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ABSTRACT

Couldn't Care Less? Understanding and Reducing the Hiring Penalty of Care-Related Career Breaks*

Surging demands for the care of dependent relatives increasingly pull workers out of paid employment. However, upon returning to the labour market, former caregivers often face hiring discrimination. Still, it remains unclear which caregiving engagements trigger this care penalty, what mechanisms sustain it, and how it can be countered. Conducting a factorial survey experiment with professional recruiters, this study compares hiring evaluations across multiple care- and non-care-related career breaks and identifies the mechanisms that anchor them. The findings show that the scarring effects of care-related breaks are less pronounced than those of long-term unemployment spells, but still substantial. Perceptions of skill loss, reduced commitment, and limited future availability fuel the care penalty. These negative perceptions are most evident following childcare-related breaks. Nonetheless, recruiters prove responsive to targeted counter-stereotypical cues: signalling flexibility or adaptability increases caregivers' hireability, but not for the long-term unemployed.

JEL Classification: C91, E24, J22, J64, J71

Keywords: career break, caregiving, care penalty, unemployment, inactivity, hiring, experiment

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1. Introduction

The need for informal care – unpaid care for dependent close others (Triantafillou et al., 2010) – is set to intensify sharply over the coming decades (Burch et al., 2019; Henle et al., 2020; Kayaalp et al., 2020), reaching an informal care burden per person nearly 50% above early-century levels by 2050 (in Europe; Cattaneo et al., 2025). Three interrelated dynamics drive this trend: (i) an increasing care demand due to population ageing (Rubin & White-Means, 2009) and rising disability rates (Keramat et al., 2025), (ii) a decreasing relative informal care supply resulting from falling fertility rates (Cattaneo et al., 2025) and mounting female labour force participation (Kayaalp et al., 2020), and (iii) a structural shift away from formal care triggered by quality-of-life concerns surrounding long-term institutional care (Bronselaer et al., 2018) and the overstretch of professional care systems (Broese van Groenou & De Boer, 2016). This growing informal care burden increasingly compels workers to interrupt their careers to provide care, because informal caregiving constrains labour supply by being time- and resource-intensive (Arenas & Ruiz, 2025; Bauer & Sousa-Poza, 2015; Colombo et al., 2011; Frimmel et al., 2025; Heitmueller, 2007; Lilly et al., 2010).

However, upon re-entering the labour market, caregivers often face other obstacles on the demand side. More concretely, emerging empirical evidence points to a care penalty: employers hesitate to hire applicants with former care-related career interruptions (D'hert et al., 2024b; Fuller et al., 2024; Henle et al., 2020; Kristal et al., 2023; Raiber et al., 2025; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Weisshaar, 2018). This reluctance is commonly attributed to employers stereotyping (former) caregivers as less productive and inferring lower career commitment due to their failure to meet ideal worker norms, such as expectations of non-stop availability and devotion to work (Coltrane et al., 2013; Kristal et al., 2023; Montanye & Livingston, 2024; Raiber et al., 2025; Weisshaar, 2018, 2021).

Beyond discriminating against job seekers with care-related employment lapses, this bias is particularly problematic within the current public policy discourse advocating higher labour force participation through the activation of inactive individuals (Baert, 2021), among whom caregivers constitute a substantial share (Eurostat, 2025; Fuller et al., 2024). Hence, empirically examining the scope, drivers, and remedies of this hiring bias is key to advancing evidence-based policies that foster equitable workforce re-entry among caregivers.

However, the existing empirical literature on the care penalty falls short in terms of these three dimensions. In what follows, we clarify how prior research remains limited in its (i) empirical scope, (ii) identification of underlying mechanisms, and (iii) evidence of bias-reducing remedies. We also articulate how our study addresses each of these limitations.

Regarding the first limitation, previous research tends to cover only a narrow set of caregiving engagements (Arenas & Ruiz, 2025), often focusing on parental care (Burch et al., 2019) and restricted to one caregiver subpopulation (e.g. Weisshaar (2018) on stay-at-home parenting). Yet, de facto, a wider spectrum of informal care engagements can pause careers, including care for a sick child or an ill partner (Bronselaer et al., 2018). These family-related lapses are unlikely to be perceived uniformly in personnel selection contexts (Arenas & Ruiz, 2025; D'hert et al., 2024b; Weisshaar, 2018). For instance, employers may view conventional childcare as a temporary constraint that eases as children mature, whereas care for a chronically ill child, a disabled partner, or an ageing parent may appear as an intensifying commitment (Kossek et al., 2001; Lam et al., 2022). At the same time, eldercare may also attract a lesser employer penalty than child and partner care, because the eldercare burden is typically shared across kin networks, whereas child and partner care constitute a more individualised responsibility, particularly for women (Dai et al., 2022; El Haj et al., 2024).[1]

Our study addresses this first limitation by assessing the hiring impact of multiple caregiving engagements within the same empirical framework. This design not only enables a comparison between heterogeneous employability effects across caregiving engagements, but also yields a more accurate estimate of the overall care penalty – one not biased by focusing on a single type of care. We test these dynamics through a factorial survey experiment in which professional recruiters evaluate fictitious applicants whose profiles randomly vary by employment break. Hireability scores are used to answer the following research question:

RQ1. How does mentioning a (specific) care-related career interruption affect hiring outcomes?

[1] These differences in employer penalties are relevant primarily when caregiving responsibilities persist at the time of labour market re-entry. This situation is common because financial constraints frequently necessitate employment alongside ongoing care (Fuller et al., 2024). Nonetheless, care obligations may have ceased before re-entry; yet, in the absence of explicit information on applicants' current caregiving status, employers often presume their continuation (Martsolf et al., 2019).

While establishing whether a care-related hiring penalty exists is crucial, uncovering its underlying mechanisms is essential to designing effective bias-reducing strategies. Existing research has proposed several explanations for the care penalty, with two particularly prominent theoretical channels: signalling theory and skill deterioration theory.

First, prior studies on caregiving breaks suggest that employer penalties stem from negative signalling processes (e.g. Weisshaar, 2018; Henle et al., 2020), a finding in line with the well-developed unemployment scarring literature (e.g. Eriksson & Rooth, 2014; Kroft et al., 2013). More concretely, signalling theory posits that employers seek to bridge information asymmetry during hiring by inferring productivity from resume cues (Connelly et al., 2011; Vishwanath, 1989), often causing career interruptions to be markers of inferior worker quality (Lockwood et al., 1991; Van Belle et al., 2018; Weisshaar, 2018).

This signalling channel can be further understood through four complementary theories that articulate distinct ways in which care-related career pauses shape employer perceptions. First, ideal worker norm theory (Acker, 1990) holds that prioritising family responsibilities – whether current or past – violates expectations of the fully committed worker (Colombo et al., 2011; Henle et al., 2020; Montanye & Livingston, 2024). Second, time trade-off theory (Becker, 1965) suggests that individuals with extensive personal obligations are perceived as less available because time devoted to care is time diverted from work (Van Borm & Baert, 2022; Weisshaar, 2021). Third, social role theory (Eagly, 1987) argues that caregiving – still culturally coded as a feminine role (Bear & Glick, 2017) – undermines perceptions of agency, a trait associated with masculine professional ideals (Chatman et al., 2022; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Yet, in the same vein, family caregiving may also evoke positive stereotypes of greater warmth (Eagly, 1987; Henle et al., 2020). Fourth, enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) hypothesises that skills honed through caregiving can positively spill over into the workplace, enhancing perceptions of organisational and interpersonal competence (Raiber et al., 2025).

Alongside signalling theory, skill deterioration theory attributes employer hiring hesitation towards applicants with career gaps to human capital depreciation (Becker, 1962). Regardless of its cause, time away from work is thought to erode job-relevant skills (Becker, 1962; Van Belle et al., 2018). As such, care-related lapses are no exception to this process (Carmichael et al., 2008; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Raiber et al., 2025).

However, regarding the second limitation, the mechanisms underlying employer aversions or preferences towards caregivers remain understudied (Montanye & Livingston, 2024), empirically inconclusive (Weisshaar, 2021), and untested within an experimental design that integrates diverse care- and (un)employment-related scenarios. Nonetheless, employer perceptions appear to be contingent on caregiving status. For instance, eldercare – and, by extension, caring for an ill child or partner – tends to be construed as involuntary and thus less deviant from ideal worker norms, whereas stay-at-home parenting and foster care may be interpreted as intentional, counter-normative choices (O'Connor et al., 2015). At the same time, due to its unpredictability, care for a dependent close other may clash more with availability expectations than conventional childcare and foster care, which entail more predictable routines as children's care needs stabilise over time (Calvano, 2013; Henle et al., 2020; Lam et al., 2022; Lantano et al., 2025). Moreover, foster care may signal greater warmth than other care forms due to its altruistic motivation and may also imply higher skill levels, given the compulsory competency screening prospective foster parents undergo (De Maeyer et al., 2014). A comparable skill assumption is likely associated with eldercare, given its greater complexity relative to other informal (adult) care engagements (Lam et al., 2022).

Our experimental design is well suited to disentangle the mechanisms underlying care-related discrimination and to assess how these vary across care types. To this end, recruiters evaluate not only the hireability of the fictitious candidates but also perceptions derived from the aforementioned theories. This approach addresses our second research question:

RQ2. What does mentioning a (specific) care-related career interruption signal to recruiters?

To address the third limitation, we test a solution-oriented strategy to buffer employer bias blocking work re-entry for caregivers – an underrepresented yet essential empirical perspective in the career break literature (Kristal et al., 2023). Building on signalling theory (see supra), we add counter-stereotypical information to the fictitious resumes, emphasising applicants' ability to stay longer when needed and adjust their working hours (i.e. day-to-day availability). This strategy is aimed at reducing employers' reliance on group heuristics during hiring (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kristal et al., 2023; Leicht et al., 2014) and has previously proven effective for older workers (e.g. Kauffmann et al., 2017), ethnic minority applicants (e.g. Sachs et al., 2024) and mothers (e.g. Bear & Glick, 2017).

However, counter-stereotypical information appears less successful for care-related career gaps. To our knowledge, Weisshaar (2021) is the only study to test this mechanism, finding limited effects but pointing to the potential of different informational treatments that may yield stronger destigmatising outcomes. Accordingly, we introduce an alternative operationalisation of counter-stereotypical information (see Section 2) and refine Weisshaar's (2021) approach along four dimensions. First, we include a no-information control condition – rather than contrasting only stereotype-reinforcing and stereotype-mitigating treatments – to better isolate the intervention's effects. Second, we test across multiple care engagements beyond stay-at-home parenting, as elder and illness care may evoke stronger stereotypes (see supra). Third, we examine informational treatment effects on recruiter perceptions rather than focusing only on recruitment outcomes. Fourth, we use a sample of professional recruiters instead of a general national sample of respondents.

Following these refinements, we experimentally test the moderating impact of counter-stereotypical information on day-to-day availability. We target this outcome because caregiving tasks conflict most directly with work availability (see Becker's (1965) time trade-off theory). That is, family responsibilities inherently limit one's ability to arrive early, work overtime, or remain constantly available (Colombo et al., 2011), qualities increasingly valued amid blurred work-non-work boundaries (Fuller et al., 2024). Adopting a solution-oriented approach, our factorial survey experiment embeds randomised availability statements to counter stereotypes of caregivers' limited day-to-day availability. In doing so, we aim to test our third research question:

RQ3. To what extent does an availability statement improve caregivers' evaluations?

Our main findings are as follows. First, we identify a clear demand-side care penalty: persons with care-related inactivity periods receive lower hireability ratings than their continuously employed counterparts. Surprisingly, no differences emerge across care engagements. Second, this penalty appears rooted in perceptions of skill loss, reduced commitment, and (most prominently) limited availability, with the latter two particularly pronounced for childcare-related breaks. Third, our counter-stereotypical information concerning day-to-day availability improves caregivers' hireability, but does not neutralise the care penalty. By contrast, unemployed applicants are rated lowest across almost all dimensions and remain unresponsive to informational cues.

The following sections proceed as follows. In Section 2, we detail the factorial survey method. In Section 3, we present the results in three subsections, each corresponding to one of our research questions. In Section 4, we conclude with the limitations of our study and outline the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

2. Data gathering and analysis

As introduced in the previous section, we set up a factorial survey experiment to estimate hiring penalties for (former) caregivers (RQ1), gain insight into the mechanisms underlying this penalty (RQ2), and test adding an availability statement as a stigma-reducing intervention (RQ3). A factorial survey experiment is particularly apt for our research aims, because it blends the benefits of laboratory experiments (i.e. high internal validity) with those of traditional survey methods (i.e. high external validity).

First, reflecting the internal validity of laboratory designs, this approach enables the experimental manipulation and randomisation of our key independent variables (i.e. caregiving status of job candidates), allowing for causal interpretation of their effects on outcome variables (i.e. hireability) (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014) – an advantage over conventional surveys, which are prone to bias from unobserved heterogeneity (Neumark, 2018). Second, akin to the external validity of survey methods, factorial survey designs can be implemented across broad and diverse respondent pools – a plus over traditional lab experiments, which often rely on small and non-representative samples (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Moreover, factorial survey experiments have been successfully applied in related research on demand-side penalties and stigma surrounding career gaps due to unemployment (e.g. Van Belle et al., 2018), illness (e.g. Sterkens et al., 2021), and family care (e.g. Henle et al., 2020).

More concretely, in the context of hiring discrimination, a factorial survey experiment typically presents participants with short descriptions of hypothetical applicants (i.e. vignettes), whose attributes (i.e. vignette factors) vary systematically or randomly across predefined categories (i.e. vignette levels) (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). This setup inherently carries the main limitation of factorial survey research: by simplifying real-world complexity, results may not fully translate to true recruitment behaviour (Forster & Neugebauer, 2024).

Throughout this section, we discuss how we sought to address this limitation.

2.1. Design

Each participant reviewed five vignettes formatted as fictitious tabulated HR notes describing candidates in terms of five randomised attributes. This design builds on prior factorial survey research (e.g. Sterkens et al., 2021; Van Belle et al., 2018) and follows methodological guidance from Auspurg and Hinz (2014).[2] More concretely, we provided information on (i) the reason and duration of an employment gap, (ii) the inclusion and phrasing of a day-to-day availability statement, (iii) gender, (iv) age, and (v) extracurricular activities. Table 1 details these candidate characteristics and their corresponding levels.

< Table 1 about here >

First, to test whether and why recruiters avoid job seekers with caregiving gaps (RQ1 and RQ2), our central vignette factor captured the reason for the non-employment period. We included five caregiving-related treatments (i.e. full-time informal care for a child with health issues, full-time informal care for a parent with health issues, full-time informal care for a partner with health issues, as well as full-time foster care and full-time stay-at-home parenting) and two control treatments (i.e. continuous employment and unemployment). These factors were selected for their expected variation in hireability and candidate perceptions (as outlined in the introduction) and for their prevalence and projected growth among informal caregivers in Flanders, the regional context of our experiment (Bronselaer et al., 2018; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Statistics Flanders, 2024). Less common care types (with a prevalence below 10% among Flemish adults; Statistics Flanders, 2024) were excluded to safeguard ecological validity. As aforementioned, this constitutes a key concern in vignette research. To further raise realism, we doubled the frequency of the continuous employment benchmark, following Weisshaar (2018), because most job seekers remain employed while applying elsewhere. Additionally, unemployment was included to clarify inconsistent findings across earlier experiments regarding care penalties: hireability ratings were lower

[2] We follow Auspurg and Hinz's (2014) recommendations to employ tabular vignettes for evaluative tasks such as hiring assessments and to restrict the number of vignette characteristics to approximately seven (plus or minus two), thereby maintaining sufficient variation while minimising respondent fatigue.

for caregivers than for the unemployed in Weisshaar (2018), were similar in Kristal et al. (2023), and were higher in D'hert et al. (2024b).

For fictitious profiles featuring an employment gap, we also specified the duration of the employment gap.[3] This design choice rests on theoretical and empirical evidence showing that hiring and productivity stigmas intensify as non-employment spells lengthen (Becker, 1962; Carmichael et al., 2008; D'hert et al., 2024a; Eriksson & Rooth, 2014; Kroft et al., 2013; Van Belle et al., 2018; Vishwanath, 1989), although enrichment theory (see Section 1) conversely suggests that prolonged caregiving may signal enhanced relevant skills (Raiber et al., 2025). To capture this variation, we included three duration levels: less than one year, one to three years, and more than three years. The one-year threshold reflects evidence that employer bias arises only after longer jobless periods (D'hert et al., 2024a; Raiber et al., 2025), while the three-year boundary aligns with observed distributions showing that longer care breaks are relatively rare and collectively occur about as frequently as the shorter categories (Carmichael et al., 2008), again enhancing ecological validity.

Second, our experimental dimension regarding day-to-day availability directly targets RQ3. We introduced two alternative operationalisations of counter-stereotypical information about day-to-day availability, distinct from those used by Weisshaar (2021), who found no destigmatising effect. Specifically, our treatments read 'the candidate is flexible' and 'the candidate is able to adapt well to rapidly changing situations.' The flexibility statement responds to evidence that care penalties largely stem from perceived deficits in flexibility (D'hert et al., 2024b), whereas the adaptability statement offers a more indirect counter-stereotypical cue, inspired by Scarnati's (1999) definition of workplace flexibility. We also added two control conditions: one emphasising minimal non-work responsibilities, analogous to Weisshaar's (2021) treatment, and one baseline no-information condition.

Third, we included gender (male or female) due to inconsistent findings regarding its moderating role in caregiver career outcomes: evidence ranges from a more substantial male care penalty (Coltrane et al., 2013; Weisshaar, 2018) to null effects (Bear & Glick, 2017;

[3] We combined the reason for the career break and its duration into a single factor to avoid logically inconsistent vignettes. Treating these dimensions as two separate factors would have produced impossible combinations (e.g. a continuously employed candidate with a break duration), thereby compromising the orthogonality of our experimental design.

Kristal et al., 2023), and even a male care premium (Raiber et al., 2025). Two opposing processes may cause this variability. On the one hand, women may face stronger penalties for care-related interruptions, consistent with the extensive motherhood penalty literature, which shows negative effects for mothers but null or even positive effects for fathers (El Haj et al., 2024). On the other hand, men with caregiving roles may be penalised for deviating from traditional breadwinner expectations, as predicted by role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Last, we integrated information on two common resume characteristics, following earlier factorial survey studies (e.g. Sterkens et al., 2021) to further foster ecological validity and thus counter the realism critique raised by Forster and Neugebauer (2024). Including these attributes also helped mask the experiment's purpose, reducing socially desirable responding (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). We added age (in years, i.e. 34, 41, 48, or 55)[4, 5] and extracurricular activities (i.e. none mentioned, voluntary work, sports activities, or cultural activities).

The full factorial combination of experimentally varied variables produced a 24 x 4 x 2 x 4 x 4 design with 3,072 unique vignettes (i.e. vignette universe; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Because evaluating all combinations would require an unfeasibly large sample size, we employed a D-efficient fractional design to maximise both statistical precision and orthogonality (i.e. vignette fraction; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Using the algorithms of Auspurg and Hinz (2014) and Kuhfeld (2010) – and allowing for two-way interactions (in light of RQ3) – 400 vignettes were retained, resulting in a high design efficiency of 91.1% (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). These vignettes were distributed across 80 blocks of five (i.e. vignette decks), randomly assigned to participants, with vignette order within these blocks further randomised to minimise sequence effects (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014).

Additionally, each vignette was embedded within a specific job context defined by two characteristics: (i) required educational degree and (ii) gender domination. The first dimension draws on human capital theory (discussed in supra; Becker, 1962), because

[4] To achieve a more realistic age distribution while avoiding vignette inflation, we have applied a quasi-continuous age distribution randomly adjusted by ±3 years, following Sterkens et al. (2021).

[5] The lower age limit of 34 was set to avoid profiles being perceived as lacking sufficient job-relevant experience, particularly when combined with longer employment lapses. The upper limit of 55 reflects evidence that caregiving duties – especially for children – decline sharply beyond this age (Fuller et al., 2024).

employment gaps are typically less penalised in positions requiring lower educational attainment (Bonoli, 2014). Such jobs are also often perceived as less demanding, thereby reducing the potential conflict between care duties and job performance (Dai et al., 2022). Second, gender domination was included because caregivers may face less discrimination in female-dominated occupations than in male-dominated ones (Henle et al., 2020). Both characteristics were operationalised at three levels – namely, low, moderate, and high for required educational degree; female-dominated, neutral, and male-dominated for gender domination – resulting in nine unique job settings.[6, 7] This approach enhanced generalisability relative to earlier experiments that were limited to one or two job contexts (e.g. Henle et al., 2020).

2.2. Procedure

To ensure external validity, the vignette experiment was fielded among actual Flemish HR professionals, tied to job openings advertised on the website of the Public Employment Agency of Flanders – matching our selected occupations (as outlined in the previous subsection). Together, 260 recruiters provided complete and valid responses, totalling 1,300 vignette evaluations (260 x 5).[8] Subsection 2.3 reviews sample representativeness.

Prior to the experimental tasks, participating recruiters received a procedural briefing detailing data processing (via an informed consent form) and general survey logistics (e.g. estimated completion time). To safeguard internal validity, the study's precise purpose was blinded; participants were informed only that it concerned a study situated in a hiring

[6] To determine the specific occupations, we followed El Haj et al. (2025), who classified jobs according to the same characteristics. In their study – set in the context of parenthood and hiring – occupations with 70% or more workers of one gender were deemed gender-typed, while those with a 40–60% gender split were labelled gender-neutral (informed by Leuze & Strauß, 2016). Educational requirements were defined using qualification criteria from the Public Employment Agency of Flanders (PEAF).

[7] The nine occupations included were: (i) kitchen worker, (ii) commercial assistant, (iii) bookkeeper, (iv) cleaner at people's homes, (v) administrative assistant, (vi) nurse, (vii) truck driver, (viii) setup operator for CNC machine tools, and (ix) ICT analyst developer. Details on occupational characteristics and task descriptions are available in Appendix Table A1.

[8] Recruiters' contact details were initially sourced from relevant active vacancies in April 2025 and, due to a low response rate, supplemented with vacancies available in July 2025. Duplicate e-mail addresses were excluded, and reminders were issued one week after the initial invitation. To stimulate participation, respondents could enter a raffle for gift vouchers by completing the survey. Only fully completed surveys were retained, defined as those successfully passing both attention checks (e.g. 'please select response option 1').

context (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014).

Participants were subsequently presented with a standardised hypothetical hiring scenario designed to enhance interpersonal comparability across responses (a recurrent vignette critique; Burstzyn et al., 2025). They were instructed to assume the role of a recruiter for a fictitious firm and to provide hiring advice for a specific vacancy, in a scenario where a colleague had already screened the applications, contacted the shortlisted candidates, and summarised the relevant information, an arrangement designed to create a realistic recruitment context. Each participant was assigned to one of nine preselected occupations, with allocations randomised in wave 1 and targeted in wave 2, the latter corresponding to the recruiter's advertised occupation. This design enabled comparison between evaluations of familiar and unfamiliar job contexts.[9] Participants were further informed that all candidates formally satisfied the educational and experience requirements after an initial screening (in line with Montanye & Livingston, 2024), while other differentiating attributes were rendered in vignette format. To avoid direct candidate comparisons, no restriction was imposed on the number of candidates the recruiters could hypothetically invite to interview (as informed by Dai et al., 2022).

In the next stage of the survey, recruiters evaluated the five fictitious candidates presented through concise profile summaries. To address RQ1, they rated each candidate's probability of interview invitation and eventual hiring on an 11-point agreement scale (0 = completely disagree; 10 = completely agree), consistent with recent experiments (e.g. El Haj et al., 2025; Sterkens et al., 2021; Van Belle et al., 2018). They also gauged how other recruiters would rate the candidates on both outcomes – a technique aimed at mitigating social desirability bias, a common concern in vignette research (Bursztyn et al., 2025).[10]

Furthermore, to examine RQ2, recruiters judged 18 candidate perceptions, structured into six clusters anchored in the theories introduced in Section 1: (i) commitment (ideal worker norm theory), (ii) availability (time trade-off theory), (iii) agency (social role theory, negative facet), (iv) warmth (social role theory, positive facet), (v) competence (enrichment

[9] After reviewing the job description for their assigned occupation, participants completed a brief comprehension check to ensure alignment with the intended job characteristics (which was confirmed).

[10] For example, participants rated both their own and others' interview recommendations using items such as 'I would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job' and 'Other hiring professionals would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job.'

theory), and (vi) skill deterioration (skill deterioration theory). Each cluster comprised three internally consistent statements ($\alpha > 0.88$), adapted from Henle et al. (2020). To our knowledge, the only peer-reviewed study employing a comparable multi-context hiring experiment.[11] The following paragraph elaborates on these clusters and perceptions.

First, the commitment cluster comprised items on commitment, work prioritisation, and willingness to make sacrifices (Colombo et al., 2011; Coltrane et al., 2013; Henle et al., 2020; Weisshaar, 2018). Second, availability was captured via statements on availability, flexibility, and absenteeism (Fuller et al., 2024; Henle et al., 2020; Martsolf et al., 2019; Van Borm & Baert, 2022). Third, agency was assessed in terms of leadership, independence, and self-confidence (Henle et al., 2020; Montanye & Livingston, 2024; Raiber et al., 2025). Fourth, warmth was measured using likeability, awareness of others' feelings, and sincerity (Henle et al., 2020; Montanye & Livingston, 2024; Raiber et al., 2025). Fifth, competence was assessed with items on intellectual abilities, efficiency, and organisation (Henle et al., 2020; Raiber et al., 2025; Van Borm & Baert, 2022). Sixth, skill deterioration was operationalised as general, social, and technological skill loss (Carmichael et al., 2008; D'hert et al., 2024b; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Raiber et al., 2025; Rubin & White-Means, 2009; Van Belle et al., 2018). A detailed overview of all statements is provided in Appendix Table A2.

In the survey's final phase, participants completed a post-experimental questionnaire for validity and robustness checks, covering recruiters demographics (i.e. gender, age, children, career break history, educational degree, and occupation) and selection expertise (i.e. involvement in selection decisions, experience with selection decisions, and expertise with the presented job). To control for response bias, social desirability tendencies were gauged using the Social Desirability Scale (Steenkamp, 2010).

2.3. Participants

Among the 260 retained recruiters, most were women (73.5%), with an average age of 43. The sample was highly educated, with 81% having completed at least a tertiary education (see Appendix Table A3 for detailed descriptives). Our sample's composition closely mirrors

[11] To minimise respondent fatigue, we retained only three items per cluster, prioritising perceptions most recurrent in prior research on care penalties.

that of Belgian recruiters in the most recent European Social Survey (ESS), suggesting that it is broadly representative.[12] Furthermore, the recruiters were well-positioned within the hiring context of our experiment: 58.1% occupied managerial positions, 33.1% made hiring decisions on a daily basis, 63.5% had more than five years of recruitment experience, and their expertise for the presented vacancies was high (mean = 7.515; midpoint = 5.000). One in four recruiters reported having no children (25%), and a similar share had never experienced a career break (25.4%). Average scores on both social desirability scales were slightly above the midpoint (3.448 for ERT and 3.342 for MRT, midpoint = 3.000).

To assess the validity of the randomisation procedure, the remaining columns of Appendix Table A3 report tests examining whether the various career break types were evaluated by recruiters with comparable characteristics. The absence of statistically significant Pearson Chi-square and Kruskal–Wallis statistics in the last column confirms that the randomisation of our key independent variable across recruiters was successful.[13]

3. Results

This section presents our experimental results. First, we examine how a (specific) care-related career interruption shapes recruiters' contact and hiring intentions (RQ1). Second, we investigate what such interruptions signal to recruiters (RQ2). Third, we assess whether former caregivers benefit from emphasising their availability when applying (RQ3). Last, we report robustness checks to ascertain the credibility and consistency of our findings.

3.1. How does mentioning a (specific) care-related career interruption affect hiring outcomes?

To address RQ1, we estimate multivariate regressions with interview and hiring probability

[12] Following Sterkens et al. (2021), we retrieved Belgian data from the most recent wave of the ESS (2023) for the following ISCO-08 codes: 1212 (Human resource managers), 2423 (Personnel and careers professionals), 3333 (Employment agents and contractors) and 4416 (Personnel clerks).

[13] Recruiters' own career break history is an exception (p = 0.027), with a slightly different distribution.

as dependent variables, career break characteristics as independent variables, and additional candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics as control variables. Standard errors are clustered at the recruiter level. Table 2 displays the regression results for both dependent variables.[14]

< Table 2 about here >

Model 1 in Table 2 adopts a parsimonious specification that classifies career breaks into three categories: no career break (reference), caregiving break, and unemployment break. Hence, this model establishes the overall magnitude of the care-related hiring penalty by contrasting caregiving breaks (any form) with continuous employment and unemployment. Model 2 in Table 2 introduces a more granular specification by disaggregating the caregiving category into the specific types of caregiving breaks included in the experiment (i.e. informal childcare, informal eldercare, informal partner care, foster care, and stay-at-home parenting). This model examines heterogeneity in the care penalty across caregiving engagements, identifying whether certain forms of care are more heavily penalised than others. We focus exclusively on coefficients that differ significantly according to pairwise F-tests for equality, which formally assess whether the estimated effects of two break types (e.g. childcare versus eldercare) are statistically distinguishable. All regression coefficients discussed below derive from Table 2, while the corresponding F-tests are reported in Appendix Table A4.[15]

Our Model 1 results point to the presence of a care penalty in hiring: applicants with a care-related career interruption score 7.88 percentage points (pp.) ($p < 0.001$) lower on the interview invitation scale and 6.87 pp. ($p < 0.001$) lower on the hiring scale (both scales ranging from 0 to 10) compared to their continuously employed counterparts. Thus, caregivers are roughly 7 to 8 pp. less likely to be interviewed or hired. However, the unemployment penalty proves more than twice as severe, with drops of 17.46 pp. ($p < 0.001$) for interview probability and 16.67 pp. ($p < 0.001$) for hiring probability (pairwise F-tests indicate significant differences in mean interview and hiring scores between

[14] Other candidate, job and recruiter characteristics are not presented for conciseness and limited relevance, because these variables yielded few significant results. The full tables are available upon request.

[15] Models 1 and 2 both show that all career break-specific coefficients capture the effect of a career break shorter than one year, as 'less than one year' serves as the reference category in the duration specification.

candidates with caregiving and unemployment breaks, $p < 0.05$; see Appendix Table A4). In this regard, the relative ranking of caregivers vis-à-vis unemployed applicants aligns with D'hert et al. (2024b) but is the reverse of Weisshaar (2018), who reports more substantial penalties for caregiving interruptions than for unemployment spells.

In Model 2, we investigate whether the care penalty applies uniformly across different caregiving engagements. All caregiving breaks yield significantly lower interview and hiring probabilities than continuous employment (at least at the $p < 0.01$ level), yet these outcomes do not differ significantly across the various care types (all F-tests for equality are insignificant at $p < 0.05$). Hence, recruiters do not differentiate between forms of caregiving when making interview or hiring decisions, even though the nature and intensity of care responsibilities may vary substantially across caregiving engagements (see Section 1).

The duration of the career gap similarly affects hireability ratings. Relative to breaks shorter than one year, those lasting between one and three years are penalised by 5.24 pp. ($p = 0.002$) and 3.43 pp. ($p = 0.004$) in interview and hiring scores, respectively (Model 1; Model 2 yields similar results). For out-of-work spells exceeding three years, the penalties further intensify to drops of 8.97 pp. ($p < 0.001$) for interview and 7.52 pp. ($p < 0.001$) for hiring chances. In Subsection 3.3, we examine how these duration effects differ depending on whether the career break stems from caregiving or unemployment.

Including an availability statement also shapes recruiter evaluations: signalling flexibility or adaptability positively affects both outcomes across models, whereas mentioning limited non-work responsibilities has no discernible effect. These results, however, reflect only the general impact of such statements. In Subsection 3.3, we assess whether they also benefit caregivers specifically and whether these effects are stronger for caregivers than for applicants without a career break. Furthermore, gender does not significantly influence hireability ratings.

3.2. What does mentioning a (specific) care-related career interruption signal to recruiters?

Related to RQ2, this subsection probes the underlying mechanisms of the care penalty identified in the previous subsection by re-estimating the models using participants'

perceptions rather than hireability outcomes, while retaining identical specifications. The perceptions are organised along the theoretical dimensions introduced earlier (see Section 1): (i) commitment, (ii) availability, (iii) agency, (iv) warmth, (v) competence, and (vi) skill deterioration. Table 3 reports the corresponding estimates, with F-tests for differences across career break categories again presented in Appendix Table A4. We subsequently discuss the results for Model 1, contrasting caregiving in general with continuous employment and unemployment, and for Model 2, contrasting different caregiving engagements.

< Table 3 about here >

Turning to the three-category career break specification (Model 1), we first see the hierarchy observed for hireability outcomes in Subsection 3.1 re-emerge for perceived commitment and skill deterioration. That is, relative to the continuously employed, caregivers are evaluated as less committed ($\beta = -0.621$, $p < 0.001$) and more prone to skill deterioration ($\beta = -0.471$, $p = 0.001$). Still, the unemployed perform markedly worse on both dimensions (F-tests significant at the $p < 0.05$ level), with commitment ratings approximately doubled ($\beta = -1.209$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived skill loss nearly tripled ($\beta = -1.298$, $p < 0.001$). This pattern suggests that unemployment more strongly violates ideal worker norms, and that caregiving experience is perceived as a milder form of human capital depreciation – at odds with Becker's (1962) human capital theory, which assumes equivalent skill loss across career lapses.

Second, availability is the only perception dimension that sees caregivers ($\beta = -1.117$, $p < 0.001$) rated as unfavourably as the unemployed ($\beta = -1.090$, $p < 0.001$; pairwise F-test $p > 0.05$) compared to the employed. This finding accords with earlier evidence suggesting that availability represents the dimension most fundamentally in tension with caregiving responsibilities, as articulated by time trade-off theory (Becker, 1965).

Third, agency and competence do not differ between caregivers and continuously employed applicants, although both dimensions decline significantly among the unemployed ($\beta = -0.729$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.857$, $p < 0.001$; respectively). Thus, caregiving responsibilities appear neither in conflict with masculine professional ideals nor indicative of additional job-relevant competencies, as proposed by social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), respectively.

Fourth, warmth is the sole dimension that sees caregivers receive higher evaluations than the continuously employed ($\beta = 0.705$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting the more communal traits conventionally ascribed to caregiving roles (in line with social role theory; Eagly, 1987).

Whereas Model 2 showed no significant variation in hireability ratings across the different caregiving engagements (see Subsection 3.1), the ratings for commitment, availability, and warmth ratings do show a systematic pattern: applicants who care for their own children (i.e. stay-at-home parenting and informal childcare) are evaluated less favourably than those in other caregiving engagements. These differences are again identified through pairwise F-tests for equality (reported in Appendix Table A4).

First, in terms of commitment perceptions, opting out of the workforce to care for one's own children (stay-at-home parenting: $\beta = -0.967$, $p < 0.001$; informal childcare: $\beta = -0.836$, $p < 0.001$) is penalised more severely than other caregiving breaks (F-tests $p < 0.05$). Notably, their coefficients are statistically similar to those of the heavily disadvantaged unemployed category (F-tests $p > 0.05$), indicating comparably low commitment ratings. The result for stay-at-home parenting aligns with prior evidence (e.g. O'Connor et al., 2015), suggesting that such breaks are interpreted as voluntary and thus particularly in tension with ideal worker norms.

Second, this pattern is even more pronounced for availability: those caring for their own children are viewed as the least available across all groups – including the unemployed (stay-at-home parenting: $\beta = -1.451$, $p < 0.001$; informal childcare: $\beta = -1.574$, $p < 0.001$; F-tests $p < 0.05$). These results counter prior evidence that regular childcare raises fewer availability concerns than other caregiving types given its greater stability (e.g. Henle et al., 2020).

Third, regarding warmth, stay-at-home parenting is evaluated significantly less favourably ($\beta = 0.342$, $p = 0.006$) vis-à-vis other care engagements, presumably because it is perceived as a more generic form of care and its warmth consequently carries less evaluative weight. Nonetheless, all caregiving breaks receive higher warmth ratings than unemployment. Contrary to prior research, the altruistic nature of foster care does not translate into higher warmth evaluations (e.g. De Maeyer et al., 2014).

Additionally, differences within the remaining perception clusters are more modest and far less sharply delineated than those observed for commitment, availability, and warmth. Across agency, competence, and skill deterioration, caregiving engagements are evaluated

in largely similar terms and consistently more favourably than unemployment. Nonetheless, minor contrasts emerge within each cluster: (i) agency ratings are higher for childcare and partner care than for stay-at-home parenting, (ii) competence scores are higher for childcare compared to elder and foster care, and (iii) skill deterioration is rated lower for childcare and foster care relative to stay-at-home parenting. This means that the elevated skill levels previously linked to eldercare and foster care (e.g. De Maeyer et al., 2024; Lam et al., 2022) are not substantiated here.

Next, we briefly consider the signalling effects of the other theoretically relevant candidate characteristics. First, regarding the out-of-work duration, the results mirror the trend observed for hireability ratings in the previous subsection: longer breaks correspond to lower perceived levels of commitment, availability, agency, competence, and skill deterioration. Warmth perceptions, however, remain unaffected by the lapse length. Second, all three availability statements show consistently positive associations with perceptions of commitment, availability, and agency, yet none influence warmth. For competence and skill deterioration, only adaptability cues enhance evaluations. Third, no gender differences emerge, except for warmth and competence, for which men are rated less positively.

3.3. To what extent does an availability statement improve caregivers' evaluations?

Turning to RQ3, we examine (i) whether counter-stereotypical information about day-to-day availability improves evaluations of caregivers and (ii) whether such information reduces the care penalty relative to continuously employed applicants. The analyses extend the specifications from Subsections 3.1 and 3.2 by incorporating two-way interaction terms between the three-category career break model and the availability statement condition.[16] Table 4 reports the interaction effects for hireability ratings and Table 5 presents the corresponding effects on the underlying perceptions.

< Table 4 about here >

[16] The three-category career break model was adopted to enhance interpretability and maintain adequate statistical power.

< Table 5 about here >

First, we assess whether an availability statement increases caregivers' hireability ratings in absolute terms. We rely on joint significance F-tests (see Appendix Table A5), which estimate the combined effect of each statement's main coefficient and its interaction for caregiving applicants (e.g. flexibility + flexibility × caregiving). These tests show that flexibility and adaptability statements both significantly increase (p-values < 0.05) caregivers' hireability ratings. By contrast, statements highlighting limited non-work responsibilities produce no meaningful improvement for caregivers – consistent with Weisshaar (2021). For the unemployed, all joint effects are statistically insignificant, indicating that none of the availability statements enhances their hireability ratings.

Second, we examine whether an availability statement also reduces the care penalty. This requires testing whether the statements exert stronger effects for caregivers than for the employed, as captured by the interaction terms reported in Table 4. Across all statements, these interaction effects are small and statistically insignificant, indicating that none of the informational cues meaningfully narrows the hiring gap between caregivers and the continuously employed. The same pattern holds for the unemployed.

The perceptual results in Table 5 clarify why statements about flexibility and adaptability improve caregivers' evaluations. Both cues substantially elevate perceptions of availability – the targeted dimension – but also raise evaluations of commitment and agency (joint F-tests $p < 0.05$; see Appendix Table A5), suggesting broader spillover benefits beyond availability concerns. These spillover effects are even more pronounced for adaptability cues, which additionally enhance perceptions of competence and skill deterioration. By contrast, statements highlighting limited non-work responsibilities yield only modest increases in perceived availability and commitment, consistent with the notion that such cues offer weak reassurance rather than active counter-signalling (Weisshaar, 2021). For the unemployed, none of the statements improves any perceptual dimension.

Turning to the other moderators tested, interactions with duration (estimated relative to unemployment spells) show that the extra penalty for caregiving gaps exceeding three years is somewhat smaller than the corresponding long-term unemployment penalty, with limited mitigation for hireability probabilities, availability, agency, and competence. Gender interactions are negligible, except for a positive interaction between being male and having

a caregiving break on warmth evaluations, indicating that caregiving increases perceived warmth more strongly for men than for women.

3.4. How robust are these effects?

Five robustness checks were conducted to verify the stability of the findings and the validity of the inferences drawn. First, we differentiated between familiar and unfamiliar job contexts (Appendix Table A6). Second, to address potential social desirability bias, we re-estimated the models excluding the upper decile of respondents on the ERT and MRT scales (Appendix Table A7). Third, as an additional probe of social desirability effects, we tested whether the results persist when recruiters evaluate others' hiring decisions rather than their own (Appendix Table A8). Fourth, given the expanded specification of Model 2 in Tables 2 and 3, which introduces multiple caregiving break types, thereby increasing the number of simultaneous comparisons, we applied multiple hypothesis testing corrections (Bonferroni–Holm, Šidák–Holm, and Westfall–Young) to account for family-wise error rates (Appendix Table A9). Last, we re-estimated all models using ordered logistic regressions (results available upon request).

Results across the robustness checks largely corroborate the main findings. The care- and unemployment-related penalties are robust across both familiar and unfamiliar job contexts, although caregiving penalties appear somewhat attenuated in familiar contexts. None of the remaining robustness checks materially altered the effects reported in the previous subsections. For brevity, robustness checks have only been reported for the hireability outcomes; full estimates for all models are available upon request.

4. Conclusion

The growing burden of informal care increasingly obliges workers to place their careers on hold to support dependent relatives. When they later re-enter the labour market, many face hiring discrimination through the so-called care penalty. This bias sits uneasily with current activation agendas that frame inactive individuals, including caregivers, as a latent labour

reserve. Despite its policy relevance, evidence on employer-driven care discrimination remains fragmented and mainly confined to conventional childcare or eldercare. Little is known about how recruiters interpret other forms of caregiving, which heuristics sustain these evaluations, or the extent to which applicants can strategically counter them through targeted self-presentation. Our study addresses these gaps by comparing hiring evaluations across multiple caregiving engagements and identifying the perceptual mechanisms through which they operate. Using a factorial survey experiment among professional recruiters, we varied fictitious candidates' career histories and signals on day-to-day availability. Recruiters rated hireability as well as six theoretically grounded perception dimensions, allowing a precise assessment of not only whether (RQ1) and why (RQ2) (specific) caregiving engagements shape hiring preferences but also how counter-stereotypical cues concerning day-to-day availability can recalibrate those preferences (RQ3).

Our results underscore the existence of a care penalty: candidates returning to employment after a caregiving hiatus are less likely to be invited for an interview or offered a position than those applying from continuous employment. Recruiters appear indifferent to the specific nature of care duties. That is, the care penalty manifests uniformly across caregiving engagements. This hiring bias is chiefly anchored in assumptions of skill deterioration, weakened commitment, and, most prominently, constrained availability, especially following career interruptions to care for one's own children. Warmth perceptions are, as expected, more favourable for caregivers, whereas agency and competence concerns are minimal. We further find that caregivers' evaluations improve when resumes signal flexibility and adaptability but remain unaffected by signals of minimal non-work responsibilities. Unemployed applicants fare worse overall, and their penalty persists despite counter-stereotypical informational cues. The care penalty is less pronounced in familiar job contexts, increases with longer lapses, and does not differ by gender.

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings regarding RQ2 lend support to ideal worker norm theory (Acker, 1990), which describes caregiving lapses as standing in tension with the ideal worker archetype, because recruiters interpret such breaks as voluntary withdrawals from professional life. Notably, recruiters also anticipate reduced future availability, even in the absence of explicit cues about ongoing care duties, consistent with time trade-off theory (Becker, 1965). In line with human capital theory (Becker, 1962), time spent outside paid

employment for caregiving is read as a phase of skill depreciation. Although caregiving gaps do not appear to conflict with masculine professional ideals, they evoke feminine-coded traits such as warmth (social role theory; Eagly, 1987). Finally, the competencies developed through caregiving experience are neither recognised nor rewarded in hiring evaluations, offering little evidence for enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Furthermore, findings in response to RQ3 align with signalling theory (Vishwanath, 1989), with adaptability and flexibility statements softening informational deficits surrounding caregiving breaks, enabling more precise inferences about hireability and reducing reliance on group heuristics. In the same informational vein, the care penalty is smaller in familiar job contexts, where contextual knowledge likely lowers asymmetry. Regarding the remaining moderators, the steeper penalties for longer lapses reaffirm human capital depreciation mechanisms (Becker, 1962), whereas the absence of gender effects implies that opposing evaluative biases towards male and female caregivers cancel each other out (for males, see role incongruity; Eagly & Karau, 2002; for females, see motherhood penalties; El Haj et al., 2024).

Turning to the practical implications, our results suggest that providing context for employment interruptions is generally advantageous. Caregivers continue to be evaluated more favourably than unemployed applicants, presumably because their labour market absence conveys a clear and socially legitimate rationale, echoing earlier findings (e.g. Eriksson & Rooth, 2014). At the same time, caregivers can actively shape recruiters' interpretations by disclosing targeted information to counteract stigma. Our evidence indicates that signalling flexibility and adaptability is particularly effective at early screening stages, whereas emphasising limited non-work responsibilities offers no comparable benefit (consistent with Weisshaar, 2021).

Several caveats merit consideration. First and foremost, factorial survey experiments offer only a simplified representation of recruitment settings, potentially constraining the extent to which the findings generalise beyond the experimental frame. To reduce this limitation, we designed highly credible applicant profiles that closely approximate real-world candidates, and we elicited evaluations exclusively from professional recruiters. Future research could further enhance ecological realism by employing more immersive scenarios such as detailed resumes, accompanying motivation letters, or simulated LinkedIn profiles.

Second, respondents may have exhibited socially desirable response behaviour, being conscious of their participation in a research context. To address this concern, we incorporated validated social desirability measures and, as a robustness check, excluded the upper decile of high scorers. Moreover, we invited participants to assess how they believed other recruiters would evaluate each applicant, offering an indirect proxy for normative bias. These precautions did not materially alter the results. Nonetheless, future work could adopt more advanced instruments for correcting desirability distortions, such as the Bayesian Truth Serum method (Prelec, 2004).

Third, the experiment included only limited information about the caregiving interruption – specifically, its reason and duration. Previous studies, however, suggest that the intensity of caregiving may also shape recruiters' evaluations (e.g. Henle et al., 2020; Raiber et al., 2025). Furthermore, respondents were not informed whether caregiving duties had fully ceased at the time of application, nor were they informed about the supply-side factors motivating labour market re-entry. Both dimensions could materially influence hiring assessments and thus merit explicit consideration in future research.

Fourth and last, the counter-stereotypical information in our design focused solely on day-to-day availability. We deliberately operationalised this dimension differently – and arguably more effectively – than Weisshaar (2021), who also explored other forms of counter-signalling, such as cues intended to offset commitment-related concerns, which did not prove successful in its context. Nonetheless, alternative approaches to framing this information may elicit different recruiter responses and warrant further examination.

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Participants were informed about the general aim of the study. Due to the nature of the experiment, participants could not be a priori informed about the study's exact objective. Consent to use the participants' data for research purposes was obtained prior to the start of the experiment.

Data and code availability

Data and code are available at https://osf.io/zaeyr/.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Liam D'hert: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; Morien El Haj: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing; Stijn Baert: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Tables

Table 1. Candidate characteristics used in the experimental materials

Vignette factors	Vignette levels
Career break[a]	Reason: {No career break; Full-time informal care for a child with health issues; Full-time informal care for a parent with health issues; Full-time informal care for a partner with health issues; Full-time foster care; Full-time stay-at-home parenting; Unemployment} Duration: {Less than one year; One to three years; More than three years}
Day-to-day availability	{None mentioned; The candidate is flexible; The candidate is able to adapt well to rapidly changing situations; The candidate has few responsibilities outside of work}
Gender	{Male; Female}
Age	{34±3 years old; 41±3 years old; 48±3 years old; 55±3 years old}
Extracurricular activities	{None mentioned; Voluntary work; Sports activities; Cultural activities}

Notes. As detailed in Subsection 2.1, the factorial product of the vignette levels (i.e. 24 x 4 x 2 x 4 x 4) resulted in 3,072 possible candidate profiles. Of these, 400 were systematically bundled into 80 decks of five vignettes using a resolution V D-efficient design (D-efficiency of 91.1%; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014) and were then randomly assigned to recruiters.

[a] For the six career break reasons, three durations were specified, whereas no duration applied to the 'no career break' condition. To enhance ecological validity, the no career break profile appeared twice as often as each break condition, resulting in 24 levels for this factor. Reason and duration are presented separately to maintain clarity and conciseness.

Table 2. Multivariate regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables

	I. Interview probability		II. Hiring probability	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)				
Caregiving	−0.788*** (0.161)		−0.687*** (0.172)	
Unemployment	−1.746*** (0.206)		−1.667*** (0.214)	
Career break: reason (ref. = No career break)				
Informal childcare		−0.943*** (0.226)		−0.823*** (0.228)
Informal eldercare		−0.642** (0.217)		−0.503* (0.215)
Informal partner care		−0.654** (0.198)		−0.645** (0.232)
Foster care		−0.795** (0.242)		−0.779** (0.253)
Stay-at-home parenting		−0.895*** (0.204)		−0.674** (0.210)
Unemployment		−1.738*** (0.206)		−1.661*** (0.214)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)				
One to three years	−0.524** (0.165)	−0.528** (0.165)	−0.343* (0.166)	−0.343* (0.166)
More than three years	−0.897*** (0.175)	−0.913*** (0.174)	−0.752*** (0.172)	−0.767*** (0.172)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)				
Flexibility	0.482*** (0.128)	0.472*** (0.128)	0.486*** (0.121)	0.476*** (0.122)
Adaptability	0.546*** (0.132)	0.542*** (0.132)	0.783*** (0.128)	0.780*** (0.128)
Non-work responsibilities	0.073 (0.124)	0.077 (0.124)	0.216† (0.127)	0.223† (0.127)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.127 (0.083)	−0.133 (0.084)	−0.020 (0.090)	−0.021 (0.091)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviation is used: ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations. Results of corresponding F-tests assessing equality of mean evaluations across career breaks are reported in the Appendix Table A4.

Table 3. Multivariate regression results with the clustered perceptions as outcome variables

	I. Commitment		II. Availability		III. Agency	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)	(III.1)	(III.2)
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)						
Caregiving	−0.621*** (0.123)		−1.117*** (0.136)		0.039 (0.116)	
Unemployment	−1.209*** (0.173)		−1.090*** (0.184)		−0.729*** (0.171)	
Career break: reason (ref. = No career break)						
Informal childcare		−0.836*** (0.171)		−1.574*** (0.182)		0.215 (0.165)
Informal eldercare		−0.521** (0.151)		−0.875*** (0.154)		0.061 (0.142)
Informal partner care		−0.316* (0.157)		−0.778*** (0.168)		0.133 (0.152)
Foster care		−0.451** (0.172)		−0.884*** (0.177)		−0.039 (0.171)
Stay-at-home parenting		−0.967*** (0.164)		−1.451*** (0.178)		−0.159 (0.141)
Unemployment		−1.196*** (0.172)		−1.071*** (0.183)		−0.727*** (0.172)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)						
One to three years	−0.402*** (0.104)	−0.413*** (0.105)	−0.292** (0.111)	−0.302** (0.113)	−0.383*** (0.105)	−0.392*** (0.107)
More than three years	−0.584*** (0.137)	−0.605*** (0.136)	−0.394** (0.134)	−0.426** (0.134)	−0.401** (0.122)	−0.409** (0.120)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)						
Flexibility	0.436*** (0.104)	0.425*** (0.104)	0.474*** (0.107)	0.456*** (0.106)	0.235* (0.091)	0.232* (0.091)
Adaptability	0.349** (0.111)	0.344** (0.110)	0.266* (0.108)	0.253* (0.107)	0.327*** (0.084)	0.337*** (0.086)
Non-work responsibilities	0.295** (0.104)	0.293** (0.103)	0.433*** (0.108)	0.437*** (0.107)	−0.114 (0.100)	0.209* (0.099)
Gender (ref. = Female)						
Male	−0.082 (0.072)	−0.097 (0.072)	−0.032 (0.075)	−0.049 (0.074)	−0.063 (0.068)	−0.068 (0.067)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 3. Multivariate regression results with the clustered perceptions as outcome variables (continued)

	IV. Warmth		V. Competence		VI. Skill deterioration	
	(IV.1)	(IV.2)	(V.1)	(V.2)	(VI.1)	(VI.2)
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)						
Caregiving	0.705*** (0.096)		−0.025 (0.105)		−0.471** (0.140)	
Unemployment	−0.290* (0.146)		−0.857*** (0.164)		−1.298*** (0.179)	
Career break: reason (ref. = No career break)						
Informal childcare		0.858*** (0.136)		0.147 (0.136)		−0.342† (0.187)
Informal eldercare		0.658*** (0.124)		−0.189 (0.133)		−0.413* (0.171)
Informal partner care		0.926*** (0.124)		0.121 (0.135)		−0.486** (0.177)
Foster care		0.758*** (0.142)		−0.246 (0.164)		−0.343* (0.173)
Stay-at-home parenting		0.342** (0.123)		−0.005 (0.132)		−0.722*** (0.176)
Unemployment		−0.285† (0.145)		−0.865*** (0.165)		−1.292*** (0.179)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)						
One to three years	−0.091 (0.094)	−0.106 (0.092)	−0.256* (0.101)	−0.252* (0.101)	−0.601*** (0.123)	−0.615*** (0.123)
More than three years	−0.158 (0.106)	−0.167 (0.102)	−0.342** (0.110)	−0.335** (0.109)	−0.833*** (0.140)	−0.841*** (0.140)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)						
Flexibility	0.089 (0.088)	0.087 (0.086)	0.152† (0.089)	0.157† (0.090)	0.194† (0.109)	0.191† (0.109)
Adaptability	0.106 (0.078)	0.115 (0.078)	0.494*** (0.090)	0.494*** (0.090)	0.253* (0.106)	0.265* (0.106)
Non-work responsibilities	−0.051 (0.075)	−0.058 (0.074)	−0.024 (0.087)	−0.029 (0.086)	0.060 (0.099)	0.057 (0.099)
Gender (ref. = Female)						
Male	−0.160** (0.057)	−0.170** (0.057)	−0.187** (0.064)	−0.186** (0.064)	−0.051 (0.078)	−0.057 (0.078)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviation is used: ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations. Results of corresponding F-tests assessing equality of mean evaluations across career breaks are reported in the Appendix Table A4.

Table 4. Multivariate regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables, two-way interactions included

	I. Interview probability	II. Hiring probability
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)		
Caregiving	−0.869** (0.301)	−0.741* (0.332)
Unemployment	−1.218** (0.441)	−1.479** (0.447)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)		
One to three years	−0.955* (0.389)	−0.521 (0.374)
More than three years	−1.776*** (0.409)	−1.598*** (0.394)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)		
Flexibility	0.253 (0.230)	0.388 (0.302)
Adaptability	0.692** (0.234)	0.867** (0.308)
Non-work responsibilities	0.464† (0.263)	0.677* (0.319)
Gender (ref. = Female)		
Male	−0.229 (0.169)	−0.258 (0.214)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes
Interactions with duration (ref. = Less than one year)		
One to three years x caregiving	0.506 (0.435)	0.189 (0.399)
More than three years x caregiving	1.043* (0.460)	0.990* (0.436)
Interactions with availability statement (ref. = No statement)		
Flexibility x caregiving	0.443 (0.292)	0.152 (0.368)
Flexibility x unemployment	−0.239 (0.566)	0.127 (0.525)
Adaptability x caregiving	−0.126 (0.297)	−0.070 (0.386)
Adaptability x unemployment	−0.385 (0.570)	−0.172 (0.552)
Non-work responsibilities x caregiving	−0.480 (0.342)	−0.622 (0.392)
Non-work responsibilities x unemployment	−0.498 (0.612)	−0.428 (0.613)
Interactions with gender (ref. = Female)		
Male x caregiving	0.104 (0.232)	0.293 (0.270)
Male x unemployment	0.404 (0.408)	0.527 (0.408)

Notes. The following abbreviation is used: ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations. Results of corresponding F-tests assessing the joint significance of interaction terms are reported in Appendix Table A5.

Table 5. Multivariate regression results with the clustered perceptions as outcome variables, two-way interactions included

	I. Commitment	II. Availability	III. Agency
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)			
Caregiving	−0.544* (0.262)	−1.146*** (0.274)	0.085 (0.228)
Unemployment	−0.275 (0.390)	−0.519 (0.402)	−0.078 (0.320)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)			
One to three years	−0.904** (0.267)	−0.693* (0.279)	−0.729** (0.237)
More than three years	−1.045** (0.341)	−0.963** (0.313)	−1.107*** (0.287)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)			
Flexibility	0.565* (0.231)	0.563* (0.232)	0.422* (0.196)
Adaptability	0.498† (0.255)	0.229 (0.242)	0.531* (0.209)
Non-work responsibilities	0.617* (0.272)	0.780** (0.275)	0.061 (0.254)
Gender (ref. = Female)			
Male	−0.009 (0.164)	−0.100 (0.165)	−0.091 (0.156)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interactions with duration (ref. = Less than one year)			
One to three years x caregiving	0.611* (0.304)	0.473 (0.311)	0.406 (0.261)
More than three years x caregiving	0.571 (0.360)	0.685* (0.327)	0.849** (0.314)
Interactions with availability statement (ref. = No statement)			
Flexibility x caregiving	−0.009 (0.274)	−0.037 (0.256)	−0.178 (0.243)
Flexibility x unemployment	−0.793 (0.486)	−0.399 (0.480)	−0.414 (0.454)
Adaptability x caregiving	−0.086 (0.297)	0.129 (0.295)	−0.158 (0.261)
Adaptability x unemployment	−0.637 (0.460)	−0.258 (0.423)	−0.661† (0.389)
Non-work responsibilities x caregiving	−0.349 (0.321)	−0.450 (0.305)	−0.216 (0.294)
Non-work responsibilities x unemployment	−0.608 (0.489)	−0.368 (0.470)	−0.156 (0.433)
Interactions with gender (ref. = Female)			
Male x caregiving	−0.065 (0.203)	0.120 (0.192)	0.061 (0.195)
Male x unemployment	−0.147 (0.324)	0.050 (0.307)	0.040 (0.295)

Table 5. Multivariate regression results with the clustered perceptions as outcome variables, two-way interactions included (continued)

	IV. Warmth	V. Competence	VI. Skill det.
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)			
Caregiving	0.685** (0.195)	0.272 (0.244)	−0.386 (0.268)
Unemployment	0.099 (0.292)	−0.140 (0.332)	−0.761† (0.397)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)			
One to three years	−0.104 (0.224)	−0.718** (0.220)	−0.862** (0.265)
More than three years	−0.163 (0.250)	−0.925*** (0.253)	−1.388*** (0.322)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)			
Flexibility	0.341† (0.190)	0.378† (0.223)	0.458† (0.235)
Adaptability	0.311† (0.182)	0.919*** (0.233)	0.365 (0.246)
Non-work responsibilities	0.150 (0.234)	0.356 (0.252)	0.235 (0.267)
Gender (ref. = Female)			
Male	−0.422** (0.127)	−0.106 (0.165)	−0.050 (0.174)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interactions with duration (ref. = Less than one year)			
One to three years x caregiving	0.009 (0.252)	0.552* (0.256)	0.312 (0.298)
More than three years x caregiving	0.019 (0.266)	0.701* (0.281)	0.669† (0.355)
Interactions with availability statement (ref. = No statement)			
Flexibility x caregiving	−0.211 (0.231)	−0.229 (0.264)	−0.275 (0.282)
Flexibility x unemployment	−0.855* (0.426)	−0.423 (0.420)	−0.537 (0.493)
Adaptability x caregiving	−0.158 (0.221)	−0.523† (0.273)	−0.081 (0.302)
Adaptability x unemployment	−0.757† (0.396)	−0.586 (0.394)	−0.349 (0.450)
Non-work responsibilities x caregiving	−0.251 (0.272)	−0.495 (0.310)	−0.172 (0.320)
Non-work responsibilities x unemployment	−0.308 (0.395)	−0.280 (0.400)	−0.378 (0.469)
Interactions with gender (ref. = Female)			
Male x caregiving	0.365* (0.154)	−0.090 (0.205)	−0.006 (0.212)
Male x unemployment	0.240 (0.277)	−0.036 (0.313)	0.109 (0.346)

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: det. (deterioration) and ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations. Results of corresponding F-tests assessing the joint significance of interaction terms are reported in Appendix Table A5.

Appendix A: Additional tables

Table A1. Job characteristics and descriptions used in the experimental materials

Jobs	Characteristics		Descriptions
	Required educational degree	Gender domination	
Kitchen worker	Low	Neutral	This employee is responsible for the preparation of dishes and helps with preparation tasks.
Commercial assistant	Medium	Neutral	This employee is responsible for handling orders and providing information about the company's products and, or, services.
Bookkeeper	High	Neutral	This employee is responsible for the correct processing of the company's bookkeeping.
Cleaner at people's homes	Low	Female	This employee is responsible for the general cleaning of people's homes.
Administrative assistant	Medium	Female	This employee is responsible for the correct execution of administrative tasks, preparing files, and handling inquiries.
Nurse	High	Female	This employee is responsible for the planning, execution, and follow-up of quality patient care.
Truck driver	Low	Male	This employee is responsible for the collection, transportation, and delivery of products and goods.
Setup operator for CNC machine tools	Medium	Male	This employee is responsible for the preparation, setting, and programming of a CNC machine tool.
ICT analyst developer	High	Male	This employee is responsible for the development of an ICT project from design to integration.

Notes. As explained in Subsection 2.1, the characteristics of the selected jobs varied to enhance generalisability. The selected characteristics were required educational degree (following insights from Becker (1962) and Bonoli (2014)) and gender domination (guided by research from Henle et al. (2020)). The selection of the jobs and their corresponding descriptions were based on qualification criteria outlined by the Public Employment Agency of Flanders (PEAF).

Table A2. Statements used in the experimental materials

Outcomes and perceptions	Statements
A. OUTCOMES	
Interview probability	
Own recommendation	I would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job.
Others' recommendation	Other hiring professionals would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job.
Hiring probability	
Own recommendation	I would advise hiring this candidate for the job.
Others' recommendation	Other hiring professionals would advise hiring this candidate for the job.
B. PERCEPTIONS	
Perceived commitment – ideal worker norm theory (Acker, 1990)	
Commitment	Applicants with such a profile are typically committed to their job.
Work prioritisation	Applicants with such a profile typically make their work a top priority.
Willingness to make sacrifices	Applicants with such a profile are typically willing to make sacrifices for their job.
Perceived availability – time trade-off theory (Becker, 1965)	
Availability	Applicants with such a profile are typically available anytime the business needs them.
Flexibility	Applicants with such a profile are typically willing to start early or stay late if needed.
Absenteeism	Applicants with such a profile are typically rarely absent.
Perceived agency – social role theory (Eagly, 1987)	
Leadership	Applicants with such a profile are typically strong leaders.
Independence	Applicants with such a profile are typically independent.
Self-confidence	Applicants with such a profile are typically self-confident.
Perceived warmth – social role theory (Eagly, 1987)	
Likeability	Applicants with such a profile are typically likeable.
Awareness of others' feelings	Applicants with such a profile are typically aware of others' feelings.
Sincerity	Applicants with such a profile are typically sincere.
Perceived competence – enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006)	
Intellectual abilities	Applicants with such a profile typically possess a sufficient level of intellectual abilities.
Efficiency	Applicants with such a profile are typically efficient.
Organisation	Applicants with such a profile are typically well organised.
Perceived skill deterioration – skill deterioration theory (Becker, 1962)	
General skill deterioration	Applicants with such a profile have typically not developed a deterioration in their general skills.
Social skill deterioration	Applicants with such a profile have typically not developed a deterioration in their social skills.
Technological skill deterioration	Applicants with such a profile have typically not developed a deterioration in their technological skills.

Notes. This table outlines the statements about selection outcomes and perceptions presented to recruiters in the online experiment. Recruiters assessed each statement on an 11-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (= strongly disagree) to 10 (= strongly agree). The theoretical rationale underlying these perception measures is discussed in Section 1.

Table A3. Description of recruiter characteristics by experimental condition

	Proportion (indicator variables) or mean (continuous and scale variables)								Independence test [p-value]
	Full sample	Experimental condition							
		No career break [N=297]	Inf. child-care [N=155]	Inf. elder-care [N=165]	Inf. partner care [N=183]	Foster care [N=156]	SAH parenting [N=162]	Unemploy-ment [N=182]	
Demographics									
Gender: male	0.265	0.263	0.310	0.297	0.262	0.270	0.272	0.200	6.733 [0.346]
Age (c.)	42.673	42.522	42.058	43.145	41.880	43.430	42.735	43.110	2.610 [0.810]
Children: no	0.250	0.269	0.271	0.236	0.262	0.186	0.235	0.269	5.252 [0.512]
Career break: no	0.254	0.205	0.200	0.315	0.295	0.295	0.216	0.280	14.248 [0.027]
Educational degree: primary	0.185	0.165	0.148	0.218	0.186	0.231	0.154	0.203	6.966 [0.324]
Occupation: manager	0.581	0.539	0.594	0.558	0.585	0.647	0.617	0.566	18.890 [0.942]
Selection expertise									
Involvement: less than daily	0.669	0.697	0.697	0.672	0.628	0.615	0.672	0.681	5.123 [0.528]
Experience: less than five years	0.365	0.350	0.342	0.339	0.366	0.327	0.426	0.412	6.413 [0.379]
Job expertise (s.)	7.515	7.448	7.406	7.594	7.612	7.455	7.593	7.533	3.822 [0.701]
Social desirability tendencies									
Egoistic response tendency (s.)	3.448	3.462	3.495	3.466	3.403	3.477	3.419	3.413	6.677 [0.352]
Moralistic response tendency (s.)	3.342	3.358	3.343	3.324	3.298	3.331	3.343	3.381	1.664 [0.948]

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable), inf. (informal), SAH (stay-at-home), and s. (scale consisting of multiple items scored from 1 to 5 (for the response tendency variables) and from 0 to 10 (for the other scale variable)). The independence between the recruiter characteristic and the experimental condition is tested by a Pearson Chi-square test for indicator variables and by a Kruskal–Wallis test for continuous and scale variables. The resulting χ^2 [p-value] is presented in the final column. For indicator variables, the value of each variable is indicated after the colon (e.g. Gender: male refers to the proportion of male recruiters).The full sample comprises 1,300 candidate evaluations.

Table A4. F-tests for equality of candidate characteristics

	Interview probability	Hiring probability	Commitment	Availability	Agency	Warmth	Competence	Skill deterioration
Career break: general								
Caregiving and unemployment	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	0.858	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**
Career break: reason								
Inf. childcare and inf. eldercare	0.224	0.182	**0.050**	**0.000**	0.325	0.177	0.012	0.677
Inf. childcare and inf. partner care	0.223	0.454	**0.002**	**0.000**	0.582	0.600	0.838	0.401
Inf. childcare and foster care	0.544	0.861	**0.045**	**0.000**	0.121	0.514	**0.010**	0.993
Inf. childcare and SAH parenting	0.841	0.543	0.471	0.508	**0.025**	**0.000**	0.304	**0.026**
Inf. childcare and unemployment	**0.002**	**0.001**	0.066	**0.007**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**
Inf. elder care and inf. partner care	0.955	0.524	0.171	0.526	0.647	0.048	0.035	0.672
Inf. elder care and foster care	0.518	0.266	0.691	0.959	0.528	0.508	0.709	0.685
Inf. elder care and SAH parenting	0.261	0.442	**0.007**	**0.000**	0.174	0.033	0.238	0.063
Inf. elder care and unemployment	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.001**	0.310	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**
Inf. partner care and foster care	0.539	0.571	0.466	0.548	0.316	0.257	0.020	0.413
Inf. partner care and SAH parenting	0.215	0.880	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.041**	**0.000**	0.321	0.144
Inf. partner care and unemployment	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	0.099	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**
Foster care and SAH parenting	0.700	0.689	**0.007**	**0.004**	0.485	**0.008**	0.149	**0.021**
Foster care and unemployment	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	0.300	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.000**
SAH and unemployment	**0.000**	**0.000**	0.228	**0.049**	**0.002**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.003**
Corresponding table in paper	Table 2	Table 2	Table 3	Table 3	Table 3	Table 3	Table 3	Table 3

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: inf. (informal), and SAH (stay-at-home). The table reports p-values from pairwise significance tests estimating equality of mean evaluations between the specified career breaks. Significant differences ($p < .05$) – defined as those remaining robust across both the benchmark regression and multiple hypothesis testing corrections (Bonferroni–Holm, Šidák–Holm, and Westfall–Young; see Subsection 3.4) – are indicated in bold.

Table A5. F-tests for joint significance of two-way interactions

	Interview probability	Hiring probability	Commitment	Availability	Agency	Warmth	Competence	Skill deterioration
Availability statement								
Flexibility (caregiving)	**0.000**	**0.001**	**0.000**	**0.000**	**0.035**	0.211	0.153	0.164
Flexibility (unemployment)	0.978	0.235	0.568	0.676	0.983	0.148	0.897	0.850
Adaptability (caregiving)	**0.002**	**0.000**	**0.003**	**0.013**	**0.002**	0.151	**0.001**	**0.046**
Adaptability (unemployment)	0.547	0.119	0.712	0.934	0.698	0.185	0.304	0.966
Non-work responsibilities (caregiving)	0.929	0.749	**0.049**	**0.010**	0.222	0.318	0.229	0.629
Non-work responsibilities (unemployment)	0.952	0.620	0.980	0.265	0.777	0.563	0.808	0.699
Corresponding table in paper	Table 4	Table 4	Table 5	Table 5	Table 5	Table 5	Table 5	Table 5

Notes. The table reports p-values from significance tests estimating the combined effect of the main term and its interaction with the specified career break (e.g. Flexibility (caregiving) = flexibility + flexibility × caregiving). Significant differences ($p < .05$) are indicated in bold.

Table A6. Robustness check: multivariate regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables, familiar versus unfamiliar job context

	Familiar job context [N=485]		Unfamiliar job context [N=815]	
	I. Interview probability	II. Hiring probability	I. Interview probability	II. Hiring probability
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)				
Caregiving	−0.541* (0.247)	−0.426 (0.261)	−0.940*** (0.217)	−0.835*** (0.215)
Unemployment	−1.546*** (0.317)	−1.407*** (0.332)	−1.876*** (0.271)	−1.852*** (0.260)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)				
One to three years	−0.611* (0.263)	−0.363 (0.250)	−0.428* (0.203)	−0.324 (0.212)
More than three years	−1.340*** (0.288)	−1.175*** (0.278)	−0.674** (0.214)	−0.542* (0.210)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)				
Flexibility	0.501* (0.224)	0.248 (0.213)	0.470** (0.153)	0.616*** (0.144)
Adaptability	0.548** (0.197)	0.574** (0.207)	0.533** (0.180)	0.946*** (0.167)
Non-work responsibilities	0.109 (0.203)	−0.025 (0.196)	0.052 (0.155)	0.385* (0.162)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.048 (0.133)	−0.087 (0.148)	−0.139 (0.110)	0.100 (0.114)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviation is used: ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations.

Table A7. Robustness check: multivariate regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables, excluding the upper 10% on the social desirability scales

	Egoistic response tendency [N=1,180]		Moralistic response tendency [N=1,175]	
	I. Interview probability	II. Hiring probability	I. Interview probability	II. Hiring probability
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)				
Caregiving	−0.725*** (0.162)	−0.604** (0.177)	−0.714*** (0,161)	−0.531** (0.169)
Unemployment	−1.586*** (0.203)	−1.507*** (0.221)	−1.751*** (0,204)	−1.566*** (0.218)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)				
One to three years	−0.613*** (0.167)	−0.376* (0.175)	−0.502** (0,169)	−0.380* (0.168)
More than three years	−0.962*** (0.175)	−0.828*** (0.175)	−0.889*** (0,177)	−0.790*** (0.173)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)				
Flexibility	0.496*** (0.134)	0.444** (0.128)	0.419** (0,131)	0.446*** (0.126)
Adaptability	0.620*** (0.137)	0.811*** (0.137)	0.497*** (0,129)	0.745*** (0.130)
Non-work responsibilities	0.067 (0.129)	0.210 (0.132)	0.016 (0,130)	0.210 (0.133)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.120 (0.085)	−0.053 (0.094)	−0.104 (0,086)	−0.013 (0.096)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviation is used: ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations.

Table A8. Robustness check: multivariate regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables, perceived others' recommendation

	I. Interview probability		II. Hiring probability	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)
Career break: general (ref. = No career break)				
Caregiving	−0.840*** (0.167)		−0.617*** (0.173)	
Unemployment	−1.806*** (0.202)		−1.537*** (0.207)	
Career break: reason (ref. = No career break)				
Informal childcare		−1.168*** (0.224)		−0.776** (0.228)
Informal eldercare		−0.636** (0.225)		−0.375† (0.216)
Informal partner care		−0.791*** (0.202)		−0.646** (0.222)
Foster care		−0.755** (0.242)		−0.624* (0.241)
Stay-at-home parenting		−0.838*** (0.211)		−0.632** (0.212)
Unemployment		−1.797*** (0.202)		−1.528*** (0.207)
Career break: duration (ref. = Less than one year)				
One to three years	−0.670*** (0.164)	−0.669*** (0.164)	−0.391* (0.157)	−0.394* (0.157)
More than three years	−1.013*** (0.177)	−1.029*** (0.177)	−0.817*** (0.168)	−0.834*** (0.167)
Availability statement (ref. = No statement)				
Flexibility	0.390** (0.133)	0.379** (0.132)	0.417** (0.120)	0.405** (0.120)
Adaptability	0.579*** (0.128)	0.569*** (0.127)	0.678*** (0.121)	0.677*** (0.120)
Non-work responsibilities	0.014 (0.133)	0.022 (0.134)	0.131 (0.129)	0.139 (0.129)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.053 (0.086)	−0.057 (0.086)	0.003 (0.091)	0.001 (0.090)
Other candidate, job, and recruiter characteristics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviation is used: ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (= definitely no interview or hire) to 10 (= definitely an interview or hire). The presented statistics are coefficient estimates, and their standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are corrected for the clustering of observations at the recruiter level. Intercepts are omitted. Significances are indicated as *** when $p < .001$, ** when $p < .01$, * when $p < .05$, and † when $p < .10$. The sample comprises 1,300 observations.

Table A9. Robustness check: multivariate regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables, p-values after corrections for multiple hypothesis testing

	Interview probability				Hiring probability			
	Original p-value	Bonferroni–Holm p-value	Šidák–Holm p-value	Westfall–Young p-value	Original p-value	Bonferroni–Holm p-value	Šidák–Holm p-value	Westfall–Young p-value
Career break: reason								
Informal childcare	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.002	0.003
Informal eldercare	0.003	0.003	0.003	0.008	0.020	0.020	0.020	0.015
Informal partner care	0.001	0.003	0.003	0.007	0.006	0.012	0.012	0.011
Foster care	0.001	0.003	0.003	0.007	0.002	0.007	0.007	0.008
Stay-at-home parenting	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.006	0.006	0.008
Unemployment	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Notes. As discussed in Subsection 3.4, multiple hypothesis testing corrections were applied exclusively to the Model 2 regressions listed in Tables 2 and 3, which disaggregate the caregiving break types. Adjustments were implemented for the career break (reason) variable based on the number of caregiving categories included, to control for the family-wise error rate arising from multiple simultaneous comparisons. The presented statistics are p-values.