

COMMENTARY

# Can the COVID-19 pandemic be good for overqualified employees' careers?

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We build on and extend Rudolph et al.'s (2021) idea about how the COVID-19 pandemic might have a positive influence on careers. We focus on overqualified employees, or those who have more education, skills, and abilities than required for their jobs (Luksyte et al., 2011), as such potential beneficiaries of the pandemic. We argue that these workers may use the current pandemic as an opportunity to reconsider their poorly fitting jobs and/or explore alternatives. Under normal circumstances, overqualified workers are dissatisfied with their jobs, have high voluntary turnover intentions, and engage in counterproductive work behaviors, as evidenced by a recent meta-analysis (Harari et al., 2017). This is because overqualified employees feel they are deprived of a better job for which they have outstanding credentials, and thus they experience misfit between their qualifications and job demands. The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating economic consequences with many people losing their jobs and numerous businesses going bankrupt. Yet, we argue that such an uncertain economic environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic may present an opportunity for overqualified employees to reconsider their person–job misfit. We discuss two possible career pathways for perceived overqualification during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first pathway concerns those overqualified workers who did not lose their jobs during the pandemic. In an environment where job loss is high, overqualified employees may think that having a job, even a poorly fitting one, is a blessing rather than a curse. The second pathway concerns those overqualified workers who lose their jobs during the pandemic, yet they may frame this loss as an opportunity to find a better career choice than what they had before the pandemic.

## Career pathway 1: Employed overqualified workers during the pandemic

If overqualified employees are able to retain their jobs during the pandemic, they may use two different coping strategies: (a) rethinking their misfit and (b) proactively seeking opportunities to use their outstanding qualifications in tasks and responsibilities that are left without personnel due to the pandemic's layoffs that still need to be accomplished and fulfilled. First, research on layoffs suggests that employees who are able to keep their jobs during layoffs experience survivors' guilt because they feel lucky to have a job when others are jobless and further attempt to address this positive inequity by improved performance (Brockner et al., 1986). Applying this positive inequity logic to perceived overqualification, we argue that overqualified employees who survived layoffs during the COVID-19 pandemic will experience a greater appreciation for their jobs despite felt misfit. Under normal circumstances, overqualified employees experience lower career satisfaction as they believe they do not have good career prospects in their organization because they feel that their job is inadequate in comparison to their skills and qualifications (Erdogan et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, their career dissatisfaction might be attenuated by cognitive reappraisal of their job, as they need to remain in the organization in order to keep a job

during the pandemic. Being “stuck” in poorly fitting jobs during the pandemic and experiencing renewed appreciation for their job, overqualified employees may also be encouraged to explore career opportunities within their organization.

Second, during the COVID-19 pandemic, overqualified workers may have more opportunities to engage in activities outside of their job description due to the decreased workforce size and, further, availability of work tasks. The availability of additional activities can occur during the pandemic as the organization may not have the ability to refill job positions; instead, they may have excess tasks that need to be allocated to layoff survivors—overqualified workers. This may represent an opportunity to expand their role and use their excess skills and abilities. Because of survivors’ guilt and greater appreciation for their job, overqualified employees may work harder and volunteer for more tasks. Engaging in these extra tasks and responsibilities may have a positive influence on their career evaluations. Specifically, their previously experienced misfit may be diminished or resolved as overqualified employees take on more tasks where they can use previously under-utilised skills and abilities. This may improve career satisfaction and further career trajectories, as having the opportunity to use excess skills in areas where previously overqualified employees may have not been able to, may be fulfilling for their career overall.

### **Career pathway 2: Unemployed overqualified workers during the pandemic**

Alternatively, overqualified employees may be laid off due to their organization experiencing financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic. We contend, however, that such an involuntary job loss may be a positive shock for overqualified employees for two reasons. First, being on poorly fitting jobs may encourage these workers to pay particular attention to fit in their future job searches. Second, lack of job alternatives during the pandemic may motivate overqualified employees to consider previously ignored career choices. For example, they may be well-equipped for jobs that were specifically designed during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, contact-tracing jobs. Overqualified workers may be well-suited for these jobs because contact tracers need to be skilled in talking to people and in gaining trust as they attempt to collect detailed information about people and whom they have been in contact with prior to virus infection. Due to the surplus of their qualifications, their previously felt misfit, and lack of meaningfulness in their jobs, overqualified employees may be well qualified to do contact-tracing jobs. Further, consideration of contact-tracing jobs may also bring meaningfulness by being on the front line of the battle with the virus.

Mahbubani (2020) discussed a sparked increase in contact-tracing job positions in the United States. In a bid to decrease COVID-19 infection rates, 2,200 workers have been hired since April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, with dramatically increased infection rates needing upwards of 300,000 workers a month later in May 2020 to assist with the outbreak. Job positions in contact tracing require a high level of detail in meticulous tracking and data collection, as well as excellent communication skills. Such prospects in this field may provide an opportunity for overqualified workers to consider contact tracing in their career trajectory during the pandemic, as they have high levels of knowledge and abilities to conduct similar jobs. It is also a good opportunity to use excess skills and experience where they may have not been able to in their previous job, potentially adding to an overqualified employee’s career capacities.

Our proposed career pathways suggest potentially positive trajectories for overqualified employees. Commonly, employment and careers during the pandemic have been noted with negative consequences for employees. However, in light of Rudolph et al.’s (2021) acknowledgment of potentially positive effects for careers during the pandemic, we support this notion. We described two possible career pathways that may prove beneficial to overqualified employees’ career trajectories during the COVID-19 pandemic in reassessing their suboptimal employment situation. Such considerations in overqualified employees’ careers provide additional insight into how this

subsection of the labor market can persevere and, in fact, have the ability to improve their careers during the current and future pandemics.

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