Dealing with the “Overqualified” Label

Being labeled as overqualified when you’re a job seeker can be a hard obstacle to overcome. It’s frustrating to have to minimize a lifetime of hard-earned professional experience. Although it doesn't happen just to older workers, it is an added burden when you're 50 or older.

It’s true you may be overqualified for a job. Or, the employer-to-be could be wary of having to supervise an older worker, or concerned that you may not have the commitment he or she is seeking. Either way, don't be discouraged. AARP can help turn your career goals into real possibilities with our Resources for Finding a Job or Starting a Business at www.aarp.org/WorkResources.

Here are some straightforward ways to deal with the overqualified label and to make your qualifications a virtue.

1. Streamline your résumé.
Focus on skills, qualifications and recent accomplishments that are relevant to the position.

» Revise your résumé to show how your relevant skills have produced proven results.

» The employer may view extensive experience as a drawback, so consider limiting your work history to 10 to 15 years. This may mean deleting seemingly relevant positions, but you'll end up with a clearer, more targeted résumé.

» List all technology credentials, including recent training and certifications.

» Use current industry keywords, especially for technical positions, throughout your résumé.

2. Personalize your cover letter.
Cover letters can be a helpful tool to tell the employer something about yourself that might not be clear from your résumé. For instance, you might want to provide context for why you are applying for a lower level position or one with less responsibility than you’ve previously held. Your cover letter can provide an effective way to explain other issues such as periods of time out of the workforce due to caregiving.

3. Prepare for the interview.
Think in advance of interview questions that might lead to the overqualified label, and determine how you’ll respond. Preempt these questions by proactively explaining that your priorities aren’t title or money. Emphasize your attitude, interests, skills and experience that led you to the position. Avoid being defensive, and remember to always have a positive attitude.

Here are some questions or comments to prepare for in advance:

“Your salary requirements are high.”
Try to determine in advance if your salary requirement is within the industry or company's range for the position. You can get salary information from the Occupational Outlook Handbook on the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) website at http://www.bls.gov/ooh/. If it is, explain that you believe the employer deserves excellence and experience, and that's what you'll bring. In addition, you will require less training, which will save the employer time and expense.

“This job is a step down for you.”
Be upbeat and confident in explaining why you want the job. For example, consider saying,
“At this point in my career, I want to apply my skills to a new position or field.” Or, “I’m more interested in flexibility and work-life balance, but would consider taking on more responsibility in the future, should it be offered.”

“You’ll get bored.”
Assure the interviewer that you are focused, dedicated and have a track record of completing projects on time. Give examples of your proven work ethic, flexibility, and teamwork. State clearly why you are interested in the particular job.

“You won’t stay long.”
Make sure you really want the position and, if true, explain that you envision working many years longer.

“Your experience is not current.”
Focus on your skills and recent training, not just your experience. Name the specific skills that are relevant to the job, how you have applied them, the outcomes, and how they will benefit the prospective employer.

At the end of the interview, if you feel you are still being considered overqualified, be assertive but friendly. Ask the interviewer an open-ended question, such as, “What other questions can I answer for you?” Follow up with reemphasizing why the position is the right fit for you and the employer, and reaffirm your interest in the job.

4. Present a confident attitude.
Show confidence. Stress your enthusiasm for the job and the reasons why you are uniquely qualified. If you don’t think you can do the job, why should the interviewer?

» Demonstrate that you’re attuned to the workforce that you want to enter. Do research so your knowledge is up-to-date on the latest developments in the field.

» Appearance bolsters a positive impression. Make sure your choice of outfit is up-to-date and professional.

» Don’t oversell your years of experience. While interviewers do want to learn about you, most important to them is how you can benefit the employer if you’re hired.

5. Target appropriate jobs
If you are repeatedly told that you are overqualified, perhaps you’re applying for the wrong job or at the wrong level. Even if you’re applying for stopgap jobs in order to supplement your income, you need to find the right fit.

Take Action!

- Take advantage of AARP’s free resources at www.aarp.org/WorkResources, where you can get tips on competing in today’s job market, salary negotiations, and more.

- Ensure you’re targeting appropriate positions. Visit www.LifeReimagined.org/Work to explore the industries, employers, and positions that make sense for you.

- Streamline your résumé to focus on skills, qualifications and recent accomplishments that are relevant to the position.

- Use a cover letter to add some personal context for why you are applying for a certain position.

- Prepare for the interview by thinking in advance of how to respond to questions that might suggest you are overqualified.

- Present a confident, enthusiastic and open attitude.

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