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Retreat, Reset, Regret? Recruiters Read Job Applicants' Career Breaks for Mental Health as Signals of Skill Deterioration and Ideal Worker Norm Violation

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Abstract

Workers who proactively exit employment to prevent burnout and preserve their mental health are, by their own logic, making a deliberate investment in long-term employability. Yet, related research on backlash against leave-taking suggests that employers may interpret this decision very differently at labour market re-entry. Using a preregistered vignette experiment in which professional recruiters evaluated 1,176 simulated LinkedIn profiles, we examine how such self-directed mental health breaks, popularised as 'micro-retirements', shape hiring evaluations. We find that applicants returning from such breaks face hiring penalties as severe as those attached to burnout-related absences. Mechanism analyses reveal why: recruiters read these interruptions primarily as signals of ideal worker norm violation, alongside skill deterioration, while failing to recognise their proactive character. This mismatch between worker perspective and employer interpretation carries implications for hiring practice, workplace mental health, and career theory.

JEL classification

C91, I12, J24, J64

Keywords

career break, mental health, burnout, unemployment, inactivity, hiring chances, stigma, factorial survey experiment, micro-retirement

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1. Introduction

"At 48, Chris had everything he thought he wanted. He held a senior title at a global accounting firm, travelled the world, and earned a good salary. He had achieved his younger self's idea of success. But lately, Chris caught himself zoning out in Zoom meetings that had become more about process than delivering a product, wondering if this was it. […] When he floated the idea of taking a six-month break at work, his colleagues looked at him as if he had asked for a one-way trip to Mars. He wasn't running away from work. He was trying to stay in it." – Forbes (Coughlin, 2025)

Stories like Chris's are becoming more visible and more consequential. The widespread rise of burnout, particularly among workers under 30 (Demerouti et al., 2021; RIZIV, 2025), has placed mental health at the centre of contemporary work debates. At the same time, demographic pressures are extending working lives: in ageing societies, labour market participation has become a prerequisite to sustain social security systems (OECD, 2019), with policy proposals pushing pension ages as high as 70 (Spirlet, 2025).

In response, workers are actively reshaping the way they work and organise their careers (Çivilidağ & Durmaz, 2024), typically through in-job arrangements such as telework (Moens et al., 2024), shorter workweeks (du Bois et al., 2025), or flexible work schedules (Herrera-Ballesteros et al., 2025). A more far-reaching strategy has recently entered public view: voluntarily leaving paid work for a self-funded career break aimed at mental recovery and personal development, often popularised as a micro- or mini-retirement (Coughlin, 2025; Ferris, 2007; Kwai, 2025; Robinson, 2025; Schultz, 2025). The underlying idea is straightforward: rather than postponing rest, self-development, and life experience until old age, individuals reclaim time earlier in life.

This phenomenon resonates with research portraying careers as increasingly non-linear, dynamic, and idiosyncratic (Akkermans et al., 2024; De Vos et al., 2021; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). In such careers, workers are expected to actively shape their own trajectories rather than merely react to career shocks (e.g. a layoff; Akkermans et al., 2024; Seibert et al., 2001) and their ability to navigate periods of stress becomes a central aspect of long-term career success (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). A self-directed break to safeguard one's mental health can be understood as an expression of both: a proactive, resilience-oriented response to the

demands of contemporary work.

However, the career consequences of stepping out of work remain uncertain. From the employee perspective, related forms of voluntary interruption (e.g. sabbaticals) have been associated with lower burnout risk, improved well-being, renewed motivation, and strengthened human and social capital (Carr & Tang, 2005; Davidson et al., 2010; Guang et al., 2020; Maslach, 2003; Schabram et al., 2023; Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2008). Through a lens of proactive career behaviour, self-directed mental health breaks may similarly be understood as deliberate investments in vitality and sustainable employability, whereby workers temporarily exit employment to protect or restore their mental resources before strain escalates further (Parker et al., 2010). Yet this preventive intention is not necessarily the signal employers receive. Research on hiring decisions shows that employers often penalise career breaks including periods of unemployment, illness-related absences, and leave-taking because they are interpreted as signals of lower productivity, weaker commitment, or elevated risk (Baert et al., 2016; D'hert et al., 2026a, 2026b; Kristal et al., 2023; Kroft et al., 2013; Montanye & Livingston, 2024; Namingit et al., 2021; Sterkens et al., 2021; Van Belle et al., 2018; Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2008).

In the case of self-directed mental health breaks, this ambiguity may be particularly consequential: the same interruption that workers frame as preventive self-care may be read by employers as evidence of skill depreciation or as a failure to conform to the ideal worker norm (D'hert et al., 2026b; Montanye & Livingston, 2024), similar to how employers often interpret burnout-related work histories. Whether employers recognise the preventive perspective of such breaks, or instead fold them into existing negative stereotypes around career gaps and mental health, remains an open question.

This tension is important for several reasons. First, the literature on career breaks has primarily studied involuntary interruptions, such as layoffs (e.g. Gibbons & Katz, 1991) or illness-related absences (e.g. Namingit et al., 2021), while research on voluntary breaks (e.g. sabbaticals) remains comparatively scarce and largely qualitative or descriptive (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Schabram et al., 2023). Second, the literature on mental health disclosure in hiring has focused mainly on severe mental health conditions such as depression (e.g. Baert et al., 2016; Hipes et al., 2016), while far less is known about how employers respond to signals of milder psychological strain (Brouwers et al., 2020; Irvine, 2011). Third, the career

management literature has shown that proactive career behaviour improves workplace outcomes (e.g. promotions; De Vos et al., 2009; Seibert et al., 2001), but it remains unclear whether leaving work to protect or restore vitality – an arguably extreme form of proactive career management – also pays off at re-entry, as research has largely focused on structured career transitions (e.g. school-to-work or unemployment-to-work; Akkermans et al., 2024).

We address these gaps through a preregistered vignette experiment in which 1,176 simulated LinkedIn profiles of fictitious applicants were evaluated by 294 professional recruiters drawn from a professional survey panel. The profiles vary randomly in the type of career break (none, mental health, burnout, childcare, or unemployment), as well as in its duration and timing and the applicant's age and gender. This design allows us to compare proactive mental health breaks with other common forms of career interruption, including reactive exits following burnout. By measuring both hiring evaluations and perceptions related to skill deterioration, ideal worker norms, and proactive vitality management – the three inferential pathways derived from our conceptual framework (Section 2) – we identify whether and why self-directed mental health breaks shape hiring decisions. The random variation in the duration and timing of the break and the age and gender of the applicant further enables us to examine how these characteristics condition recruiter responses. This approach allows us to address the following research questions:

RQ1a. How does a self-directed mental health break affect recruiters' interview and hiring evaluations?

RQ1b. How do these evaluations compare with those attached to a prior burnout-related break?

RQ2a. Which inferences do recruiters draw from a self-directed mental health break when evaluating applicants?

RQ2b. How do these inferences compare with those attached to a prior burnout-related break?

RQ3. To what extent are these effects moderated by the duration and the timing of the break and by the age and the gender of the applicant?

Our study offers five main contributions. First, we extend the career break literature by examining a fully voluntary, growth-oriented interruption, shifting attention from largely

involuntary interruptions to a proactive form of career disengagement. Second, we contribute to the literature on employer responses to common mental health conditions by examining a signal of prior psychological strain that does not necessarily disclose a diagnosed condition. Third, we advance the career management literature by shifting attention from in-employment to re-entry outcomes of proactive career behaviour, testing whether proactivity is intrinsically valued or rewarded only when visible inside the employment relationship. Fourth, we provide the first theoretical and empirical account of mental health breaks, or micro-retirements, from a hiring perspective, offering a conceptual anchor for a phenomenon that is gaining increasing attention. Fifth, we contribute methodologically by embedding treatments in immersive LinkedIn profile simulations rather than the stylised HR notes typically used in vignette studies, increasing ecological realism in a method often criticised for limited external validity (Forster & Neugebauer, 2024).

The results are clear. Applicants returning from a self-directed mental health break are penalised strongly in both interview and hiring evaluations. These penalties are statistically indistinguishable from those attached to a prior burnout-related break and substantially larger than the penalties associated with unemployment or full-time childcare. Mechanism analyses further show that recruiters interpret mental health breaks through a decidedly negative lens: they infer greater skill deterioration and especially weaker fit with ideal worker norms, while not rewarding these breaks as a form of proactive vitality management. In short, recruiters do not appear to value preventive exit decisions as investments in sustainable employability, although these penalties fade as the break lies further in the past.

2. Framework

This section develops the conceptual framework underlying our study. We first situate the self-directed mental health break at the intersection of the career break, workplace mental health, and career management literatures. Building on this positioning, we then identify three competing inferential pathways through which recruiters may interpret such a break, and consider how applicant and career break characteristics may shift their relative salience.

2.1. Conceptual positioning

We define a self-directed mental health break as a voluntary exit from paid employment to recover mentally, reduce stress, or pursue reflection and personal development, without maintaining a formal employer–employee relationship. This conceptualisation places career breaks for mental health at the intersection of three complementary literatures.

Career break literature. This literature helps situate self-directed mental health breaks relative to other forms of non-employment. They differ from unemployment, which implies active job search, and are therefore better described as a form of labour market inactivity. At the same time, they do not fit classical inactivity categories such as education or caregiving (Baert, 2021; ILO, 2016), nor do they resemble formal leave arrangements (e.g. sabbaticals) in which the employment relationship is preserved (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Klotz et al., 2021). In terms of how time away from work is used, however, they resonate with self-funded leaves or sabbaticals, which serve similar purposes of personal and professional growth (Davidson et al., 2010; Klotz et al., 2021; Schabram et al., 2023).

Workplace mental health literature. This literature bears directly on the concept because the interruption is explicitly framed around mental well-being. Self-directed mental health breaks can be situated on the milder, non-diagnosed side of the mental health continuum proposed by Kelloway et al. (2023), which conceptualises mental health as ranging from positive functioning and well-being to more severe forms of psychological strain and impairment. In this sense, strain, stress, or exhaustion may be present without necessarily implying a formal disorder or medical leave. This connects self-directed mental health breaks to research on the disclosure of common mental health problems in the workplace (Brouwers et al., 2020; Irvine, 2011).

Career management literature. This literature indicates that a self-directed mental health break may also be understood as a proactive career choice. Career concepts such as the protean career (Hall, 1996), the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994), and proactive career crafting (Tims & Akkermans, 2020) depict careers as increasingly self-directed and oriented toward long-term sustainability, growth, and person–career fit (De Vos et al., 2009; Seibert et al., 2001; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). The sustainable career model extends this view by conceptualising careers as dynamic, cyclical processes in which changes in employment status may shape long-term career sustainability, understood in terms of health, happiness,

and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020). From this perspective, temporarily stepping away from work to preserve well-being may constitute an active effort to sustain future functioning rather than a mere withdrawal from work.

Taken together, these literatures suggest that a self-directed mental health break is neither reducible to unemployment nor fully assimilable to formal leave, sabbatical, or illness absence. Precisely because it straddles these categories, it is likely to be an ambiguous cue in hiring contexts.

2.2. Theoretical mechanisms

Employer evaluations at hiring are characterised by strong information asymmetries. Recruiters must infer applicants' likely future productivity from the limited and imperfect information available in resumes and professional profiles (Blanchard & Diamond, 1994; Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). Signalling theory offers the foundational lens for this inferential process: observable cues function as proxies for unobservable applicant qualities, and their informational value lies in the receiver's inference about which underlying construct the cue approximates (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973; Vishwanath, 1989). As Connelly et al. (2025) emphasise in their recent state-of-the-theory review, a single signal does not carry an inherent meaning: the same observable cue can be mapped onto multiple – and even competing – unobservable constructs, with receivers selecting among them based on context, prior beliefs, and the inferential frames they bring to bear. This receiver-side ambiguity is the conceptual starting point of our study.

We apply this lens to a specific and theoretically rich cue: a self-directed mental health break. We identify three unobservable constructs (i.e. not directly visible from a LinkedIn profile) that recruiters plausibly infer from this single cue, and which together generate competing inferential pathways: (i) skill deterioration, (ii) ideal worker norm violation, and (iii) proactive vitality management. These pathways are theoretically distinct, may coexist, and point to divergent expectations about how recruiters evaluate such applicants. Direct evidence on self-directed mental health breaks is absent; the supporting evidence we draw on is therefore indirect, derived from related cues such as employment gaps, sabbaticals, caregiving interruptions, and workplace mental health.

Skill deterioration. From a human capital perspective, time away from work may be interpreted as reducing productivity because workers do not accumulate new skills and may even lose job-relevant knowledge while absent (Acemoglu, 1995; Becker, 1962; Pissarides, 1992). Recruiters may therefore infer that a candidate returning from a career interruption is less up to date, less practiced, or more costly to reintegrate. Consistent with this inferential logic, employers have repeatedly been shown to interpret periods of non-employment as indicators of human capital decline (D'hert et al., 2026b; Shi et al., 2018; Van Belle et al., 2018). At the same time, not all interruptions are interpreted as pure depreciation. When time away from work is understood as involving general or transferable skill development, interruptions may be evaluated more favourably, as is the case for training episodes (Albrecht et al., 1999; Arun et al., 2004; Dalle et al., 2024; Theunissen et al., 2011). Research on related career breaks such as sabbaticals points in the same direction: time away from work is often used for learning, personal development, and social activities that foster professional relationships (Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2008). A self-directed mental health break is therefore ambiguous from a human capital perspective: recruiters may infer lost skills, but they may also infer developmental gains.

Ideal worker norm violation. A second inferential pathway concerns fit with expectations about the 'ideal worker,' who is assumed to be continuously available, highly committed, and willing to organise life around paid work (Davies & Frink, 2014; Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Williams, 2000). For this pathway, we draw explicitly on Montanye and Livingston's (2024) recent theoretical and empirical contribution, which identifies deviation from the ideal worker norm as a key driver of organisational backlash against leave-takers. Applied to our case, a self-directed mental health break may be interpreted as violating the ideal worker norm in at least two ways. First, recruiters may infer that the candidate voluntarily prioritised a non-work need (i.e. recovery, reflection, or personal well-being) over uninterrupted labour market participation. Career interruptions taken for non-market reasons such as caregiving have indeed been linked to lower hiring evaluations because they imply weaker work devotion (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; D'hert et al., 2025; Leslie et al., 2012; Montanye & Livingston, 2024; Mortelmans & Frans, 2017; Theunissen et al., 2011; Weisshaar, 2018). Second, because the break is tied to mental health, recruiters may assume an elevated probability of recurrent strain. Consistent with this, the workplace mental health literature shows that cues related to psychological strain may trigger

stereotypes of fragility, unpredictability, and reduced commitment (Elraz, 2017; Follmer & Jones, 2017; Kelloway et al., 2023; Maslach et al., 1997; Østerud, 2023; Sterkens et al., 2021). Both interpretations may weaken perceived fit with the ideal worker model, and a self-directed mental health break may thus be read as a dual deviation: both a withdrawal from continuous employment and a cue of possible future strain.

Proactive vitality management. A third pathway is more positive. From a proactive motivation perspective, workers may act in advance to preserve energy, functioning, and future performance rather than reacting to deteriorating circumstances (Parker et al., 2010). Op den Kamp et al. (2018) conceptualise proactive vitality management as self-initiated behaviour aimed at maintaining physical and mental energy for work. A self-directed mental health break may be interpreted through this lens because it is voluntary, anticipatory, and future-oriented: the applicant steps back before, or instead of, reaching a more severe crisis point (Nielsen et al., 2013). Recruiters may therefore infer agency, autonomy, self-awareness, and long-term responsibility rather than incapacity (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Adjacent literature supports the plausibility of such an inference: both the career break and mental health literatures suggest that self-directed breaks (e.g. sabbaticals) afford opportunities for introspection, yielding more authentic life changes and intrinsically motivated career choices (Carr & Tang, 2005; Elraz, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2013; Schabram et al., 2023), outcomes employers may interpret as evidence of a more sustainable employer–employee match. Moreover, returning employees have been shown to report lower stress, better mental health, greater autonomy, and enhanced creativity (Carr & Tang, 2005; Davidson et al., 2010; Kang et al., 2010; Schabram et al., 2023). Although this evidence does not establish directly that recruiters reward such breaks, it suggests that a self-directed interruption may plausibly be read as an attempt to preserve and strengthen one's capacity to work sustainably, rather than as disengagement from work.

Comparison with burnout. A useful contrast for distinguishing between these pathways is the comparison with a prior burnout-related break. A self-directed mental health break can be understood as a preventive act, undertaken voluntarily to protect well-being before a more explicit breakdown occurs (Kang et al., 2010; Nielsen et al., 2013). By contrast, a burnout is clearly reactive, following a recognised crisis. If recruiters interpret both breaks primarily through the lens of skill deterioration, both should be penalised similarly, as both

involve an equivalent period of non-employment. If ideal worker norm violation dominates, a self-directed mental health break may even be penalised more severely than burnout, as voluntarily stepping away may signal weaker work devotion than an involuntary breakdown. If, however, recruiters recognise the proactive character of a self-directed break, they should evaluate it more favourably than burnout. The contrast thus serves as a diagnostic: it helps reveal which of the three inferential pathways dominates recruiters' evaluations.

2.3. Moderating factors

The relative salience of the three inferential pathways is unlikely to be constant across applicants and career break characteristics. Rather than mapping neatly onto a single mechanism, moderators may shift the weight recruiters place on skill deterioration, ideal worker norm violation, and proactive vitality management.

Duration of the career break. Skill deterioration inferences are likely to intensify as break length grows: the more time away, the greater the implied human capital depreciation (Becker, 1962). Empirically, Kroft et al. (2013) and Van Belle et al. (2018) find that hiring probabilities drop sharply with unemployment duration, D'hert et al. (2026b) document a comparable effect for inactivity, and Theunissen et al. (2011) show that longer career interruptions correlate negatively with subsequent wages. Importantly, however, this penalty appears to be neutralised when the interruption is filled with productive activity such as training (D'hert et al., 2026b). By extension, if recruiters interpret a mental health break primarily through the lens of proactive vitality management, duration may matter less.

Timing of the career break. Research consistently indicates that career interruptions followed by subsequent work experience carry less negative weight. Theunissen et al. (2011) find stronger wage penalties for more recent interruptions; Eriksson and Rooth (2014) report a hiring penalty for current unemployment but not for unemployment located further in the past; and Sterkens et al. (2024) similarly show that a more distant health-related absence is evaluated less negatively than a recent one. Mortelmans and Frans (2017) document a comparable catch-up effect over time, possibly reflecting employer perceptions of recovered human capital. Bjørnshagen (2021) does, however, suggest that the stigma associated with mild mental health struggles may be more persistent, with candidates continuing to face discrimination even after one year of subsequent work experience. The

timing of the career break may therefore shape the extent to which recruiters continue to infer current skill deterioration or ongoing deviation from ideal worker expectations.

Age of the applicant. Mortelmans and Frans (2017) argue that interruptions at older ages are more common and therefore less at odds with ideal worker expectations, whereas a young candidate who temporarily steps back may be perceived as deliberately and proactively shaping their career (Akkermans et al., 2024) – a reading more consistent with the proactive vitality management mechanism. Because age may plausibly increase the salience of different inferential pathways in opposite directions, we treat it as an exploratory boundary condition rather than as a moderator with a clear directional expectation.

Gender of the applicant. Prior research consistently finds that career interruptions are penalised more severely for male than for female applicants, for three interrelated reasons rooted in the ideal worker norms mechanism. First, men more commonly follow linear career trajectories (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), meaning career breaks are perceived as more deviant for them (Albrecht et al., 1999; Mortelmans & Frans, 2017; Speiser, 2021; Theunissen et al., 2011). Second, when men do take breaks, these are more often for professional development purposes (e.g. training; Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2008), meaning a personally motivated interruption (e.g. one for mental health) is a stronger violation of gender-based expectations. Third, women are overrepresented in mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (Matousian & Otto, 2023; Nielsen et al., 2013) and are more willing to acknowledge such struggles (Brohan et al., 2012), thereby reducing the extent to which a mental health break violates gendered ideal worker expectations.

3. Method

We address our research questions using a preregistered within-subjects vignette experiment,[1] following the seminal work of Auspurg and Hinz (2014). In our experimental context, real-life recruiters evaluate a set of fictitious profiles in which selected attributes

[1] The full preregistration is available at: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/AC3XK.

are randomly varied across predefined conditions (e.g. career history). Random assignment ensures that the manipulated candidate characteristics are independent of unobserved candidate features, allowing differences in recruiter evaluations to be causally attributed to those manipulations (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; Neumark, 2018; Sterkens et al., 2021; Van Belle et al., 2018).

This design offers two advantages over conventional surveys. First, by embedding trade-offs in multidimensional candidate profiles, vignette experiments more closely approximate real-world personnel evaluation while still allowing identification of the effect of each manipulated attribute (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Second, because multiple profile dimensions vary simultaneously, the specific purpose of the study is not revealed ex ante, reducing the scope for socially desirable responding (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Related labour market studies have successfully used vignette experiments to examine employer responses to unemployment, leave-taking, and burnout histories (Montanye & Livingston, 2024; Sterkens et al., 2021; Van Belle et al., 2018).

3.1. Design

To maximise ecological realism, we designed the vignettes as highly realistic LinkedIn profile simulations rather than as stylised HR notes or tabulated resumes, as is common in related experiments (e.g. Sterkens et al., 2021; D'hert et al., 2026b). This approach follows Schellaert et al.'s (2025) LinkedIn experiment on age discrimination and allowed us to present career histories in a format that more closely resembles contemporary recruitment practice (see Figure 1 for an example). We chose a LinkedIn-based screening scenario because LinkedIn is currently the leading platform for recruitment and plays a prominent role in initial candidate screening (Employ, 2024; Ruparel et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023). This format is particularly suited to the study of career breaks, as LinkedIn's dedicated Career Break feature allows users to disclose and contextualise employment gaps directly within their profiles (Cohen, 2022).

< Figure 1 about here >

Each participant was presented with four fictitious LinkedIn profiles that varied along five dimensions: (i) reason for the career break, (ii) duration of the career break, (iii) timing

of the career break, (iv) applicant age, and (v) applicant gender. Table 1 summarises these experimental factors and their respective levels.

< Table 1 about here >

Reason for the career break. Our key treatment dimension comprised five substantive conditions: no career break, a self-directed mental health break, a burnout-related break, a full-time childcare break, and unemployment. To strengthen realism, all break conditions were presented in a format closely mirroring LinkedIn's Career Break feature (Ellson, 2022).

As argued in Section 2, burnout is a theoretically informative comparator because it captures a more reactive interruption following explicit strain, whereas a self-directed mental health break reflects a more proactive and self-initiated withdrawal. This contrast speaks directly to our comparative research questions regarding both recruiters' evaluations and the inferences they draw (**RQ1b** and **RQ2b**).

Childcare and unemployment serve complementary benchmark functions. Childcare is among the most common motives for self-directed career interruptions and, similar to a self-directed mental health break, may violate ideal worker expectations (Weisshaar, 2018). Unemployment, in turn, is a standard comparator in career break research (D'hert et al., 2026b) and is substantively relevant because non-employment may be evaluated differently depending on whether it is framed as purposeful rather than unexplained (Carr & Tang, 2005; Sterkens et al., 2021). More generally, self-initiated career breaks may be penalised more strongly than interruptions attributed to external circumstances (Karren & Sherman, 2013; Norlander et al., 2020).

Finally, we included a 'no career break' baseline condition to capture evaluations of uninterrupted labour market participation, following related work (e.g. Sterkens et al., 2024). To enhance ecological realism, this control condition appeared twice as often as each break condition (following Weisshaar, 2018), yielding six effective levels for this factor in the design matrix. The profile displayed a continuous work history without a Career Break entry.

Duration of the career break. We operationalised this factor using three interval categories: 3 to 5 months, 6 to 11 months, and 12 to 18 months. This specification builds on D'hert et al. (2026b), who examine employer responses to inactivity spells, but excludes the shortest and longest categories used in that study because they were considered less

realistic in the context of a self-directed mental health break. To preserve variation without substantially increasing design complexity, exact durations were randomly drawn within these predefined intervals, yielding a quasi-continuous measure.

Timing of the career break. To assess whether recency matters, we varied the timing of the interruption across three categories: current, two years ago, and five years ago. These levels were derived from Sterkens et al. (2024).

Age of the applicant. Age was operationalised quasi-continuously around four target values (i.e. 30, 37, 44, and 51 years), randomly varying within a three-year age range around each value. This specification allowed us to introduce realistic age variation without substantially increasing design complexity. As age is not ordinarily displayed on LinkedIn profiles, it was stated explicitly in the introductory sentence preceding each profile (e.g. 'This is the profile of Ellen Maes (43 years old)'). To preserve realism, profiles combining the youngest age category with a career break dating back five years were excluded and replaced with more plausible profiles. Such combinations could otherwise imply applicants aged 27 who had already experienced an 18-month career break five years earlier, which is unlikely at such an early stage of the career.

Gender of the applicant. Gender was signalled through first names – the most ecologically valid approach in the context of fictitious LinkedIn profiles, where explicitly stating gender would not reflect real-world practice. Following Martiniello and Verhaeghe (2022), first names were selected from among the most common Belgian names according to Statistics Belgium (2025c), the Belgian federal statistical office, while avoiding names that might signal a non-Belgian ethnic background, religiosity, or socioeconomic status. To additionally ensure name-age consistency, names were drawn specifically from the most common names for the birth decade corresponding to the applicant's fictitious age. As surnames do not carry any systematic association with either gender or age, they were simply drawn from among the most common Belgian family names (based on Statistics Belgium, 2025b). Where identical full names were presented to the same respondent, surnames were manually adjusted to ensure each profile carried a unique name.

The five experimental factors jointly (6 × 3 × 3 × 4 × 2) yielded 432 unique candidate profiles. From this full factorial design, we selected 200 profiles using a resolution V D-efficient fractional design (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; Kuhfeld, 2010). This approach minimised

correlations between factors and allowed precise estimation of their effects, including the two-way interactions required for RQ3. The resulting design achieved a D-efficiency of 99.2%, well above the recommended minimum of 90% (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). The selected profiles were then bundled into 50 four-profile decks. Respondents were randomly assigned to one deck and the profile order within decks was randomised to guard against sequence effects.

3.2. Measures

For each fictitious LinkedIn profile, recruiters completed two sets of outcome measures. First, to address RQ1, they reported their hiring evaluations. Second, to address RQ2, they rated a series of possible inferences relating to skill deterioration, ideal worker norm violation, and proactive vitality management. All items, including those adapted from instruments with shorter original response formats, were measured on an 11-point Likert scale (with 0 quantifying 'completely disagree' and 10 'completely agree') to ensure consistency across items, comparability across analyses, and alignment with recent vignette experiments on career interruptions (e.g. D'hert et al., 2026b; Sterkens et al., 2021, 2024; Van Belle et al., 2018). Appendix Table A1 provides the full item wording.

Hiring evaluations. Participants indicated their agreement with the statements 'I would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job' and 'I would advise hiring this candidate for the job.' In line with prior vignette-based hiring experiments (e.g. Van Belle et al., 2018) we refer to these measures as interview probability and hiring probability, respectively. We also included indirect versions of both measures, asking respondents how they expected most other hiring professionals to evaluate the same candidate. Drawing on the 'nominative technique' (Krumpal, 2013), these items provide a less direct way of capturing evaluative tendencies and may therefore be less susceptible to socially desirable responding (Devos et al., 2026; Krumpal, 2013), a common vignette concern (Bursztyn et al., 2025). We report these indirect measures as a robustness test (in Subsection 4.4).

Skill deterioration. We assessed this construct using the three-item skill loss scale from Van Belle et al. (2018), covering applicants' perceived general skills, social skills, and awareness of technological evolutions. The items were coded such that lower scores reflect greater perceived skill deterioration. Internal consistency reliability was $\alpha = 0.903$.

Ideal worker norm violation. We relied on the validated seven-item ideal worker evaluation scale developed by Montanye and Livingston (2024), capturing the extent to which applicants are seen as accessible, available, committed, devoted, responsive, willing to prioritise work, and willing to work long hours. Internal consistency reliability was α = 0.912.

Proactive vitality management. This dimension was assessed with the validated eight-item proactive vitality management scale developed by Op den Kamp et al. (2018), comprising eight items on applicants' motivation, energy, enthusiasm, focus, and self-initiated efforts to sustain vitality at work. Items were adapted from self-reported on-the-job behaviour to recruiter-rated pre-employment judgments. Internal consistency reliability was α = 0.956.

3.3. Procedure

Because vignette materials are typically embedded in a broader survey flow rather than presented as a stand-alone task (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014), the experiment was administered through an online survey. The procedure unfolded in four stages.

Setup. Upon entry, respondents received general information about the study (e.g. the estimated completion time). To limit the aforementioned socially desirable responding, the study purpose was described only in broad terms (i.e. as a study on personnel selection) and full anonymity was guaranteed (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Participants then provided informed consent in accordance with GDPR requirements. Their professional experience with recruitment and personnel selection was subsequently assessed in order to screen for the HR expertise required for participation, thereby strengthening the study's external validity.

Vacancy. In the second stage, recruiters were asked to assume the role of a hiring decision-maker at a fictitious organisation with a vacancy to be filled. Whereas prior studies on career interruptions typically centre on a single occupation (e.g. Davidson et al., 2010; Van Belle et al., 2018), the present design spans multiple job contexts to enhance external validity and to explore job-level moderators. Each recruiter was randomly assigned to one of twelve occupations, constructed by crossing three job characteristics: gender dominance (male-dominated, neutral, or female-dominated), required stress tolerance (high or low),

and degree of customer contact (high or low). These characteristics were selected because they are likely to shape hiring evaluations. In particular, male-dominated contexts place greater weight on continuous availability and work devotion (Lewis, 1997; Mennino & Brayfield, 2002; Østerud, 2023), whereas high-stress and high-customer-contact roles heighten concerns about applicants' resilience and reliability (Bjørnshagen, 2021; Østerud, 2023; Sterkens et al., 2021). As a manipulation check, recruiters rated the occupation to which they were assigned in terms of these characteristics. Their assessments aligned with the intended classifications. Details on the occupations are provided in Appendix Table A2.

Scenario. In a subsequent step, participants were presented with the hiring scenario. They were informed that the vacancy involved a multi-stage selection process in which a colleague had already screened applicants' LinkedIn profiles. Before candidates were invited to the next round, that colleague sought the respondent's advice. All applicants were described as formally qualified for the position on the basis of their education, work experience, or both, thereby holding these characteristics constant by design, analogous to Montanye and Livingston (2024). Respondents then viewed fictitious LinkedIn profiles corresponding to the occupation to which they had been assigned. These profiles displayed only the candidates' three most recent work experiences, while employer information was omitted. This design choice reflects a trade-off between realism and experimental control, as employer names may convey additional signals that fall outside the experimental manipulation. Although profile descriptions differed in wording, job content remained closely comparable and was carefully aligned with the levels of the three job characteristics introduced above. After reviewing each profile, respondents evaluated the candidate using the measures described in Subsection 3.2, thereby generating the outcomes used to answer RQ1 and RQ2.

Covariates. After completing the experimental evaluations, respondents filled out a post-experimental questionnaire containing a set of covariates. These included basic background characteristics such as gender and age, as well as indicators of educational degree, occupational position, and selection expertise, following earlier vignette studies on career breaks (e.g. D'hert et al., 2026b; Sterkens et al., 2021). We also asked whether respondents had previously worked with someone who had taken a self-directed mental health break or a burnout-related break and, if so, whether that experience had been

positive, negative, or neutral. This was motivated by research suggesting that positive interpersonal contact with individuals experiencing mental health vulnerability can reduce stigma (Brohan et al., 2013; Østerud, 2023). In addition, respondents reported whether they had themselves experienced a career interruption and, if so, for which reason. To account for socially desirable responding, we administered the widely used scale developed by Steenkamp et al. (2010), which distinguishes between egoistic response tendencies (ERT, α = 0.606) and moralistic response tendencies (MRT, α = 0.737). Finally, self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg (1979) scale, given evidence that higher self-esteem is associated with less stereotypical thinking about potential colleagues with a mental health condition (Matousian & Otto, 2023). Internal consistency reliability was α = 0.896.

3.4. Sample

A total of 294 Flemish recruiters met the study criteria by completing the experiment in full and passing both attention checks (e.g. 'please select response option 1'). The experiment was administered in August 2025 through a professional survey agency. As each respondent evaluated four fictitious candidate profiles, the final analytic sample comprises 1,176 profile assessments. Data are available at the Open Science Framework (OSF).[2]

Appendix Table A3 reports the descriptive profile of the recruiter sample. In demographic terms, the sample was fairly balanced by gender (with 52.7% male respondents) and had a mean age of 48.956 years [23–66]. At the same time, the sample was highly educated, with 87.1% holding a master's degree. Comparison with the most recent European Social Survey (ESS) suggests that the sample broadly resembles the Flemish recruiter population, although men and, in particular, highly educated individuals were (somewhat) overrepresented in our data (ESS: 41.8% male; 53.2% highly educated).[3] The sample's relevance is further reflected in its professional profile: 60.2% held managerial positions, 29.6% made hiring decisions at least monthly, and 59.5% had more than five years of recruitment experience. Respondents also reported relatively strong familiarity with the

[2] The OSF repository is available at: https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/PR7F4.

[3] Following D'hert et al. (2026b) and 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).

vacancy under evaluation, with an average expertise score of 6.874 (midpoint = 5.000).

Descriptives further indicate that 71.4% of respondents had never taken a career break themselves, while 34.4% and 23.5%, respectively, reported no prior experience working with someone who had taken a mental health-related or burnout-related break. ERT and MRT scores were slightly above the midpoint of 5 (5.885 and 5.764, respectively) and self-esteem averaged at a relatively high level of 7.375 (midpoint = 5.000).

Finally, the far-right column of Appendix Table A3 reports the independence tests, using chi-square tests for indicator variables and Kruskal–Wallis tests for continuous and scale measures. The absence of statistically significant differences across experimental conditions indicates that the random assignment of applicant profiles was successful.

3.5. Analyses

We estimate a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with interview probability, hiring probability, and the three perception measures serving as dependent variables in separate models. Because each recruiter evaluated multiple profiles, observations within the same respondent are not independent: failing to account for this within-respondent correlation would underestimate standard errors and inflate test statistics. Standard errors are therefore clustered at the participant level, allowing for arbitrary correlation and heteroscedasticity within respondents. For each outcome, we first estimate a parsimonious specification including candidate characteristics only and then a fuller specification adding job and participant controls. As the substantive conclusions are unchanged across both sets of models, we focus primarily on the fully adjusted specifications while noting the stability of the findings across model variants. To compare specific career break categories, we report F-tests for coefficient equality. Moderation is assessed through two-way interaction models; for interactions involving duration and timing, unemployment is retained as the reference career break category. As an additional check, ordered logistic models yield the same empirical conclusions and are available upon request.

4. Results

We report the experimental findings in four steps. We begin by addressing RQ1a and RQ1b, examining whether a self-directed mental health break affects interview and hiring evaluations and whether this effect differs from that of a burnout-related break. We then turn to RQ2a and RQ2b by analysing the recruiter inferences that appear to underlie these evaluations. Next, we address RQ3 by testing whether the observed effects vary by break duration, break timing, and applicant age and gender. We conclude with a series of robustness checks.

4.1. Hiring evaluations

Figure 2 provides a descriptive overview of average interview and hiring scores by experimental condition. Even at this descriptive level, a clear ordering emerges: applicants without career break receive the most favourable evaluations, those with a self-directed mental health break or a burnout-related break the least favourable, and those with childcare- or unemployment-related interruptions fall in between.

< Figure 2 about here >

Table 2 confirms these patterns in the regression analyses. Relative to uninterrupted employment, a self-directed mental health break substantially reduces both interview and hiring probability. In the fully adjusted models, the estimated penalty amounts to −13.05 percentage points (pp.) on the interview scale and −11.57 pp. on the hiring scale (both $p < .001$). This provides a clear answer to RQ1a: recruiters respond negatively to self-directed mental health breaks at both key stages of the screening decision.

< Table 2 about here >

Turning to RQ1b, these penalties are statistically indistinguishable from those attached to a burnout-related break. In the fully adjusted models, burnout reduces interview probability by 14.71 pp. and hiring probability by 12.70 pp. (both $p < .001$). The equality of the mental health and burnout coefficients cannot be rejected for either interview probability ($p = .343$) or hiring probability ($p = .492$). Thus, recruiters do not appear to value the more preventive and self-directed nature of a mental health break relative to the more

reactive nature of a burnout-related interruption.

Other break types are evaluated more favourably. Childcare and unemployment are penalised less strongly than self-directed mental health breaks on both interview and hiring probability (all relevant F-tests: $p < .001$). Put differently, the central contrast is not between uninterrupted and interrupted careers, but between mental health-related interruptions and other career breaks.

Beyond the focal break-type effects, only two other characteristics matter consistently. First, break timing is significant: breaks that occurred in the past are evaluated more favourably than recent breaks for both interview and hiring probability. Second, male applicants receive slightly lower interview and hiring evaluations than female applicants.

4.2. Recruiter inferences

To address RQ2a and RQ2b, we next examine how recruiters interpret applicants with a self-directed mental health break on the three perception scales derived from Section 2: perceived skill deterioration, perceived fit with ideal worker norms, and perceived proactive vitality management.

< Table 3 about here >

Table 3 shows that self-directed mental health breaks are rated significantly more negatively than uninterrupted careers on both skill deterioration and ideal worker norms. In the fully adjusted models, the coefficient equals −1.102 for skill deterioration and −0.799 for ideal worker norms (both $p < .001$). Thus, recruiters report perceiving both greater skill loss and weaker fit with ideal worker norms from such breaks, directly answering RQ2a.

With respect to RQ2b, the comparison with burnout is revealing. On perceived skill deterioration, self-directed mental health breaks and burnout-related breaks are statistically indistinguishable ($p = .301$), indicating that both are read as similarly negative signals of deteriorated skills. On ideal worker norms, however, self-directed mental health breaks are evaluated even more negatively than burnout-related breaks ($p = .034$). Recruiters thus view self-directed mental health breaks not only as equivalent to burnout in terms of skill deterioration, but as an even stronger deviation from the ideal worker norm. Apparently, the voluntary nature of the break itself backfires: whereas burnout at least implies the

worker was striving until they could no longer continue, choosing to step away signals a more fundamental departure.

By contrast, there is no evidence that recruiters recognise such breaks as signals of proactive vitality management. The coefficient for self-directed mental health breaks on that scale is small and statistically insignificant and the same holds for burnout. Hence, the potentially positive reading implied by the proactive career management perspective is not supported in recruiters' perceptions.

The other break types are only relevant here insofar as they clarify the hierarchy of perceptions. On skill deterioration, childcare and unemployment are again judged less negatively than self-directed mental health breaks. On ideal worker norms, the contrast is sharper still: self-directed mental health breaks fare worse not only than unemployment, which is not penalised on this dimension, but also than childcare, despite the fact that childcare interruptions are themselves often associated with ideal worker norm violation (D'hert et al., 2025; Weisshaar, 2018). By contrast, no break type differs meaningfully from uninterrupted employment on proactive vitality management.

Among the other candidate characteristics, two results are worth noting. Longer breaks are associated with greater perceived skill deterioration and breaks further in the past are evaluated more favourably across all three scales, especially for skill deterioration. In addition, male applicants are attributed slightly more skill deterioration and somewhat lower proactive vitality management than female applicants.

4.3. Moderating effects

We now turn to RQ3 by examining whether the effects of self-directed mental health breaks vary by break duration, break timing, applicant age, or applicant gender. Tables 4 and 5 present the interaction models for, respectively, hiring evaluations and recruiter inferences.

< Table 4 about here >

< Table 5 about here >

We begin with duration. Relative to unemployment, the negative duration gradient is weaker for self-directed mental health breaks. In the fully adjusted models, the interaction

between duration and mental health is positive and significant for interview probability (β = 0.099, p < .05) and hiring probability (β = 0.103, p < .05). This indicates that additional months away from work are penalised less strongly for self-directed mental health breaks than for unemployment. For the underlying mechanisms, however, duration yields little systematic moderation. No robust duration interactions emerge for ideal worker norms or proactive vitality management, and the positive interaction on skill loss is at most marginal.

We next consider timing. Here, the moderation pattern is clearer. For hiring evaluations, the *Two years ago x Mental health* interaction is positive, particularly for hiring probability. In the adjusted model, this coefficient equals 1.626 (p < .01), indicating that the negative effect of a mental health break fades more quickly over time than the corresponding penalty attached to unemployment. The same interaction is only marginally significant for interview probability. Importantly, this relative advantage disappears once the break dates back five years, suggesting convergence rather than a lasting divergence in recovery patterns. A similar timing pattern appears for the mechanisms. Compared with unemployment, a self-directed mental health break that occurred two years ago is evaluated more favourably on ideal worker norms (β = 1.012, p < .01) and proactive vitality management (β = 0.781, p < .05). Again, these positive interaction effects disappear when the break lies five years in the past. Thus, the moderation evidence consistently suggests that self-directed mental health breaks normalise more quickly than unemployment in the first phase after re-entry.

Finally, we find no evidence that the effects of self-directed mental health breaks vary systematically by applicant age or gender. None of the relevant interaction terms reaches conventional levels of significance, either for hiring evaluations or for recruiter inferences. Thus, although male applicants receive slightly less favourable evaluations in the main-effects models, neither age nor gender meaningfully conditions the penalty attached to a self-directed mental health break. Exploratory interaction analyses with job and participant characteristics similarly reveal no statistically significant or systematic heterogeneity.

In short, the answer to RQ3 is selective. The effects of self-directed mental health breaks depend primarily on duration and especially timing, whereas applicant age and gender do not meaningfully moderate these effects.

4.4 Robustness tests

To assess the robustness of the reported effects and the validity of the inferences drawn, we conducted a series of robustness tests. First, we re-estimated the hiring models after excluding respondents in the upper decile of the ERT and MRT scales. As shown in Appendix Table A4, the results remain intact. Second, we turned to the indirect hiring measures based on the nominative technique (i.e. how respondents believe other hiring professionals would evaluate the same candidate). The estimates in Appendix Table A5 closely reproduce the main findings and, if anything, suggest even stronger penalties for self-directed mental health and burnout-related breaks. Third, we adjusted the relevant significance levels for multiple hypothesis testing using the Bonferroni–Holm, Šidák–Holm, and Westfall–Young procedures. As Appendix Table A6 shows, the key coefficients remain statistically significant after these corrections. Taken together, these additional analyses reinforce confidence in the main results. For reasons of space, we report robustness tests only for the hiring evaluations; full estimates for the remaining models are available upon request.

5. Discussion

Workers increasingly respond to intensifying career demands by self-directing breaks for mental recovery – popularised as 'micro-retirements' – yet how employers interpret such breaks has remained an open question. In response, this study examined how professional recruiters evaluate applicants returning from a self-directed mental health break and whether such breaks are interpreted through a lens of skill deterioration, ideal worker norm violation, or proactive vitality management. Drawing on a preregistered vignette experiment with 294 systematically sampled Flemish recruiters evaluating 1,176 simulated LinkedIn profiles, we investigated both the magnitude and the mechanisms of the hiring penalty associated with such breaks, while comparing them with burnout-related absences, childcare gaps, and unemployment spells. The results are unambiguous and warrant attention from researchers and practitioners alike.

Summary of findings. Recruiters penalise self-directed mental health breaks

substantially in both interview and hiring evaluations and this penalty is statistically indistinguishable from that attached to a prior burnout-related absence (RQ1). By contrast, childcare and unemployment gaps are treated significantly more favourably. Mechanism analyses show that recruiters do not evaluate mental health breaks through a proactive lens: instead, they infer greater skill deterioration and, crucially, stronger violations of the ideal worker norm compared with burnout (RQ2). The potentially positive reading that a self-directed break reflects agentic, anticipatory vitality management receives no empirical support. The timing of the break moderates these effects: penalties fade faster for self-directed mental health breaks than for unemployment spells in the first two years following re-entry, but this relative advantage disappears thereafter (RQ3).

Theoretical implications. Our findings make several contributions to theory. First, we extend the career break literature beyond its predominant focus on involuntary exits such as layoffs and illness-related absences. Voluntary exit, even when framed as a deliberate investment in well-being, does not escape the evaluative penalties that pervade research on involuntary non-employment (D'hert et al., 2026a; Kroft et al., 2013; Van Belle et al., 2018). This finding challenges arguments from the career management literature that frame proactive career disengagement as a rational and rewarded strategy (De Vos et al., 2021).

Second, we contribute to the literature on the disclosure of common mental health problems in the workplace by showing that hiring penalties extend to mild, non-diagnosed psychological strain. Prior research has focused almost exclusively on severe conditions such as depression, leaving the far more common grey zone of stress and early exhaustion understudied (Brouwers et al., 2020; Kelloway et al., 2023). Even this milder signal suffices to activate stigma with the same intensity as a clinically visible burnout episode.

Third, we advance the proactive career management literature by providing a causal employer-side test of whether proactive career behaviour pays off at re-entry. Although proactivity predicts career success within employment (De Vos et al., 2009; Seibert et al., 2001), the proactive vitality management perspective (Op den Kamp et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2010) does not translate into hiring returns when it involves exiting employment entirely. Proactivity may be rewarded within organisations but not necessarily at the gate of re-entry.

Fourth, the finding that self-directed mental health breaks trigger an even stronger ideal worker norm violation than burnout extends the ideal worker norm literature (Davies &

Frink, 2014; Montanye & Livingston, 2024) in an important direction. Recruiters appear to perceive voluntary withdrawal for personal well-being as more deviant than reactive exit following a recognised crisis: burnout at least implies the worker was striving until they could not continue. Voluntary agency in leaving may paradoxically penalise candidates more than involuntary incapacity – a finding that sharpens the understanding of which deviations from the ideal worker norm carry the strongest evaluative weight.

Practical implications. The evidence carries direct relevance for three groups of actors. For job seekers, the most concrete mitigation strategy suggested by the broader literature is to invest in demonstrable activities during the break (e.g. formal training or volunteer work) and to document these explicitly, for instance through LinkedIn's Career Break feature (Cohen, 2022). Importantly, our findings show that framing the break itself as self-care or personal development is unlikely to reduce the hiring penalty; according to prior research, demonstrating productive use of the break time may prove more effective (Dalle et al., 2024; D'hert et al., 2026b).

For policymakers, the priority is to erode the ideal worker norm assumptions that drive much of the hiring penalty. Public awareness campaigns and efforts to normalise career breaks as a legitimate labour market category may over time shift recruiter attitudes. Anti-discrimination frameworks may also need to extend their scope to cover mild and non-diagnosed mental health signals, which do not necessarily meet the legal threshold for protected conditions (Brohan et al., 2012).

For organisations, the most powerful lever is to foster a culture in which proactivity is recognised and supported rather than penalised. By offering formal sabbatical schemes or leave arrangements, organisations can facilitate recovery within the employment relationship and reduce the number of employees who eventually reach burnout (Carr & Tang, 2005; Davidson et al., 2010; Schabram et al., 2023). On the recruitment side, structured procedures and debiasing interventions targeting mental health stereotypes can further reduce stigma-driven bias in hiring (Kristal et al., 2023; Østerud, 2023).

Limitations and future research. Several limitations should be considered when interpreting our findings. First, our sample is drawn from Flemish professional recruiters, and findings may not fully generalise to contexts where cultural attitudes toward mental health disclosure, norms of continuous employment, or the regulatory environment differ

meaningfully. Cross-national replications are needed. Second, although our LinkedIn-based design represents a methodological advance over tabulated resumes, vignette experiments still measure stated evaluative tendencies rather than actual hiring behaviour (Forster & Neugebauer, 2024). Future work using field experimental designs would help triangulate the estimated penalties. Third, our study captures only the initial profile screening stage, whereas the penalty may shift as candidates gain opportunities to contextualise their career history across subsequent interview rounds. Fourth, we could not test how organisational culture conditions our findings. Extending the framework on which we built (Montanye & Livingston, 2024), ideal worker norms vary in how strongly they are upheld across organisations, suggesting that penalties may be attenuated in well-being-oriented cultures. Incorporating organisational culture as a moderator would help test these boundary conditions.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, this study documents a substantial and consequential mismatch between the perspective of proactive career management and the evaluative realities of labour market re-entry. Workers who step away from employment to protect their mental health do so in a context where that choice is not recognised as a career investment, at least not by the recruiters who decide their fate at the hiring stage. Closing this gap will require changes in recruiter practice, organisational policy, and public discourse alike.

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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://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/PR7F4.

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; Stijn Baert: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition; Kristen du Bois: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Tables and figures

Table 1. Candidate characteristics used in the experiment

Vignette factors	Vignette levels
Reason for the career break	{No career break;[a] Health and well-being: career break for mental health (micro-retirement); Health and well-being: burnout; Full-time care for own children; Unemployment}
Duration of the career break	{3–5 months; 6–11 months; 12–18 months}
Timing of the career break	{Current; 2 years ago; 5 years ago}
Age of the applicant	{30±3 years old; 37±3 years old; 44±3 years old; or 51±3 years old}
Gender of the applicant	{Male; Female}

Notes. As detailed in Subsection 3.1, the factorial product of the vignette levels (i.e. 6 x 3 x 3 x 4 x 2) resulted in 432 possible candidate profiles. Of these, 200 were systematically bundled into 50 decks of four vignettes using a resolution V D-efficient design (D-efficiency of 99.2%; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014) and were then randomly assigned to recruiters. For ecological validity reasons, we omitted implausible and illogical combinations of candidate characteristics. First, as explained in Subsection 3.1, gender was operationalised and randomised using first names, which occasionally resulted in identical names appearing within the same vignette deck. In such cases, the surname of one profile was manually adjusted so that no two profiles had identical names. Second, profiles combining the youngest age category with a career break dating back five years were excluded and replaced with more realistic profiles. Such combinations could, for instance, imply applicants aged 27 who had already experienced an 18-month career break five years earlier, which is unlikely given their early labour market stage.

[a] To enhance ecological validity, the 'no career break' profile appeared twice as often as each break condition, resulting in 6 levels for this factor.

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)
A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS				
Reason (ref. = No career break)				
Mental health	−1.319*** (0.227)	−1.305*** (0.226)	−1.135*** (0.235)	−1.157*** (0.226)
Burnout	−1.455*** (0.234)	−1.471*** (0.234)	−1.251*** (0.247)	−1.270*** (0.234)
Childcare	−0.514* (0.203)	−0.502* (0.195)	−0.162 (0.217)	−0.174 (0.207)
Unemployment	−0.469* (0.181)	−0.481** (0.182)	−0.475* (0.206)	−0.528** (0.200)
Duration (c.)	−0.023 (0.014)	−0.022 (0.014)	−0.019 (0.015)	−0.018 (0.014)
Timing (ref. = Current)				
Two years ago	0.801*** (0.164)	0.802*** (0.161)	0.665*** (0.152)	0.669*** (0.148)
Five years ago	1.052*** (0.147)	1.018*** (0.144)	1.035*** (0.149)	0.998*** (0.142)
Age (c.)	0.011† (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.199* (0.081)	−0.199* (0.082)	−0.201* (0.085)	−0.201* (0.086)
B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS				
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes
C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS				
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes
D. ADDITIONAL PARAMETERS				
F-tests for equality (p-value)				
Mental health and Burnout	0.437	0.343	0.491	0.492
Mental health and Childcare	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Mental health and Unemployment	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Burnout and Childcare	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Burnout and Unemployment	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Childcare and Unemployment	0.775	0.890	0.057	0.027

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable) 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 1,176 observations.

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

	I. Skill deterioration		II. Ideal worker norms		III. Proactive vitality management	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)	(III.1)	(III.2)
A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS						
Reason (ref. = No career break)						
Mental health	−1.120*** (0.181)	−1.102*** (0.178)	−0.817*** (0.159)	−0.799*** (0.157)	−0.216 (0.162)	−0.220 (0.157)
Burnout	−1.228*** (0.191)	−1.252*** (0.184)	−0.590*** (0.159)	−0.560*** (0.156)	−0.214 (0.167)	−0.204 (0.162)
Childcare	−0.707*** (0.167)	−0.718*** (0.155)	−0.497** (0.143)	−0.490*** (0.134)	0.182 (0.142)	0.161 (0.131)
Unemployment	−0.812*** (0.160)	−0.846*** (0.157)	0.004 (0.134)	−0.013 (0.129)	−0.091 (0.138)	−0.136 (0.130)
Duration (c.)	−0.055*** (0.013)	−0.055*** (0.013)	−0.014 (0.010)	−0.016† (0.009)	−0.006 (0.010)	−0.008 (0.010)
Timing (ref. = Current)						
Two years ago	0.942*** (0.136)	0.966*** (0.132)	0.259* (0.102)	0.272** (0.098)	0.270* (0.106)	0.294** (0.099)
Five years ago	1.250*** (0.137)	1.214*** (0.136)	0.533*** (0.107)	0.500*** (0.103)	0.441*** (0.112)	0.415*** (0.106)
Age (c.)	0.015** (0.005)	0.016** (0.005)	0.001 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)
Gender (ref. = Female)						
Male	−0.140* (0.070)	−0.139† (0.071)	−0.081 (0.059)	−0.081 (0.060)	−0.128* (0.056)	−0.128* (0.057)
B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS						
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS						
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
D. ADDITIONAL PARAMETERS						
F-tests for equality (p-value)						
Mental health and Burnout	0.465	0.301	0.040	0.034	0.984	0.882
Mental health and Childcare	0.007	0.011	0.008	0.008	0.001	0.001
Mental health and Unemployment	0.029	0.069	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.288	0.460
Burnout and Childcare	0.001	< 0.001	0.401	0.513	0.001	0.002
Burnout and Unemployment	0.006	0.006	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.317	0.570
Childcare and Unemployment	0.470	0.366	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.016	0.004

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable) and ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (e.g. definitely violating ideal worker norms) to 10 (e.g. not violating ideal worker norms). 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 1,176 observations.

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

	I. Interview probability		II. Hiring probability	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)
A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS				
Reason (ref. = No career break)				
Mental health	−2.798* (1.081)	−2.573* (1.057)	−2.452* (1.124)	−2.338* (1.068)
Burnout	−0.388 (1.227)	−0.578 (1.177)	−0.176 (1.316)	0.208 (1.258)
Childcare	−1.415 (1.084)	−1.382 (1.036)	0.510 (1.219)	0.741 (1.126)
Unemployment	−0.375 (1.007)	−0.237 (0.945)	0.480 (1.281)	0.790 (1.239)
Duration (c.)	−0.084** (0.030)	−0.087** (0.028)	−0.089* (0.035)	−0.096** (0.034)
Timing (ref. = Current)				
Two years ago	0.440† (0.255)	0.509* (0.242)	−0.011 (0.301)	−0.005 (0.303)
Five years ago	0.940** (0.344)	0.960** (0.326)	1.063** (0.405)	0.938* (0.398)
Age (c.)	0.006 (0.010)	0.006 (0.011)	0.006 (0.014)	0.009 (0.013)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.390* (0.196)	−0.462* (0.195)	−0.335 (0.232)	−0.265 (0.237)
B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS				
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes
C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS				
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes
D. ADDITIONAL PARAMETERS				
INTERACTIONS WITH CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS				
Duration (c.)				
Duration x Mental health	0.103* (0.047)	0.099* (0.042)	0.077 (0.052)	0.103* (0.048)
Duration x Burnout	0.048 (0.047)	0.063 (0.046)	0.113* (0.051)	0.126* (0.051)
Duration x Childcare	0.082† (0.045)	0.080† (0.043)	0.070 (0.050)	0.064 (0.048)
Timing (ref. = Current)				
Two years ago x Mental health	0.876† (0.452)	0.845† (0.450)	1.599** (0.493)	1.626** (0.499)
Two years ago x Burnout	−0.199 (0.478)	−0.309 (0.469)	−0.074 (0.509)	−0.003 (0.516)
Two years ago x Childcare	0.521 (0.442)	0.417 (0.394)	1.037* (0.518)	0.882† (0.489)
Five years ago x Mental health	0.588 (0.576)	0.613 (0.549)	0.489 (0.607)	0.567 (0.586)
Five years ago x Burnout	−0.087 (0.550)	−0.155 (0.520)	−0.268 (0.592)	−0.112 (0.559)
Five years ago x Childcare	−0.108 (0.500)	−0.221 (0.481)	−0.081 (0.593)	0.003 (0.560)
Age (c.)				
Age x Mental health	0.021 (0.027)	0.015 (0.026)	0.018 (0.028)	0.013 (0.027)
Age x Burnout	−0.022 (0.027)	−0.021 (0.026)	−0.030 (0.029)	−0.040 (0.028)
Age x Childcare	0.012 (0.024)	0.012 (0.023)	−0.020 (0.028)	−0.021 (0.026)
Age x Unemployment	0.014 (0.022)	0.010 (0.021)	−0.003 (0.028)	−0.007 (0.027)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male x Mental health	−0.050 (0.419)	0.072 (0.384)	0.201 (0.437)	0.073 (0.441)
Male x Burnout	0.412 (0.396)	0.542 (0.364)	0.177 (0.427)	0.130 (0.409)
Male x Childcare	0.476 (0.351)	0.606† (0.349)	0.029 (0.407)	0.007 (0.402)
Male x Unemployment	0.053 (0.324)	0.136 (0.305)	0.118 (0.387)	−0.063 (0.388)

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable) 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 1,176 observations.

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

	I. Skill deterioration		II. Ideal worker norms		III. Proactive vitality management	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)	(III.1)	(III.2)
A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS						
Reason (ref. = No career break)						
Mental health	−0.986 (0.808)	−0.818 (0.809)	−1.602* (0.802)	−1.652* (0.758)	−0.850 (0.812)	−0.977 (0.766)
Burnout	−0.624 (0.962)	−0.450 (0.915)	0.057 (0.752)	0.523 (0.755)	−0.343 (0.919)	0.182 (0.848)
Childcare	−0.426 (0.984)	−0.120 (0.943)	−1.525* (0.765)	−0.897 (0.727)	−0.833 (0.811)	−0.216 (0.766)
Unemployment	−0.758 (0.983)	−0.751 (0.961)	0.216 (0.875)	0.021 (0.767)	−0.444 (0.882)	−0.751 (0.769)
Duration (c.)	−0.098** (0.028)	−0.095*** (0.027)	−0.031 (0.023)	−0.029 (0.021)	−0.030 (0.024)	−0.027 (0.021)
Timing (ref. = Current)						
Two years ago	0.728** (0.258)	0.793** (0.249)	−0.225 (0.216)	−0.166 (0.193)	−0.097 (0.222)	−0.016 (0.195)
Five years ago	1.690*** (0.317)	1.608*** (0.290)	0.687* (0.283)	0.522† (0.269)	0.729* (0.312)	0.504† (0.273)
Age (c.)	0.019* (0.009)	0.022* (0.009)	−0.005 (0.009)	0.000 (0.009)	−0.009 (0.009)	−0.004 (0.008)
Gender (ref. = Female)						
Male	−0.277† (0.166)	−0.297† (0.163)	−0.126 (0.166)	−0.114 (0.158)	−0.196 (0.159)	−0.188 (0.152)
B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS						
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS						
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
D. ADDITIONAL PARAMETERS						
INTERACTIONS WITH CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS						
Duration (c.)						
Duration x Mental health	0.072† (0.040)	0.062 (0.039)	0.005 (0.036)	−0.001 (0.033)	0.021 (0.037)	0.020 (0.034)
Duration x Burnout	0.042 (0.043)	0.052 (0.042)	0.012 (0.035)	0.021 (0.034)	0.007 (0.035)	0.018 (0.032)
Duration x Childcare	0.046 (0.047)	0.037 (0.046)	0.033 (0.034)	0.021 (0.031)	0.050 (0.038)	0.031 (0.035)

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

	I. Skill deterioration		II. Ideal worker norms		III. Proactive vitality management	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)	(III.1)	(III.2)
Timing (ref. = Current)						
Two years ago x Mental health	0.587 (0.359)	0.625† (0.357)	0.974** (0.354)	1.012** (0.323)	0.768* (0.376)	0.781* (0.343)
Two years ago x Burnout	0.053 (0.450)	−0.111 (0.439)	0.202 (0.329)	0.035 (0.328)	0.273 (0.356)	0.119 (0.333)
Two years ago x Childcare	0.107 (0.434)	0.089 (0.425)	0.778* (0.359)	0.682* (0.316)	0.361 (0.371)	0.246 (0.336)
Five years ago x Mental health	−0.190 (0.505)	−0.101 (0.471)	0.347 (0.412)	0.435 (0.384)	−0.041 (0.450)	0.091 (0.411)
Five years ago x Burnout	−0.466 (0.480)	−0.477 (0.451)	−0.451 (0.405)	−0.340 (0.394)	−0.243 (0.426)	−0.032 (0.378)
Five years ago x Childcare	−0.929† (0.487)	−0.786† (0.463)	−0.337 (0.429)	−0.038 (0.401)	−0.770† (0.463)	−0.360 (0.414)
Age (c.)						
Age x Mental health	−0.015 (0.019)	−0.019 (0.020)	0.016 (0.019)	0.017 (0.018)	0.010 (0.019)	0.012 (0.018)
Age x Burnout	−0.018 (0.022)	−0.024 (0.022)	−0.012 (0.020)	−0.023 (0.020)	0.006 (0.020)	−0.008 (0.019)
Age x Childcare	−0.004 (0.022)	−0.012 (0.021)	0.019 (0.017)	0.004 (0.016)	0.021 (0.019)	0.007 (0.017)
Age x Unemployment	0.006 (0.021)	0.004 (0.020)	0.003 (0.019)	0.007 (0.017)	0.017 (0.019)	0.022 (0.017)
Gender (ref. = Female)						
Male x Mental health	0.054 (0.314)	0.130 (0.311)	−0.067 (0.289)	−0.072 (0.279)	0.102 (0.300)	0.093 (0.291)
Male x Burnout	0.405 (0.319)	0.389 (0.304)	0.185 (0.283)	0.107 (0.266)	0.054 (0.305)	0.001 (0.270)
Male x Childcare	0.108 (0.350)	0.135 (0.330)	0.102 (0.269)	0.128 (0.244)	0.143 (0.307)	0.209 (0.278)
Male x Unemployment	0.154 (0.299)	0.214 (0.284)	−0.048 (0.265)	−0.048 (0.239)	−0.035 (0.272)	−0.064 (0.243)

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable) and ref. (reference category). The outcome variable ranges from 0 (e.g. definitely violating ideal worker norms) to 10 (e.g. not violating ideal worker norms). 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 1,176 observations.

Figure 1. Example of a candidate profile used in the experiment

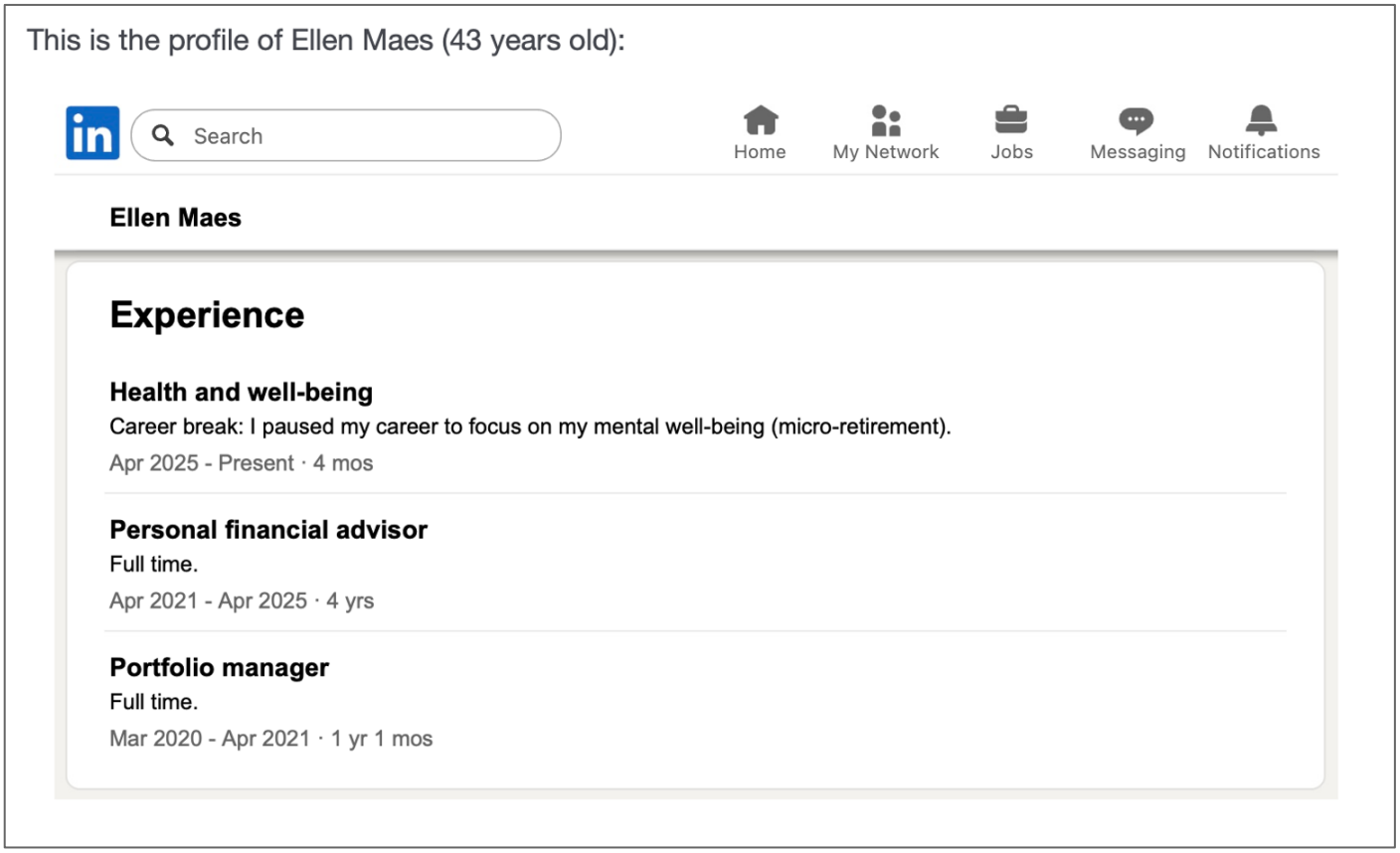
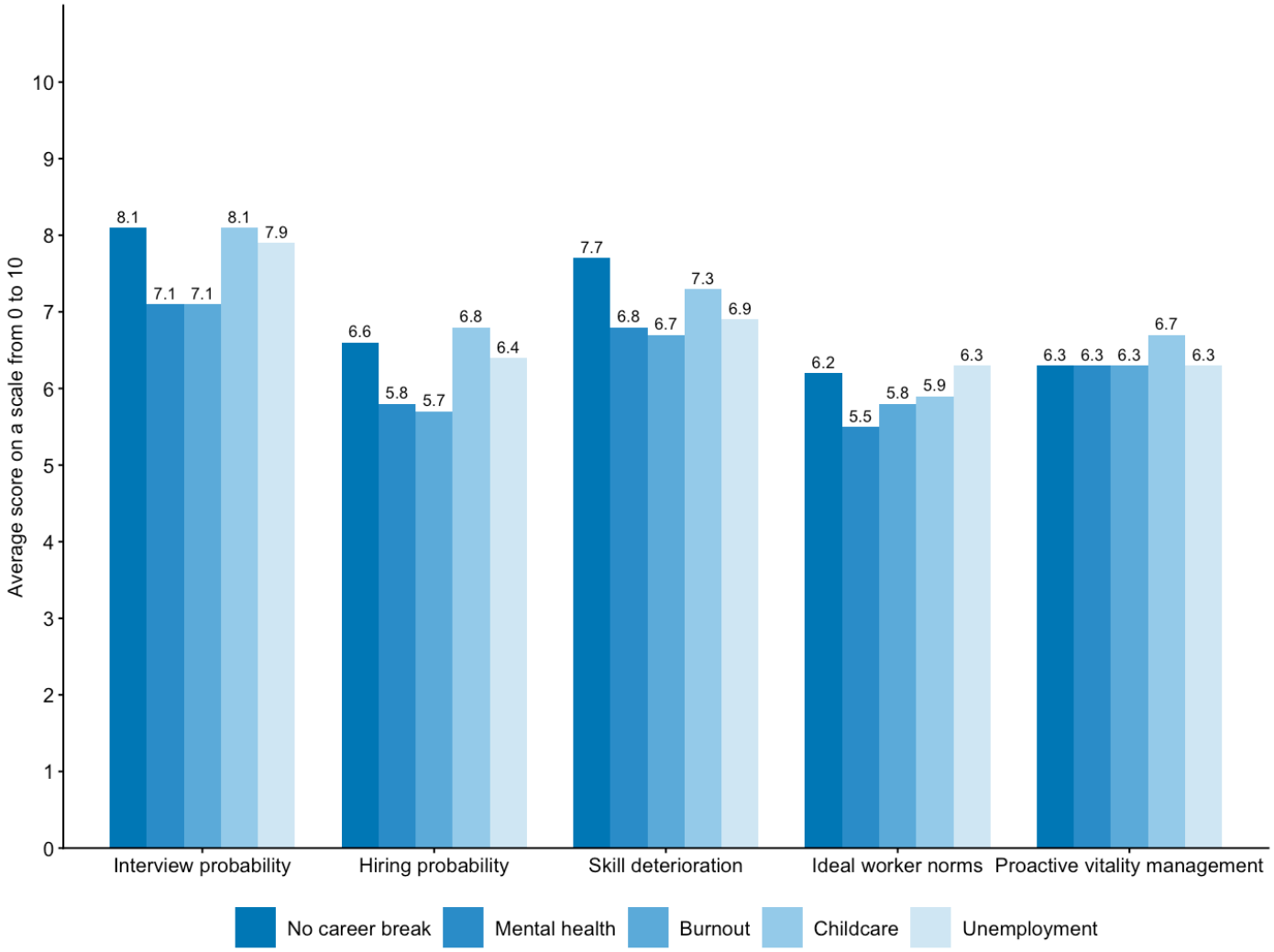


Figure 2. Average interview, hiring, and perception scores by experimental condition



Appendix A: Additional tables

Table A1. Items used in the experiment

Outcomes, perceptions and corresponding items
A. OUTCOMES
Interview probability
I would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job.
Other hiring professionals would advise inviting the candidate for a job interview for the job.
Hiring probability
I would advise hiring this candidate for the job.
Other hiring professionals would advise hiring this candidate for the job.
B. PERCEPTIONS
Perceived skill deterioration (skill loss scale; Van Belle et al., 2018)
Applicants with such a profile have not developed a deterioration in their general skills.
Applicants with such a profile have not developed a deterioration in their social skills.
Applicants with such a profile are sufficiently aware of the technological evolutions in the work field.
Perceived ideal worker norms (ideal worker evaluation scale; Montanye & Livingston, 2024)
Applicants with such a profile are accessible.
Applicants with such a profile are always available for their work.
Applicants with such a profile are completely committed to their work.
Applicants with such a profile are devoted to their work.
Applicants with such a profile are responsive to unexpected work.
Applicants with such a profile are willing to arrange their outside responsibilities around their paid work.
Applicants with such a profile are willing to work long hours.
Perceived proactive vitality management (proactive vitality management scale; Op den Kamp et al., 2018)
Applicants with such a profile are motivated.
Applicants with such a profile feel energetic during their work.
Applicants with such a profile make sure to approach their work with a fresh pair of eyes.
Applicants with such a profile make sure to approach their work with a positive mindset.
Applicants with such a profile make sure to do things that make them enthusiastic.
Applicants with such a profile make sure to focus well on their work.
Applicants with such a profile make sure to have enough space in their head to think.
Applicants with such a profile try to inspire themselves.

Notes. This table outlines the items 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 rationales underlying these perception measures are discussed in Section 2.

Table A2. Job characteristics and descriptions used in the experiment

Jobs	Characteristics			Descriptions
	Gender domination	Required stress tolerance	Degree of customer contact	
Machinist	Male	Low	Low	This employee is responsible for performing machining operations, identifying machine malfunctions, and carrying out basic machine maintenance.
Housekeeping cleaner	Female	Low	Low	This employee is responsible for performing light cleaning duties to maintain private households in a clean and orderly manner.
Chemical engineer	Neutral	Low	Low	This employee is responsible for designing chemical plant equipment and developing processes for manufacturing chemicals.
Telecommunications equipment installer	Male	Low	High	This employee is responsible for installing telephone, television, and internet systems, troubleshooting installation issues, and informing customers about the operation of the systems.
Cashier	Female	Low	High	This employee is responsible for managing financial transactions in non-financial establishments – using registers or scanners – and processing card transactions or checks.
Personal financial advisor	Neutral	Low	High	This employee is responsible for advising customers on financial planning, evaluating financial profiles, and executing financial asset transactions.
Computer programmer	Male	High	Low	This employee is responsible for developing and evaluating computer software, performing revisions on existing software, and maintaining documentation related to the software.
Medical and clinical laboratory technician	Female	High	Low	This employee is responsible for conducting routine medical laboratory analyses to support the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease.
Parking enforcement worker	Neutral	High	Low	This employee is responsible for enforcing parking regulations by monitoring assigned public parking areas and issuing citations for violations.
Sales manager	Male	High	High	This employee is responsible for managing the distribution of products or services, formulating sales strategies, training sales staff, and analysing sales statistics.
Childcare worker	Female	High	High	This employee is responsible for caring for young children in a daycare setting, including feeding, bathing, and supervising play activities.
Real estate sales agent	Neutral	High	High	This employee is responsible for managing real estate transactions, including property listings, property visits, negotiation of sale conditions, and contract formulations.

Notes. As explained in Subsection 3.2, job characteristics were varied to enhance generalisability. Specifically, we varied (i) gender domination, (ii) required stress tolerance, and (iii) degree of customer contact. Gender domination was determined using the most recent data from the Belgian statistics office for the 100 most common occupations in Belgium (Statistics Belgium, 2025a). Occupations were classified as male- or female-dominated when more than 70% of workers belonged to one gender, and as gender-neutral when this share ranged between 40% and 60%, following Leuze and Strauß (2016) and the OECD (2002). To enhance external validity, occupations in which the minority gender represented less than 2.5% of the workforce were excluded. Required stress tolerance and degree of customer contact were operationalised using the O*NET indicators 'Stress Tolerance' and 'Customer & Personal Service', respectively (O*NET is an application developed by the U.S. Department of Labor featuring occupational information on job characteristics for over 900 occupations (O*NET (n.d.)). Occupations were classified as 'high' or 'low' on each characteristic based on whether they fell within the top or bottom 30% of the corresponding O*NET score distribution.

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=396]	Mental health [N=210]	Burnout [N=195]	Childcare [N=187]	Unemployment [N=188]	
Demographics							
Gender: male	0.527	0.548	0.533	0.492	0.524	0.516	1.773 [0.777]
Age (c.)	48.956	48.884	48.633	49.385	48.701	49.277	0.544 [0.969]
Career break: no	0.714	0.732	0.733	0.672	0.706	0.707	2.838 [0.585]
Experience with colleagues with mental health break history: no	0.344	0.343	0.329	0.344	0.364	0.340	3.540 [0.990]
Experience with colleagues with burnout history: no	0.235	0.245	0.219	0.215	0.246	0.239	4.643 [0.969]
Educational degree: tertiary	0.871	0.854	0.871	0.872	0.877	0.899	2.438 [0.656]
Occupation: manager	0.602	0.621	0.605	0.595	0.562	0.606	4.876 [0.996]
Selection expertise							
Involvement: more than semesterly	0.296	0.284	0.319	0.251	0.316	0.319	3.447 [0.486]
Experience: more than five years	0.595	0.593	0.600	0.595	0.615	0.575	0.664 [0.956]
Job expertise (s.)	6.874	6.861	6.876	6.836	6.920	6.894	0.025 [0.999]
Social desirability tendencies							
Egoistic response tendency (s.)	5.885	5.902	5.833	5.812	5.926	5.943	3.094 [0.542]
Moralistic response tendency (s.)	5.764	5.817	5.736	5.687	5.664	5.862	2.317 [0.678]
Self-esteem (s.)	7.375	7.390	7.352	7.364	7.353	7.403	0.656 [0.958]

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable) and s. (scale consisting of multiple items scored from 0 to 10). 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 1,176 candidate evaluations.

Table A4. Robustness test: regression results with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables, excluding the upper 10% on the social desirability scales

	Excluding the upper 10% on the ERT scale [N=1,064]				Excluding the upper 10% on the MRT scale [N=1,040]			
	I. Interview probability		II. Hiring probability		I. Interview probability		II. Hiring probability	
	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)	(I.1)	(I.2)	(II.1)	(II.2)
A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS								
Reason (ref. = No career break)								
Mental health	−1.356*** (0.238)	−1.342*** (0.238)	−1.192*** (0.247)	−1.204*** (0.238)	−1.499*** (0.237)	−1.499*** (0.236)	−1.244*** (0.253)	−1.309*** (0.240)
Burnout	−1.527*** (0.251)	−1.554*** (0.251)	−1.297*** (0.264)	−1.294*** (0.251)	−1.545*** (0.243)	−1.581*** (0.241)	−1.314*** (0.263)	−1.405*** (0.243)
Childcare	−0.538* (0.223)	−0.535* (0.213)	−0.207 (0.233)	−0.212 (0.223)	−0.684** (0.213)	−0.688** (0.205)	−0.300 (0.229)	−0.362† (0.217)
Unemployment	−0.475* (0.191)	−0.475* (0.193)	−0.485* (0.215)	−0.513* (0.209)	−0.537** (0.184)	−0.568** (0.185)	−0.468* (0.213)	−0.566** (0.205)
Duration (c.)	−0.023 (0.015)	−0.023 (0.015)	−0.016 (0.016)	−0.016 (0.015)	−0.020 (0.015)	−0.020 (0.014)	−0.024 (0.016)	−0.019 (0.015)
Timing (ref. = Current)								
Two years ago	0.801*** (0.164)	0.802*** (0.161)	0.665*** (0.152)	0.669*** (0.148)	0.801*** (0.164)	0.802*** (0.161)	0.665*** (0.152)	0.669*** (0.148)
Five years ago	1.052*** (0.147)	1.018*** (0.144)	1.035*** (0.149)	0.998*** (0.142)	1.052*** (0.147)	1.018*** (0.144)	1.035*** (0.149)	0.998*** (0.142)
Age (c.)	0.011† (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.011† (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)
Gender (ref. = Female)								
Male	−0.199* (0.081)	−0.199* (0.082)	−0.201* (0.085)	−0.201* (0.086)	−0.199* (0.081)	−0.199* (0.082)	−0.201* (0.085)	−0.201* (0.086)
B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS								
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS								
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable), ERT (egoistic response tendencies), MRT (moralistic response tendencies), 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 $p < .10$.

Table A5. Robustness test: 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)
A. CANDIDATE CHARACTERISTICS				
Reason (ref. = No career break)				
Mental health	−1.921*** (0.220)	−1.927*** (0.221)	−1.776*** (0.215)	−1.791*** (0.217)
Burnout	−2.088*** (0.226)	−2.105*** (0.226)	−1.899*** (0.230)	−1.901*** (0.227)
Childcare	−0.951*** (0.215)	−0.955*** (0.212)	−0.670** (0.205)	−0.679** (0.200)
Unemployment	−1.035*** (0.190)	−1.059*** (0.191)	−0.951*** (0.204)	−0.996*** (0.202)
Duration (c.)	−0.036* (0.014)	−0.033* (0.014)	−0.024 (0.015)	−0.021 (0.014)
Timing (ref. = Current)				
Two years ago	1.004*** (0.156)	1.002*** (0.157)	0.956*** (0.146)	0.968*** (0.145)
Five years ago	1.370*** (0.149)	1.353*** (0.149)	1.241*** (0.155)	1.237*** (0.153)
Age (c.)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)
Gender (ref. = Female)				
Male	−0.208* (0.088)	−0.207* (0.089)	−0.212* (0.085)	−0.210* (0.086)
B. JOB CHARACTERISTICS				
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes
C. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS				
Included	No	Yes	No	Yes

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: c. (continuous variable) 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 1,176 observations.

Table A6. Robustness test: multiple testing adjustment of regression coefficients' p-values with interview and hiring probability as outcome variables

	I. Interview probability								II. Hiring probability							
	(I.1)				(I.2)				(II.1)				(II.2)			
	Original p-value	BH p-value	SH p-value	WY p-value	Original p-value	BH p-value	SH p-value	WY p-value	Original p-value	BH p-value	SH p-value	WY p-value	Original p-value	BH p-value	SH p-value	WY p-value
Reason																
Mental health	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Burnout	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
Childcare	0.012	0.020	0.020	0.019	0.010	0.018	0.018	0.013	0.454	0.454	0.453	0.448	0.402	0.402	0.402	0.383
Unemployment	0.010	0.020	0.020	0.019	0.009	0.018	0.018	0.013	0.022	0.044	0.043	0.034	0.009	0.017	0.017	0.013

Notes. The following abbreviations are used: BH (Bonferroni–Holm), SH (Šidák–Holm), and WY (Westfall–Young). As discussed in Subsection 4.4, adjustments were implemented for the four career break conditions to control for the family-wise error rate arising from multiple simultaneous comparisons. Corrections were computed using the Bonferroni–Holm, Šidák–Holm, and Westfall–Young step-down procedures, with the latter based on 1,000 bootstrap replications. The presented statistics are p-values.