
Overqualified Employees: Perspectives of Older Workers

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In their focal article, Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, and Truxillo (2011) briefly note that overqualified older workers, in particular, are more likely to be a benefit rather than a liability to the organization. We expand on this idea, focusing on three dynamics that can explain why older workers find benefits in being overqualified: developmental changes that occur over the life span, higher levels of job and organization embeddedness experienced by older workers, and bridge employment.

Developmental Changes

Life span and life course research has shown that older workers' attitudes toward work and working evolve over time (Baltes, Rudolph, & Bal, in press; Barnes-Farrell & Matthews, 2007). For example, older workers are less interested in promotions and more interested in work consistent with their values and talents, as well as positions that allow them to continue learning and that provide increased flexibility and

autonomy. For example, Johnson, Kawachi, and Lewis (2009) analyzed data gathered from over 9,000 individuals between the years 1992 and 2006 through the Health and Retirement Study. Their results showed that workers over 50 years of age who decided to change jobs tended to make less money and were less likely to have pension and health benefits. However, the same individuals reported that their new positions offered more flexible work hours and were less stressful than their previous positions.

In addition, older workers who make the decision to change careers are most likely to take the step to move out of managerial jobs and move into sales and operations positions. Although these new positions are less stressful than managerial roles, they will likely be overqualified for such positions. However, according to Johnson et al. (2009), the majority of those who changed jobs and careers after age 50 reported higher levels of satisfaction and enjoyment as they downshifted to jobs that had less stress and had more flexible schedules, even though the pay and benefits were reduced when compared to their previous jobs. The majority of individuals who downshifted reported that even though their new jobs were less prestigious and

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had a lower social standing, they enjoyed their new jobs more than the previous jobs they held. As a result, for older workers who are in positions for which they are overqualified, there may be fewer negative effects when compared to younger workers. This is consistent with Erdogan et al.'s observation that older workers, when compared to their younger counterparts, are likely to be motivated by different aspects of their jobs, such as being less interested in promotions and more interested in working in roles in which they are doing work that is consistent with their values and interests and uses their talents.

In addition, older workers are more likely to seek positions that provide them with opportunities to continue learning and use their talents. For many older workers, the desire to learn and continue to refine their skills and abilities is very motivating (Deal, 2007). Regardless of one's age, it is very stimulating and exciting to learn new skills and approaches that help individuals improve their talents and develop new and creative ways to improve efficiency and effectiveness in one's job performance (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Harter, 2003). In the current economic environment, we can speculate that overqualified older workers who are interested in continuing to learn and develop their skills will provide their organizations with the advantage of their years of experience to help the organization develop new processes, approaches, and products that will contribute to the ongoing effectiveness and competitiveness of the organization in the future.

Embeddedness

Owing to the increased perceptions of fit, strong social linkages, and the perceived sacrifices that would occur if an older worker was to leave his or her job, older workers tend to be more firmly embedded in their jobs, organizations, and careers compared to younger workers (Feldman, 2007). Erdogan et al. make the distinction between apparent and

emergent overqualification. The majority of the research on overqualification has focused on the former. However, older workers may be more likely to experience emergent overqualification, which only becomes evident over time. Perceived emergent overqualification will be balanced, however, against this higher level of embeddedness at various levels for older workers. As individuals' levels of embeddedness increase, the negative aspects of their perceived overqualifications are likely to be less salient. In addition, older workers may seek out jobs that offer more opportunities for work–life balance, better health benefits, and a more age-friendly environment. As a result, they may be willing to accept or continue in a job for which they are overqualified if they can obtain these desired characteristics.

Similarly, older workers may decide to stay in their current job because of continuance commitment or pension eligibility reasons. However, they may also enjoy the autonomy and flexibility that results from their overqualifications and invest that additional time in leisure, family, or retirement planning activities. So, in both instances, the negative consequences typically associated with being overqualified for a given job are likely to have less of an impact on older workers because of their generally higher levels of job, organization, and career embeddedness.

Bridge Employment

The concept of apparent overqualification would be more relevant to older workers seeking to leave their career jobs and pursue bridge employment. Bridge employment refers to jobs that are taken after long-term career jobs but before full leisure retirement (Wang & Shultz, 2010). Older workers seeking bridge employment are more than likely to accept new employment at a lower level than their career job, both in terms of qualifications and rewards. Hence, older workers engaging in bridge employment are likely to be considered

overqualified for the vast majority of positions they seek and thus experience apparent overqualification. Yet, because they enter the employment situation with this expectation, they are less likely to be dissatisfied with the situation and thus suffer negative repercussions from it. This would be analogous to professionals who engage in volunteer activities (Wang & Shultz, 2010). Most of these individuals are likely to be overqualified for the tasks they carry out during their volunteer assignments (often physical or clerical in nature), but doing so provides them with a sense of accomplishment and giving back to the community. Similarly, as Erdogan et al. note, older workers may well see their engagement in work for which they are overqualified as giving back to their profession or community.

In conclusion, we laud Erdogan et al. for discussing both the positive and negative aspects of hiring overqualified applicants. However, they failed to note that individual's motivations, desires, and preferences for working will most likely evolve as they progress through their career (Baltes et al., in press; Barnes-Farrell & Mathews, 2007). As a result, the issues of job, organizational, and career embeddedness, as well as bridge employment, will be particularly prominent for older workers, with the former tempering perceptions of emergent

overqualification and the latter tempering perceptions of apparent overqualification.

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