

Are You "Overqualified?" The Age Issue...

The issues of age discrimination and particular concerns for job seekers "over a certain age" -- what you will face and strategies to use age and experience as an advantage in the job search.

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Are You "Overqualified?" The Age Issue...

If you are a job-seeker who is over a certain age – sooner or later it’s not uncommon to hear that you’ve been passed over for an opportunity that you applied and/or interviewed for because you were judged to be “overqualified.” That’s such an interesting word: “overqualified.” Think about it ... it means, literally, that you possess experience and qualifications that exceed the stated job requirements. So, you might ask, why should that be a bad thing? Wouldn’t any company want someone who exceeds their requirements instead of someone who does not? Well, we all know what’s really going on when someone says you are “overqualified.” It’s a euphemism for “too old” or “too expensive” or both, right?

Not long ago, I represented a very savvy 50-something year-old candidate who was invited in for a final face-to-face interview for a key position with a Fortune 500 client company I was working with. His job history and specific qualifications were an exact match for what they were looking for. He fit the requirements listed for the job to a tee. In addition, he knew the salary range they had defined for this position, and was fine with it. He had already filled out an extensive job application, taken a 2-hour online personality and skills assessment test, had a lengthy phone interview, and met in-person with two different HR people. Based on all of that, his chances seemed excellent. Then he walked into the final interview room where he met the actual decision-maker – the person who would be his immediate supervisor for this position. She was a very attractive, 20-something year-old woman – very sharp, with an MBA from a prominent business school, 5 years of increasing responsibilities at this company and a rising star in their corporate culture. (Now I’m imagining this next part ... so please forgive me for this narrative license!) They looked at each other, and he thought: “She’s young enough to be my daughter!” And she thought: “He’s old enough to be my father!” It was reminiscent of a scene from the movie *“In Good Company.”* The interview continued in a very professional manner – but needless to say, he didn’t get the job and was never given any direct explanation for why. When I later questioned my HR contact at the company, I heard the “O” word mentioned in passing ... but not much else.



**“We’re looking for someone with the wisdom of a 50-year old,
the experience of a 40-year old, the drive of a 30-year old
and the payscale of a 20-year old.”**

Age discrimination is a fact of life in the business world. While the definition of someone's "prime" working ages varies from industry to industry, from company to company, and from position to position ... if I had to guess based on my own experience as a recruiter, I'd say that candidates who range in age from their early 30's to mid 40's are probably the group who have the least trouble with age discrimination. Much younger than that, and most job-seekers would be looking mostly at low paying, "entry-level" positions (the woman in the previous example notwithstanding.) And, of course, job-seekers in their 50's and beyond encounter the "overqualified" objection much more often.

So, what is an "older" job-seeker supposed to do? What advice can I offer to help those candidates in that more senior category? Well, here are some general ideas and strategies that might help:

- Target companies who are known to be "age friendly" and concentrate less on the ones known to favor younger workers and who emphasize their youthful cultures. You probably wouldn't feel comfortable working in such a place anyway.
- Pay attention to the job requirements, and only pursue positions that you truly match. Don't waste time applying to jobs that are clearly not a match for your skills, or level of experience.
- Keep yourself up to date on technology, and current on the details of your industry. Be a continuous learner. Be as computer and internet savvy as your younger competitors.
- Maintaining your health and appearance.
- Embrace "The Power of a Positive Attitude." Concentrate on projecting positive energy and enthusiasm in every casual conversation, every networking meeting, and every interview. I've coached thousands of candidates for interviews during my many years as a recruiter. If there's one thing I've learned about the interview process that holds true for almost every industry and every position, it's this: the number one most important factor that determines who gets hired and who doesn't is NOT who is best qualified, who has the most experience or skills, or who has the best résumé – and it's NOT AGE. It's attitude! People hire other people that they like, and want to be around. Real enthusiasm for a position or a company, true passion for your work, a sense of humor, and a genuine projection of positivism and optimism are the qualities that make a person attractive to others. A positive, energetic and youthful attitude can easily transcend age as a factor and it's nearly impossible to fake. It's an incredibly important issue for every job-seeker to think about and to try adjusting within themselves.

Beyond those general ideas, here are some other specific suggestions, ideas and tips that might help older job-seekers in their pursuit of their goals. These are mostly interview strategies to consider when the "overqualified" objection seems to be coming up, either overtly or by implication:

- During interviews, emphasize your capabilities, not your experience.
- When interviewing with a hiring manager, try to find out what their problems, needs, and concerns are. Then, explain how you can help. Offer ideas for solutions to problems. This is known as the "consultative sales" approach. A younger person with little to no experience will be much less likely to know how to do this. [Read "Why Job Hunting is a Consultative Sales Position" for more on this concept.]
- If a prospective employer comes right out and says: "*You're Overqualified,*" consider responding with a statement like: "*Well, you wouldn't feel that way about your surgeon, would you?*"

- Or consider saying: *"Wouldn't you rather hire someone who exceeds your requirements instead of someone who doesn't?"*
- Or: *"Don't you want a person that you're confident can do this job without requiring a lot of training and a lot of your time?"*
- If you are getting asked questions during an interview that indicate the interviewer wants to know your age, respond by saying: *"I think what you're asking me is 'How long will I be in this position?'"* Then, pause and say firmly: *"I'm committed to staying at your company at least five years. How many young candidates will promise you that?"*
- If someone comes right out and asks how old you are, say: *"I'm only xx"*. The word is very important. Without coming out and saying it, the word implies to the other person that you think you've got many productive years ahead of you.
- You probably won't be able to overcome the "overqualified" objection unless you understand what the employer believes is the underlying problem. You might say: *"What problems do you foresee if I were overqualified?"*
- Consider saying: *"When you say that I'm overqualified, does that mean you are concerned about what you might have to pay me? I would be happy to discuss compensation with you. What did you think is reasonable?"* [Read "Answering the Dreaded Salary Question" for more strategies on handling this issue.]
- Don't use phrases like: *"At my age...," "Years ago...," "Back then...," "When I was younger...," "It used to be that ...," "We used to...," "...up in years," "Nowadays...,"* etc. Avoid statements in résumés and cover letters like: *"I have 25 years experience in ..."* And don't make references to your grandchildren!
- Finally, as an interview closer, consider saying something like: *"I understand your concerns as far as you thinking I'm 'overqualified.' However, I am confident that you will find me a valuable asset in this position. In addition, should you want to promote internal talent in the future, I'll have proven myself and have the years of experience to assume more responsibilities successfully. My sole objective is to prove myself over time."*

