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Rumors Fly Online When Jobs Are at Stake

Lucas Laursen
United States
9 May 2008

Originally started by physicists of various obscure stripes, job-rumor Web sites now cover more than a dozen disciplines from [anthropology](#) to [zoology](#). Some of these Web sites have a Webmaster who (sometimes) vets and posts rumors about postdoc and faculty jobs, whereas other sites take the form of wikis, which individual users can update. The sites offer varying levels of information, but all of them make water-cooler job rumors available to the world.

Job-rumor sites are useful for "knowing whether a job you are hoping for has an offer out at all and whether it is to someone who has one or six other offers." --Joanne Cohn, University of California, Berkeley

Some people worry that the sites' transparency could have unintended consequences for candidates who, for instance, don't want interviewers to know about their other offers. But senior academics discount the notion that Internet job boards really tell search committees anything they don't--or couldn't--know otherwise. And anyway, most rumor listings appear to be made, or at least confirmed, by the candidates themselves. Nevertheless, the information tantalizes both candidates and other prospective job seekers.

INFORMATION ASYMMETRIES

Although the individual sites have a narrow target audience, they seem to be quite popular, at least anecdotally. According to Greg Kuperberg, [a mathematician](#) at the [University of California \(UC\), Davis](#), the [math job wiki](#) logs about 1000 page views a day. Kuperberg's site, like most of the job-rumor wikis, contains a lengthy list of available academic openings, with the names of those rumored to be under consideration next to each job. Italics, strikethroughs, and bold fonts indicate whether a candidate has an offer, has declined it, or has accepted it.

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Alceste Bonanos's name now appears in bold font on the [Astrophysics Job Rumour Wiki](#). Last fall, Bonanos was in her final year of a 3-year postdoctoral fellowship at the [Carnegie Institution](#) in Washington, D.C., and had applied to various places for a second postdoc. As the months went by, her name and those of other short-listed candidates appeared next to the postdoctoral fellowships listed on the astronomy job wiki. Following the hiring process on the wiki was useful to see "which people get the offers," Bonanos says.



Greg Kuperberg

And probably the biggest boon to job seekers is the glimpse into the sometimes-mysterious machinery of the search process. For someone new to the job market, the time between sending in an application to interviewing and then getting a decision can seem excruciatingly long. The job boards let users see when offers--and rejection letters--start to trickle out, which can be a relief to candidates on tenterhooks.

For candidates with fewer connections to the academic grapevine, the Web sites may stand in for real-life water-cooler talk. "At least anecdotally," says Kuperberg, "the wiki is even more of a revelation at universities that are lower on the totem pole." But, although they may provide information for the less well connected, the sites may not necessarily even the playing field, Kuperberg counters, because those already high on the totem pole could use the sites to amplify their advantages.

However, Moon Duchin, a postdoc at UC Davis who was on the math job market this year, argues that the sites can artificially inflate someone's standing in the job market and leave other well-qualified candidates out in the cold. "The major factor in the jobs game is how much buzz there is around a job seeker," she asserts. "It's a kind of echo chamber for received wisdom." Despite the potential advantages, she kept her name off her field's job wiki. "I had visions of stressed-out job seekers sitting in their underwear and neurotically clicking 'refresh' " on the math job wiki.

Being listed on several public shortlists may carry risks. A hiring committee might be swayed against a candidate if they know he or she is short-listed for several other positions. Being on the wiki could hurt a candidate "if a school chose not to bother making an offer because a bigger name reportedly made an invitation," says Ben Webster, a mathematician at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. On the other hand, he says, job committees usually "already know this stuff." Senior academics are less concerned about the alleged influence of job-rumor Web sites on search committee decisions. "If it really mattered to another committee that someone had a lot of offers," says Joanne Cohn, an astronomer at the [University of California, Berkeley](#), responsible for the astrophysics job wiki, "I'd expect them to check--committees do talk to each other and to people writing reference letters."

RELIABILITY



Like any self-reporting system, job-rumor Web sites will be incomplete or inaccurate unless everyone has an incentive to report their status--and to report it accurately. Some job-rumor Web site moderators have verified rumors in the past by e-mailing the subject of the rumor, but the time-consuming process may be falling out of fashion as wikis--sites that anyone can edit--spread, and the labor and responsibility for maintaining the sites pass on to an anonymous crowd. Bonanos believes the move to wikis has improved the job-hunting process, "because updates are now made quickly and continuously."

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The [Astrophysics Job Rumour Wiki](#) is one of dozens of field-specific sites that track the academic job market. (Link opens in a new window.)

But that move worries Webster, who took part in [an online discussion](#) of the math job wiki last fall. He says that, due to the ease with which information can be added and subtracted, there is a lower "psychological barrier to cross" for the unscrupulous than when they had to e-mail

a moderator. Cohn notes that the sites tend to be self-correcting, though there is some minor misbehavior. She writes in an e-mail: "I have seen people take stuff off about themselves and then have others keep (obsessively!) putting the rumors back on."

WIKI-WHAT-TO-DO?

Even fans of the job-rumor sites concede that the sites are incomplete at best. Yet they seem, at worst, relatively harmless. "I definitely consider the rumor page a positive and useful tool for those on the job market," says Bonanos. "Without the rumor page, you wouldn't know if offers have been made or if you might still have a chance in getting a certain job." Jordan Ellenberg, [an associate professor](#) of math at the [University of Wisconsin, Madison](#), who was initially skeptical of the job wiki, says, "I didn't really see any of the negatives that I anticipated playing out, ... so my worries were somewhat assuaged."

Duchin's search resulted in an offer, which she successfully kept off the job wiki and still prefers not to make public. Bonanos got an offer, too--but most of her search was tracked on her field's job wiki. Of course, there's no way of knowing whether the sites helped or hindered either candidate's search. But some people, like Cohn, are glad the sites exist. "What it is useful for is knowing whether a job you are hoping for has an offer out at all and whether it is to someone who has one or six other offers," says Cohn. "This can be encouraging during the high-pressure period where it is all up in the air."

SOME SCIENCE JOB-RUMOR WEB SITES

Internet job sites were once the domain of various physics subfields, and still are, but other fields are catching on, too.

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