

Fighting the Overqualified Label: 10 Tactics for a Successful Job-Search

By Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

There's a dirty little secret in job-hunting, and if you're a job-seeker with several years of experience -- or worse, in middle management -- you may have been exposed to it without even being aware. What is it? It's the label hiring managers put on mid-career job-seekers who appear to have one of three flaws: too many years of experience, too much education, too highly paid in current or previous job. Yes, it's the label many job-seekers fear: being overqualified. Overqualified is code for "will not fit the current position" -- and be forewarned that it is a difficult label to overcome.

Frequently, you will not even be aware of being labeled as overqualified because you'll simply never hear back from the prospective employer. And before we get too much farther along in this article, let me release some guilt and confess my sins. Yes, when I was a hiring manager, I most certainly had a pile for applicants seen as overqualified - and those applicants files were placed directly into the trash. In my mind, these job-seekers could be classified as one of several types:

- . *The out-of work-desperate-for-any-job applicant.* This job-seeker failed to explain why someone who worked at this level years ago would be again applying for a position at this lower level -- and is seen as someone who leave as soon as s/he got a better offer.
- . *The totally incompetent applicant.* This job-seeker had worked at the same level for more years than anyone should without giving a reason why s/he never has sought a promotion - and is seen as a liability.
- . *The too-full-of-myself applicant.* This job-seeker, often older than the hiring manager, comes off as having way too many years of experience -- and sounding as though s/he was responsible for every major accomplishment in the field.
- . *The way-too-expensive-fool applicant.* This job-seeker was currently earning a significant amount more than the very top of our salary range and was seen as someone completely out of touch with reality.
- 零. *The been-there, done-that applicant.* This job-seeker passed this level years ago, and for whatever reasons wishes to return to that level - but without explanation and could be perceived as washed-up, burnt-out, and in the worst cases, too old.

What should you do if you -- on paper -- fit one of the types above? Perhaps you absolutely love what you do and refuse to get promoted out of it? Or what if you are such a revenue generator or cost saver that you will easily earn the higher salary? The key for any job-seeker who thinks that the "Big O" label will be applied during his or her job-search is to attack the perception head-on -- before the hiring manager even has a chance to think it herself. This advice is counter to career experts' usual advice to avoid mentioning negatives until the employer raises them, but with the overqualified label, you must be proactive if you ever

want a chance to make your case in a job interview. Develop a two-part strategy. The first part focuses on your job-search correspondence tools, where you will need to develop a short statement explaining exactly why you are seeking the position given your background. The second part focuses on your sales pitch during the job interview, where you can elaborate on why your experience, skills, accomplishments, and enthusiasm make you perfect for the job.

Tactics for overcoming the overqualified label As you develop your strategy, here are 10 specific tactics to consider:

- . *Let your network speak for you.* Nothing you could say about yourself is stronger than a recommendation from someone who knows you and can recommend you. The ideal scenario is for you to use your network to find someone within the organization and let that person make the first pitch for you.
- . *Focus more on skills and accomplishments than job titles.* Use the employer's own words -- from the job description -- to show how your skills match perfectly while at the same time downplaying skills not required for this job.
- . *Take salary off the table.* Make it clear from the beginning that you are completely flexible about salary -- and that your previous salary is of no relevance to your current job-search.
- . *Reveal financial advantages of hiring you.* If you suspect salary will be a concern, use specific examples from your past experiences to show how you increased revenue generation and/or cut costs/realized increased savings.
- . *Emphasize teamwork and personality.* Demonstrate that you are a team player -- that the success of the team is more important than any of the individual team members.
- 0. *Showcase current or cutting-edge knowledge.* Discuss recent training or skill-building that shows that you are adaptable and up-to-date -- not stuck in the ways of old.
- . *Demonstrate loyalty.* One method to attempt to overcome the fear that you will leave as soon as a better offer comes along is to point to your longevity with previous employers.
- . *Do what it takes to get the interview.* Be prepared to deal with the overqualified issue when you call to follow-up your application -- and sell the hiring manager on at least giving you a "meeting" if not an interview so that you can make your case in person.
- . *Everything in moderation.* You should illustrate how you are the perfect candidate for the position without overwhelming the hiring manager with your experience -- or your ego. Avoid intimidating a younger hiring manager.
- . *Express interest, admiration, and enthusiasm.* Nothing wins over a hiring manager more than a positive attitude and a passion for the job -- and the employer.

Final Thoughts If all else fails, if you have followed the guidelines in this article and are still getting the overqualified label, the one last option you have is to ask the direct question of the hiring manager. Be as blunt and direct as possible -- and ask for the same in the answer -- by asking something along the lines of: "What can I do to convince you that I am the best candidate for the job?"

And by all means, stay as positive and upbeat as possible. If you are not having success, evaluate your performance. And if you have been fired or downsized, review your actions and attitudes to be sure you are not emitting any negative (or self-doubting) vibes. (Read my article, [Getting Fired: An Opportunity for Change and Growth](#).)

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our [Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms](#).

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