The flow of job information through social networks is practically and theoretically important for organizations, job seekers, and sociologists. Theories that seek to explain this flow of information argue that some kinds of networks or some kinds of network contacts – diverse networks, sparsely connected networks, acquaintances, high-status ties – are superior for job hunters because they contain more information. I argue that researchers must expand their theoretical view of information flow beyond explaining the availability of information and explain how and when available information passes from information holders to potential job applicants. This project will examine the contingencies that influence the flow of information by studying information holders directly and asking how and when they make decisions to share or withhold information. I will answer three primary questions:

1. What factors do information holders take into account in determining which of their network members are potential applicants for job openings, and which network members with whom to share information?
2. How does information sharing vary by characteristics of information holders, characteristics of information holders’ occupations, and characteristics of the job opening in question?
3. How is the decision to share information affected by organizational practices of the recruiting organization?

This research extends a theoretical framework based on how information holders assess and manage risks to their relationships with both their employers and their network members. Key to managing relationships with network members is the need to be sure, before offering job information, that this information will be welcome. Before sharing information, information holders seek knowledge or signals that a network member is likely to be interested in a particular job opening. Knowledge of career goals is more likely available for potential applicants who are close to the information holder. More weakly-tied network members find signals in the form of relevant credentials or experience. Consequently, referrals to weak ties are predicted to be less likely in occupations that do not require specific credentials, training, or experience.

The proposed project will refine and extend this theoretical framework by exposing it to comparative study in labour markets that differ in the specificity or narrowness of their job requirements; by assessing the role of gender as a potential alternative signal of suitability; and by examining how organizational contexts influence this decision-making process.

The current project will study six carefully selected labour markets to allow comparisons between occupations with different kinds of requirements, different institutional settings, and with different gender compositions. This study will proceed in three stages: first, my research assistant and I will select the sample of six strategically-chosen occupations; second we will conduct a small-sample qualitative study of information holders in which we will analyze their accounts of why they choose to share or withhold information; third, we will conduct a larger-scale quantitative survey of information holders. Both studies will sample information holders from the same six labour markets and collect data on their knowledge of job information, the existence of potential applicants within their networks, their frequency of information sharing, and their reasons for choosing to share or withhold information, and the ways in which their employers do or do not encourage or facilitate referrals. We will analyze these quantitative data to determine how information sharing is affected by characteristics of occupations, relationships to potential applicants, and organizational practices.

This research will have important implications for researchers interested in the study of social capital, workplace gender segregation, and social mobility, as well as organizations interested in maximizing the
benefits of network-based recruitment.