SCREENING FOR BREAKTHROUGHS

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Progress: finding & implementing better ways of doing things.

Requires

- (1) discovery
- (2) disclosure.

 \implies must incentivise prompt disclosure:

screen for private info about when, rather than what.

Model

Breakthrough occurs at uncertain time.

- privately observed by agent
- expands utility possibilities
- causes conflict of interest

Agent (verifiably) discloses breakthrough at time of her choosing.

Principal controls payoff-relevant allocation over time.

Principal has commitment.

Applications

Talent-hoarding

Manager observes whether & when subordinate acquires skill.

Conflict: HQ wants to assign talent optimally, manager wants to keep worker.

Unemployment insurance

Unemployed worker receives job offer at uncertain time.

State observes employment status, not job offers.

Conflict: state wants employed to work hard & pay tax.

Results

Question: how best to incentivise disclosure of privately-observed breakthrough?

Answer: mechanisms with deadline structure.

- affine case: simple deadline mechanism.
- in general: graduated deadline mechanism.

Related literature

Incentives for proposing agent

Armstrong–Vickers '10, Nocke–Whinston '13, Guo–Shmaya '21

- agent privately observes which allocations available
- (a) agent can propose only available allocations
- (b) principal can implement only proposed allocations.

Bird–Frug '19: different dynamic model with (a) & (b).

- simple payoffs \implies no conflict of interest in our sense
- promised rewards subject to dynamic budget constraint.

 Verifiable disclosure:
 (a)
 (b)
 Grossman/Hart/ Milgrom '80-'81

 Dynamic adverse selection:
 (a)
 (b)
 e.g. Green-Taylor '16, Madsen '21

Contribution

- (1) identify pervasive agency problem: the need to incentive *prompt* disclosure.
- (2) isolate & study the problem: characterise optimal mechanisms.
- (3) develop techniques for this problem.

Plan

Model

The principal's problem

Keeping the agent indifferent

Deadline mechanisms

Optimal mechanisms in general

Unemployment insurance

Model

Agent & principal. Utilities $u \in [0, \infty)$ and $v \in [-\infty, \infty)$. Time $t \in [0, \infty)$. Common discount rate r > 0.



Utility possibility frontiers $F^0 \leq F^1$ – unique peaks u^0, u^1 . – concave and upper semi-continuous

- finite on $(0, u^0]$.

Conflict of interest: peaks satisfy $u^1 < u^0$.

 F^1 arrives at $\tau \sim G$.

Agent observes breakthrough, can disclose availability of F^1 .

Principal controls flow u, has commitment. (discussion: slide 41)

Illustration



Old allocations (\bullet) , new allocation (\mathbf{O}) , utility possibility (grey).

Mechanisms

A mechanism is (x^0, X^1)

- $-x_t^0$: flow utility at time t if agent has not disclosed,
- $-X_t^1$: continuation utility from disclosing at time t

$$= r \int_t^\infty e^{-r(s-t)} x_s^{1,t} \mathrm{d}s \quad \text{for some flow } \left(x_s^{1,t}\right)_{s \ge t}$$

Incentive-compatibility

Mechanism (x^0, X^1) is incentive-compatible ('IC') iff agent prefers to disclose promptly:

(a) does not prefer to delay disclosure by some d > 0(b) does not prefer to *never* disclose.

Revelation principle: suffices to consider IC mechanisms.

Wlog for IC to use F^1 when available. (Clearly optimal.)

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The principal's problem after disclosure

Fix a mechanism (x^0, X^1) .

Recall: for each t, continuation X_t^1 provided by a flow $(x_s^{1,t})_{s>t}$



s.t.
$$r \int_t^\infty e^{-r(s-t)} x_s^{1,t} \mathrm{d}s = X_t^1.$$

Principal's flow payoff: $F^1(x_s^{1,t})$.

 $\begin{array}{ll} \text{Option 1:} & \text{constant flow} \\ & x_s^{1,t} = X_t^1 \quad \forall s \geq t. \end{array}$

Option 2: non-constant flow.

 F^1 concave \implies constant better.

The principal's problem

Fix an IC mechanism (x^0, X^1) .

Principal's flow payoff:

- before breakthrough: $F^0(x_t^0)$
- after breakthrough: $F^1(X^1_{\tau})$ forever

Principal's problem:

$$\max_{(x^0,X^1)} \mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G} \left(r \int_0^\tau e^{-rt} F^0\left(x_t^0\right) \mathrm{d}t + e^{-r\tau} F^1\left(X_\tau^1\right) \right) \quad \text{s.t. IC.}$$

Undominated and optimal mechanisms

Principal's problem:

$$\max_{(x^0, X^1)} \mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G} \left(r \int_0^\tau e^{-rt} F^0(x_t^0) \mathrm{d}t + e^{-r\tau} F^1(X_\tau^1) \right) \quad \text{s.t. IC.}$$

An IC mechanism *dominates* another iff

- former is better for every G,
- strictly for some G.

Undominated: not dominated by any IC mechanism.

An IC mechanism is *optimal* for G iff undominated & maximises principal's payoff under G.

Undominated mechanisms have $x^0 < u^0$

Lemma. If (x^0, X^1) is undominated, then $x_t^0 \leq u^0$ for a.e. t.



- better for principal - delay less attractive

(proof: slide 42)

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Keeping the agent indifferent

Fix a mechanism (x^0, X^1) .

Let X_t^0 denote time-t continuation utility from *never* disclosing:

$$X_t^0 \coloneqq r \int_t^\infty e^{-r(s-t)} x_s^0 \mathrm{d}s.$$

Agent chooses between

- disclosing promptly: payoff X_t^1
- never disclosing: payoff X_t^0
- delaying by d > 0: payoff $X_t^0 + e^{-rd} \left(X_{t+d}^1 X_{t+d}^0 \right)$

Theorem 1. If (x^0, X^1) is undominated, then agent always indifferent: $X_t^1 = X_t^0$ for every t.

Keeping the agent indifferent

Theorem 1. If (x^0, X^1) is undominated, then agent always indifferent: $X_t^1 = X_t^0$ for every t.



Naïve intuition: when incentive strict, lower disclosure reward X_t^1 .

Problem: need not benefit principal.

Hurts her if $X_t^1 \in [0, u^1]$. And will spend time here!

(sketch proof: slide 43)

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Dropping superscripts

A mechanism is (x^0, X^1) .

An undominated mechanism is pinned down by x^0 since X^1 must make agent indifferent (Theorem 1):

$$X^1_t = X^0_t = r \int_t^\infty e^{-r(s-t)} x^0_s \mathrm{d}s.$$

Drop superscripts: a mechanism is (x, X). (Automatically IC.)

Deadline mechanisms



Suppose F^0 is affine on $[0, u^0]$.

Write u^{\star} for max of $F^1 - F^0$ on $[0, u^0]$. Assume unique.

Deadline mechanism
$$(x, X)$$
: $x_t = \begin{cases} u^0 & t < T \\ u^* & t \ge T \end{cases}$ for $T \in [0, \infty]$.

Deadline mechanisms



Theorem 2. If F^0 is affine on $[0, u^0]$, then all undominated mechanisms are deadline mechanisms.

The role of affineness



Countervailing force:

if F^0 strictly concave, then intermediate flows x^0 better than extreme ones.

This force is absent if F^0 is affine.

Front-loading



Fix a mechanism (x, X)with $u^* \le x \le u^0$.

Deadline mechanism:

$$x_t^{\dagger} = \begin{cases} u^0 & \text{for } t < T \\ u^{\star} & \text{for } t \ge T \end{cases}$$

with T s.t. $X_0^{\dagger} = X_0$.

A front-loading: flow has same present value, but is higher early and lower late. (better: slide 48)

Optimal deadline

Optimal deadline depends on breakthrough distribution G: given by a first-order condition. (undom. DLs: slide 54) (FOC: slide 55)

Later breakthrough $(G \nearrow \text{ in FOSD}) \implies \text{later deadline.}$

Summary: if F^0 affine,

- qualitative prediction: deadline mechanism. distribution-free.
- quantitative prediction: deadline given by FOC. distribution-dependent.

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Optimal mechanisms in general



Let u^* be the rightmost $u \in [0, u^0]$ at which F^0, F^1 have equal slopes.

Assume u^* is strict local max of $F^1 - F^0$ (rather than saddle).

Theorem 3. Any mechanism (x, X) optimal for a distribution G with G(0) = 0 & unbounded support has $x_t \searrow$ from $\lim_{t\to 0} x_t = u^0$ to $\lim_{t\to\infty} x_t = u^*$.

Only difference from deadline mech: transition $u^0 \longrightarrow u^*$ possibly gradual.

Front-loading vs. concavity

Theorem 3 combines

- Theorem 2 insight: front-loading \implies deadline incentives
- mechanical force: concavity \implies graduality.

Proof: a 'local' front-loading argument. (Rather involved.)

Distribution-free qualitative prediction: $x_t \searrow$ from u^0 to u^* .

Optimal path depends on breakthrough distribution G: described by an Euler equation. (Euler: slide 58)

Later breakthrough $(G \nearrow \text{ in MLRP})$

 \implies more lenient: $X_t \nearrow$ in every period t.

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Unemployment insurance

Purpose of UI: support the involuntarily unemployed.

- want those with job offers to accept.

Difficulty: job offers privately observed.

 \implies cannot be too generous lest workers turn down offers.

Model

Unemployed worker receives job offer at uncertain time, chooses whether & when to accept.

Homogeneous jobs: wage w > 0. No saving/borrowing.

State observes employment status, not job offers.

State controls benefits & income tax \iff controls C, L.

(equivalence: slide 59)

Optimal UI: literature

Private job offers

esp. Atkeson and Lucas (1995)

- assumption: offers expire instantly.

Private search effort

esp. Shavell and Weiss (1979), Hopenhayn and Nicolini (1997)

- moral hazard rather than adverse selection

Utility possibilities

$$u = \phi(C)$$
 $v = u + \lambda \times (-C)$



Utility possibilities

$$u = \phi(C) - \kappa(L) \qquad v = u + \lambda \times (wL - C)$$



Unemployed: L = 0. Employed: vary both C & L.

Conflict $u^1 < u^0$: state wants L > 0, worker doesn't.

 $(u^\star:$ slide 60)

Deadline benefits

Deadline mechanism: e.g. Germany, France, Sweden, ...

- before deadline: high benefit / efficient consumption
 Germany: 60% of previous net salary.
- after deadline: low benefit.
 Germany: €446 per month.



Approx optimal iff F^0 approx affine.

either (a) ϕ close to affine or (b) λ small.

(other countries: slide 61)

Gradual tapering

Exactly optimal benefit: \searrow from generous to low.

Italy:



Choice of deadline

Optimal deadline: later for workers with worse prospects.



Conclusion

Problem: agent privately observes technological breakthrough.

Solution: a deadline structure to incentivise disclosure.

- affine case: simple deadline mechanism.
- in general: graduated deadline mechanism.

Method: new techniques, e.g. front-loading argument.

Conclusion

Problem: agent privately observes technological breakthrough.

Future work: embed our problem in richer environments, utilising our techniques. E.g.

- costly & unobservable effort to hasten break through
- repeated breakthroughs over time.

The limited role of transfers



Suppose can pay agent $w \ge 0$. \implies payoffs resp. u + w & v - w.

Expands utility possibility frontiers when slope < -1.

Transfers used only where expanded frontier > original.

Proposition. Undominated mechanisms (x, X) use transfers

- only after disclosure
- only when $X > u^{\bullet}$.

Robustness

Weak assumptions on frontiers F^0, F^1 , none on distribution G.



Without loss:

- $-F^0, F^1$ concave, usc, finite on $(0, u^0]$
- disclosures verifiable (if principal observes her payoff)

Nothing changes:

- participation instead of $u \ge 0$
- random F^1 , provided agent doesn't observe realisation.

(back to slide 9)

Undominated mechanisms have $x^0 \leq u^0$: proof

Lemma. If (x^0, X^1) is undominated, then $x_t^0 \leq u^0$ for a.e. t.



Proof: Fix an IC (x^0, X^1) .

Alternative mechanism: $(\min\{x^0, u^0\}, X^1).$

Better, strictly unless $x^0 \leq u^0$ a.e.

and IC: in every period,

- disclosure equally attractive
- non-disclosure (weakly) less attractive.

(back to slide 17)



If both RHS terms are $\geq u^1$, then the LHS is $> u^1$

 $\iff \quad \text{either} \quad (\text{i}) \ X^1_t > u^1, \quad (\text{ii}) \ x^0_t < u^1, \quad \text{or} \quad (\text{iii}) \ X^1_{t+1} < u^1.$

Sketch proof of Theorem 1 slack IC: $X_t^1 > (1-\beta)x_t^0 + \beta X_{t+1}^1$ \implies either (i) $X_t^1 > u^1$, (ii) $x_t^0 < u^1$, or (iii) $X_{t+1}^1 < u^1$

There's an IC-preserving improvement in each case:



Case (i): lower X_t^1 (Preserves time-t IC, slackens time-(t-1) IC.)

Case (ii): raise x_t^0 (Preserves time-t IC.)

Case (iii): raise X_{t+1}^1 (Preserves time-t IC, slackens time-(t + 1) IC.)

(back to slide 20)

Sketch proof of Theorem 1: remaining pieces

 We showed: agent is indifferent about *delaying* disclosure.
 Final piece: agent indifferent about *never* disclosing. (proof: slide 46)

(2) Proof in continuous time: delicate, but same economics.

- case (ii): insufficient to modify x^0 in single period: must increase it on *non-null* set of times.
- cases (i) & (iii): cannot modify X^1 in single period while preserving IC.

(back to slide 20)

Final piece in proof of Theorem 1



We showed: agent is indifferent about *delaying* disclosure:

$$\begin{aligned} X_t^1 &= (1-\beta)x_t^0 + \beta X_{t+1}^1 \\ &= \underbrace{(1-\beta)\sum_{s=t}^{T-1}\beta^{s-t}x_s^0}_{\rightarrow X_t^0 \text{ as } T \rightarrow \infty} + \beta^{T-t}X_T^1. \end{aligned}$$

Must show: indifferent about *never* disclosing:

$$X_t^1 = X_t^0 \quad \Longleftrightarrow \quad \lim_{T \to \infty} \beta^{T-t} X_T^1 = 0.$$

If not, then X_t^1 blows up as $t \to \infty$. Fairly clear that this is not optimal. (back to slide 45)

Final piece in proof of Theorem 1: formal

Since $X_t^1 \to \infty$, there is a time T after which $X_t^1 > u^0 + u^1$.

Consider
$$(x^0, X^{1\dagger})$$
, where $X_t^{1\dagger} \coloneqq \begin{cases} X_t^1 & \text{for } t \leq T \\ X_t^0 + u^1 & \text{for } t > T. \end{cases}$

Better since $u^1 \leq X_t^{1\dagger} \leq X_t^1$, strictly after T.

To verify IC, check deviations:

- never disclosing is unprofitable: $X^{1\dagger} \ge X^0$
- before T, delay is unprofitable:
 - delaying to $t' \leq T$: same as in original mechanism
 - delaying to t' > T: worse than in original mechanism
- after T, delay is unprofitable: earn u^1 upon disclosure, so sooner is better. (back to slide 45)



Front-loading x makes X decrease faster (before T):

$$X_t^{\dagger} \leq X_t$$
 with equality at $t = 0$.

(proof: slide 51)

Write
$$Y_t \coloneqq r \int_t^\infty e^{-rs} F^0(x_s) ds$$

= $F^0\left(r \int_t^\infty e^{-rs} x_s ds\right) = F^0(X_t)$ since F^0 affine.

Principal's payoff:
$$Y_0 + e^{-r\tau} \Big[F^1(X_\tau) - Y_\tau \Big]$$

= $F^0(X_0) + e^{-r\tau} \Big[F^1(X_\tau) - F^0(X_\tau) \Big].$

Front-loading...

- increases pre-disclosure payoff $Y_0 e^{-r\tau}Y_{\tau}$.
- changes post-disclosure payoff $F^1(X_{\tau})$.



Principal's payoff: $F^0(X_0) + e^{-r\tau} \left[F^1(X_\tau) - F^0(X_\tau) \right].$

Since $X \ge u^{\star}$, F^0 steeper than $F^1 \implies$ lower X is better.

Slight elaboration to drop assumption $x \ge u^*$. (full proof: slide 52)

(back to slide 25)

Proof of Theorem 2: front-loading lowers X

Mechanism (x, X). Deadline mechanism:

$$x_t^{\dagger} = \begin{cases} u^0 & \text{for } t < T \\ u^{\star} & \text{for } t \ge T \end{cases} \text{ with } T \text{ s.t. } X_0^{\dagger} = X_0.$$

Claim. $X^{\dagger} \leq X$. (With equality at t = 0.)

Proof:

- For t < T, since $x^{\dagger} = u^0 \ge x$ on $[0, t] \subseteq [0, T]$,

$$e^{-rt}X_t^{\dagger} = X_0^{\dagger} - r \int_0^t e^{-rs} x_s^{\dagger} \mathrm{d}s$$
$$\leq X_0 - r \int_0^t e^{-rs} x_s \mathrm{d}s = e^{-rt} X_t.$$

- for
$$t \ge T$$
, $X_t^{\dagger} = u^* \le X_t$.
(Recall: assumed $u^* \le X$ for simplicity.)

(back to slide 48)

Proof of Theorem 2: dropping $x \ge u^*$

Principal's payoff =
$$F^0(X_0) + e^{-r\tau} \left[F^1 - F^0 \right](X_{\tau})$$



Idea: still a front-loading, but now possibly increase X_0 . (Good.)

Proof of Theorem 2: dropping $x \ge u^*$

Principal's payoff =
$$F^0(X_0) + e^{-r\tau} \left[F^1 - F^0 \right] (X_\tau)$$



By the front-loading logic, $X^{\dagger} \leq X \lor u^{\star}$. X^{\dagger} better since both are $\geq u^{\star}$, and $F^{1} - F^{0} \searrow$ on $[u^{\star}, u^{0}]$.

Clearly $X \lor u^{\star} \ge X$.

 $X \vee u^*$ better since they differ only when in $[0, u^*]$, and $F^1 - F^0 \nearrow$ on $[0, u^*]$.

(back to slide 25)

Undominated deadlines



Are all DL mechs undominated?

No. If T so early that $X_0 < u^1$, better to increase until $X_0 = u^1$:

 $\begin{array}{rcl} - & X \text{ higher in every period} \\ \implies & \text{closer to peak } u^1 \end{array}$

-x high for longer.

But that's all:

Proposition. If F^0 is affine on $[0, u^0]$, then the undominated mechanisms are exactly the DL mechanisms with deadline late enough that $X_0 \ge u^1$.

First-order condition

Assume $u^* > 0$ & F^1 diff able on $(0, u^0)$. (And F^0 affine.)

Proposition. Mechanism (x, X) is optimal for Giff it is a deadline mechanism with $\mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G}(F^{1\prime}(X_{\tau})) = 0.$ (derivation: next slide)



Derivation of first-order condition

principal's payoff:
$$\mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G} \left(r \int_0^\tau e^{-rs} F^0(x_s) \mathrm{d}s + e^{-r\tau} F^1(X_\tau) \right).$$

Increasing T has two effects:

$$- \text{ if } \tau > T,$$

$$\underbrace{\left[F^{0}(u^{0}) - F^{0}(u^{\star})\right]}_{=F^{0'}(u^{\star}) \times (u^{0} - u^{\star})} dT \times \text{ discounting.}$$

$$- \text{ if } \tau \leq T,$$

$$F^{1'}(X_{\tau}) \times dX_{\tau} \times \text{ discounting.}$$

$$= F^{1'}(X_{\tau}) \times \left(u^{0} - u^{\star}\right) dT \times \text{ discounting.}$$

First-order condition:

$$[1 - G(T^*)]F^{0'}(u^*) + G(T^*)\mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G}\Big(F^{1'}(X_{\tau})\Big|\tau \leq T^*\Big) = 0.$$

Derivation of first-order condition

FOC:
$$[1 - G(T^*)]F^{0'}(u^*) + G(T^*)\mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G}(F^{1'}(X_{\tau})|\tau \leq T^*) = 0.$$



 $F^{0\prime}(u^{\star}) = F^{1\prime}(u^{\star})$ since u^{\star} is interior max of $F^1 - F^0$.

$$X_{\tau} = u^{\star}$$
 for $\tau > T^{\star}$.

$$\Rightarrow \text{ first FOC term} \\ = [1 - G(T^*)]F^{1\prime}(X_{\tau})$$

 $\implies \text{FOC reads} \\ \mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G} (F^{1\prime}(X_{\tau})) = 0.$

(back to slide 26)

Optimal path: Euler equation

Proposition. Assume $u^* > 0$ & F^0, F^1 diff'able on $(0, u^0)$. If (x, X) is optimal for G with G(0) = 0 & unb'd'd support, then satisfies

- initial condition $\mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G}(F^{1\prime}(X_{\tau})) = 0$

- Euler eq'n
$$F^{0\prime}(x_t) = \mathbf{E}_{\tau \sim G} (F^{1\prime}(X_{\tau}) | \tau > t)$$
 if $x_t < u^0$
 \geq if $x_t = u^0$.

If G has cont's density $g \& F^0$ twice diff'able with $F^{0\prime\prime} < 0$, differentiated (& rearranged) Euler reads

$$\dot{x}_t = -\underbrace{\left(\frac{g(t)}{1-G(t)}\right)}_{\text{hazard rate}} \underbrace{\frac{F^{0\prime}(x_t) - F^{1\prime}(X_t)}{-F^{0\prime\prime}(x_t)}}_{\text{curvature}}$$

(back to slide 30)

Taxation principle for UI

By choosing income tax schedule $\theta(Y) \leq Y$,

 $\begin{array}{ll} \mbox{can implement any } C,L\\ \mbox{s.t.} \quad \phi(C)-\kappa(L)\geq 0. \end{array}$



budget set $\{(C, L) \in \mathbf{R}^2_+ : C \le wL - \theta(wL)\}$ induced by $\theta(Y) = \min\{Y, mY + b\} = \bigwedge_{V \to V} \psi(Y)$

(back to slide 33)

Utility possibilities in UI: u^{\star}

$$u = \phi(C) - \kappa(L) \qquad v = u + \lambda \times (wL - C)$$



$$F^{0\prime} > F^{1\prime} \implies u^{\star} = 0.$$

Reason: interests less aligned when worker employed.

(back to slide 35: utility poss) (back to slide 36: DL UI mechs)

Some deadline UI schemes

	before DL	after DL (€/mo.)
Germany	60% of net salary	446
Sweden	80% of net salary	415
Netherlands	70% of net salary	1059
France		515

*SJR: an industry-specific reference salary.

Note: this excludes additional funds for particular expenses, such as rent or utilities. These are large in e.g. Sweden.

(back to slide 36)

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