

## Preference Signaling in Matching Markets<sup>†</sup>

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*Many labor markets share three stylized facts: employers cannot give full attention to all candidates, candidates are ready to provide information about their preferences for particular employers, and employers value and are prepared to act on this information. In this paper we study how a signaling mechanism, where each worker can send a signal of interest to one employer, facilitates matches in such markets. We find that introducing a signaling mechanism increases the welfare of workers and the number of matches, while the change in firm welfare is ambiguous. A signaling mechanism adds the most value for balanced markets. (JEL C78)*

Job seekers in labor markets often “cast a wide net” by applying for many positions, as there is a low cost for applying and a high value for being employed. Consequently, many employers face the daunting task of reviewing and evaluating large numbers of applications. Moreover, since pursuing candidates is costly, employers must assess not only the quality of an applicant, but also whether the applicant is attainable: that is, whether the candidate is likely to ultimately accept a job offer, should the employer make one. In this paper we study a mechanism that aids employers in this evaluation process by allowing applicants to credibly signal information about their preferences for positions.

In practice, in many markets that suffer from this form of application congestion, candidates communicate special interest in a select number of positions. For example, in college admissions in the United States, many universities have early admission programs, where high school seniors may apply to exactly one college before the general application period. Evidence suggests that universities respond to such action in that it is easier to get into a college through early admission programs (Avery, Fairbanks, and Zeckhauser 2003).<sup>1</sup> Another example of applicants signaling interest can be found in the market for entry-level clinical psychologists, which

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<sup>1</sup> Under single early application programs, universities often require that an applicant not apply early to other schools, and this is often enforced by high school guidance counselors. In another example of colleges looking for signs of interest, many schools take great care to note whether applicants visit the campus, which presumably is costly for parents in terms of time and money.

in the early 1990s was organized as a telephone-based market. On “match day,” program directors called applicants to make offers, and candidates were, at any moment, allowed to hold on to at most one offer. At the end of match day, all nonaccepted offers were automatically declared as rejected. Due in part to its limited time frame, this market suffered from congestion, and it was common for program directors to make offers out of their preference order to applicants who credibly indicated they would accept an offer immediately (Roth and Xing 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Some markets have formal, market-wide mechanisms that allow participants to signal preferences, and the formal nature of the signals ensures credibility. Since 2006, the American Economic Association (AEA) has operated a signaling service to facilitate the job search for economics graduate students. Using this service, students can send signals to up to two employers to indicate their interest in receiving an interview at the annual Allied Social Science Associations (ASSA) meeting. Coles et al. (2010) provide suggestive evidence that sending a signal of interest increases the chances of receiving an interview. Since interviews take place over a single weekend, departments typically interview about twenty candidates out of hundreds of applicants, which suggests that most departments must strategically choose from among their candidates that are above the bar.<sup>3</sup> In a related category of markets, some online dating websites allow participants to send signals to potential partners. For example, in the matchmaking service of the website “Hot or Not,” participants can send each other virtual flowers that purportedly increase the chances of receiving a positive response.<sup>4</sup> In a field experiment on a major Korean online dating website, Lee et al. (2011) study the effect of a user attaching one of a limited number of “virtual roses” to a date request. They find that users of both genders are more likely to accept a request when a virtual rose is attached.<sup>5</sup>

These examples all share three important features. First, in each case, substantial frictions lead to market congestion: employers (or colleges or dating partners)

<sup>2</sup> Congestion in the telephone market was costly for program directors who worried that their offer would be held the whole match day and then rejected in the last moments, leaving them to fill the position in a hectic “aftermarket” with only a few leftover candidates. As an example of offer strategy, the directors of one internship program decided to make their first offers (for their five positions) to numbers 1, 2, 3, 5, and 12 on their rank-order list of candidates, with the rationale that 3, 5, and 12 had indicated that they would accept immediately and that 1 and 2 were so attractive as to be worth taking chances on. Anecdotal evidence suggests that promises to accept an offer were binding. The market was relatively small, and as one program director mentioned: “you see these people again.”

<sup>3</sup> Similar mechanisms exist for nonacademic jobs. For example, Skydeck360, a student-operated company at Harvard, offers a signaling service for MBA students in their search for internships and full-time jobs. Each registered student can send up to ten signals to employers via their secure website. (See <http://skydeck360.posterous.com> for details.)

<sup>4</sup> In this case the number of flowers one may send is unlimited, but each flower is costly. Signals of interest may be helpful in dating markets because pursuing partners bears real costs. At the very least, each user may be limited in the number of serious dates she can have in a given period. “As James Hong from Hot or Not tells it, his virtual flower service has three components: there’s the object itself represented by a graphical flower icon, there’s the gesture of someone sending the flower to their online crush, and finally, there’s the trophy effect of everyone else being able to see that you got a flower. People on Hot or Not are paying \$10 to send the object of their affection a virtual flower—which is a staggering 3–4x what you might pay for a real flower!” (from <http://www.viralblog.com/research/why-digital-consumers-buy-virtual-goods/>). See <http://www.hotornot.com/m/?flowerBrochure=1> for a description of Hot or Not’s virtual flower offerings.

<sup>5</sup> This dating website targets people looking for marriage partners, rather than people who want many dates. Hence, dates may be perceived as particularly costly, so users must decide carefully on whom to “spend” a date. The study found that candidates of average attractiveness, who may worry that date offers are only “safety” offers, are particularly responsive to signals of special interest.

are unable to give full attention to all possible candidates when making decisions. Second, applicants are ready to provide information about their preferences over employers. Third, employers value this preference information and are prepared to act on it.

For employers to take useful action, preference signals must be credible. But simply declaring one's interest typically bears almost no cost, and job seekers have an incentive to indicate particular interest to many employers, regardless of how strong their preferences towards these employers actually are. Hence, absent any credibility guarantee, employers may struggle to discern which preference information is sincere and which is simply cheap talk. So while candidates may wish to signal their preferences, and employers may value learning candidate preferences, inability to credibly convey information may prevent any gains from preference signaling from being realized.

In this paper, we investigate how a *signaling mechanism* that limits the number of signals a job seeker may send can overcome the credibility problem and improve the welfare of market participants. We develop a model that can account for the three stylized facts mentioned above. In our model, firms may make a limited number of offers to workers, so that firms must carefully select the workers to whom they make offers. We focus on the strategic question of offer choice and abstract away the question of acquiring information that determines preferences. Hence, we assume that each agent knows her own preferences over agents on the other side of the market, but is uncertain of the preferences of other agents.

In our model, we introduce a new class of preferences for workers we term *block-correlated* preferences. In particular, firms can be partitioned in blocks, so that all workers agree about ranking of firm blocks; however, within a block, workers have idiosyncratic preferences over firms. Firm preferences are idiosyncratic and uniformly distributed. This modeling choice of preferences allows for correlation of workers' preferences, keeps the model tractable, and adequately describes many characteristics of labor markets. For example, in the job market for new PhD economists, economics departments may be roughly ranked based on academic output or other factors. Graduate students form their preferences based on not only this academic ranking, but also on idiosyncratic factors including family preferences, location, climate, and colleagues. Block correlation is meant to capture the notion that while students may roughly agree on ranking of tiers of departments, their idiosyncratic preferences dictate which departments are preferred within each tier.

Workers have the opportunity to send a signal to one firm, where each signal is binary in nature and does not transmit any further information. Firms observe their signals, but not the signals of other firms, and then each firm simultaneously makes exactly one offer to a worker. Finally, workers choose offers from those available to them. We focus on equilibria in anonymous strategies to eliminate any coordination devices beyond the signaling mechanism.

We show that, in expectation, introducing a signaling mechanism increases both the number of matches as well as the welfare of workers. Intuitively, when firms make offers to workers who send them signals, these offers are unlikely to overlap, leading to a higher expected number of matches. Furthermore, workers are not only more likely to be matched, but are also more likely to be matched to a firm they

prefer the most. On the other hand, when a firm makes an offer to a worker who has signaled it, this creates strong competition for firms in the same block who would like to make an offer to that same worker because, for example, they rank that worker highest. Hence, by responding to signals, that is, being more likely to make offers to workers who have signaled them, firms may generate a negative spillover on other firms in the same block. Consequently, the effect on firm welfare from introducing a signaling mechanism is ambiguous; welfare for a firm depends on the balance between individual benefit from responding to signals and the negative spillover generated by other firms responding to signals. Furthermore, we show that the degree to which a firm responds to signals is a case of strategic complements. When one firm responds more to signals, it becomes riskier for other firms to make offers to workers who have not sent them signals. Consequently, multiple equilibria, with varying responsiveness to signals, may exist. If there is a single block of firms, these equilibria can be welfare ranked: workers prefer equilibria where firms respond more to signals, while firms prefer the equilibria where they respond less.

To understand when a signaling mechanism might be most helpful, we compare performance across market settings. To do this, we focus on a simpler environment with a single block of firms where agents care about getting a match, but not the quality of the match. Hence, the value of introducing a signaling mechanism is simply the expected increase in the number of matches. For such an environment, we find that the value of a signaling mechanism is maximal for *balanced markets*; that is, markets where the number of firms and workers are of roughly the same magnitude. We further show that the increase in the number of matches is roughly homogenous of degree one in the number of firms and workers. That is, signaling mechanisms are equally important for large and small markets in terms of the expected increase in the fraction of matched participants. Finally, we show that when we extend the number of periods in a market, the value of signaling is reduced, as additional periods serve as an alternative means of mitigating market congestion.

Our approach is related to several strands of literature. A standard interpretation of signaling and its effectiveness is that applicants have private information that is pertinent to how valuable an employee they would be. In Spence's classic signaling model (Spence 1973), applicants use wasteful, costly signals (e.g., education), to signal their type (e.g., their ability). Hoppe, Moldovanu, and Sela (2009) extend this idea to an environment where agents on both sides of the market may send signals.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Avery and Levin (2010) model early application in US college admissions as a way for students to signal college-specific quality, such as enthusiasm for a particular college. In their model, colleges explicitly derive more utility from having enthusiastic students in their freshman class than they do from other, equally able students. By contrast, in our model we abstract away from such motives and instead show how congestion, stemming from the explicit opportunity costs of making offers, can generate room for useful preference signaling.

A more closely related strand of literature is that of strategic information transmission, or "cheap talk," between a sender and receiver, introduced in Crawford and

<sup>6</sup> See also Damiano and Li (2007) and Hopkins (2012) for related models.

Sobel (1982). Our analysis varies from the standard model here in that we consider a multistage game with many senders (workers) and many receivers (firms), where the structure of allowable signals plays a distinctive role. Each sender must choose the receiver to whom she will send one of her limited, identical signals, and the scarcity of signals induces credibility. Each receiver knows only whether a sender has sent a signal to it or not, and receives no additional information. While Crawford and Sobel (1982) study an information transmission problem between the sender and receiver, our setting includes an additional coordination problem among receivers who must decide whom to make an offer. Nevertheless, some features of Crawford and Sobel persist in our model. Signals are “cheap” in the sense that they do not have a direct influence on agent payoffs. Each agent has only a limited number of signals, so there is an opportunity cost associated with sending a signal. Finally, in our model there always exist babbling equilibria where agents ignore signals; hence, the introduction of a signaling mechanism always enlarges the set of equilibria.

Like the classical search literature, our model considers decentralized agent interactions (see e.g., Montgomery 1991; Peters 1991). Our paper contributes to this line of work via its analysis of a mechanism that helps agents on one side of the market influence whether they will be approached by the agents on the other side of the market. Our model considers incomplete information with a finite number of agents, compared to the complete information models with a continuum of agents that are common in this literature.<sup>7</sup> Since we abstract away from wage competition and search frictions, we do not study the equilibrium wage dispersion and the frictionless limit of markets that are central questions in this area of research (see e.g., Kircher 2009).

While to our knowledge we are the first to introduce preference signaling in decentralized markets, papers by Abdulkadiroğlu, Che, and Yasuda (2012) and Lee and Schwarz (2007) deal with preference signaling in the presence of centralized clearinghouses. Paredo (2010) analyzes coordination signaling in a model of complete information with identical employers and commonly ranked employees. Ely and Siegel (forthcoming) study how interview decisions transmit information in a common-value labor setting with many firms and one worker.

In summary, our paper models the introduction of a signaling mechanism in markets where interviews or offers are costly for firms, either in direct monetary terms, or because of opportunity costs. Our results suggest potentially large welfare gains for workers, and an increase in the expected total number of matches. Furthermore, as the experience with the economic job market shows, introducing a signaling mechanism can be a low cost, unintrusive means of improving market outcomes. As such, we see our paper as part of the larger market design literature (see Roth 2008).

The paper proceeds as follows. Section I begins with a simple example, and Section II discusses the offer games with and without a signaling mechanism. Section III analyzes equilibria properties for both setups. Section IV considers the impact of introducing a signaling mechanism on the welfare of agents. Section V

<sup>7</sup> For the relationship between finite and infinite economies in a directed search framework see Galenianos and Kircher (2012).

analyzes the robustness of the welfare results across various market structures. Section VI concludes.

### I. A Simple Example

In this section we lay out a simple example that shows the effects of introducing a signaling mechanism and highlights some of our main findings. Consider a market with two firms  $\{f_1, f_2\}$  and two workers  $\{w_1, w_2\}$ . For each agent, a match with one's most preferred partner from the other side of the market yields payoff 1, while a match with one's second choice partner yields  $x \in (0, 1)$ . Remaining unmatched yields payoff 0.

Ex ante, agent preferences are random, uniform, and independent. That is, for each firm  $f$ , the probability that  $f$  prefers worker  $w_1$  to worker  $w_2$  is one-half, as is the probability that  $f$  prefers  $w_2$  to  $w_1$ . Worker preferences over firms are similarly symmetric. Agents learn their own preferences, but not the preferences of other agents.

We first examine behavior in a game where once agent preferences are realized, each firm may make a single offer to a worker, and workers then accept at most one of their available offers. We will examine sequential equilibria, which ensures that workers accept their best available offer.

In the unique equilibrium of this game where firm strategies do not depend on the name of the worker, each firm simply makes an offer to its most preferred worker.<sup>8</sup> This follows because firms cannot discern which worker is more likely to accept an offer. In this congested market there is a 50 percent chance that both firms make an offer to the same worker, in which case there will only be one match. Hence, on average there are 1.5 matches, and the expected payoff for each firm is  $\frac{3}{4}1 + \frac{1}{4}0 = 0.75$ . For workers, if they receive exactly one offer, it is equally likely to be from their first or second choice firm. There is also a 50 percent chance that one worker receives two offers, which ensures a payoff of one. The expected payoff for each worker is then  $(2 + x)/4$ .

We now introduce a signaling mechanism: before firms make offers, each worker may send a *signal* to a single firm. Each signal has a binary nature: either a firm receives a signal from a particular worker or it does not; signals do not transmit any other information. We focus on non-babbling equilibria, where firms interpret a signal as a sign of being the more preferred firm of that worker, and workers send a signal to their more preferred firm.<sup>9</sup>

To analyze firm behavior, note that a firm that receives a signal from its top worker will make this worker an offer, since it will certainly be accepted. If on the other hand a firm receives no signals, it again optimally makes an offer to its top worker, as symmetry implies the workers are equally likely to accept an offer. The interesting strategic decision a firm must make is when it receives a signal only from its second ranked worker. In this case the other firm also receives exactly one signal.

<sup>8</sup> See Section II for a formal definition of anonymous strategies.

<sup>9</sup> Note that there is no equilibrium where firms interpret signals as a lack of interest. If this were the case, workers would simply not send any signal. There are, however, babbling equilibria where no information is transmitted. We will not focus on these in this paper, as they are equivalent to not having a signaling device.

TABLE 1—A SIMPLE EXAMPLE

$f_1 \backslash f_2$	Respond	Ignore
Respond	$x$	$x$
Ignore	0	$1/2$

Note: Table shows firm  $f_1$ 's payoffs conditional on receiving a signal from its second ranked worker.

We say a firm “responds” to the signal if it makes the signaling worker an offer, and “ignores” the signal if it instead makes an offer to its top worker, which did not send it a signal.

Suppose  $f_1$  prefers  $w_1$  to  $w_2$  and only  $w_2$  sent a signal to  $f_1$ , which implies  $w_1$  sent a signal to  $f_2$ . When  $f_1$  makes an offer to  $w_2$ ,  $f_1$  is ensured a payoff of  $x$ . Suppose  $f_1$  instead makes an offer to  $w_1$ , who sent a signal to  $f_2$ . If  $f_2$  responds to signals, then  $f_2$  also makes an offer to  $w_1$ , which  $w_1$  will accept, hence leaving  $f_1$  a payoff of 0. If  $f_2$  ignores signals, then there is still a 50 percent chance that  $w_1$  is actually  $f_2$ 's first choice, in which case an offer is tendered and accepted, so that  $f_1$  again receives 0. Otherwise,  $f_1$  receives 1. Table 1 summarizes  $f_1$ 's payoffs conditional on receiving a signal from its second ranked worker, and the strategies of  $f_2$ . Table 1 shows that strategies of firms are strategic complements. If a firm responds to signals, then the other firm is weakly better off from responding to signals as well. In this example, if  $f_2$  switches from the action ignore (not making an offer to a second choice worker who has signaled) to the safe action of responding (making an offer to a second choice worker who has signaled), then  $f_1$  optimally also takes the safe action of responding.

Turning to equilibrium analysis, note that if  $x > 0.5$  there is a unique equilibrium in which both firms respond to signals. When  $x < 0.5$ , that is when the value of the first choice worker is much greater than that of the second ranked worker, there exist two equilibria in pure strategies. In the first, both firms respond to signals (Respond-Respond) and in the second both firms ignore signals (Ignore-Ignore).<sup>10</sup> Table 2 summarizes welfare properties of these equilibria. Note that the expected firm and worker payoffs, as well as the expected number of matches when signals are ignored are the same as when there is no signaling mechanism, since agent actions in these two settings are identical.<sup>11</sup> Whenever there are multiple equilibria ( $x < 0.5$ ), we can rank them in terms of firm welfare, worker welfare, and the expected number of matches. Workers and firms are opposed in their preferences over equilibria: workers prefer the equilibrium in which both firms respond to signals while firms prefer the equilibrium in

<sup>10</sup> There is also a mixed strategy equilibrium whenever there are two pure strategy equilibria. Properties of this equilibrium coincide with those in the equilibrium where both firms respond to signals.

<sup>11</sup> When both firms respond to signals, since each firm has a 50 percent chance of receiving a signal from its first choice worker, half the time this strategy yields payoff of one. Otherwise a firm has a 1/4 chance of receiving a signal from its second choice worker only, yielding a payoff of  $x$ . With a 1/4 chance a firm receives no signal, in which case it makes an offer to its first choice worker, who will accept with 50 percent probability (whenever she is not the first choice worker of the other firm). Hence, expected firm payoffs equals  $\frac{5+2x}{8}$ . Payoffs for workers and the expected number of matches can similarly be calculated given these outcomes.

TABLE 2—WELFARE OUTCOMES

	Firm payoffs	Worker payoffs	Number of matches
Respond-Respond	$(5 + 2x)/8$	$(6 + x)/8$	$7/4$
Ignore-Ignore	$3/4$	$(2 + x)/4$	$3/2$

Note: Welfare outcomes in equilibria “Respond-Respond” and “Ignore-Ignore.”

which they both ignore signals. Intuitively, while one firm may privately gain from responding to a signal, such an action may negatively affect the other firm. The expected number of matches in the equilibrium when both firms respond to signals is always greater than in the equilibrium when both firms ignore the signals.

These welfare results enable us to study the effects of introducing a signaling mechanism, as outcomes in the offer game without signals are identical to those when both firms ignore signals. The expected number of matches and the welfare of workers in the offer game with signals in any non-babbling equilibrium are greater than in the offer game with no signals. The welfare of firms changes ambiguously with the introduction of a signaling mechanism. We now show that these results generalize.

## II. Model: The Offer Game without and with Signals

Let  $\mathcal{F} = \{f_1, \dots, f_F\}$  be the set of firms, and  $\mathcal{W} = \{w_1, \dots, w_W\}$  be the set of workers, with  $|\mathcal{F}| = F$  and  $|\mathcal{W}| = W$ . We consider markets with at least two firms and two workers. Firms and workers have preferences over each other. For each firm  $f$ , let  $\Theta_f$  be the set of all possible preference lists over workers, where  $\theta_f \in \Theta_f$  is a vector of length  $W$ . We use the convention that the worker of rank one is the most preferred worker, while the worker of rank  $W$  is the least preferred worker. The set of all firm preference profiles is  $\Theta_F = (\Theta_f)^F$ . Firm  $f$  with preference list  $\theta_f$  values a match with worker  $w$  as  $u(\theta_f, w)$ , where  $u(\theta_f, \cdot)$  is a von-Neumann Morgenstern utility function. Firms are symmetric in the following sense: a firm’s utility for a match depends only on a worker’s rank. That is, for any permutation  $\rho$  of worker indices, we have  $u(\rho(\theta_f), \rho(w)) = u(\theta_f, w)$ .<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, all firms have the same utility function  $u(\cdot, \cdot)$ .

Similarly, we define  $\theta_w$ ,  $\Theta_w$ , and  $\Theta_W$  for workers. Worker  $w$  with preference list  $\theta_w$  values a match with firm  $f$  as  $v(\theta_w, f)$ , where match utility again depends only on rank, and all workers share the same utility function.

Though not essential for our results, we will assume that workers and firms derive zero utility from being unmatched, and that any match is preferable to remaining unmatched for all participants. We denote the set of all agent preference list profiles as  $\Theta \equiv \Theta_F \times \Theta_W$  and let  $t(\cdot)$  be the distribution over this set. A *market* is given by the 5-tuple  $\langle \mathcal{F}, \mathcal{W}, t, u, v \rangle$ .

<sup>12</sup> Let  $\rho: \{1, \dots, W\} \rightarrow \{1, \dots, W\}$  be a permutation. Abusing notation, we apply  $\rho$  to preference lists, workers, and sets of workers such that the permutation applies to the worker indices. For example, suppose  $W = 3$ ,  $\rho(1) = 2$ ,  $\rho(2) = 3$ , and  $\rho(3) = 1$ . Then we have  $\theta_f = (w_1, w_2, w_3) \Rightarrow \rho(\theta_f) = (w_2, w_3, w_1)$  and  $\rho(w_1) = w_2$ .



In our model we consider *block-correlated* distributions of preferences. That is, firms can be partitioned in blocks, so that all workers agree which block contains the most desirable firms, which block the second most desirable set of firms and so on. However, within a block, workers have idiosyncratic preferences over firms. Each firm has preferences over the workers chosen uniformly, randomly, and independently from the set of all strict preference orderings over all workers.<sup>13</sup>

**DEFINITION 1:** *The distribution of agent preferences  $t(\cdot)$  is block-correlated if there exists a partition  $\mathcal{F}_1, \dots, \mathcal{F}_B$  of the firms into blocks such that*

- (i) *For any  $b < b'$ , where  $b, b' \in \{1, \dots, B\}$ , each worker prefers every firm in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  to any firm in block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ ;*
- (ii) *Each worker's preferences within each block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  are uniform and independent; and*
- (iii) *Each firm's preferences over workers are uniform and independent.*

Block-correlated preferences are meant to capture the notion that many two-sided markets are segmented. That is, workers may largely agree on the ranking of blocks on the other side of the market, but vary in their preferences within each block. For example, workers might agree on the set of firms that constitute the “top tier” of the market; however within that tier, preferences are influenced by factors specific to each worker.

#### A. The Offer Game without Signals

In the absence of a signaling mechanism, play proceeds as follows. After preferences of firms and workers are realized, each firm simultaneously makes an offer to at most one worker. Workers then choose at most one offer from those available to them. Sequential rationality ensures that workers will always select the best available offer. Hence, we take the behavior in the last stage as given and focus on the reduced game with only firms as strategic players.

Once its preference list  $\theta_f$  ( $f$ 's type) is realized, firm  $f$  decides whether and to whom to make an offer. Firm  $f$  may use a mixed strategy denoted by  $\sigma_f$  which maps the set of preference lists to the set of distributions over the union of workers with the no-offer option, denoted by  $\mathcal{N}$ ; that is  $\sigma_f: \Theta_f \rightarrow \Delta(\mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N})$ .<sup>14</sup> We denote a profile of all firms' strategies as  $\sigma_F = (\sigma_{f_1}, \dots, \sigma_{f_F})$ , and the set of firm  $f$ 's possible strategies as  $\Sigma_f$ .

<sup>13</sup> For tractability, we consider only correlation of worker preferences and not correlation of firm preferences, though our intuition is that benefits from signaling would extend in a model where workers are also partitioned in blocks.

<sup>14</sup> In other words,  $f$  selects elements of a  $W$ -dimensional simplex;  $\sigma_f(\theta_f) \in \Delta^W$ , where  $\Delta^W = \{x \in \mathbb{R}^{W+1} : \sum_{i=1}^{W+1} x_i = 1, \text{ and } x_i \geq 0 \text{ for each } i\}$ .

Let the function  $\pi_f: (\Sigma_f)^F \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$  denote the payoff of firm  $f$  as a function of firm strategies and realized agent types. We are now ready to define the Bayesian Nash equilibrium of the offer game with no signals.

DEFINITION 2: *Strategy profile  $\hat{\sigma}_F$  is a Bayesian Nash equilibrium in the offer game with no signals if for all  $f \in \mathcal{F}$  and  $\theta_f \in \Theta_f$ , the strategy  $\hat{\sigma}_f$  maximizes the profit of firm  $f$  of type  $\bar{\theta}_f$ . That is,*

$$\hat{\sigma}_f(\bar{\theta}_f) \in \arg \max_{\sigma_f \in \Sigma_f} \mathbb{E}_{\theta_{-f}}(\pi_f(\sigma_f, \hat{\sigma}_{-f}, \theta) | \bar{\theta}_f).$$

We focus on equilibria in which firm strategies are *anonymous*; that is, they depend only on workers' ranks within a firm's preference list.<sup>15</sup> This rules out strategies that rely on worker indices, eliminating any coordination linked to the identity of workers. As an example, "always make an offer to my second-ranked worker" is an anonymous strategy, while "always make an offer to the worker called  $w_2$ " is not.

DEFINITION 3: *Firm  $f$ 's strategy  $\sigma_f$  is anonymous if for any permutation  $\rho$ , and for any preference profile  $\theta_f \in \Theta_f$ , we have  $\sigma_f(\rho(\theta_f)) = \rho(\sigma_f(\theta_f))$ .<sup>16</sup>*

### B. The Offer Game with Signals

We now modify the game so that each worker may send a "signal" to exactly one firm. A signal is a fixed message; that is, the only decision of workers is whether and to whom to send a signal. No decision can be made about the content of the signal. Note that the signal does not directly affect the firm's utility, as the firm's utility from hiring a worker is determined by how high the firm ranks that worker. However, the signal of a worker may affect a firm's beliefs over whether that worker is likely to *accept* an offer. Since we have a congested market where firms can only make one offer, these beliefs may affect the firm's decision of whom to make an offer. The offer game with signals proceeds in three stages:

- (i) Agents' preferences are realized. Each worker decides whether to send a signal, and to which firm. Signals are sent simultaneously, and are observed only by firms who have received them.
- (ii) Each firm makes an offer to at most one worker; offers are made simultaneously.
- (iii) Each worker accepts at most one offer from the set of offers she receives.

<sup>15</sup> This assumption is standard in search literature (see e.g., Shimer 2005; Kircher 2009).

<sup>16</sup> As stated in footnote 12, we consider only permutations of the worker indices in strategy profile  $\rho(\sigma_f(\theta_f))$  and do not permute the no-offer option, i.e.,  $\rho(\mathcal{N}) = \mathcal{N}$ .

Once again, sequential rationality ensures that workers will always select the best available offer. Hence, we take this behavior for workers as given and focus on the reduced game consisting of the first two stages.

In the first stage, each worker sends a signal to a firm, or else chooses not to send a signal. A mixed strategy for worker  $w$  is a map from the set of all possible preference lists to the set of distributions over the union of firms and the no-signal option, denoted by  $\mathcal{N}$ ; that is,  $\sigma_w : \Theta_w \rightarrow \Delta(\mathcal{F} \cup \mathcal{N})$ . In the second stage, each firm observes the set of workers that sent it a signal,  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$ , and based on these signals forms beliefs  $\mu_f(\cdot | \mathcal{W}^S)$  about the preferences of workers. Each firm, based on these beliefs as well as its preferences, decides whether and to whom to make an offer. A mixed strategy of firm  $f$  is a map from the set of all possible preference lists,  $\Theta_f$ , and the set of all possible combinations of received signals,  $2^{\mathcal{W}}$ , which is the set of all subsets of workers, to the set of distributions over the union of workers and the no-offer option. That is,  $\sigma_f : \Theta_f \times 2^{\mathcal{W}} \rightarrow \Delta(\mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N})$ . We denote a profile of all worker and firm strategies as  $\sigma_W = (\sigma_{w_1}, \dots, \sigma_{w_W})$  and  $\sigma_F = (\sigma_{f_1}, \dots, \sigma_{f_F})$  respectively.

The payoff to firm  $f$  is a function of firm and worker strategies and realized agent types, which we again denote as  $\pi_f : (\Sigma_w)^W \times (\Sigma_f)^F \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$ . Similarly, define the payoff of workers as  $\pi_w : (\Sigma_w)^W \times (\Sigma_f)^F \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$ . As the offer game with signals is a multistage game of incomplete information, we consider sequential equilibrium as the solution concept.

**DEFINITION 4:** *Strategy profile  $\hat{\sigma} = (\hat{\sigma}_W, \hat{\sigma}_F)$  and posterior beliefs  $\hat{\mu}_f(\cdot | \mathcal{W}^S)$  for each firm  $f$  and each subset of workers  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$  are a sequential equilibrium if*

$$\hat{\sigma}_w(\theta_w) \in \arg \max_{\sigma_w \in \Sigma_w} \mathbb{E}_{\theta_{-w}}(\pi_w(\sigma_w, \hat{\sigma}_{-w}, \theta) | \bar{\theta}_w)$$

for any  $w \in \mathcal{W}$ ,  $\bar{\theta}_w \in \Theta_w$  and

$$\hat{\sigma}_f(\bar{\theta}_f, \mathcal{W}^S) \in \arg \max_{\sigma_f \in \Sigma_f} \mathbb{E}_{\theta_{-f}}(\pi_f(\sigma_f, \hat{\sigma}_{-f}, \theta) | \bar{\theta}_f, \mathcal{W}^S, \hat{\mu}_f)$$

for any  $f \in \mathcal{F}$ ,  $\bar{\theta}_f \in \Theta_f$ ,  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$ , where  $\hat{\sigma}_{-a}$  denotes the strategies of all agents except  $a$ , for  $a = w, f$ , and beliefs are defined using Bayes' rule.<sup>17</sup>

We again focus on equilibria where agents use anonymous strategies, thereby eliminating unrealistic sources of coordination.

**DEFINITION 5:** *Firm  $f$ 's strategy  $\sigma_f$  is anonymous if for any permutation  $\rho$ , preference profile  $\theta_f \in \Theta_f$ , and subset of workers  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$  who send  $f$  a signal, we have  $\sigma_f(\rho(\theta_f), \rho(\mathcal{W}^S)) = \rho(\sigma_f(\theta_f, \mathcal{W}^S))$ . Worker  $w$ 's strategy  $\sigma_w$  is anonymous if for*

<sup>17</sup> As usual in a sequential equilibrium, permissible off-equilibrium beliefs are defined by considering the limits of completely mixed strategies.

any permutation  $\rho$  that permutes only firm orderings within blocks and any preference profile  $\theta_w \in \Theta_w$ , we have  $\sigma_w(\rho(\theta_w)) = \rho(\sigma_w(\theta_w))$ .<sup>18</sup>

### III. Equilibrium Analysis

#### A. The Offer Game with No Signals

Let us first consider the offer game with no signals. When deciding whom to make an offer, firms must consider both the utility from hiring a specific worker and the likelihood that this worker will accept an offer. Because preferences of firms are independently and uniformly chosen from all possible preference orderings, and since firms use anonymous strategies, an offer to any worker will be accepted with equal probability. Hence, each firm optimally makes an offer to the highest-ranked worker on its preference list. Indeed, this is the unique equilibrium when firms use anonymous strategies.

**PROPOSITION 1 (Equilibrium without Signals):** *The unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals when firms use anonymous strategies and workers accept the best available offer is  $\sigma_f(\theta_f) = \theta_f^1$  for all  $f \in \mathcal{F}$  and  $\theta_f \in \Theta_f$ .*

Note that the above statement requires that firm strategies be anonymous only in equilibrium. Firm deviations that do not satisfy the anonymity assumption are still allowed. As seen in the example in Section I, in this equilibrium there might be considerable lack of coordination, leaving many firms and workers unmatched.

#### B. The Offer Game with Signals

We now turn to the offer game with signals, where we will be interested in equilibria where firms within each block play symmetric, anonymous strategies. That is, if firm  $f$  and firm  $f'$  belong to the same block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , for some  $b \in \{1, \dots, B\}$ , they play the same anonymous strategies and have the same beliefs. We call such firm strategies and firm beliefs *block-symmetric*. We denote equilibria where firm strategies and firm beliefs are block-symmetric and worker strategies are anonymous and symmetric as *block-symmetric equilibria*.

Our first step in characterizing the set of block-symmetric equilibria is to pin down the strategies of workers, who must choose whether to send a signal, and if so, to which firm. In block-symmetric equilibria, firms within each block use the same anonymous strategies. Hence, we can denote the ex ante probability of a worker  $w$  receiving an offer from a firm in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , conditional on  $w$  sending and not sending a signal to it as  $p_b^s$  and  $p_b^{ns}$  correspondingly. We also denote the equilibrium probability that a worker sends her signal to a firm in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  as  $\alpha_b$ , where  $\alpha_b \in [0, 1]$  and  $\sum_{b=1}^B \alpha_b \leq 1$ .

<sup>18</sup> As stated in footnote 12 we consider only permutations of the worker indices in  $\rho(\mathcal{W}^S)$  and  $\rho(\sigma_f(\theta_f, \mathcal{W}^S))$  and do not permute the no-signaling and the no-offer option, i.e.,  $\rho(\mathcal{N}) = \mathcal{N}$ .

The following proposition characterizes worker strategies in all block-symmetric sequential equilibria that satisfy a multiplayer analog of Criterion D1 of Cho and Kreps (1987).<sup>19</sup>

**PROPOSITION 2 (Worker Strategies):** *Consider a block-symmetric sequential equilibrium that satisfies Criterion D1. Then either*

- (i) *Signals do not influence offers: for every  $b \in \{1, \dots, B\}$ ,  $p_b^s = p_b^{ns}$  or*
- (ii) *Signals sent in equilibrium increase the chances of receiving an offer: there exists  $b_0 \in \{1, \dots, B\}$  such that  $p_{b_0}^s > p_{b_0}^{ns}$  and*
  - (a) *for any  $b \in \{1, \dots, B\}$  such that  $\alpha_b > 0$ , we have  $p_b^s > p_b^{ns}$ , and if a worker sends her signal to block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , she sends her signal to her most preferred firm within  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , and*
  - (b) *for any  $b' \in \{1, \dots, B\}$  such that  $\alpha_{b'} = 0$ , workers' strategies are optimal for any off-equilibrium beliefs of firms from block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ .*

Proposition 2 states that there are two types of block-symmetric equilibria that satisfy Criterion D1. Equilibria of the first type are babbling, where firms ignore signals. The outcomes of these equilibria coincide with the outcome in the offer games with no signals. Consequently, the signaling mechanism adds no value in this case. In equilibria of the second type, workers send signals only to their most preferred firm in each block, possibly mixing across these top firms (see Figure 1). It is quite natural to expect that in equilibrium, workers may signal to multiple blocks with positive probability. Note that if all workers were signaling to the same block, the benefits to a single worker from signaling to a different block could be quite high.

In equilibrium, workers only send signals to blocks in which firms respond to signals; that is, the chances of receiving an offer from the firm they signaled must be higher than if they had not sent that signal. Moreover, if in equilibrium worker  $w$  is not prescribed to signal to some block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ , then  $w$ 's choice of  $\alpha_{b'} = 0$  is optimal for any beliefs of firms in block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ . In particular, this strategy would be optimal even if firms in block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$  interpreted unexpected signals in the most favorable way; i.e., upon receiving a signal from worker  $w$ , each firm  $f$  in  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$  believes that it is  $w$ 's most preferred firm within block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ .

We call strategies where workers send signals only to their most preferred firm in any block (or mix over such firms) *best-in-block strategies*. We call beliefs where a firm interprets a signal from a worker  $w$  as indicating it is the most preferred firm of  $w$  in that block *best-in-block beliefs*. We will now assume that workers use

<sup>19</sup> Criterion D1 lets us characterize beliefs when firms receive "unexpected," or off-equilibrium, signals. See the proof of Proposition 2 for the definition of our analog of Criterion D1 of Cho and Kreps (1987). Other refinements could also be used in our equilibrium characterization: for example, we could replace Criterion D1 with "universal divinity" of Banks and Sobel (1987) or by "never a weak best response" of Cho and Kreps (1987) without making a change to the statement of Proposition 2.

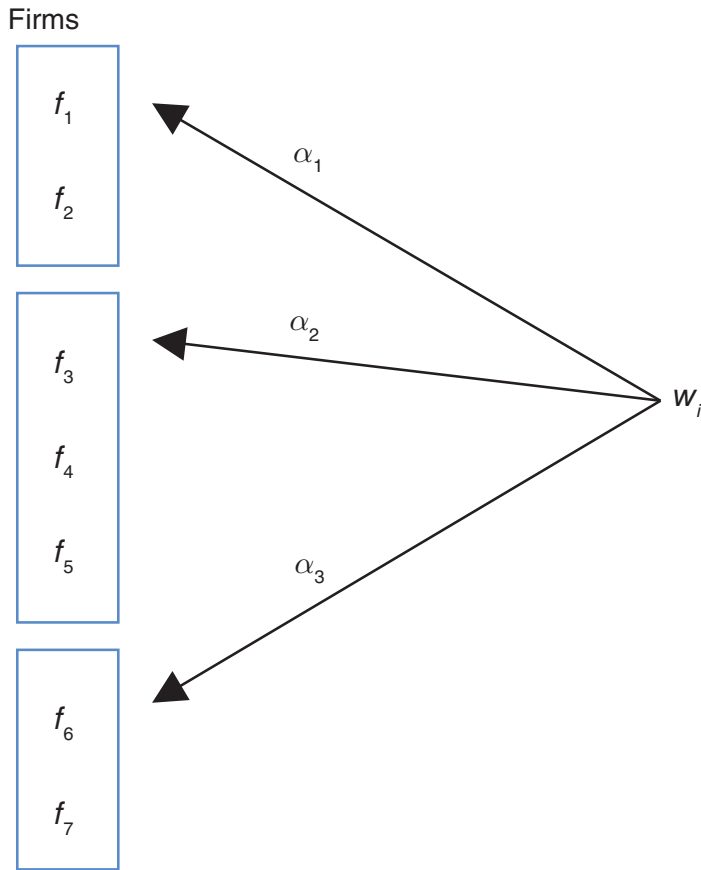


FIGURE 1. SIGNALS IN BLOCK SYMMETRIC EQUILIBRIA

*Notes:* In block symmetric equilibria, a worker sending a signal may mix over multiple firms, but these firms may include only the worker's most preferred firm in any block. When a firm receives a signal in equilibrium, it interprets this as meaning to be the signaling worker's most preferred firm within the block.

*symmetric best-in-block strategies* and that firms have *best-in-block beliefs*, and examine firm offers in the second stage of the game.<sup>20</sup>

Call  $f$ 's most preferred worker  $T_f$  ( $f$ 's top-ranked worker). Consider a firm  $f$  that has received signals from a subset of workers  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$ . We denote  $|\mathcal{W}^S|$  be the number of received signals and assume that  $|\mathcal{N}| = 0$ . Call  $f$ 's most preferred worker in this subset  $S_f$  ( $f$ 's most preferred signaling worker). The expected payoff to  $f$  from making an offer to  $T_f$  or  $S_f$  (whichever yields greater payoff) is strictly greater than the payoff from making an offer to any other worker. This follows

<sup>20</sup> Note that firms have best-in-block beliefs on the equilibrium path in any block-symmetric equilibrium. In addition, a block-symmetric equilibrium satisfies Criterion D1 if and only if worker strategies remain optimal if firm off-equilibrium beliefs are best-in-block beliefs. Hence, we will focus on equilibria where firms have best-in-block beliefs even off the equilibrium path. See the proof of Proposition 2 in the Appendix for details.

from symmetry of worker strategies and block-symmetry and anonymity of firm strategies: for any two workers who sent a signal,  $f$ 's expectation that these workers will accept an offer is identical. Hence, if  $f$  makes an offer to a worker who sent a signal, it should make that offer to the worker it prefers the most among them. The same logic holds for any two workers who have not sent a signal. (Proposition A1 in the Appendix provides a rigorous argument for the above statements). This suggests a special kind of strategy for firms, which we will call a *cutoff strategy*.

**DEFINITION 6 (Cutoff Strategies):** *Strategy  $\sigma_f$  is a cutoff strategy for firm  $f$  if  $\exists j_1, \dots, j_W \in \{1, \dots, W\}$ , such that for any  $\theta_f \in \Theta_f$  and any set  $\mathcal{W}^S$  of workers who sent a signal,*

$$\sigma_f(\theta_f, \mathcal{W}^S) = \begin{cases} S_f & \text{if } \text{rank}_{\theta_f}(S_f) \leq j_{|\mathcal{W}^S|} \\ T_f & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

*We call  $(j_1, \dots, j_W)$   $f$ 's cutoff vector, which has as its components cutoffs for each positive number  $|\mathcal{W}^S|$  of received signals.*

A firm  $f$  which employs a cutoff strategy need only look at the rank of the most preferred worker who sent it a signal, conditional on the number of signals  $f$  has received. If the rank of this worker is below a certain cutoff (lower ranks are better since one is the most preferred rank), then the firm makes an offer to this most preferred signaling worker  $S_f$ . Otherwise the firm makes an offer to its overall top ranked worker  $T_f$ . Cutoffs may in general depend on the number of signals the firm receives. This is because the number of signals received provides information about the signals the other firms received. This in turn affects the behavior of other firms and hence the optimal decision for firm  $f$ . Note that any cutoff strategy is, by definition, an anonymous strategy.

While we defined cutoffs as integers, we can extend the definition to include all real numbers in the range  $(1, W)$  by letting a cutoff  $j + \lambda$ , where  $\lambda \in (0, 1)$ , correspond to mixing between cutoff  $j$  and cutoff  $j + 1$  with probabilities  $1 - \lambda$  and  $\lambda$  respectively.<sup>21</sup>

Cutoff strategies are not only intuitive, but they are also *optimal* strategies for firms. Whenever other firms use anonymous strategies and workers signal to their most preferred firms within blocks, for any strategy of firm  $f$  there exists a cutoff strategy that provides firm  $f$  with a weakly higher expected payoff (see Proposition A2 in the Appendix). To see this, note that firm and worker strategies are anonymous, and the probability that firm  $f$ 's offer to  $T_f$  or  $S_f$  will be accepted depends only on the number of signals firm  $f$  receives, and not on the identity of the signaling workers. Hence, if  $f$  finds it optimal to make an offer to  $S_f$ , it will certainly make an offer to a more preferred  $S_f$ , provided the number of signals it receives is the same. The equilibrium results in this paper will all involve firms using cutoff strategies.

<sup>21</sup> This is equivalent to  $f$  making offers to  $S_f$  when  $S_f$  is ranked better than  $j$ , randomizing between  $T_f$  and  $S_f$  when  $S_f$  has rank exactly  $j$ , and making offers to  $T_f$  otherwise.

Since cutoff strategies can be represented by cutoff vectors, we can impose a natural partial order on them: firm  $f$ 's cutoff strategy  $\sigma_f'$  is greater than cutoff strategy  $\sigma_f$  if all cutoffs of  $\sigma_f'$  are weakly greater than all cutoffs of  $\sigma_f$  and at least one of them is strictly greater. We say that firm  $f$  responds more to signals than firm  $f'$  when  $\sigma_f$  is greater than  $\sigma_{f'}$ .

We now examine how a firm should adjust its behavior in response to changes in the behavior of opponents. We find that responding to signals is a case of strategic complements.

**PROPOSITION 3 (Strategic Complements):** *Suppose workers play symmetric best-in-block strategies, all firms use cutoff strategies, and firm  $f$  uses a cutoff strategy that is a best response. If one of the other firms increases its cutoffs (responds more to signals), then the best response for firm  $f$  is also to increase its cutoffs.*

When other firms make offers to workers who have signaled to them, it is risky for firm  $f$  to make an offer to a worker who has not signaled to it. Such a worker has signaled to another firm, which is more inclined to make her an offer. The greater this inclination on the part of the firm's opponents, the riskier it is for firm  $f$  to make an offer to its most preferred overall worker  $T_f$ . Hence as a response, firm  $f$  is also more inclined to make an offer to its most preferred worker among those who sent a signal, namely  $S_f$ .

The next result establishes the existence of equilibria in block correlated settings in the offer game with signals. To prove the theorem, we first demonstrate equilibrium existence while requiring firms to use only cutoff strategies. We then invoke the optimality of cutoffs result to show that this step is not restrictive.

**THEOREM 1 (Equilibrium Existence):** *There exists a block-symmetric equilibrium where 1) workers play symmetric best-in-block strategies, and 2) firms play block-symmetric cutoff strategies.*

Observe that when there is a single block of firms, we have an even sharper characterization of equilibria. With one firm block, an optimal strategy for each worker is to send a signal to her most preferred firm, for any anonymous firm cutoff strategies. Fixing this behavior, we may then use the strategic complements property of Proposition 3 to cleanly apply Theorem 5 from Milgrom and Roberts (1990). When there is a single block of firms, there exists a symmetric equilibrium in pure cutoff strategies where 1) workers signal to their most preferred firms and accept their best available offer and 2) firms use symmetric cutoff strategies. Furthermore, there exists pure symmetric equilibria with smallest and largest cutoffs. (See Theorem A1 in the Appendix for details).

#### IV. Welfare Effects of Introducing a Signaling Mechanism

We have analyzed the unique equilibrium in the offer game with no signals, and we have studied *block-symmetric* equilibria in the offer game with a signaling mechanism. In this section we address the effect of introducing a signaling mechanism on the market outcome. We consider three outcome measures: the number of matches



in the market, the welfare of firms, and the welfare of workers. For agent welfare comparisons we consider Pareto ex ante expected utility as our criterion. The expected welfare for a firm  $f$  and a worker  $w$  are captured by  $\pi_f$  and  $\pi_w$  respectively, where  $\pi_f, \pi_w : (\Sigma_w)^W \times (\Sigma_f)^F \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$ . Let the function  $m : (\Sigma_w)^W \times (\Sigma_f)^F \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$  denote the expected total number of matches in the market as a function of agent strategies and types.

We can now state the result regarding the effect of adding a signaling mechanism to an offer game with no signals. Note that for the comparisons in the theorem to be strict, we require a block with at least two firms where in equilibrium, workers send signals with positive probability to that block. Without this condition, we only have weak comparisons.

**THEOREM 2 (Welfare):** *Consider any non-babbling block-symmetric equilibrium of the offer game with signals, in which there is a block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  with at least two firms such that  $\alpha_b > 0$ . Then,*

- (i) *The expected number of matches is strictly greater than in the unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals.*
- (ii) *The expected welfare of workers is strictly greater than in the unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals.*
- (iii) *The welfare of firms may be greater or smaller than in the unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals.*

The introduction of a signaling mechanism increases the expected number of matches because firms, by responding to signals, make offers to workers who are more likely to accept them. Furthermore, firms responding to signals also unambiguously increase the expected welfare of workers because workers receive offers from better firms and with higher probability.

In contrast, a firm responding to signals has a negative spillover on the welfare of other firms in the same block. To see this, note that when a firm makes an offer to a worker who has signaled it, any other firm in the same block planning to make this worker an offer because it has ranked it highest despite not having received a signal, suddenly faces insurmountable competition. This logic illustrates that while there is an “information effect” where firms value signals which help them assess which workers will accept offers, there is a potentially countervailing “competition effect” where firm response to signals may negatively impact the welfare of other firms. Either effect can dominate, explaining the ambiguous impact of signaling on firm welfare (recall our example in Section I).

In a model with a single block of firms, we once again can make sharper predictions. In addition to analyzing the effect of introducing a signaling mechanism, we can also compare welfare across signaling equilibria. When multiple symmetric equilibria exist, firms and workers are *opposed* in their preferences: workers prefer the equilibrium that involves firms responding most to signals (greatest cutoffs), while firms prefer the equilibrium where they respond least.

**THEOREM 3 (Welfare: Single Block of Firms):** *Consider any two symmetric cutoff strategy equilibria in the offer game with signals with one block of firms where in one equilibrium firms have greater cutoffs (respond more to signals). Compared to the equilibrium with lower cutoffs, in the equilibrium with greater cutoffs we have the following: (i) the expected number of matches is weakly greater, (ii) workers have weakly higher expected payoffs, and (iii) firms have weakly lower expected payoffs.*

Note that we cannot generalize this result to block-correlated markets. When a single firm responds more to signals, firms in lower ranked blocks may benefit: a low ranked firm making an offer to a worker who has signaled it will face less competition when a higher ranked firm focuses on a (different) worker who has signaled it. Hence, we no longer see a purely negative spillover on other firms.

## V. Market Structure and the Value of a Signaling Mechanism

In this section, we analyze the effects of introducing a signaling mechanism across different market structures. In particular, we focus our analysis on the increase in the expected number of matches due to the introduction of a signaling mechanism as we vary the relative size of the two sides of the market and the number of periods of interaction.

To isolate the impact of a signaling mechanism on the number of matches in the market, we consider a special case where agents want to match, but are nearly indifferent over whom they match with. That is, firms and workers play an (almost) *pure coordination* game amongst themselves. Specifically, we consider the cardinal utility from being matched to a partner as being *almost* the same across partners. If agent  $a$  has a preference profile  $\theta_a$ , agent  $a$  prefers to be matched with partner  $\theta_a^k$ , rather than with partner  $\theta_a^{k'}$ ,  $k' > k$ , though the difference between utility intensities is very small.<sup>22</sup> In addition, there is only one block of firms, so that agent preferences are uniformly distributed.<sup>23</sup>

Under these assumptions, there is a unique non-babbling symmetric equilibrium in the offer game with signals. Each worker sends a signal to her most preferred firm. Each firm makes an offer to its most preferred worker that has signaled provided the firm receives at least one signal; otherwise, it makes an offer to its top-ranked

<sup>22</sup> The “nearly indifferent” condition for firms is that  $u(W) > W/F(1 - (1 - 1/W)^F)u(1)$ , where  $u(1)$  and  $u(W)$  are firm utility from matching with first and last ranked workers, respectively. A complete specification of the setup can be found in the subsection “Market Structure and the Value of a Signaling Mechanism” of the online Appendix.

<sup>23</sup> Our pure coordination model has similarities to the “urn-ball” model in the labor literature, concisely described in a survey by Petrongolo and Pissarides (2001): “Firms play the role of urns and workers play the role of balls. An urn becomes “productive” when it has ball in it. [...] In the simplest version of this process  $U$  workers know exactly the location of  $V$  job vacancies and send one application each. If a vacancy receives one or more applications it selects an applicant at random and forms a match. The other applicants are returned to the pool of unemployed workers to apply again.” Our pure coordination model effectively flips the urn-ball problem around. Workers apply to all jobs, and firms propose the offers. We have a nonrandom selection procedure, and of course in our model we study the role of signaling. Perhaps the paper with the closest market structure to ours is Julien, Kennes, and King (2000).

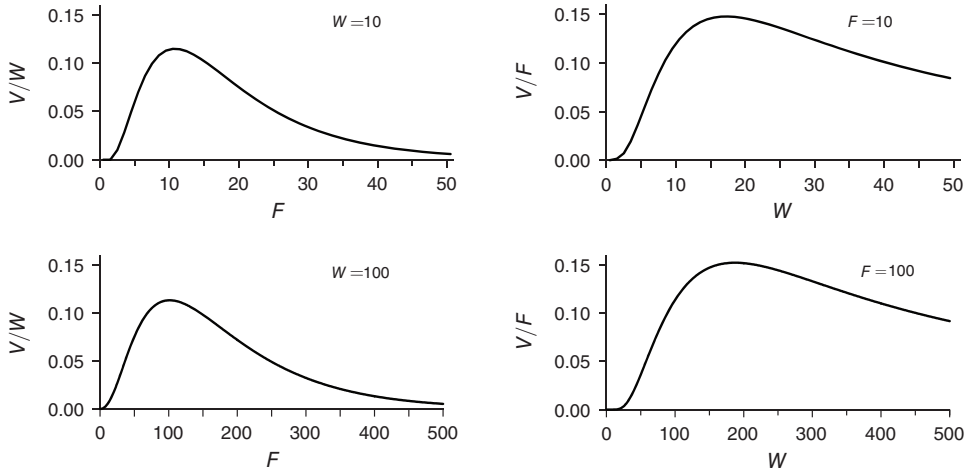


FIGURE 2. BALANCED MARKETS

Note: The graph shows the proportional increase in the number of matches due to introducing a signaling mechanism as we vary the number of firms for a fixed number of workers (left graphs) and vice versa (right graphs).

worker (see Proposition B1 in the online Appendix).<sup>24</sup> Proposition 1 also applies in this setting; that is, there is a unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals.

We denote the expected number of matches in the unique equilibrium in the pure coordination model with signals and with  $F$  firms and  $W$  workers as  $m^S(F, W)$ , and without a signaling mechanism as  $m^{NS}(F, W)$ . The increase in expected number of matches from the introduction of the signaling mechanism, which we term the *value of the signaling mechanism*, we denote as  $V(F, W) \equiv m^S(F, W) - m^{NS}(F, W)$ .

### A. Balanced Markets

In this subsection, we examine how the value of the signaling mechanism changes for markets of various sizes. We begin with an illustration. Figure 2 graphs  $100 \cdot V(F, W)/W$  as a function of  $F$  for fixed  $W = 10$  and  $W = 100$ , and  $100 \cdot V(F, W)/F$  as a function of  $W$  for fixed  $F = 10$  and  $F = 100$ . That is, the figure depicts the increase in the expected number of matches proportional to the size of the side of the market we keep fixed (which places an upper bound on the total number of possible matches).

The figures suggest that the value of a signaling mechanism is single peaked when varying one side of the market and holding the other constant. In this example, the signaling mechanism is most beneficial for balanced markets—markets where the number of firms and the number of workers are roughly of the same magnitude. To understand why signaling may be particularly useful in balanced markets, it is helpful to think about the endpoints. With many workers and very few firms, firms

<sup>24</sup> In this case, one can view the offer game with no signals as the result of the first round of a firm-proposing deferred acceptance algorithm. When workers send signals, the result resembles one round of a worker-proposing deferred acceptance with one exception: firms who received no offer (no signal from any worker) do get to make an offer.

will almost certainly match with or without the signaling mechanism, as there is no large coordination problem. With many firms and few workers, the reverse holds: most workers will get offers with or without the signaling mechanism. Hence, the signaling mechanism offers little benefit at the extremes. Furthermore, Figure 2 suggests that the proportional increase in the expected number of matches remains steady as market size increases, holding constant the ratio of workers to firms. Proposition 4 describes these observations precisely.

**PROPOSITION 4 (Balanced Markets):** *Consider markets with  $F$  firms and  $W$  workers. Then (i) for fixed  $W$ ,  $V(F, W)$  attains its maximum value at  $F = x_0W + O_W(1)$ , where  $x_0 \approx 1.01211$  and (ii) for fixed  $F$ ,  $V(F, W)$  attains its maximum value at  $W = y_0F + O_F(1)$ , where  $y_0 \approx 1.8442$ .*

The proof of Proposition 4 involves the calculation of an explicit formula for  $V(F, W)$ . The expected increase in the number of matches can be represented as

$$V(F, W) = \alpha\left(\frac{W}{F}\right)F + O_F(1)$$

or as

$$V(F, W) = \beta\left(\frac{F}{W}\right)W + O_W(1),$$

where  $\alpha(\cdot)$  and  $\beta(\cdot)$  are particular functions and  $O_W(1)$  and  $O_F(1)$  denote functions that are smaller than a constant for large  $W$  and for large  $F$  respectively. Hence,  $V(F, W)$  is “almost” homogeneous of degree one for large markets. That is, the proportional increase in the number of matches,  $V(F, W)/W$  and  $V(F, W)/F$ , is almost homogenous of degree zero.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, we can evaluate the introduction of the signaling mechanism for a sample market, and its properties will be preserved for markets of other sizes, but with the same ratio of firms to workers.

For example, we can use Figure 2 to investigate maximal quantitative gains from the introduction of the signaling mechanism in large markets. For a fixed number of workers, the maximum increase in expected number of matches is approximately 15 percent. Furthermore, the returns to the signaling mechanism are substantial over a wide range of market conditions. For example, only when the number of firms outweighs the number of workers by more than fourfold do the gains from introducing the signaling mechanism drop to below 1 percent.

<sup>25</sup> Note that this result corroborates the stylized fact in the empirical labor literature that the matching function (the expected number of matches) has a constant return to scale. See, for example, Petrongolo and Pissarides (2001) or Rogerson, Shimer, and Wright (2005).

### B. Multiple Periods of Interaction

We now explore how the value of a signaling mechanism is impacted when agents can interact in multiple periods. As in the general model, each worker can send only one signal and has only one interview position to fill. However, we now consider an offer game with  $L + 1$  periods, where workers send signals to firms in period 0, while in the other  $L$  periods agents can interact and be matched. The exact description of the game is as follows:

#### Period 0: Workers send signals.

- (i) Agents' preferences are realized. Each worker decides whether to send a signal and to which firm. Signals are sent simultaneously and are observed only by firms who have received them.

#### Period 1–L: Agents interact. Each period consists of two stages:

- (i) Each firm makes an offer to at most one worker; offers are made simultaneously.
- (ii) Each worker accepts at most one offer from the set of offers she receives, and rejects all other offers.

Offers cannot be deferred, and acceptance is binding. When a worker accepts an offer, the firm-worker pair leaves the market, and this is observed by all agents. Only the unmatched agents participate in the remaining periods. As a point of comparison, we will also be interested in the  $L$ -period offer game with no signals, which is identical to the game described above except that period 0 is excluded. Finally, we assume a discount factor  $\delta \in (0, 1)$  for being matched in later periods; that is, a match in period  $T$  reduces utility by a factor of  $\delta^{T-1}$ .

Under the assumptions of the pure coordination model and with a sufficiently small discount factor, there is no incentive to delay offers or acceptances, since agents care (almost) only about being matched. There is a unique symmetric sequential equilibrium in the offer game with no signals, where each firm makes an offer to its most preferred worker and each worker accepts its best offer in each period. Similarly, there is a unique symmetric sequential non-babbling equilibrium in the offer game with signals. Each worker sends her signal to her most preferred firm in period 0. Each worker accepts the best available offer in each period. In any period, each firm makes an offer to its most preferred worker (among those remaining in the market) who has sent it a signal, provided such a worker exists. Otherwise the firm makes an offer to its most preferred worker among those still in the market (Proposition B2 in the online Appendix proves these results formally).

We may now compare the offer game with and without the signaling mechanism when there are multiple periods of interaction. Additional periods of interaction provide an opportunity for a greater number of firms and workers to be matched. Therefore, the value of the signaling mechanism decreases as the number of periods of interaction increases. The next proposition shows this relationship formally.

**PROPOSITION 5 (Multiple Periods):** *The expected increase in number of matches from the introduction of the signaling mechanism,  $V^L(F, W)$ , is a decreasing function of the number of periods of interactions,  $L$ .*

The effect of multiple periods on the value of the signaling mechanism is intuitive: the larger the number of periods, the lower the degree of market congestion, and the lower the value of signaling. As a practical matter, however, this result has important limitations. The result depends crucially on participants recognizing who has left the market, information which in practice is often only slowly disseminated. Extending the length of a market may also simply not be feasible. Entry level labor markets often have fixed end dates, and each “period” involves a high degree of organization. For example, adding a second ASSA meeting with interviews would likely be unpalatable to hiring committees. Finally, extending the market length can also have the effect of extending the time it takes to make and respond to offers (cf. Roth and Xing 1997), so that the effective market length remains short, and congestion remains. So while reducing congestion by adding periods has theoretical promise, these limitations suggest that the value of signaling will persist even in decentralized markets with longer timeframes.

## VI. Discussion and Conclusion

Excessive applications by job market candidates lead to market congestion: employers must devote resources to evaluate and pursue potential candidates, but cannot give due attention to all. Evaluation is further complicated because employers must assess which applicants, many of whom are performing broad searches, are likely to ultimately accept a job offer.

Consequently, applicants are often eager to convey information about their interest in particular employers, and employers stand ready to act upon such information, if it can be deemed credible. However, in many markets indicating preferences is cheap, and employers may struggle to identify which preference information is sincere. This, in turn, may prevent any potential gains from preference signaling from being realized.

In this paper we examined how a signaling mechanism can overcome this credibility problem and improve agent welfare. In our model, workers are allowed to send a costless signal to a single firm. While participation is free and voluntary, this mechanism nevertheless provides workers with a means of credibly expressing preferences. In a setting where workers agree on the ranking of blocks of firms but vary in their preferences within each block, workers will send their signal to their most preferred firm in a block, mixing across blocks. Firms use this information as guidance, optimally using cutoff strategies to make offers. We find that on average, introducing a signaling technology increases both the expected number of matches as well as the expected welfare of workers. The welfare of firms, on the other hand, changes ambiguously, because firms responding more to signals may impose a negative externality on other firms. We showed further that introducing a signaling mechanism adds the most value for balanced markets, that is, markets in which the number of firms and the number of workers are of roughly the same magnitude.

One path for future research would be to characterize the full set of agent preferences where signaling is beneficial. While in this paper we find that signaling mechanisms can improve agent welfare under a reasonably broad class of preferences, for some, agent preferences signaling can worsen outcomes. Kushnir (2012) models a high-information setting with minimal congestion where signals disturb firms' commonly held beliefs about workers preferences, which in turn disrupts the maximal matching. Kushnir's example corroborates the intuition that signals may be more useful in low information settings than in high. Further investigation of this question could be fruitful.

Another interesting question that is beyond the scope of the current paper concerns the optimal signaling mechanism. Providing candidates with one, or else a small number of identical signals offers a tractable approach, and participants may value its simplicity. But within the realm of mechanisms that offer candidates equal numbers of identical signals, how do we identify the optimal number of signals, especially in light of the fact that multiple equilibria may exist? And might we do even better?

If we expand the class of mechanisms under study, we can potentially improve performance even more. For example, the signaling mechanism that maximizes the number of matches may be asymmetric. Consider the example in Section I, with two firms and two workers. In the example, each worker had exactly one signal. If both workers have and send two signals that are identical, outcomes are as if each had no signal. If we offered each worker two distinct signals, e.g., a "gold" and a "silver" signal, analysis is as if they had one signal each.

Asymmetric signaling capacities, however, can generate a full matching. Suppose that one worker has a gold signal, while the other has two silver signals. Suppose further that firms are indifferent between the two workers. Then one equilibrium involves the first worker sending its gold signal to its preferred firm. The firm that receives the gold signal will make the signaling worker an offer, while the firm who receives no gold signal will make an offer to the worker who sent a silver signal. Both firms and workers will always be matched.

Signaling under general preferences, optimal signaling mechanisms, and the benefits from signaling across market structures all offer exciting areas for future research.

This work suggests that a signaling mechanism has the potential to improve outcomes in congested markets. But importantly, since signaling mechanisms are free, voluntary, and built on top of existing labor markets, these improvements come in a reasonably noninvasive manner. As opposed to a central clearinghouse, as in the National Resident Matching Program (see, e.g., Roth 1984 and Roth and Peranson 1999), a centralized signaling mechanism requires much less intervention. Market designers may find it easier to get consensus from participants to introduce such a mechanism, which nevertheless can offer significant benefits. As such, we hope that in addition to furthering our understanding of how labor markets work, our paper adds to the practical literature that aims at changing and improving existing markets.

#### APPENDIX

The Appendix covers the proofs of the main theorems and propositions from Sections III and IV. We also introduce Propositions A1 and A2 as well as

Theorem A1 which formalize statements made in the text, and are building blocks for the main results. Proofs for these propositions are in the online part of the Appendix.

**PROPOSITION A1 (Binary Nature of Optimal Firm Offer):** *Suppose firms  $-f$  use anonymous strategies and workers use symmetric best-in-block strategies. Consider a firm  $f$  that receives signals from workers  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$ . Then the expected payoff to  $f$  from making an offer to  $S_f$  is strictly greater than the payoff from making an offer to any other worker in  $\mathcal{W}^S$ . The expected payoff to firm  $f$  from making an offer to  $T_f$  is strictly greater than the payoff from making an offer to any other worker from set  $\mathcal{W} \setminus \mathcal{W}^S$ .*

**PROPOSITION A2 (Optimality of Cutoff Strategies):** *Suppose workers use symmetric best-in-block strategies and firms have best-in-block beliefs. Then for any strategy  $\sigma_f$  of firm  $f$ , there exists a cutoff strategy that provides  $f$  with a weakly higher expected payoff than  $\sigma_f$  for any anonymous strategies  $\sigma_{-f}$  of opponent firms  $-f$ .*

**THEOREM A1 (Equilibrium Existence: Single Block of Firms):** *In the offer game with signals with single block of firms, there exists a symmetric equilibrium in pure cutoff strategies where 1) workers signal to their most preferred firms and accept their best available offer, and 2) firms use symmetric cutoff strategies. Furthermore, there exist pure symmetric equilibria with smallest and largest cutoffs.*

**PROOF OF PROPOSITION 1 (Equilibrium without Signals):**

Consider some agent preference profile  $\theta \in \Theta$ . We will compare two strategies for firm  $f$  given its profile of preferences  $\theta_f$ : strategy  $\sigma_f$  of making an offer to its top worker, and strategy  $\sigma'_f$  of making an offer to its  $n$ th ranked worker,  $n > 1$ . We have  $\sigma_f(\theta) = \theta_f^1 \equiv w$  and  $\sigma'_f(\theta) = \theta_f^n \equiv w^n$ . We will show that for any anonymous strategies  $\sigma_{-f}$  of opponent firms  $-f$ , these two strategies yield identical probabilities of  $f$  being matched, so that  $f$  optimally makes its offer to its most preferred worker. The proposition straightforwardly follows.

Denote a permutation that changes the ranks of  $w$  and  $w^n$  in a firm preference list (or profile of firm preference lists) as  $\rho : (\dots, w, \dots, w^n, \dots) \rightarrow (\dots, w^n, \dots, w, \dots)$ . We now construct preference profile  $\theta' \in \Theta$  from  $\theta$  as follows:

- firm  $f$ 's preferences are the same as in  $\theta$  :  $\theta'_f = \theta_f$ ,
- workers  $w$  and  $w^n$  are exchanged in the preference lists of firms  $-f$ :  $\forall f' \in -f$ , we have  $\theta'_{f'} = \rho(\theta_{f'})$
- worker  $w$  and worker  $w^n$  preference profiles are exchanged:  $\theta'_w = \theta_{w^n}$ ,  $\theta'_{w^n} = \theta_w$ , and
- $\theta_{w'} = \theta'_{w'}$  for any other  $w' \in \mathcal{W} \setminus \{w, w^n\}$ .

Define function  $m_f : (\Sigma_w)^W \times (\Sigma_f)^F \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathcal{R}$  as the probability of firm  $f$  being matched as a function of agent strategies and types. Since firm  $-f$  strategies are anonymous we have

$$\sigma_{-f}(\theta'_{-f}) = \sigma_{-f}(\rho(\theta_{-f})) = \rho(\sigma_{-f}(\theta_{-f})).$$



Therefore, the probability of firm  $f'$ ,  $f' \in -f$ , making an offer to worker  $w$  for profile  $\theta$  equals the probability of making an offer to worker  $w^n$  for profile  $\theta'$ . Moreover, since we exchange worker  $w$  and  $w^n$  preference lists for profile  $\theta'$ , whenever it is optimal for worker  $w$  to accept firm  $f$  offer for profile  $\theta$ , it is optimal for worker  $w^n$  to accept firm  $f'$ 's offer for profile  $\theta'$ . Therefore,

$$m_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) = m_{f'}(\sigma_{f'}, \sigma_{-f}, \theta').$$

In other words, given  $\theta_f$ , for each  $\theta_{-f}$  there exists  $\theta'_{-f}$  such that the probability of  $f$ 's offer to  $\theta_f^1$  being accepted when opponent preferences are  $\theta_{-f}$  equals the probability of  $f$ 's offer to  $\theta_f^n$  being accepted when opponent preferences are  $\theta'_{-f}$ .<sup>26</sup> Moreover  $\theta'_{-f}$  is different for different  $\theta_{-f}$  by construction. Since  $\theta_{-f}$  and  $\theta'_{-f}$  are equally likely, we have

$$\mathbb{E}_{\theta_{-f}} m_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta | \theta_f) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta'_{-f}} m_f(\sigma_{f'}, \sigma_{-f}, \theta | \theta_f)$$

and

$$\mathbb{E}_{\theta} m_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta} m_{f'}(\sigma_{f'}, \sigma_{-f}, \theta).$$

That is, the expected probability of getting a match from firm  $f$ 's top choice equals the expected probability of getting a match from firm  $f$ 's  $n$ th ranked choice. Since the utility from obtaining a top match is greater, the strategy of firm  $f$  of making an offer to its top worker is optimal.

#### PROOF OF PROPOSITION 2 (Worker Strategies):

We first define an analog of criterion *D1* of Cho and Kreps (1987) for our setting. Consider some block-symmetric sequential equilibrium. Fix strategies of all agents except worker  $w$  and firm  $f$ , which we denote as  $\sigma_{-f,w}$ . Fix also the beliefs of firms other than firm  $f$ , denoted as  $\mu_{-f}$ . We now analyze strategies of  $w$  and strategies and beliefs of  $f$ .

There are two cases where information sets for firms might be reached with zero probability (lie “off the equilibrium path”) in a block-symmetric equilibrium. First, when the symmetric worker equilibrium strategy prescribes zero probability of sending a signal to a particular block, firms in these blocks would view signals from such workers as “unexpected.” Second, when a firm anticipates receiving a signal with 100 percent probability, then *not* receiving a signal would correspond to an off-equilibrium information set. But by the anonymous strategies assumption, this can only happen in a block-symmetric equilibrium if the firm is the only one in its block. In this case, the symmetry of worker strategies would ensure that all workers send their signals to this firm with probability 1. Since signals then would not transmit information about worker types, this equilibrium is outcome equivalent to a babbling equilibrium. We will concentrate on the first type of off-equilibrium messages—“unexpected” signals.

<sup>26</sup> In this context,  $\theta_{-f}$  is a preference profile for all agents—both workers and firms—other than  $f$ .

Consider firm  $f$ 's decision at some information set that includes a (hypothetical, off-equilibrium) signal from worker  $w$ . Denote the expected equilibrium payoffs of firm  $f$  and worker  $w$  as  $u_f^*$  and  $u_w^*$ . For each possible type  $\bar{\theta} \in \Theta_f$  for firm  $f$  and each set of signals that firm  $f$  could receive, we denote the mixed best response of firm  $f$  that has beliefs  $\bar{\mu}$  as  $MBR_f(\bar{\theta}, \mathcal{W}^S \cup w, \bar{\mu})$  that by definition equals

$$\arg \max_{\sigma_f \in \Sigma_f} \mathbb{E}_{\theta_f}(\pi_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) | \theta_f = \bar{\theta}, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S \cup w, \mu_f = \bar{\mu}).$$

We then denote the mixed best response of firm  $f$  for all possible types and all possible profiles of signals it may receive conditional on receiving  $w$ 's signal as

$$MBR_f(w, \bar{\mu}) = \{MBR_f(\bar{\theta}, \mathcal{W}^S \cup w, \bar{\mu}) \text{ for all } \bar{\theta} \in \Theta_f, \mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}\}.$$

We denote the set of best responses of firm  $f$  to probability assessments concentrated on set  $\Omega \subset \Theta_w$  as

$$MBR_f(w, \Omega) = \bigcup_{\{\mu_f : \mu_f(\Omega)=1\}} MBR_f(w, \mu_f).$$

Denote for any worker's type  $t \in \Theta_w$

$$D_t = \{\phi \in MBR_f(w, \Theta_w) : u_w^*(t) < \mathbb{E}_{\theta_{-w}}(\pi_w(\sigma_w, \phi, \sigma_{-w,f}, \theta) | \theta_w = t)\}$$

$$D_t^0 = \{\phi \in MBR_f(w, \Theta_w) : u_w^*(t) = \mathbb{E}_{\theta_{-w}}(\pi_w(\sigma_w, \phi, \sigma_{-w,f}, \theta) | \theta_w = t)\}.$$

Intuitively, set  $D_t$  ( $D_t^0$ ) is the set of firm  $f$  strategies (consistent with  $f$  best responding to strategies of firms  $-f$  and to some set of beliefs that places weight 1 on  $w$  signaling  $f$ ) such that by signaling  $f$ , worker  $w$  of type  $t$  would receive an expected payoff greater than (equal to) her equilibrium payoff. We say that type  $t$  may be pruned from firm  $f$ 's beliefs if firm  $f$ 's off-equilibrium beliefs place zero probability on worker  $w$  being type  $t$  (upon  $f$  receiving a signal from her). Using the above notation, we now state our analog of criterion  $D1$  as follows:

**CRITERION D1:** Fix strategies of workers  $-w$  and strategies and beliefs of firms  $-f$ . If for type  $t \in \Theta_w$  of worker  $w$  there exists a type  $t' \in \Theta_w$  with  $D_t \cup D_t^0 \subseteq D_{t'}$ , then  $t$  may be pruned from the domain of firm  $f$ 's beliefs.

The intuition behind this criterion is that whenever type  $t$  of worker  $w$  either wishes to defect and send an off-equilibrium signal to firm  $f$  or is indifferent, some other type  $t'$  of worker  $w$  strictly wishes to defect. When we prune  $t$  for  $w$  from firm  $f$ 's beliefs, we are interpreting that firm  $f$  finds it infinitely more likely that the off-equilibrium signal has come from type  $t'$  than from type  $t$ .

We first show that there cannot be a *block-symmetric* sequential equilibrium that satisfies Criterion D1 where sending a signal to a firm in some block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ ,  $b \in \{1, \dots, B\}$  reduces the likelihood of receiving an offer, i.e.,  $p_b^s < p_b^{ns}$ .

Let us assume that such a block-symmetric sequential equilibrium exists. If there are at least two workers, agents use anonymous block-symmetric strategies, and agents' types are uncorrelated, each worker is unmatched with positive probability. Then in equilibrium, certainly no worker sends her signal to a firm within block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ ; she'd prefer to simply send no signal at all. Hence, it must be that a signal would reduce the probability of an offer for firms in some block not signaled in equilibrium. Following the definition of  $D_t$ , whenever it would be beneficial for some type  $\theta_w \in \Theta_w$  to deviate from the equilibrium path and send her signal to firm  $f$  (which would require firm  $f$  making an offer to worker  $w$ ), then it would be beneficial for any type  $\theta'_w \in \Theta_w$  of worker  $w$  such that firm  $f$  is  $w$ 's most preferred firm within block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , to similarly deviate. Therefore, the only types (preference profiles) of worker  $w$  that are not pruned in firms' beliefs according to Criterion D1 are those where firm  $f$  is  $w$ 's most preferred firm within block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ . Hence, given these beliefs, if it is optimal for firm  $f$  to make an offer to worker  $w$  when it does not receive a signal from her, it is optimal for firm  $f$  to make an offer to worker  $w$  when it receives her signal. This contradicts our initial assumption, and hence  $p_b^s < p_b^{ns}$  cannot be part of a block-symmetric sequential equilibrium that satisfies Criterion D1.

We have established that  $p_b^s \geq p_b^{ns}$  for each  $b = 1, \dots, B$ . It is easy to observe that there exists a block-symmetric sequential equilibrium that satisfies Criterion D1 where for any  $b = 1, \dots, B$ ,  $p_b^s = p_b^{ns}$ . For example, each worker may randomize her signal across all firms with equal probability, independently of her preferences, and firms simply play the equilibrium strategies of the offer game with no signals. The equilibrium beliefs are trivially block-uniform since when a firm receives a signal from worker  $w$ , its beliefs coincide with the priors. Since all blocks are reached with positive probability in equilibrium, no off-equilibrium beliefs need be specified, and the equilibrium satisfies Criterion D1.

Let us now consider the case when there exists  $b_0 \in \{1, \dots, B\}$ , such that  $p_{b_0}^s > p_{b_0}^{ns}$  in some block-symmetric sequential equilibrium. Recall that the equilibrium probability that a worker sends her signal to a firm within block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  is denoted as  $\alpha_b$ , where  $\alpha_b \in [0, 1]$  and  $\sum_{b=1}^B \alpha_b \leq 1$ . Let us consider some block  $\mathcal{F}_b (\neq \mathcal{F}_{b_0})$  such that  $\alpha_b > 0$ . As mentioned, if there are at least two workers, agents use anonymous block-symmetric strategies, and agents' types are uncorrelated, each worker is unmatched with positive probability in equilibrium. Therefore,  $\alpha_b > 0$  and  $p_b^s = p_b^{ns}$  are incompatible in an equilibrium (worker  $w$  can benefit by signaling to block  $\mathcal{F}_{b_0}$  rather than block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ ). Hence, if  $p_b^s > p_b^{ns}$  then if worker  $w$  plans to send a signal to a firm in  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , it should be to her most preferred firm within this block, as this delivers the greatest expected payoff to her.

Now suppose there is some block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ ,  $b' \in \{1, \dots, B\}$ , such that  $\alpha_{b'} = 0$ . Consider the decision of some firm  $f \in \mathcal{F}_{b'}$  at an information set that includes a (hypothetical, off-equilibrium) signal from worker  $w$ . We have two cases: either there exists type  $t \in \Theta_w$  of worker  $w$  such that  $D_t \neq \emptyset$ , or else for any type  $t \in \Theta_w$ ,  $D_t = \emptyset$ .

We will first rule out the former case. Suppose there exists type  $t \in \Theta_w$  of worker  $w$  such that  $D_t \neq \emptyset$ . That is, if worker  $w$  sends a signal to firm  $f$ , there exists a “reasonable” firm  $f$  strategy that delivers expected payoff to worker  $w$  of type  $t$  greater than her equilibrium payoff. However, any firm  $f$  offer that delivers payoff exceeding equilibrium payoff for worker  $w$  of type  $t$ , also delivers payoff exceeding equilibrium payoff for a worker  $w$  of type  $t'$  which prefers firm  $f$  to any other firm in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ . Therefore, the only firm  $f$  off-equilibrium beliefs that survive Criterion D1 are such that

$$(A1) \quad \mu_f(\{\theta_w \in \Theta_w : f = \max_{\theta_w}(f' \in \mathcal{F}_b)\} | w \in W_f^S) = 1.$$

But since  $D_{t'}$  and  $D_t^0$  consist of firm  $f$  best responses, it is optimal for firm  $f$  to indeed make an offer to worker  $w$  upon receiving her signal, provided  $f$ 's beliefs are restricted to (A1). This means that the equilibrium strategy of worker  $w$  of type  $t'$  (not sending a signal to firm  $f$ ) is not optimal if firm  $f$  has beliefs (A1). Therefore, there cannot exist type  $t \in \Theta_w$  of worker  $w$  such that  $D_t \neq \emptyset$ .

Let us now consider the case where for any type  $t \in \Theta_w$ , we have  $D_t = \emptyset$ . That is, it is never beneficial for any type of worker to send an off-equilibrium signal, as no reasonable offers can be expected for any firm beliefs. Therefore,  $\alpha_b = 0$  is an equilibrium strategy for worker  $w$  independently of off-equilibrium beliefs of firm  $f$ . In particular, worker  $w$ 's strategy is optimal for any off-equilibrium beliefs of firms in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ , even if each firm  $f$  has the most favorable possible beliefs about worker  $w$ , such as in (A1).

Note that if there are at least two workers, the interaction between worker  $w$  and some firm  $f$  (fixing the strategies and beliefs of other agents) is a monotonic signaling game of Cho and Sobel (1990). The assumption of monotonicity is satisfied in our environment because each type of worker  $w$  prefers the same action of firm  $f$ , i.e., firm  $f$  making an offer to worker  $w$ . As a consequence, Criterion D1 is equivalent to “never a weak best response” of Cho and Kreps (1987) and “universal divinity” of Banks and Sobel (1987) in our setting. More detailed discussion of monotonic signaling games can be found in Cho and Sobel (1990).

#### PROOF OF PROPOSITION 3 (Strategic Complements):

Consider some firm  $f$  from some block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ ,  $b \in \{1, \dots, B\}$ . We consider two strategy profiles,  $\sigma_{-f}$  and  $\sigma'_{-f}$ , for firms  $-f$  that vary only in the strategy for firm  $f'$ . For simplicity, we assume that  $\sigma_{-f}$  differs from  $\sigma'_{-f}$  only for profile  $\bar{\theta}_{f'}$  and set of received signals  $\overline{W}_{f'}^S$ :

$$\sigma_{f'}(\bar{\theta}_{f'}, \overline{W}_{f'}^S) = \alpha S_{f'} + (1 - \alpha) T_{f'}$$

$$\sigma'_{f'}(\bar{\theta}_{f'}, \overline{W}_{f'}^S) = \alpha' S_{f'} + (1 - \alpha') T_{f'},$$

such that  $\alpha' > \alpha$ . Formally, this means  $\sigma'_f$  is not a cutoff strategy, because a cutoff strategy requires the same behavior for any profile of preferences (anonymity) when firms receive the same number of signals. We will prove the statement using our simplifying assumption about strategies for firms  $-f$ , and the extension to the full proposition follows from iterated application of this result.

Consider some realized firm  $f$  preference profile  $\theta_f^* \in \Theta$  and some set of signals  $\mathcal{W}^S \subset \mathcal{W} \cup \mathcal{N}$ . We want to show that firm  $f$ 's payoff from making an offer to  $T_f$  (weakly) decreases whereas firm  $f$ 's payoff from making an offer to  $S_f$  (weakly) increases when firm  $f'$  responds more to signals, i.e., plays strategy  $\sigma'_{f'}$  instead of  $\sigma_{f'}$ . That is,

$$\begin{aligned} & \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(\pi_f(T_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ & \geq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(\pi_f(T_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ & \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(\pi_f(S_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ & \leq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(\pi_f(S_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S). \end{aligned}$$

Since firm  $f$ 's offer can only be either accepted or declined, the above statements are equivalent to

$$\begin{aligned} I) \quad & \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(m_f(T_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ & \geq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(m_f(T_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ II) \quad & \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(m_f(S_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ & \leq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}(m_f(S_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S). \end{aligned}$$

That is, we wish to show that the probability of being matched to  $T_f$  weakly decreases, and the probability of being matched to  $S_f$  weakly increases.

We first prove I). Define sets of agent profiles that lead to an increase and a decrease in the probability of getting a match given the change in  $f'$  strategy as

$$\bar{\Theta}_+ \equiv \{\theta \in \Theta \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S \text{ and } m_f(T_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) < m_f(T_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta)\}$$

$$\bar{\Theta}_- \equiv \{\theta \in \Theta \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S \text{ and } m_f(T_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) > m_f(T_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta)\}$$

respectively. If set  $\bar{\Theta}_+$  is empty, the statement has been proved. Otherwise, select arbitrary  $\theta \in \bar{\Theta}_+$  and denote  $T_f \equiv w$ . Since the change of  $f'$  strategy pivotally

reduces competition to  $f$ 's offer to  $w$  in this case, we must have  $T_{f'}(\theta_{f'}, \overline{\mathcal{W}_{f'}^S}) = w$  and  $S_{f'}(\overline{\theta}_{f'}, \overline{\mathcal{W}_{f'}^S}) = w' \neq w$ , and

$$\sigma_{f'}(\overline{\theta}_{f'}, \overline{\mathcal{W}_{f'}^S}) = \alpha w' + (1 - \alpha) w$$

$$\sigma'_{f'}(\overline{\theta}_{f'}, \overline{\mathcal{W}_{f'}^S}) = \alpha' w' + (1 - \alpha') w.$$

Note that it cannot be that firm  $f$  is from a higher ranked block than firm  $f'$ , i.e.,  $f' \in \mathcal{F}_{b'}$  where  $b' > b$ . If  $f$  were from a higher ranked block, an offer from firm  $f'$  is always worse than the offer of firm  $f$  and could not influence the probability that firm  $f$  obtains a match. Therefore, firm  $f$  is from a block that is weakly worse than  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ , i.e.,  $b' \leq b$ .

Note that under  $\theta$ , worker  $w$  has sent a signal neither to firm  $f$  nor to firm  $f'$ . This will allow us to construct element  $\theta' \in \overline{\Theta}_-$ . Consider a permutation that changes the ranks of  $w$  and  $w'$  in a firm preference profile  $\rho : (\dots, w, \dots, w', \dots) \rightarrow (\dots, w', \dots, w, \dots)$ . For any profile  $\theta \in \overline{\Theta}_+$  we construct profile  $\theta' \in \Theta$  as follows:

- $\theta'_f = \theta_f^*$
- ranks of workers  $w$  and  $w'$  are exchanged in the preference lists of firms  $-f$ : for each firm  $f' \in -f$ ,  $\theta'_{f'} = \rho(\theta_{f'})$
- workers  $w$  and  $w'$  preference profiles are exchanged:  $\theta'_w = \theta_{w'}$ ,  $\theta'_{w'} = \theta_w$ ,
- for any other  $w^0 \in \mathcal{W} \setminus \{w, w'\}$ ,  $\theta_{w^0} = \theta'_{w^0}$ .

Note that under  $\theta$  and  $\theta'$ , firm  $f$  has the same preferences  $\theta_f^*$  and receives the same set of signals. Since firm strategies are anonymous we have that

$$\begin{aligned} \sigma_f(\theta'_f, \mathcal{W}_{f'}^S) &= \sigma_{f'}(\rho(\theta_{f'}), \rho(\mathcal{W}_{f'}^S)) \text{ (by our construction)} \\ &= \alpha \rho(w') + (1 - \alpha) \rho(w) \text{ (by anonymity)} \\ &= \alpha w + (1 - \alpha) w' \end{aligned}$$

and similarly

$$\sigma'_{f'}(\theta'_{f'}, \mathcal{W}_{f'}^S) = \alpha' w + (1 - \alpha') w'.$$

We will now argue that  $\theta' \in \overline{\Theta}_-$ . Since  $\theta \in \overline{\Theta}_+$ , the strategy change for firm  $f'$  reduces the likelihood of firm  $f$  being matched with worker  $w$  (when  $f$  makes  $T_f$  an offer under profile  $\theta$ ). Under profile  $\theta'$ , firm  $f'$  makes an offer to worker  $w$  more frequently when using strategy  $\sigma'_{f'}$  rather than  $\sigma_{f'}$ . Furthermore, worker  $w$  prefers firm  $f'$  to firm  $f$  under profile  $\theta'$ . (We have already shown that  $f'$  cannot be in a lower ranked block than  $f$ . If firm  $f'$  is in a higher ranked block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ ,  $b > b'$ , worker  $w$  always prefers firm  $f'$  to firm  $f$ . If firm  $f$  and firm  $f'$  are from the same block,  $b = b'$ , worker  $w$  prefers  $f$  to  $f'$ , since worker  $w$  sends a signal to firm  $f'$  under profile  $\theta'$ ).

To finish our proof, we must also investigate the behavior of a firm that receives worker  $w$ 's signal for profile  $\theta$ , say firm  $f_y$ . If firm  $f_y$  makes an offer to worker  $w$  for profile  $\theta$ , since the change of firm  $f'$  strategy changes firm  $f$ 's payoff, firm  $f_y$  must be lower ranked than both firms  $f$  and  $f'$  in worker  $w$ 's preferences. Hence, firm  $f_y$ 's offer cannot change the action of worker  $w$ . If worker  $w$  sends her signal to firm  $f_y$  then firm  $f_y$  either makes an offer to worker  $w'$  or to worker  $T_{f_y}$ , which are both different from worker  $w$ .

Hence, firm  $f_y$  does not influence the behavior of the agents in question, and the overall probability that firm  $f$ 's offer to worker  $w$  is accepted is smaller when firm  $f'$  uses strategy  $\sigma'_{f'}$  rather than  $\sigma_{f'}$ . That is,  $\theta' \in \bar{\Theta}_-$ .

Note that the above construction gives different profiles in  $\bar{\Theta}_+$  for different profiles of  $\bar{\Theta}_-$ . Hence, our construction is an injective function from  $\bar{\Theta}_+$  to  $\bar{\Theta}_-$ , so  $|\bar{\Theta}_-| \geq |\bar{\Theta}_+|$ .<sup>27</sup> Since profiles  $\theta$  and  $\theta'$  are equally likely, we have

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbb{E}_\theta(m_f(T_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ \geq \mathbb{E}_\theta(m_f(T_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S). \end{aligned}$$

We now prove inequality *II*). That is, we will show that if firm  $f'$  responds more to signals, the probability of firm  $f$  being matched to  $S_f$  (upon making  $S_f$  an offer) weakly increases. If firm  $f, f \in \mathcal{F}_b$ , receives a signal from worker  $w$  it believes it is the best firm in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  according to worker  $w$ 's preferences. That is, worker  $w$  prefers the offer of firm  $f$  to an offer from any other firm  $f'$  from any block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$  with  $b' \geq b$ . Therefore, the change of the behavior of any firm  $f'$  from block  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ ,  $b' \geq b$ , does not influence firm  $f$ 's payoff.

Firm  $f'$  from group  $\mathcal{F}_{b'}$ ,  $b' < b$ , can draw away worker  $w$ 's offer from firm  $f$  only if it makes an offer to worker  $w$ . However, firm  $f'$  makes an offer to worker  $w$ , conditionally on firm  $f$  receiving a signal from worker  $w$ , only when worker  $w$  is  $T_{f'}$ . However, if firm  $f'$  responds more to signals, it makes an offer to its  $T_{f'}$  more rarely. This means that firm  $f'$  draws worker  $w$  away from firm  $f$  less often. Therefore, the probability that firm  $f$ 's offer is accepted by  $S_f$  increases:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbb{E}_\theta(m_f(S_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S) \\ \leq \mathbb{E}_\theta(m_f(S_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta) \mid \theta_f = \theta_f^*, \mathcal{W}_f^S = \mathcal{W}^S). \end{aligned}$$

As a corollary of *I*) and *II*), if firm  $f'$  increases its cutoff point for some set of signals, firm  $f$  will also optimally (weakly) increase its cutoff points. The above logic is valid for the change of cutoff points for any set of signals of the same size and any profile of preferences, so the statement of the proposition immediately follows.

<sup>27</sup> One may show by example that this is not, in general, a bijection.

PROOF OF THEOREM 1 (Equilibrium Existence):

We first prove the theorem while requiring that firms use cutoff strategies and have best-in-block beliefs, and that workers use best-in-block strategies. We then show that this assumption is not restrictive. Denote a typical such strategy profile as  $\sigma = (\sigma_F, \sigma_W)$  that consists of firm cutoff strategies  $\sigma_F = (\sigma_{f_1}, \dots, \sigma_{f_F})$  and worker best-in-block strategies  $\sigma_W = (\sigma_{w_1}, \dots, \sigma_{w_W})$ .

Denote by  $U_w(\sigma_w, \sigma_{-w})$  the expected payoff of worker  $w$  when she uses best-in-block strategy  $\sigma_w$  and the other agents use strategies  $\sigma_{-w}$ . Denote by  $U_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f})$  the expected payoff of firm  $f$  when it uses strategy  $\sigma_f$  and the other agents use strategies  $\sigma_{-f}$ . Note that  $U_w$  and  $U_f$  are continuous, as firms and workers mix over a finite set of strategies.

Denote firm  $f$ 's best reply correspondence by  $g_f$ , which maps each strategy profile  $\sigma$  to the set of mixed strategies that maximize  $f$ 's payoff when opponents (firms and workers included) play  $\sigma_{-f}$ . Denote the analogous best reply correspondence for worker  $w$  as  $g_w$ . Recall that agent preferences are block-symmetric. Hence, if  $g_f(\sigma)$  are best reply strategies to some block-symmetric profile  $\sigma$  for firm  $f$ , they are best reply strategies for any firm from the same block. Similarly, if  $g_w(\sigma)$  are best reply strategies to some block-symmetric profile  $\sigma$ , they are best reply strategies for any worker. Hence, we consider the best reply correspondence from the set of block-symmetric profiles to the set of block symmetric profiles, denoted by  $g = (g_{f_1}, \dots, g_{f_F}, g_{w_1}, \dots, g_{w_W})$ , where if  $f$  and  $f'$  are from the same block then  $g_f = g_{f'}$  and for any  $w$  and  $w'$  we have  $g_w = g_{w'}$ .

We now invoke Kakutani's theorem (Kakutani 1941) to establish the existence of a block-symmetric equilibrium. Note first that the set of block-symmetric mixed-strategy profiles is a compact, convex, and nonempty subset of a finite-dimensional Euclidean space. Since the arguments of  $g$  are mixed strategies, we have that  $g$  is nonempty and convex over all block-symmetric profiles  $\sigma$  (see e.g., the logic in Fudenberg and Tirole 1991, 29–30). The final condition we need to apply Kakutani's theorem is that  $g$  has a closed graph. By way of contradiction, assume  $g$  does not have a closed graph, so that there is a sequence  $(\sigma^n, \hat{\sigma}^n) \rightarrow (\sigma, \hat{\sigma})$  such that  $\sigma^n$  and  $\hat{\sigma}^n$  are block-symmetric and  $\hat{\sigma}^n \in g(\sigma^n)$ , but  $\hat{\sigma} \notin g(\sigma)$ . Then there exists  $i \in F \cup W$  such that  $\hat{\sigma}_i \notin g_i(\sigma)$ . Hence, we can find  $\varepsilon$  and  $\sigma'_i$  such that  $U_i(\sigma'_i, \sigma_{-i}) > U_i(\hat{\sigma}_i, \sigma_{-i}) + 3\varepsilon$ . Since  $U_i$  is continuous and  $(\sigma^n, \hat{\sigma}^n) \rightarrow (\sigma, \hat{\sigma})$ , then for  $n$  sufficiently large we have

$$U_i(\sigma'_i, \sigma_{-i}^n) > U_i(\sigma'_i, \sigma_{-i}) - \varepsilon > U_i(\hat{\sigma}_i, \sigma_{-i}) + 2\varepsilon > U_i(\hat{\sigma}_i^n, \sigma_{-i}^n) + \varepsilon,$$

which is a contradiction to  $\hat{\sigma}_i^n$  being a best reply to  $\sigma^n$ . Hence,  $g$  has a closed graph and we can apply Kakutani's theorem to establish the existence of a fixed point of  $g$ .

Until now we have required cutoff strategies and best-in-block beliefs for firms, and best-in-block strategies for workers. Consider any block-symmetric profile of strategies that is a fixed point of  $g$ . Since firms use block-symmetric strategies in this profile, Proposition 2 allows us to conclude that best-in-block strategies are optimal for workers even if we expanded the worker strategy space to include all strategies. Since workers use best-in-block strategies for this profile, firms holding best-in-block beliefs is indeed consistent. Finally, by Proposition A2 we see that firm cutoff



strategies are optimal even if we allow any firm deviations, not simply deviations in cutoff strategies. Hence, we have established the existence of an equilibrium when workers use symmetric best-in-block strategies and firms use symmetric cutoff strategies and have best-in-block beliefs.

PROOF OF THEOREM 2 (Welfare):

We will use the following lemma, proved in the online Appendix.

LEMMA A1 (Incremental Welfare): *Assume firms use cutoff strategies and workers use best-in-block strategies. Fix the strategies of firms  $-f$  as  $\sigma_{-f}$ . Let firm  $f$ 's strategy  $\sigma_f$  differ from  $\sigma'_f$  only in that  $\sigma'_f$  has greater cutoffs (responds more to signals). Then  $\mathbb{E}_\theta(m(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)) \geq \mathbb{E}_\theta(m(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta))$  and  $\mathbb{E}_\theta(\pi_w(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)) \geq \mathbb{E}_\theta(\pi_w(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta))$ .*

Let us denote firm strategies in the unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals as  $\sigma_f^0$ . Now consider a block-symmetric equilibrium of the offer game with signals when agents use strategies  $(\sigma_F, \sigma_W)$ . If agents employ strategies  $(\sigma_F^0, \sigma_W)$ , the expected number of matches and the welfare of workers equal the corresponding parameters in the offer game with no signals. Therefore, the result that the expected number of matches and the expected welfare of workers in a block-symmetric equilibrium in the offer game with signals are *weakly* greater than the corresponding parameters in the unique equilibrium of the offer game with no signals is a consequence of sequential application of Lemma A1.

Let us now consider a non-babbling block-symmetric equilibrium  $(\sigma_F, \sigma_W)$  of the offer game with signals such that there exists block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  with at least two firms where  $\alpha_b > 0$ . Proposition 2 shows that firms from block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  respond to signals in the equilibrium, i.e., make offers to signaling workers with positive probability so that  $p_b^s > p_b^{ns}$ .

Select some firm  $f$  from block  $\mathcal{F}_b$ . Using a construction similar to that in the proof of Lemma A1 we consider two sets of preference profiles:

$$\bar{\Theta}_+ \equiv \{\theta \in \Theta \mid m(\sigma_f^0, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) < m(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)\}$$

$$\bar{\Theta}_- \equiv \{\theta \in \Theta \mid m(\sigma_f^0, \sigma_{-f}, \theta) > m(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)\}.$$

Consider some realized profile of preferences,  $\theta \in \Theta$ , and denote  $T_f = w'$  and  $S_f = w$ . Define mapping  $\psi : \Theta \rightarrow \Theta$  so that  $\psi(\theta)$  is the profile in which workers have preferences as in  $\theta$ , but firms  $-f$  all swap the positions of workers  $w'$  and  $w$  in their preference lists. Note that  $\psi(\psi(\theta)) = \theta$  and  $\psi$  is a bijection on  $\Theta$ . The proof of Lemma A1 establishes that  $|\bar{\Theta}_+| \geq |\bar{\Theta}_-|$  and that for any  $\theta \in \bar{\Theta}_-$ ,  $\psi(\theta) \in \bar{\Theta}_+$ . Let us now show that the inequality is actually strict, i.e., there exist  $\theta \in \bar{\Theta}_+$  such that  $\psi(\theta) \notin \bar{\Theta}_-$ .

There are at least two firms,  $f$  and  $f'$ , in block  $\mathcal{F}_b$  that respond to signals. Consider some profile  $\theta$  from  $\bar{\Theta}_+$ . We again denote  $T_f = w'$  and  $S_f = w$ . Therefore, worker  $w$  does not have an offer from any other firm for profile  $\theta$  from  $\bar{\Theta}_+$ , but worker  $w'$  has at least two offers. Since worker  $w'$  sends her signal to firm  $f'$  with positive probability and firm  $f'$  responds to signals, i.e., makes offers to its top signaling workers,

there exist  $\theta^* \in \bar{\Theta}_+$  such that worker  $w'$  is the top signaling worker of firm  $f'$ , and firm  $f'$  makes an offer to worker  $w'$ .

However, worker  $w$  for profile  $\psi(\theta^*)$  does not have any other offer, because she is neither  $T_f$  nor  $S_f$  for profile  $\psi(\theta^*)$ . Therefore,  $\psi(\theta^*)$  cannot belong to  $\bar{\Theta}_-$ . Therefore, we have found a profile from  $\bar{\Theta}_+$  that does not belong to  $\bar{\Theta}_-$ . As a result,  $|\Theta_+| > |\Theta_-|$  and we have that

$$\mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f^0, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] < \mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)].$$

In addition, we know that  $\mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f^0, \sigma_{-f}^0, \theta)] \leq \mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f^0, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)]$ , which gives us

$$\mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f^0, \sigma_{-f}^0, \theta)] < \mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)].$$

Overall, the expected number of matches in the offer game with signals when agents use strategies  $(\sigma_f, \sigma_w)$  is strictly greater than the expected number of matches in the offer game with no signals.

Using the above construction and the logic of the proof of Lemma A1 we obtain the result for worker welfare. The example presented in Section I illustrates that signals can ambiguously influence the welfare of firms. Specifically, Table 2 shows that firm welfare increases upon introduction of a signaling mechanism only if the value of a second ranked worker is sufficiently high, in this case when  $x > 0.5$ .

PROOF OF THEOREM 3 (Welfare: Single Block of Firms):

We first consider any strategy profile in which firms use cutoff strategies, workers send signals to their most preferred firms, and workers accept their best available offer. Fix the strategies of all firms but  $f$  as  $\sigma_{-f}$ . Let firm  $f$ 's strategy  $\sigma'_f$  differ from  $\sigma_f$  only in that  $\sigma'_f$  responds more to signals, that is, has higher cutoffs than  $\sigma_f$ . Lemma A1 shows that the expected number of matches and the expected payoff of each worker  $w$  increases if firm  $f$  responds more to signals, i.e.,  $\mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] \geq \mathbb{E}_\theta[m(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)]$  and  $\mathbb{E}_\theta[\pi_w(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] \geq \mathbb{E}_\theta[\pi_w(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)]$ .

Let us now show that firm  $f$  responding more to signals generates a negative spillover on opponent firms. That is, for each  $f' \in -f$ ,

$$\mathbb{E}_\theta[\pi_{f'}(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] \leq \mathbb{E}_\theta[\pi_{f'}(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)].$$

Let firm  $f$  strategy  $\sigma_f$  differ from  $\sigma'_f$  in that  $\sigma'_f$  has weakly greater cutoffs. Consider some firm  $f' \in -f$ . For each preference list  $\theta_{f'}$  and set of signals received  $\mathcal{W}^S$ , firm  $f'$  either makes an offer to  $S_{f'}(\theta_{f'}, \mathcal{W}^S)$  or  $T_{f'}(\theta_{f'}, \mathcal{W}^S)$ . Observe that a change in strategy of firm  $f$  does not affect  $f'$ 's payoff from making  $S_{f'}$  an offer. This follows since each worker sends her signal to her most preferred firm, so offers to signaling workers are always accepted. However, as shown in the proof of Proposition 3 complements, the probability that  $T_{f'}$  accepts firm  $f'$ 's offer weakly decreases. Hence, overall the expected payoff of firm  $f' \in -f$  weakly decreases when firm  $f$  responds more to signals:  $\mathbb{E}_\theta(\pi_{f'}(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)) \geq \mathbb{E}_\theta(\pi_{f'}(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta))$ .

That the expected number of matches and the expected welfare of workers are higher in the equilibrium with higher cutoffs is a straightforward consequence of

iterated application of the first and the second results above. In order to show that firms have lower expected payoffs in the equilibrium with greater cutoffs, we combine the third result with a simple equilibrium property. Consider two symmetric equilibria, where firms play cutoff strategies  $\sigma$  and  $\sigma'$ , with  $\sigma' \geq \sigma$ . From the definition of an equilibrium strategy we have  $\mathbb{E}_{\theta}[\pi_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] \geq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}[\pi_f(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)]$ . The third result yields  $\mathbb{E}_{\theta}[\pi_f(\sigma'_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] \geq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}[\pi_f(\sigma'_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta)]$ . Combining these inequalities yields  $\mathbb{E}_{\theta}[\pi_f(\sigma_f, \sigma_{-f}, \theta)] \geq \mathbb{E}_{\theta}[\pi_f(\sigma'_f, \sigma'_{-f}, \theta)]$ .

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