

Guide to the Economics Job Market “Scramble” for New Ph.D.s

American Economic Association
Ad Hoc Committee on the Job Market*

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Abstract

The American Economic Association facilitates the market for new Ph.D.s in economics by sponsoring a “scramble” toward the end of the job market season. The goal is to increase the number of matches by giving prospective employers and job candidates information about who remains unmatched on the opposite side of the market. This guide explains how the scramble works, who may participate, the outcomes of recent scrambles, and answers frequently asked questions.

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Introduction and Background

The American Economic Association Ad Hoc Committee on the Job Market¹ seeks to increase the efficiency of the job market for new economics Ph.D.s. One problem in the job market is a lack of information; in particular, after the primary job market clears in February or March, it is difficult for employers and job candidates to determine who remains available on the other side of the market. This lack of information prevents some mutually beneficial labor contracts from being struck.

To reduce this information asymmetry, the AEA has, since 2005-2006, sponsored a “job market scramble.”² Specifically, the AEA provides a website on which unmatched job candidates and employers can advertise their continued availability.

This guide explains how the scramble works. Its success depends on the market being “thick”, with many active participants on each side of the market. For this reason, we urge all unmatched agents, whether job candidates or employers, to participate. The goals of this guide are to ensure that both sides are familiar and comfortable with the process, to increase participation, and ultimately to increase the number of successful matches.

How the Job Market Scramble Works

The Job Market Scramble occurs during March and April. Between March 12 and March 18, 2020, job candidates and prospective employers who remain unmatched may log on to the American Economic Association website (<http://www.aeaweb.org/joe/scramble/>) and register their continued availability. For purposes of the scramble, “unmatched” means a job candidate who has not yet accepted a job offer or an employer who has unfilled positions. Candidates holding a job offer they have not accepted may participate in the scramble. (However, candidates in such a position should discuss their situation with their advisors and placement director.) Job candidates who have accepted a job offer are ineligible to participate in the scramble.

On the website, unmatched agents are asked to provide the following information:

Job candidates: name, email address, and other information from job candidate profile which may include their affiliations, JEL classifications, CV, job market papers, and list of references.

Prospective employers: name of organization/department, number of positions that remain available, JEL codes of fields sought, internet address of the *Job Openings for Economists* listing that contains the full information about the position, and the name and email address of the person registering the position for the scramble.

¹ As of January 2012 the committee members are: Alvin Roth (chair), John Cawley, Peter Coles, Phillip Levine, Muriel Niederle, and John Siegfried.

² This concept is borrowed from the market for medical residents. After the primary market, both medical school graduates and hospitals that remain unmatched advertise their continued availability, and unmatched medical school graduates “scramble” to meet and match with residency programs.

Unlike job candidates, employers have the option of withholding their information from the website. (In the first three years of the scramble, information was posted for all employers, but the Committee received negative feedback from employers who were overwhelmed by excessive contact by aggressive job candidates. Faced with the threat of employers refusing to participate in the scramble, the Committee decided to allow employers to register but withhold their information from job candidates.) Employers must still register for the scramble if they wish to review the information on unmatched job candidates.

Both job candidates and prospective employers may add a few sentences about themselves or the characteristics they seek in a match. For example, a job candidate could indicate whether she is on the market jointly with a spouse or partner, whether she has strong geographic preferences, or a desired sector of employment (e.g. private sector, government, academic-liberal arts college, academic- research university). Prospective employers could, for example, indicate how their preferences for a candidate differ from their original JOE listing.

Unmatched agents may register for the scramble website until registration closes on March 18, 2020. At that point, registration closes for the year. The scramble website goes online March 20. Only registered participants are given access to the scramble website; agents can only see who is unmatched on the other side of the market. To clarify, job market candidates who register for the scramble may only see job openings; they may not see which other job market candidates remain unmatched. Prospective employers are only able to see which job candidates remain available; they may not see which other jobs remain unfilled.

Thereafter, the AEA plays no further role in the scramble. The AEA does not make or suggest matches. It falls entirely to the unmatched agents to research each other, contact each other, and if both sides agree, move forward with interviews, campus visits, or job offers. It is expected that both sides of the market will take the initiative in contacting each other. Job candidates are expected to be professional; employers have told us that they look unfavorably on job candidates who send persistent or aggressive inquiries about job openings.

The scramble webpage will not be updated to include new listings. The committee does not want the website to become a pernicious waste of time for job market candidates; if new listings could be posted, candidates might be tempted to log on to the site frequently in search of new jobs. To avoid this, the only information that will ever be contained on the webpage is that which is on it the first minute it goes online.

The webpage will not be updated to delete the listings of agents who have matched. It is not cost effective to assign someone the task of keeping the webpage current in real time. The scramble website will be taken down April 7, 2020.

The committee seeks feedback on the usefulness of the scramble and how it could be improved. For this reason, those who participate in the scramble will be asked to complete a survey. Thoughtful responses will allow us to improve future scrambles.

Frequently Asked Questions

Must I participate in the scramble?

No, it is completely voluntary for both job candidates and potential employers.

What are the key dates?

March 12-18, 2020: Unmatched job candidates and prospective employers may register for the scramble. The registration webpage will be accessible from the main AEA webpage. (<http://www.aeaweb.org/joe/scramble/>)

March 20, 2020: The scramble webpage goes online and is accessible by password only by those who registered as unmatched agents. Unmatched agents are only able to see who is unmatched on the other side of the market (they cannot see who else is unmatched on their side of the market). No new listings are permitted after the website goes online, nor will filled jobs or hired candidates be deleted.

April 7, 2020: The scramble website is no longer accessible.

I'm not a member of the AEA; can I still participate in the scramble?

Yes, the scramble is open to non-members of AEA. However, we hope individual participants will join the Association. (See <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AEA/mbr.htm>)

Is there any charge for participating in the scramble?

No, there is no charge to either job applicants or prospective employers to participate in the scramble. However, prospective employers must have previously listed a vacancy in *Job Openings for Economists* (JOE) in order to participate (see below).

Must employers list a job in *Job Openings for Economists* in order to participate?

Yes. The scramble webpage does not include full job listings, only a link to a JOE listing. This is true of all types of jobs, including postdoctoral positions, lectureships, visiting professorships, research associates, etc. A JOE listing costs \$400. Information on how to place a listing in JOE is available at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/joe>

Can I post a new job on the scramble webpage?

Absolutely! The committee believes that the success of the secondary market depends on it being “thick” with many participants on both sides. Agents who did not participate in the primary job market may participate in the secondary job market. However, one must list the job in *Job Openings for Economists*.

I was late finishing my job market paper so I didn't interview at the AEA meetings and only just decided to go on the market. Can I participate in the scramble?

Yes. Success of the secondary market depends on many participants on both sides. Agents who did not participate in the primary job market are welcome to participate in the secondary job market. However, the committee strongly recommends that job candidates considering this strategy discuss it with their advisors and placement director.

Can I participate in the scramble if I've already accepted a job, but I want to find a "better" one?

Absolutely not. The acceptance of a job offer is binding; if you have accepted one then you may not participate in the scramble. You may participate if you have an offer in hand that you have not accepted (although if you seriously pursue jobs through the scramble your job offers are likely to expire, as it can take considerable time to schedule and complete campus visits). Job candidates who have an offer but are considering participating in the scramble are strongly advised to discuss their situation with their primary advisor and their placement director.

Will I, as an unmatched job candidate, be stigmatized for participating in this market? Would I be better off by not posting my information on the scramble website and hoping that something works out for me anyway?

Failing to match is not a sign of low quality. There are idiosyncratic reasons why candidates and positions fail to match, so you should not fear stigma. In addition, the job market scramble webpage is confidential. Only agents who register as unmatched can see who is unmatched on the other side of the market. Unmatched job candidates who participate in the scramble cannot see which other job candidates are also participating. The committee encourages job candidates who remain unmatched to post their information on the scramble website.

The scramble website is already up and running but unfortunately I missed the deadline to be listed on it. Would you add me now?

No. The scramble website is not updated. The only information that will ever be posted on it is what was on it the first minute it opens online on March 20.

The scramble website is online and I can see who's unmatched on the other side of the market. What do I do now? Do I contact them or do they contact me?

It is expected that both sides will initiate contact. You should contact those who remain available on the other side of the market that seem to be a good match. Job candidates are expected to behave professionally in these contacts; in particular, do not contact the employers repeatedly or aggressively.

I see job openings posted that I applied for back in December but those employers did not interview me at the AEA meetings. What should I do?

Simply contact the employer (once!) to indicate your continued availability. Do not re-send all of your materials unless you are asked to do so.

Will the scramble suggest likely matches, like the dating websites eHarmony.com and Match.com?

No. All that the website does is allow agents to signal their continuing availability and link interested parties to relevant information. It falls to the agents to do their research and determine which parties on the opposite side of the market would be a good match.

I participated in the scramble and ended up getting a job! (Or: Thanks, we've hired for that position.) Would you please delete me (that position) from the scramble webpage?

The scramble webpage is not updated for either new participants or participants who have matched and are no longer active in the market. However, you needn't worry – the webpage is only visible to those on the other side of the market who have registered as unmatched, and the website is taken down on April 7, 2020.

What happened during previous scrambles?

The table below provides some descriptive statistics for the scramble from 2006 to 2010. The number of employers has ranged from 67 to 100; employers typically advertise one position each; the number of job applicants has ranged from 361 to 535.

Basic Descriptives of the Job Market Scramble

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Employers registered	70	67	100	78	67
Total positions	70	75	103	87	71
Job applicants registered	518	535	361	395	374

Note: Prior to the 2008 scramble, it was emphasized that the scramble was primarily for new Ph.D.s, which accounts for much of the decline in applicants registered.

From 2006–2009, we surveyed participants to gauge the results of the scramble. The response rates have been modest: about 30–40 percent of employers and 20–30 percent of job candidates. The survey results suggest that about half of employers initiate an interview as a result of the scramble. The survey results also allow us to identify some of the jobs that have been filled, and confirm that at least 10 percent of the jobs listed in the scramble have been filled through the contacts it facilitated. In the 2008 follow-up survey, 17 of the 22 responding employers who contacted applicants in the scramble were academic economics departments, as were 8 of the 10 responding employers who reported hiring through the scramble.

In 2009, the scramble underwent a noteworthy change. Some employers complained that they were inundated with e-mails and calls from candidates in the scramble, and expressed reluctance to participate again unless they could remain invisible to job applicants while still viewing which job candidates remained available. The committee, wanting the market to be thick, agreed, somewhat reluctantly. In 2009, 17 of the 87 positions were not made visible even to registered applicants; these were openings with employers who preferred to lurk—that is, to observe available applicants but not to be observed by them. The Committee was unable to detect a pattern about which employers chose to remain visible and which chose to be invisible.