WORK & FAMILY

The 'Overqualified' Trap Can Hit You at Any Time

You don't have to be near retirement to battle a perception that you've accomplished too much; here's what to do about it

ILLUSTRATION: PEP MONTSERRAT

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A 39-year-old executive with a successful record as a senior vice president has been job-hunting since she was laid off a few months ago. She doesn't care about matching her former title. She just wants a challenging job where she can learn and grow.

But she was shocked recently when a recruiter told her she was too senior for an opening that matched her skills and experience almost perfectly. "It's hard when your big title or years of experience are seen as a disqualifier, rather than a qualifier," says the executive, who asks that her name not be used. "It would be so easy to go down a rabbit hole wondering, 'What am I doing wrong?' "

Few obstacles are more perplexing for job seekers than being told you're overqualified. The problem can crop up anytime, even early in applicants' careers, and often when they least expect it. Trying to overcome hirers' misgivings can feel like shadowboxing with a ghost. New research lends insight into some of the quirky and often counterintuitive reasons managers decide

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somebody is just too good for the job—reasons applicants can sometimes overcome with forethought and skillful communication.

Many people wrongly assume a power-packed résumé is a ticket to a job, says Oliver Hahl, an assistant professor of organization theory and strategy at Carnegie Mellon University. "Decisions are often much more nuanced than that," he says.

Dr. Hahl and several colleagues tested hiring managers' willingness to make an offer to two candidates for a corporate finance job. Both had elite-college degrees and worked at comparable employers. One candidate had a stellar record, heading a 10-person team financing $1.5 billion transactions. The other led a much smaller team doing deals one-tenth the size.

The managers were more likely to make an offer to the candidate with the less impressive record, according to a study published in March and co-led by Dr. Hahl, Roman Galperin, an associate professor of management at Johns Hopkins University, and Adina Sterling, an associate professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University. The managers assumed the candidate with the stellar résumé wouldn't be as committed to the company or stick with the job as long as the other applicant, the researchers found.

The hiring managers also assumed the star candidate wouldn't be as motivated to do well, the study showed. And bosses might feel threatened by him, fearing he wouldn't listen to them or might even take their job, Dr. Hahl says.

Labeling a candidate as overqualified is often a pretext for age discrimination. But younger workers also face this obstacle.

An Ivy League degree can confer major career advantages, and some firms prefer to hire only grads from schools they consider blue-chip. But other employers have a surprising bias against candidates from elite schools. "Some managers want applicants who went to a second-tier M.B.A. program, worked while they were in school,

got straight As and were scrappy," says executive coach Julie Kantor in New York. "For them, it's about looking under the hood."

Others fear that a job seeker with a turbocharged résumé won't play well with others. Bill Sandbrook once rejected a candidate with impeccable credentials because he behaved like a prima donna. "You could just tell he thought, 'You need to hire me because I'm me. Can't you see?' " says Mr. Sandbrook, chairman and chief executive of U.S. Concrete, a company with 3,300 employees based in Euless, Texas.

CEO Bill Sandbrook once rejected an applicant with flawless credentials because he behaved like a prima donna. PHOTO: U.S. CONCRETE

Mr. Sandbrook is also cautious about loading up a team with too many A-plus players who might compete against each other, rather than cooperating to benefit the company.

Some people have legitimate reasons for applying for jobs beneath their capabilities, such as gaining more time for family-care duties or recovering from burnout. Employers still worry that such applicants overestimate their own willingness to live with the losses that come with reduced status, says Mark Phillips, chief executive of Sanford Rose Associates/HireEducation, a Boulder, Colo., recruiting firm. He's skeptical of candidates who say they're willing to take a 25% pay cut, for example.

Such applicants must be able to tell a compelling story about their motivations, says Elaine Varelas, managing partner of Keystone Partners, a Boston leadership-development firm.

One senior executive wearied of working at a company where employees were paid well above the industry average. "She was tired of having to deal with employees who were complaining about whether their bonus was $200,000 or $210,000," Ms. Varelas says. Although the executive appeared overqualified for the new position she sought, she landed the job by persuading the CEO that her commitment was genuine, Ms. Varelas says.

Showing passion for a company's mission is persuasive, Ms. Varelas says. This requires researching the company and the job, so you can explain what excites you about both.

Lorraine Vargas Townsend held senior human-resources leadership posts at several companies ranging from 5,000 to 150,000 employees before deciding last year to take some time off with her wife and baby. A recruiter soon approached her about an opening at a 600-employee company, saying, "I have this job, but it's too small for you," Ms. Townsend says.

She was excited about the opening, however—a senior position at a Boston-based tech company. The company provides a platform for building the kind of apps Ms. Townsend wished she'd had on previous jobs, to automate basic human-resources tasks, and she was eager to help identify needs its technology could meet. She soon signed on as chief people officer and loves the work.

"You have to have a compelling reason why the needs of this business and this job are right for you, and about what you can bring to the role," she says.

Highly qualified applicants also must be prepared to give evidence that they've done similar jobs in the past, Mr. Phillips says.

Hirers at one tech startup were wary when a former vice president applied for a job as its first salesperson, Mr. Phillips says. "A big question was, 'Is this person genuinely interested in this job, or will we be left at the altar if we make an offer?' " he says.

The applicant was consistent throughout seven interviews in explaining that the job required the same skills he'd used to build sales at his previous employer, including prospecting and cold calling, Mr. Phillips says.

Lorraine Vargas Townsend says star players must give a compelling reason for stepping down to a smaller job. PHOTO: DANIELLE GOODMAN

“Any applicant who faces some unspoken objections needs to connect those dots, and say, ‘I’ve done that work. Check me out,’ ” Mr. Phillips says. His references backed him up.

Avoid the Overqualification Label

* Explain up front why you’re applying for a position that seems beneath you.

* Research the job in depth so you can describe how it matches your experience.

* Be consistent in explaining your reasons for applying throughout all interviews for the job.

* Show openness and flexibility by talking about things you want to learn.

* Line up references who will vouch for your commitment.

* Network with contacts who also know insiders at the target company.

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