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Overqualified? 6 Tips to Shed the Label

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In a tight job market midcareer professionals often consider openings that are less lucrative and less prestigious than their last job. Sometimes employers are glad to hire seasoned workers at a bargain, but others dismiss the candidate as "overqualified."

What's behind the overqualified label is an employer's fear that if you're hired, you'll be searching for a better job before you learn where the restrooms are. But if you really want the job, there are ways of countering the perception that you're too good for it.

1. Re-read the job description.

Just because you earned more and had more responsibility in the past doesn't mean you're overqualified for this job. If you meet or exceed every criterion, consider yourself highly qualified. On the other hand, if you don't meet all the requirements -- you would be using a new technology you've never heard of, for example -- you may actually be underqualified.

"Too many job seekers think, 'If I can do this big thing, then surely I can do those smaller things,'" says Laura DeCarlo of Career Directors International. "Maybe they can do them, but it will be a tougher sell."

2. Fine-tune your resume.

"A resume is not a document set in stone," says John M. O'Connor, president of Career Pro, Inc. "You should always rewrite your [resume](#) to fit that particular job, and that may mean taking down the tone a notch and emphasizing exactly the skills needed in the new job." To tune your resume and cover letter, also consider the company culture and include relevant words, phrases, and technologies, O'Connor adds.

3. Don't lie about your history.

It's true that some screeners go right to the [salary](#) in order to weed out the "too expensive" candidates. If you were an executive earning six figures, don't say you were a junior accountant earning \$40K. Then again, unless you're filling out an online form that requires your salary history, a sin of omission just to get in the door is fine.

Experts recommend addressing salary in a cover letter or interview by giving a wide range of income you would consider, or by saying you assume the company will pay competitive salary for the job.

"You want to steer the conversation to the tasks of the job and your history of longevity in other companies and away from dollar figures," Barbara Safani, president of Career Solvers, recommends. "If you can explain how previous lateral moves benefited you, that can diffuse their fear you'll be looking for a higher-paying job."

4. Check your sense of entitlement at the door.

Are you miffed at applying for a job "beneath" your abilities or ticked at defending a career that began when the interviewer was in diapers? Those attitudes won't do you any favors.

"People read energy and attitude," O'Connor says. One way to turn around your negative attitude and impress the interviewer at the same time, O'Connor recommends, is to come prepared with incisive questions about the job duties and the company. "Show you are in touch and engaged and understand their needs."

5. Clearly explain why the job will be good for you.

"If you hire me now, I won't lose my house" may be true, but it won't impress an interviewer. Have good reasons why it would benefit you personally and professionally. "If the position is in your area of passion, say so," DeCarlo advises. "You can make the case that even though you had a management job, for example, you want to move away from management. If the job is a good career fit, the employer will be much more impressed."

6. Make circumstantial evidence work for you.

Remember, the employer is looking for a good "fit," and that means cultural and personal fit in addition to hard skills. Do you have volunteer experience or community commitments that would interest a hiring manager at a "young, hip" company? Emphasize them.

Likewise, your network can speak volumes for your ability to fit in. But make sure those contacts are recent, O'Connor says. Referrals from people who haven't seen you in 20 years could give the impression your most productive days are behind you.

What about the age issue? Career coaches admit age discrimination exists, but it may not be as widespread as seasoned job seekers like to believe. An updated wardrobe, newer hairstyle, or current cultural references could hedge against ageism, or they could make you look silly. Experts agree that the best way to impress a hiring manager is showing how well you understand their immediate problem and how you're the solution.

That's true for job seekers at any stage of their careers.

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