Occupation Specificity and the Decline in the Aggregate Job Separation Rate

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Abstract

The long-run decline in the aggregate job separation rate in the U.S. has been documented in the literature. This paper analyzes the role of increasing occupation specificity in the falling aggregate job separation rate. I do a shift-share decomposition of the decline in the aggregate job separation rate to find that it is accounted mostly by the within-occupation increase in specificity. Then I build a search-and-matching model where the increase in specificity within occupations reduces job separations. The model predicts 60% of the decline in the aggregate job separation rate. When occupations become more specific, human capital acquired from one occupation becomes less transferable to a different occupation, resulting in larger wage cuts for occupation switchers. Occupation switchers also have to undergo a longer period of occupation-specific training in their new occupation, during which they earn low wages. In the model, after the increase in occupation specificity, workers separate less to avoid switching occupations, accepting lower wages at their current job at the same level of productivity.

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