
Overqualified as a Euphemism for Too Old?

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Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, and Truxillo (2011) bring to light the potential benefits of overqualification from the perspectives of both the overqualified employee and the organization. This is a phenomenon that has not received extensive attention in the industrial–organizational literature and is of particular importance given our current economic situation. One noteworthy inference that could be made from this article is this: If indeed employers recognize the potential benefits of hiring and retaining overqualified employees, a related outcome could be a decrease in discrimination against older workers. Although there are certainly overqualified employees applying for jobs in many industries across all age groups, older employees have historically been associated with the “overqualified” label. Indeed, many believe that “you are too qualified” or “you have too much experience” are merely euphemisms for “you are too old.” Thus, if we can remove the stigma of overqualification in the eyes of employers, do we also reduce age bias? Unfortunately, it is likely not so simple.

In 2007, my colleague and I (Finkelstein & Farrell, 2007) made a case for the expansion of the current view of age bias in the workplace to include a tripartite perspective on bias (e.g., Kite & Smith Wagner, 2002), separately considering the roles of cognition

(stereotypes), affect (dislike), and behavior (discriminatory decisions). Acknowledging the potential role of affect independent of cognitions in discriminatory decisions is important (Rupp, Vodonovich, & Credé, 2005). For example, regardless of some people’s beliefs about the qualities of older workers, sometimes they simply might feel less happy or comfortable in their company. In such a case, even if the stereotype “overqualified” was either eliminated or reframed as a positive quality, negative affect can still be a driver of an age-discriminatory behavior.

In addition, we suggested that researchers take a broader social–psychological perspective on the *core motives* for age bias at work (Fiske, 2004). Fiske asserts that there are four core human motives that drive social biases and that existing theories to explain various biases can be united within this framework. Briefly, these motives include *understanding* (to make sense of the world), *belonging* (to feel connected to groups), *controlling* (to have a sense of control and the ability to avoid threat), and *self-enhancement* (to see the self in a positive light). Bias can be the end result of any of these motives but differs in the level of blatancy and even in the level of awareness of the bias holder.

So, how is this relevant to overqualification? If, for example, an instance of an older worker being labeled as “too experienced” and consequently not hired was motivated purely by an *understanding motive* (e.g., heuristic to simplify our

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decision making), taking away the negative stigma of being overqualified (or indeed reframing it as a positive quality) should help to reduce the likelihood that this older worker would receive unfair treatment. However, if the age bias was motivated by a need to *enhance the self* (e.g., avoiding feelings of mortality salience) or *controlling* (e.g., avoiding out-group members who could change the social order), changing the valence of the characteristic “overqualified” is unlikely to deter that particular instance of age discrimination.

Furthermore, Erdogan et al. suggest that perhaps one way overqualified employees could be a boon to an organization is that they may be able to do even more than is required by the job for which they were hired; in other words, they could be the role innovators. Younger overqualified workers may be more likely to take advantage of this angle, as innovation is often a characteristic associated with youth. It may be harder for employers to associate older overqualified workers with potential innovative and change behavior, as it runs counter to general older worker stereotypes (Finkelstein, Ryan, & King, 2009; Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

The bottom line is that the suggestions presented in the focal article are intriguing ones that appear plausible and potentially beneficial to organizations and employees dealing with the rampant overqualification

in the market today. However, it is likely that these ideas won't work equally well for older overqualified workers as for younger and middle-aged overqualified workers. This is, of course, an empirical question that is worthy of testing in the near future.

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