Supporting Job Search for Mauritian Youth with Little Education

Jorge Luis Castaneda, Isis Gaddis, Marco Ranzani, and Joana Sousa Lourenço

Boosting shared prosperity also means including disadvantaged groups in the labor market. While many factors can hinder labor force participation, behavioral factors have emerged as key barriers in the case of Mauritian youth with little education. This Note describes the results of an intervention that delivered training on job search, goal setting, and planning skills to a group of young job-seekers with low educational attainment in Mauritius. While the intervention had to be interrupted due to the COVID-19 outbreak, preliminary results show encouraging positive impacts for youth employability and job search behaviors, and point to useful lessons.

Mauritius has one of the strongest economies in Africa. Over recent decades, it has achieved an extraordinary structural transformation, steady economic growth, and poverty reduction, but economic success has recently fallen short of expectations in terms of both growth and shared prosperity. In addition, Mauritius' population is aging rapidly, and the labor force is shrinking. Mauritius will therefore need to pursue a new growth model to reignite productivity growth and employ more people to make them less dependent on fiscal redistribution.

Mauritian youth show significantly lower than average labor force participation rates. Out of about 351,000 youth ages 16–35, 21 percent are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and almost 70 percent of NEET youth are women. About 39 percent of NEET youth have at best completed primary education, and this typically accompanies poor living standards. About 74 percent of NEET youth with low levels of education are living in households in the bottom 40 percent, and about 30 percent are living in poor households. Disengaged youth miss the opportunity to develop at an age that is crucial for future social and economic outcomes, and are exposed to economic vulnerability, social marginalization, and violence.

The intervention provided job-seekers with in-person training, and a 20-minute phone call “boost” 4 to 5 weeks after the training. The training focused on building effective job search skills, such as goal setting and planning, while the boost focused on motivation and mentoring. The decision to include the phone-call “boost” responded to the suspension of the intervention due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Training in job search skills: The training included 3 main components: (a) the job search journey, providing simplified templates of reference letters and résumés that were easy to navigate; (b) training to promote goal setting and the use of planning tools (Figure 1); (c) a job search primer, in the form of an

1 The full study is available for download at http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/582261592536259683/.
information leaflet providing data on local labor market conditions, resources, and tips.

**Job search journey:** The diagnostic analysis found that many youth lacked job application experience, and were uncertain about documentation, steps, channels, and duration of the process of looking for employment. Thus, the training aimed at guiding youth through the process and supporting them in setting realistic expectations and persevering. The initial activity described the job search journey, including main steps, requirements, potential difficulties, and possible outcomes. The presentation then focused on 2 main documents: the reference letters and the CV. The activity sought to motivate and guide participants to fill out simplified templates for these documents (available in the booklet) to use when applying for jobs.

**Training in goal setting and planning:** Fieldwork before the training identified the lack of soft skills key for effective job search, namely goal setting and planning, as well as lack of achievable and realistic aspirations. The training included several main components, leveraging insights from behavioral science: simplification, implementation intentions, commitment devices, and the concept of “making it social” (instead of individual). Job-seekers were invited to set specific weekly job search goals in terms of number of hours spent searching, identifying opportunities, and sending applications. They also created weekly job search plans. Training provided a weekly planning tool, a template structuring each activity into “what, when, where, and how”, and participants received a checklist on job search channels. Job-seekers signed a commitment statement on their weekly goals and plan, and were asked to write down the name of someone with whom they would share the plan. The goal setting, planning, and commitments participants established during week 1 were completed during the training sessions with guidance from facilitators, and the templates they filled out during weeks 2–4 were included in the workbook.

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**Implementation**

The intervention was implemented in 8 of the 14 employment offices located in 7 of 10 Mauritian districts. Adequate space and infrastructure for the training were the main criteria for site selection. Youth were identified through a registry of job-seekers ages 16–35 with low educational attainment. A third-party survey firm invited them to participate through phone calls and SMSs. After confirming their eligibility, participants selected their preferred date and time to attend the training at a location near their residence. Each received an SMS reminder 1 day prior to their session. Youth visited the specified venue on the selected day and completed the baseline survey, before being randomly assigned to a control arm (no training and no boost) or a treatment arm (training and boost). Random assignment was conducted within each data collection session to avoid self-selection bias and ensure balance between treatment and control arms.

Intervention implementation started on March 9, 2020. The baseline survey and training were planned to last 18 calendar days and to finish on March 27, and the end line survey was scheduled for early May. However, the COVID-19 outbreak forced suspension of field activities only 10 days after the start, so only 306 individuals (147 treated) participated in the training instead of the planned 1,040 (520 per arm).

The World Bank team recruited and trained 5 facilitators with degrees in social work or psychology and previous professional experience with the target population to deliver the training and the boost. The facilitators (2 per session) delivered the training in 2-hour session to groups of up to 12 job-seekers. The phone boost took place 4 to 5 weeks after training.

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2 Individuals were considered eligible if they were NEET as well as if they had done only a small amount of paid work (up to six hours) in the seven days prior to the interview.
We aggregated outcomes into 3 main groups: job search and employability, socioemotional skills, and labor market outcomes (Table 1).

**Job search and employability:** The training had highly positive impacts on compliance with the specific job search strategies covered during the training activities: preparing, revising, or submitting a CV (33 percentage points); asking for a referral or requesting a recommendation letter (21 percentage points); and developing a job search plan (13 percentage points).

**Socioemotional skills.** The intervention did not affect the socioemotional skills covered (columns 5-7). These null effects are not surprising considering that soft skills training focused on goal setting and planning. Consistently, significant differences were found in job search intensity and reference seeking, in line with previous research.\(^4\) Additionally, the intervention included guidance and information about the Mauritian labor market (job search training and primer). While there was no significant difference between the control and treatment groups on job search expectations (the number of months to find a job), interpretation is made difficult by the COVID-19 labor market-related disruptions.\(^5\)

**Labor market outcomes:** The intervention did not improve the employment of participants (column 8). This is not surprising for at least 2 reasons. First, the time between the intervention and the end line data collection—the “exposure time” —was a short 4 to 5 weeks. Second, COVID-19 led to a sudden decline in economic activity and labor demand worldwide as well as restrictions on the movements of people. Thus, it would have been difficult to observe employment effects, which are a combination of several factors, including labor demand, labor supply, and matching.

**Gender differences:** While more women than men participated in the intervention, some evidence implies that the intervention was more effective in increasing job search efforts for young men. For “asking for a referral” or “requesting a recommendation letter”, the intervention was more likely to succeed for men than for women (36 percentage points and 13 percentage points, respectively). There are no significant differences by gender for the other 2 job search strategies, which may partly be due to lack of statistical power given the smaller than anticipated sample size. Nonetheless, these findings, as well as focus group discussions, indicate that female labor force participation is constrained by factors, such as lack of childcare services and traditional gender norms, not addressed by the intervention.

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\(^3\) The results discussed in this section cover the treatment-on-the-treated effect, which captures the impact of the actual participation in the training and boost activities on the outcomes, after controlling for those who did not take part in the boost training.


\(^5\) Additional reasons for not detecting any statistically significant effects can be found in the full version of the study available at http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/582261592536259683/.
### Table 1. Intervention Impacts on Selected Outcomes: Treatment on the Treated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Prepared or posted CV</th>
<th>(2) Requested references</th>
<th>(3) Worked on search plan</th>
<th>(4) Looked for work</th>
<th>(5) Grit</th>
<th>(6) Growth mindset</th>
<th>(7) Expectations</th>
<th>(8) Worked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training and boost</td>
<td>0.332***</td>
<td>0.208***</td>
<td>0.130**</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>-0.056</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.055)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.067)</td>
<td>(0.096)</td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No boost</td>
<td>-0.154</td>
<td>-0.154</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.246</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.133)</td>
<td>(0.124)</td>
<td>(0.129)</td>
<td>(0.106)</td>
<td>(0.177)</td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
<td>(0.246)</td>
<td>(0.192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.454***</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>-0.186*</td>
<td>0.399*</td>
<td>4.011***</td>
<td>0.733**</td>
<td>4.569***</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.120)</td>
<td>(0.234)</td>
<td>(0.094)</td>
<td>(0.196)</td>
<td>(0.449)</td>
<td>(0.282)</td>
<td>(0.219)</td>
<td>(0.235)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Estimates from an ordinary least squares regression, including individual sociodemographic controls (female, age, marital status as single, and educational attainment), and fixed effects for the day of random assignment. Standard errors are clustered at the EIC level. Dependent variables 1–4, 6 and 8 are defined as dichotomous variables set equal to 1 if respondent reported the stated activity at the end line survey, and dependent variables 5 and 7 are the averages of 2 and 6 respective items, scored on a Likert agreeableness scale ranging from 1 to 5.

Significance level: * = 10 percent, ** = 5 percent, *** = 1 percent.

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