counseling. Previous models of employment counseling (e.g., Aquilanti & Leroux, 1999) did not cover the complete counseling process and included only broadly defined client-centered behaviors. Our model distinguishes between four different phases, covering the entire counseling process, and identifies the specific behaviors toward governmental agencies, colleagues, employers, as well as clients, who are required in each of the four phases in counseling. As shown in the model, our results suggest that employment counseling comprises a preconditional phase, aimed at setting the stage and creating the preconditions for clients' job search and reemployment; a preparation phase, aimed at enabling clients to start their job search; an actual job search phase, aimed at assisting clients in their job search; and an employment phase, aimed at successful long-term employment for clients. Furthermore, our findings indicate that the four phases are consecutive; thus, the behaviors representing the distinct phases are aligned. As displayed in the process model, we therefore propose that behaviors perceived as representing the preconditions for effective counseling (i.e., good contacts with governmental agencies, a climate of information sharing and support with colleagues, and networking with employers) should be performed before starting the preparation phase. Similarly, we propose that before moving to the actual job search phase, counselors should perform the behaviors representing the preparation phase (i.e., adequate assessment of clients by counselors) that are perceived to ensure an effective counseling process. Furthermore, to increase the chances of long-term employment, counselors should provide follow-up services to clients and coach and counsel employers after the completion of behaviors representing the actual job search (i.e., assisting clients in their job search and matching between employers and clients). For future research to investigate, we tentatively propose the following:

*Proposition 3:* Effective employment counseling involves four consecutive phases in which behavior representing these phases must be aligned: first, behaviors representing the preconditions for counseling; followed by behaviors representing the preparation for counseling; then, behaviors representing the actual job search; and, finally, behaviors representing maintaining employment.

Finally, our data suggest two sets of behaviors that are necessary in more than one phase of the employment counseling process. The first set of behaviors is communication and maintaining a good relationship with clients. A good relationship with clear communication, in which the counselor keeps in contact and is readily available, increases the likelihood that clients will seek assistance in case of problems, will listen to advice, and will become motivated, thus enhancing the chances of (long-term) reemployment. Although we realize that communication and maintaining a good relationship with clients are reciprocal and hard to separate between behaviors from clients and from counselors, the behaviors perceived as effective were behaviors performed by counselors and not between clients and counselors. The second set of behaviors is the more general behaviors of counselors influencing all phases of employment

counseling and all stakeholders concerned (i.e., governmental agencies, colleagues, employers, as well as clients). For example, our data suggest that employment counseling represents emotional labor. One of the main characteristics of an emotional labor job is the necessity of regulating one's emotions when the work role demands certain emotions to be expressed to clients (Grandey, 2000). Employment counselors need to regulate their emotions in order to stay calm in difficult situations not only with clients but also with employers and governmental agencies. Furthermore, counselors need to reflect on their own behavior and adjust their behavior in all phases of the counseling process when it is not effective.

It therefore seems that communication and maintaining a good relationship with clients are perceived as being important for effective client-centered behavior in three phases of the process of employment counseling and that general behavior of counselors, such as emotion regulation and self-reflection, is essential during all phases of employment counseling. On the basis of these findings, we therefore tentatively suggest the following:

*Proposition 4:* Effective employment counseling involves (a) adequate communication and maintaining relationships with clients during the preparation, actual job search, and employment phases of employment counseling and (b) adequate general behavior of counselors (i.e., emotion regulation, self-reflection, planning and organizing, keeping agreements, and keeping job knowledge up to date) during all four phases of the employment counseling process.

Both the model and the propositions are inductively developed based on our findings and therefore should be considered as preliminary, mainly serving as a direction for future research regarding employment counseling.

### **Limitations**

This study was designed to establish a comprehensive overview of employment counselors' behaviors and to develop a preliminary model of the employment counseling process. We used structured interviews with various subject matter experts to gather rich and in-depth data. Although our interviewees can be considered as a good representation of the stakeholders involved in employment counseling, we collected our data in only one employment agency in only one country. Future research, therefore, is needed to test the generalizability of our category framework and process model in other agencies and in other countries.

Our research focused on identifying behaviors of employment counselors that are perceived as effective or ineffective by clients, counselors, and supervisors. A limitation of our design was that it did not directly investigate observable behavior but rather probed participants' retrospective memory and their attribution of the outcomes. Therefore, it might be that it is the meaning of events and behavior that is captured and not objective behavior itself. Also, social desirability may have affected our findings. For example, it might be that the behaviors found represent behaviors that participants perceived as effective rather than behaviors that are actually effective. However, the interviewees asked for

incidents occurring in the past 6 months and sought for a very high level of detail of the incidents. Also, a stratified random sampling of clients, supervisors, and employment counselors of 12 independent offices was used, which may attenuate these concerns. Nevertheless, future research should empirically test our model and propositions using a quantitative prospective design with objective effectiveness measures as outcomes (e.g., employment status and quality).

### **Practical Implications**

Our findings have several practical implications for employment counselors themselves as well as for employment counseling agencies. First, there are implications for the employment counseling process itself. Counseling was found to be broader than direct assistance in job search or other client-centered behaviors. Additional requirements include, for instance, communication with employers and governmental agencies and information sharing with colleagues. Moreover, our study suggests that employment counseling is a process that consists of four consecutive steps. First, the preconditions for counseling need to be established and maintained. Next, adequate assessment of clients is needed before they can be helped and guided in their job search and employers and clients can be matched. Finally, when clients find a job, they should be provided with follow-up services, and employers should be coached and counseled to increase the chances of long-term employment. Because the interviews indicate that not all counselors are aware of the importance of all these behaviors, counseling agencies may want to increase the awareness of their counselors regarding these behaviors.

Second, our findings can be used to reconsider and improve training and education programs for employment counselors. For instance, because maintaining good relationships with employers turned out to be perceived as important for effective counseling, training programs could focus on teaching counselors the networking skills that they need.

Third, agencies may also use our findings to review their hiring profiles. Until now, the focus has primarily been on counselors who excel in client-directed behavior. However, our findings suggest that other types of behaviors are also perceived as important for an effective employment counseling process. The same applies to agencies' performance management systems, because these systems should reflect and reward the full spectrum of behaviors that are required for effectively guiding and assisting individuals to reemployment.

Finally, our findings have implications for measuring the effectiveness of employment counselors and agencies. Traditionally, client satisfaction is considered an important indicator of effectiveness. Although client satisfaction certainly is an important criterion, in line with the job performance literature (e.g., Campbell et al., 1990), it became clear from the interviews that employment counseling also needs to be measured by means of objective performance (i.e., the profit for the organization or time of counseling) or subjective performance (i.e., supervisory, peer, or self ratings).

### **Conclusion**

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We designed this study to inductively build theory on counseling of unemployed job seekers by means of a critical incident study, which

resulted in a preliminary process model of employment counseling. A next step would be to quantitatively test our proposed model. Future research should examine whether the counselor behaviors that we found to be perceived as effective or ineffective by job seekers, counselors, and their supervisors are also actually distinguishing effective and ineffective counselors in terms of objective counseling success. The model and the research propositions are aimed at guiding future research in this area. First, a measurement instrument for the behaviors of employment counselors should be developed and empirically tested. Next, empirical research is needed to validate the relationships as outlined in the process model and propositions. In addition to testing the proposed relationships of our model, future research should examine the wider generalizability and relative importance of the counselor behaviors that we identified.

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