

Turn Being Overqualified to Your Advantage – Tip 12

Experienced and older job seekers dread hearing an interviewer say they are overqualified for a position. Before you stumble through a response that will likely fall on deaf ears, think about the intent of the statement. They are thinking you are either too old (for them) or you'll only stay until you find a job more suited to your level of experience. Being told you are overqualified happens despite the legal issues or the misplaced assumptions on their part.

Let's look first at some situations where employers believe a bias would be appropriate when employing someone:

- They have a very young group of employees in the department/group/etc. you would be in and they believe it would be difficult for an older person to adapt. Or, they may believe the current employees may not easily accept an older person coming in and it could cause friction and adversely affect productivity.
- They may have a high percentage of employees in a department who will be approaching retirement at the same time and they must recruit younger, less experienced people who can learn and grow to fill that vacuum.
- Their customer base is young or their market targets a particular culture and they believe they need to recruit people who could more easily connect with their market.

Let's now turn to how to prepare yourself in advance by having a strategy for how you can address it, if and when it comes up. Interviewers may not express this issue verbally so you'll need to listen for signs that it might be an issue. You can do this by listing the objections you or others have heard or you think you might hear and write how you would address those issues.

Don't talk about how fit you are, how well you keep in shape, or try to convince them that you won't consider other jobs that might be more appropriate for you. You must focus on what you bring to the table and how it will benefit them. Here are some examples of wording you might incorporate when responding:

- "I've held a similar position with ABC Company and have had to deal with many, if not most, of the issues that someone in this position will encounter."
- "Using my prior experience, I can anticipate the issues and prevent them from becoming problems that then have to be dealt with after the fact."
- "I've learned the most effective techniques and what doesn't work. That should mitigate problems and help create a more efficient organization."
- "I've learned the value of building a succession plan and have the experience and knowledge of all the functions in the department. Using that to your advantage, I can organize cross-training and coach people to be more effective in what they do. I can also recognize their strengths and weaknesses more easily and identify those who should be promoted or who need more training."

- “While I understand you think I might leave when the economy recovers, I have a history of being very loyal to my employers. I never left only because another opportunity paid more. I left for reasons out of my control (headcount reductions, etc.) or, like the majority of people who leave their employer, because of a boss that I chose not to work for anymore.” (Whatever the reason, be prepared to explain it objectively without any hint of emotion.)
- “I’ve learned throughout my career that change is constant and I’ve always been very adaptable to new systems and ways of doing things. My past experience has often helped me to improve upon suggestions made by others.”
- “I have had to work for younger people (or in teams) on a number of occasions and have often helped mentor them. Many of my former younger colleagues have become personal friends.”

While your demeanor, choice of words and how you convey them will be critical to your overcoming their perceptions, interviewers also will be looking at and assessing the following:

Men

- Facial hair – Makes you look older
- Clothes – Out of character with the industry or company
- Shoes – Worn heels or soles (seriously!)
- Aggressiveness – Attempting to come across as energetic or youthful
- Sensitivity to the comment “overqualified”

Women

- Clothes – Lacking in color or unflattering
- Cosmetics – Excessive amounts
- Jewelry – Inappropriate for the norms of the business or industry

While you may not be successful at overcoming an entrenched belief, you must approach each interview as a fresh opportunity to explain how you can be a resource that a company needs. Some companies will accept what you say as an indication that you can adapt and work within their culture, and, aren’t those the companies you would prefer working for anyway?

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