



A National Job Bank Worth Using

Original Publication: September 1, 2026.

Experimental Thought Inc.

<https://experimentalthought.com/stories/national-job-bank/2026-09-01.pdf>

The labour market is not merely one market among many. It is the mechanism through which an economy decides, in practice, who does what. It helps determine which abilities are used and which are wasted; which work people spend their lives performing; where they must live, move, or travel; how much of their waking lives is surrendered to commuting; whether they can leave an unsuitable employer; and whether years of accumulated skill are ever put to their best use. For many people, a single successful or unsuccessful match may alter the course of decades of life.

And unlike participants in many other markets, people looking for work are frequently under considerable pressure to transact. They need to reconnect themselves to an income, and time is short. Savings diminish, obligations continue, and the practical freedom to keep searching for a better match can disappear very quickly. A person may therefore accept the first tolerable opportunity, remain in a poorly matched job simply to avoid having to search again, abandon a field in which their skills would have greater value, move somewhere they would rather not live, or submit to an exhausting commute—not because any of those outcomes represents their preferred allocation, but because the machinery for finding something better is costly, fragmented, uncertain, and slow.

That makes the quality of labour-market infrastructure extraordinarily consequential. A badly functioning labour market does not merely waste a few hours of search time. It can lock human beings and their abilities into inferior arrangements for years, while employers elsewhere simultaneously complain that they cannot find the people they need.

And the consequences do not stop with the individual. Every business, public service, institution, and productive activity in the economy ultimately depends upon the allocation of human beings through this market. In that sense, there may be no more important market. It determines not merely who receives which job, but who ends up doing the things upon which the rest of the economy depends. Which makes the way we presently organize it appalling.

We leave workers and employers to search through a fragmented collection of private job boards, corporate websites, recruiters, aggregators, social networks, and whatever else happens to exist. The problem is not that there are too few places to look. Quite the opposite: there are far too many. If there is one market whose basic informational infrastructure ought to work extraordinarily well, surely it is this one.

The proposal is simple: every publicly advertised job should also be required to appear on a single, free, national employment platform.

Private job boards can stay. Recruiters can stay. LinkedIn can stay. Indeed can stay. Employers can advertise anywhere else they please. If private services provide genuinely useful additional services, excellent—let them compete on those services. But there should be one place where a person can go and know, with reasonable confidence, that every publicly available job is there.

And the same should be true in the opposite direction. Workers who choose to make themselves available should be able to maintain a standardized, searchable employment profile. Employers should have immediate access to the broadest available pool of people potentially suited to the work they need done. A worker in Los Angeles willing to move to New York should be able to say so once; an employer in New York should then be able to discover that person without either side correctly guessing which private website the other happens to be using.

The information should be standardized enough to be genuinely searchable: occupation, compensation, location, working hours, employment status, qualifications, experience, principal duties, licences, mobility, availability, and other conditions that actually matter. Employers may still describe what makes a position or workplace distinctive, but a pizza-delivery job should probably appear when someone searches for pizza-delivery jobs even if somebody has decided that “mobile customer experience associate” sounds more impressive. This would also give policymakers something remarkably useful: a live, structured picture of what employers across the country are actually trying to hire people to do.

And stop making applicants dance

The conventional application process begins from a peculiar assumption: that the person with the fewest resources should perform most of the search labour. One side is ordinarily an organization with money, employees, administrative systems, and a vacancy it wants filled. The other may be unemployed, underemployed, worried about paying rent, caring for children or relatives, trying to escape a bad workplace, or conducting a job search while already working full-time. Yet we routinely organize the process as though the second party should bear an enormous portion of the cost of finding the first.

Reverse the presumption. A worker should maintain one durable standardized profile containing the information legitimately relevant to employment. If that worker sees a suitable vacancy, the application could ordinarily consist of little more than a mark of interest. The employer can then inspect the standardized record and decide whom it wishes to contact. Employers could also search proactively among available people whose records suggest that they may be appropriate candidates.

Rather than hundreds of people individually trying to attract the attention of one organization, the organization with the vacancy and the resources can perform a meaningful share of the work involved in finding the people it might actually wish to employ. That is not particularly radical. It is simply refusing to treat the applicant's time as free.

Design away pointless labour

There need be no cover-letter field, no mechanism for uploading a personalized declaration of devotion to the employer, no employer-designed questionnaire requiring applicants to re-enter information already contained in their standardized profiles, and no facility through which consideration for a position can be conditioned upon some additional written performance merely because an employer would like one.

Cover letters need not be “illegal” in some dramatic sense. The public infrastructure simply need not solicit them, transmit them, score them, or allow employers to make them a condition of application. The message of the system should be simple: your record speaks for you; your indication of interest is enough; desperation is not a qualification.

Good regulation can often work more effectively through architecture than prohibition. Instead of drafting hundreds of behavioural rules and then policing every evasion, design the infrastructure so that pointless practices are difficult to turn into conditions of participation.

The profile should be a record, not a performance

Applicants themselves would inevitably try to recreate the old system. If changing three sentences in a profile might improve the probability of getting a particular job, somebody will change the three sentences. Then somebody else will feel obliged to do the same. Before long the standardized profile has become another customized résumé and the arms race begins again.

Your employment history is your employment history. Your skills are your skills. Your qualifications do not change according to which employer happens to be reading them. The profile should therefore be a durable record of the person rather than a sales document rewritten for every opportunity. One possible mechanism would impose a delay —perhaps two weeks—between substantive profile changes and their becoming visible to employers, making last-minute tailoring to a particular vacancy largely pointless. The standardized profile is the beginning, not the end, of the employee-employer matching process; nothing prevents either side from gathering or exchanging further information as the process develops.

Standardization should not, however, flatten people into a collection of boxes. There will always be relevant information that does not fit neatly within predefined fields. Give the applicant a tightly constrained space—perhaps fifty words—to identify something material that the standardized record fails to capture. That is enough room to communicate a useful fact. It is deliberately not enough room to recreate the cover letter.

Prevent the arms race from simply moving elsewhere

If the formal application becomes effortless, applicants desperate for work may start competing through some other channel: contacting hiring managers directly, tracking down private email addresses, sending supplementary material, or finding other ways to demonstrate that they want the position more than the next person. Because somebody will do it, everyone may soon feel that they have to.

So the system should watch for it. Employers could report whether a person ultimately hired for a publicly advertised vacancy made relevant off-platform contact or supplied supplementary material during the recruitment process. The object need not be punitive. The object is to discover whether supposedly optional behaviour is quietly becoming necessary to compete. A person should not lose an employment opportunity because somebody else was more willing, more desperate, or simply had more free time to devise ways of circumventing a standardized application process.

Desperation has a public cost

People looking for work will often participate enthusiastically in practices that are collectively terrible for them. That is not irrational. If another hour spent rewriting an application appears to increase the probability of getting a desperately needed job by even a little, spending that hour can make perfect sense to the individual applicant.

Now multiply that hour across hundreds of applicants, thousands of vacancies, and millions of job searches. Hours that could have been spent caring for children, learning something, performing other work, finding genuinely different opportunities, resting, participating in community life, or simply being alive are consumed in a contest in which everyone is trying to signal slightly more effort than everyone else. Once everyone does it, much of the relative advantage disappears, while the labour expended remains very real. The fact that desperate people are willing to perform wasteful labour does not make the labour valuable. It strengthens the case for designing it out of the market.

One of the stranger features of the existing system is that the time of job seekers is effectively priced at zero. An employer can save a small amount of administrative effort by imposing considerably greater effort across hundreds of applicants, and the resulting procedure can still look efficient from the employer's side of the transaction. Economically, the time has not disappeared. It has simply been externalized.

Jobs should exist

A national platform would also make it possible to enforce a few standards that should hardly require saying. A job advertised as available should actually be available. Listings should expire automatically unless affirmatively renewed. Filled or withdrawn positions should be removed. Employers and recruitment agencies should not advertise fictitious vacancies merely to collect résumés for possible future use. If an organization wants to build a prospective candidate pool, it can say so. What it should not do is invite people to expend time responding to an opportunity that does not exist.

One stale or fictitious listing can waste the time of dozens or hundreds of people while imposing practically no cost on the organization responsible. Again, the time has not vanished. It has simply been pushed onto the side least able to refuse the burden.

Employers receive something extraordinary too

This is not a proposal to make employers shoulder additional search costs while giving them nothing in return. Quite the opposite: give every employer immediate, free access to the best available picture of the national applicant pool.

An employer should not have to wonder which job board people happen to be using this year, advertise in several places, pay several intermediaries, search separate résumé databases, reproduce listings across multiple services, reconcile information presented in incompatible formats, and then wait to see whether the right candidate happens to encounter the right advertisement. The same principle that says a worker should not have to search five or ten different places applies equally well in the opposite direction. Neither side should have to search for the market.

A universal platform could sharply reduce recruitment departments' time and expense in deciding where to advertise, purchasing access to candidate pools, reproducing job postings, reconciling different formats, and waiting to discover who happens to respond. The information would already be there, organized under common fields and terminology.

And it should be free. This is national labour-market infrastructure, not a gimmick to be monetized every time somebody needs to hire another human being. Employers participating in the economy should have access, without fee, to the best public information available about people who have chosen to make themselves available for work, just as prospective employees should have access, without fee, to the complete public inventory of publicly available jobs.

Let Indeed be Indeed

None of this requires hostility toward private employment services. Indeed can remain. LinkedIn can remain. Recruitment firms can remain. New firms can enter. If they provide better matching technology, professional networking, career services, specialist recruitment, assessment, labour-market analytics, particularly good interfaces, or anything else people genuinely value, wonderful. Let them compete on value added.

What no private company has an entitlement to is fragmentation itself. The basic fact that a job exists should not have to be discovered through whichever intermediary happens to possess the listing. Nor does the commercial value of businesses built around fragmented access to employment information constitute a reason for society to preserve the fragmentation.

If good public infrastructure makes some existing business models less valuable, their owners remain free to redeploy their technology, matching expertise, recruitment tools, data capabilities, and whatever other genuine skills they possess. They can, for lack of a better term, apply somewhere else.

A labour market designed to work

The central idea is not that government should run a prettier employment website. It is that the national labour market should be treated as infrastructure important enough to design deliberately.

Build one excellent national employment platform and require every publicly advertised vacancy to appear on it. Require standardized occupational terminology and standardized information concerning qualifications, compensation, hours, location, and other material conditions. Require advertised vacancies to be genuine and current. Give every worker a durable standardized profile and make a mark of interest sufficient to apply. Give applicants a tightly limited opportunity to communicate genuinely relevant information the standardized record cannot capture.

Do not provide machinery through which employers can demand cover letters, bespoke essays, repetitive questionnaires, or individualized application performances. Prevent profiles from becoming vacancy-specific advertisements. Watch for off-platform behaviour that begins recreating the same competitive arms race. Expect employers to search proactively among interested and potentially suitable candidates. Put more of the search burden where the organizational resources are—but make that search dramatically easier by giving employers free, standardized access to the available labour pool. Then let every private firm that wants to operate around this infrastructure compete on whatever genuine additional service it can provide.

The present arrangement permits an extraordinary amount of unnecessary effort because nobody acting individually has much incentive to eliminate it. Employers can externalize application costs. Applicants compete by supplying ever more unpaid labour. Job boards can profit from fragmentation. Recruiters can benefit from opacity. Employers themselves simultaneously waste money and staff time navigating fragmented candidate pools and buying access to information that could simply form part of common public infrastructure. Everyone can behave perfectly rationally within the system while the system as a whole remains absurdly inefficient.

That is exactly the sort of problem public institutions exist to solve. Create one common infrastructure, make the information complete and accurate, make the rules sensible, design away pointless applicant labour, and give employers the same fundamental thing workers receive: one place where the whole relevant market can be found.

The labour market determines what people do with enormous portions of their lives and where, geographically and institutionally, those lives are lived. It determines whether skills find useful application or lie dormant, whether people can leave relationships of employment that no longer suit them, whether businesses can find the human capacity they require, and ultimately who performs the work on which every other part of the economy depends.

People entering that market often do so under duress. They do not have unlimited time to search. The cost of a badly designed market can therefore become a badly designed life.

AI Disclosure

The ideas are the author's, expressed in various forms over the past decade. Prior to editing, more editing, and publication, AI was used to organize and draft the present version from those materials—as it is far better at those tasks than the author, and hates doing them much less. Presentation aside, not a single substantive—or unsubstantive, frankly—idea presented here originated with AI.