

Signaling for Interviews in the Economics Job Market

<http://www.aeaweb.org/joe/signal/>

The AEA has introduced a mechanism through which applicants can signal their interest in receiving an interview at the January meetings. From November 16 until December 1, shortly after the December JOE comes out, each applicant on the economics job market can designate no more than two departments (or other employers) to whom to send a signal of particular interest. On December 3, the AEA will transmit these signals to the departments a candidate has chosen. (Signals will not be made public.)

How it Works:

Applicants: Job applicants interested in sending a signal need to register at the JOE site, with their full name, email address, year of Ph.D. (or other degree), degree granting institution, and current position (if not graduate student). The deadline for registration is December 1. They will then receive a confirmation email and a password.

Up to midnight on Monday, December 1, Eastern time, applicants can decide which two employers should receive their signals of particular interest. Applicants will enter the JOE ID number for each of the two places they wish to signal (or fill in information for a job that has no JOE listing). They may also, if they wish, send one line of text message, which could be used, for example, to indicate for which of the multiple jobs in a particular listing the signal is intended. The AEA will ensure that each applicant sends no more than two signals.

Departments will receive the signals by email by December 3 (all signals sent to the same email address will be aggregated, so that departments will receive all signals together to the extent possible). Departments should not ask candidates to which (other) departments they sent their signals.

Advice to Departments:

Applicants may only send two signals, and may send none, so if a department *doesn't* get a signal from some applicant, that fact contains almost no information. (See advice to applicants, below, which suggests how applicants might use their signals). But because applicants can send only two signals, the signals a department *does* receive convey valuable information about the candidate's interest.

A department that has more applicants than it can interview can use the signals to help break ties for interview slots, for instance. Similarly, a department that receives applications from some candidates who it thinks are unlikely to really be interested (but might be submitting many applications out of excessive risk aversion) can be reassured of the candidate's interest if the department receives one of the candidate's two signals.

A department that receives a signal from a candidate will likely find it useful to open that candidate's dossier and take one more look, keeping in mind that the candidate thought it worthwhile to send one of his or her two signals to the department.

Advice to Applicants:

The two signals should *not* be thought of as indicating your top two choices. Instead, you should think about which two departments that you are interested in would be likely to interview you if they receive your signal, but not otherwise (see advice to departments, above). You might therefore want to send a signal to a department that you like but that might otherwise doubt whether they are likely to be able to hire you. Or, you might want to send a signal to a department that you think might be getting many applications from candidates similar to you, and a signal of your particular interest would help them to break ties. You might send your signals to departments to whom you don't have other good ways of signaling your interest.

How might signals be used? Here are some specific scenarios that might face departments and candidates:

Departments

1. Some departments may receive few or no signals, because their high rank and famously friendly faculty make everyone interested in them, so candidates feel no need to “waste” a signal of particular interest.
2. A typical department may notice some attractive applicants it thinks would be too hard to get to justify one of their scarce interview slots. At the same time they may have a large number of applicants, more than they can interview, who seem interesting and very possibly attainable (but good enough to attract other offers from similarly ranked universities). In each case, receiving a signal of particular interest from an applicant shows that he or she is more likely to be attainable than previously thought, which may make it more worthwhile to devote a scarce interview to this candidate. It should certainly make it worthwhile to open up his or her dossier one more time for another look.

Candidates

1. **Candidate 1 already has already attracted some interest from very competitive universities**, but is sensibly worried that these might not lead to a job. This candidate might send signals to slightly-less-competitive universities at which she would be happy to work, but which might be reluctant to interview her because her very competitive interviews make them worry that she’d be impossible for them to hire.
2. **Candidate 2 is a strong but not flashy candidate.** Just as for candidate 1, there may be some departments that hesitate to interview him because they worry he’d be hard to get. He can send one of his signals to one of those that he particularly likes. At the same time, there may be a more competitive university that he particularly likes but that hasn’t yet invited him for an interview, perhaps because they have trouble picking him out from the crowd. He can send his second signal there, to let them know they should take another look at his dossier, because he’s particularly interested and thinks he’d be a good fit for them.
3. **Candidate 3 has an unusual background**, and thinks he’d be a good fit with some departments to which his advisors don’t have good connections, and that don’t normally recruit from his university. He worries that his dossier will get lost in the crush, but that if it were given a good look, he’d have a reasonable shot at an interview. He can send a signal to convey that message.

Further advice for candidates:

- a. Use this as an opportunity to talk to your advisor and get a sense of where you should be applying. (In our preliminary analyses of 2006-8 signaling and survey data, we looked at interviews a candidate received without sending a signal, and observed that a signal sent to a much more highly ranked department was most often wasted. In contrast, signals sent to schools similar or lower ranked than the interviews the candidate received without signaling seemed to increase the probability of receiving an interview.)
- b. Be able to explain to a department why you sent them a signal
- c. If asked by a department why you didn’t send them a signal, feel free to point out e.g. that you thought you could adequately signal your interest through other channels.
- d. You can change your signal up until December 1, so there’s no need to wait until the last minute to go on the web page and choose where you want your signals to go.