

OVERQUALIFIED EMPLOYEES: “Truth or Dare”

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of modern industry, there has been the notion that certain employees are “overqualified” for certain jobs. This “perceived overqualification” (Liu, et. al; 2024) occurs when an employee starts believing that his or her qualifications, that is to say, their work experience, skills/capabilities, formal education, and other factors, exceed and are far superior to, the requirements of the job. This article explores the reasons why such notions occur in employees, i.e., what are the factors (whether internal or external) that may lead an employee to start thinking in this manner and develop this type of mindset, which in turn, can have serious consequences on the person, his or her career development, and ultimately, the entire organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Numerous studies and field research, including interviews with business executives, have clearly shown that the perception of “overqualified employees” is indeed a reality in the workplace. The following studies validate this.

A study by Lee, Erdogan, Tian, Willis, & Cao; (2020), shows two pathways, whereby the perception of overqualification has both direct and indirect implications and effects upon employees’ job performance. Their study also highlights the degree to which individuals either regard their jobs as steppingstones to future promotional opportunities, or a dead-end situation with no solution other than to find another job. They highlight a direct correlation between perceived overqualification and effective (or ineffective) job performance.

Adding on to the viewpoint expressed above, Huang, Tian, Wang, & Wang (2022) also underscore how the perception of overqualification can adversely affect an employee’s job performance, sense of self-worth, job esteem, and relationship building in the work environment. They further define the correlation between overqualification and “withdrawal behavior”, which occurs when an employee quietly loses his/her sense of self-worth in a job and essentially becomes complacent, withdrawn and detached from job-related achievement.

Along similar lines, Liu, Huang, Kim, & Yang (2024) illustrates how perceived employee overqualification can lead to cynicism, negativity, ineffectual job performance, a sense of detachment and disillusion, and a resigned complacency in job performance. A case is also made for constructive deviance, whereby the employee, rather than taking a totally negative and pessimistic view of his/her perceived overqualification, instead uses it in a more constructive and positive manner as a coping mechanism, using their surplus potential, experience, knowledge and qualifications to benefit their colleagues and organization.

Debus, Korner, Wang, & Kleinmann (2023) show similar pathways resulting from perceived employee overqualification, demonstrating the relationship between such perceptions and a misalignment of company/departmental/team goals, a decrease in employee job satisfaction, lower productivity and engagement, and poor inter-employee relationship management. They provide solid solutions for managers who have employees affected by these perceptions, including how to coach and mentor them to use their higher-level skills to the company’s advantage, which concurrently recognizing that such employees must also be accorded greater respect, autonomy and self-reliance when being managed.

In their article, Abdalla, Saeed, & Khan (2023) focus on the “Person-Job Fit Theory”, illustrating that an individual’s job search activities are guided in great part by their self-perception of their competencies, skills and knowledge. Once on the job, employees displaying higher levels of proactive behavior demonstrate a less adverse influence of perceived overqualification and a more balanced psychological well-being, emphasizing that such insights are crucial to effective management of higher-level employees such as these.

Clark & Saxberg (2019) attempt to clarify the reasons why good employees lose their drive and motivation, which invariably leads to loss of confidence and reliance on oneself to do a particular job; a disengagement from company activities; a deterioration of employee relationships, including with their managers; and an unwillingness on the part of such employees to expend the time and effort required to get the job done, no matter the challenges being faced. They recommend counseling these employees to become more objective about their skills and capabilities, and somewhat less emotionally involved, not allowing these perceptions of overqualifications to be the sole driver of their future career growth.

PERCEPTIONS vs. REALITY:

When an employee begins to question him/herself and starts doubting whether they can continue to make a meaningful and positive contribution to the organization, doubts such as the ones addressed above begin to surface. It should be mentioned that these feelings of “overqualification” can occur not only in employees with long tenures in a particular job and who at some point start feeling a sense of disappointment, frustration or unfulfillment, but also in employees who may not have a long tenure in the job and/or company, but who because of a sense of “superiority” may feel that they are far more knowledgeable, capable and experienced than their colleagues. In either scenario, this sense of “overqualification” can have a negative and very detrimental effect on the employee’s performance, productivity, job satisfaction, and long-term success within the organization (Clark and Saxberg; 2019)

Recent industrial studies have postulated that around 20% of employees worldwide may find themselves believing that they are “overqualified” for their current job. In turn, such ambiguity towards their job (and in many instances, the profession in which they work), can erupt into negativity in the workplace, conflict with other employees or team members, higher turnover and reduced employee retention, erratic productivity, less job satisfaction, and ultimately, less commitment to the organization. (Debus, et. al; 2023).

Surprisingly however, that same person who may perceive themselves as overqualified for their job may choose to deal with it in one of two ways. They can either subjectively change their perceptions about their job (i.e., defensive tactics) or they can take steps to objectively change their work environment (i.e., coping tactics).

It’s valuable to look at both paths and to explore and understand them more viably, because they represent a wide range of responses (both negative and positive) that overqualified employees use to make their personal workplace situation better, or at least more tolerable to them. (Huang, et. al; 2023).

DEFENSIVE TACTICS vs. COPING TACTICS:

One way so-called “overqualified employees” deal with their frustration and disappointment is with Defensive Tactics, such as cynicism toward the job. This pathway is where an overqualified employee begins to distance themselves from their work, generally exhibited by a lack of enthusiasm and meaningfulness, often leading to lower job performance and creativity. This mentality can be broadly summed up as: “*This job is beneath me, so why should I try my hardest and do my best?*”

On the other hand, some “overqualified employees” may choose a different path, i.e. that of Coping Tactics, which is a methodology whereby the employee decides to use their surplus potential and capabilities to benefit their colleagues, department, team, or their organization as a whole. Essentially, they choose to go above and beyond the requirements of their role, taking control of the situation in a positive way. These individuals also develop the ability to “grow” their jobs in following this more positive tactic, i.e. saying in effect: “*If I can’t grow my job laterally, I’ll use my talents and abilities to grow it horizontally*”. Another way of stating this is: *If I can’t go up the corporate ladder at my company, I’m going to use my skills, education, knowledge and experience to expand the boundaries of my job*” (and thus assume additional roles and responsibilities, with the hope that senior management and ownership will eventually recognize and reward them accordingly). The author of this article has had numerous and very positive experiences with this tactic.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP in WORKING WITH “OVERQUALIFIED EMPLOYEES”:

Leadership can have a strong moderating influence in these types of situations but must also have a clear understanding of how this can be achieved. Effective leaders can use both individual-focused and team-focused transformational leadership (TFL) to support their overqualified employees. Individual-focused TFL – providing customized support to followers by understanding their unique needs – can motivate overqualified employees to utilize their surplus potential, which may reduce cynical thoughts about their job, and instead help them re-focus their creative and organizational energies in healthier directions.

The term “overqualified employee” itself is something that is distasteful, inappropriate and archaic. It undervalues the potential every employee should and could bring to the corporate table and is an outdated terminology that has long outlived its usefulness. Rather than focusing on what an employee can do, it seems to focus instead on what negative attributes an employee possesses that do not provide any type of value nor contribute anything meaningful to the organization.

Team-focused TFL aims to develop shared values and beliefs and direct attention to the entire team's needs. This can enhance the group's status in the minds of overqualified employees, encouraging them to engage in proactive behaviors like constructive deviance.

Debus, Korner, Wang and Kleinmann (2023) conducted research involving hundreds of employees in various organizations, and showed that:

- Overqualified employees who felt cynicism toward their job experienced reduced job performance and creativity. This negative effect was **lessened** by individual-focused TFL.
- Constructive deviance had a positive effect on job performance and creativity in overqualified employees. This effect was **strengthened** by team-focused TFL.
- They very rightly call for a more careful evaluation of employee-job “fit”, and postulate that some companies are doing this in a less than satisfactory manner, albeit due to time, budgetary, and organizational constraints

FINDINGS:

While perceived overqualification is a widespread factor across all types of working environments, it isn't invariably a bad thing. Nor is it impossible to manage. Managers need to be aware of both the benefits and problems that overqualified employees can bring and must adapt their leadership style to bring out the best in such individuals while mitigating their worst impulses.

Specifically, if encouraging constructive deviance is an organization's main goal, it should invest in team-focused TFL training, where managers and overqualified employees work together for the collective good. Under more enlightened leadership, many of these so-called “overqualified employees” can have their energy and cynicism re-directed and re-channeled so that they may serve as coaches or mentors to less-qualified employees! (Debus, et. al; 2023).

Improving group-based human resources practices can be helpful, too, such as more competitive compensation, enriched employee benefits packages, the development and utilization of training programs, a more focused “total rewards” mindset, the establishment of mentoring/coaching programs etc. These methodologies are all useful stimuli for encouraging a more proactive mindset and a more vibrant and challenging work environment which may mitigate or even drastically reduce the onset of job dissatisfaction, cynicism, hopelessness, and emotional upheaval that characterizes the behavioral patterns of these so-called “overqualified employees”.

Organizations can also provide managers with interventions and training programs that improve their individual-focused TFL (i.e., individualized support and constructive feedback) to better understand and motivate their overqualified employees who have cynical perceptions toward their jobs.

In both cases, managers must carefully monitor their overqualified employees' behaviors. At their best, they represent an invaluable resource and a powerful agent for positive change across the organization. At their worst, they can develop an unhealthy level of cynicism and contempt for their work, potentially encouraging others to do likewise.

It cannot be overstated that it is important for the employee to own their career and make sure they are expressing their sentiments to their manager. Often, there is a misalignment where the employee thinks they are "overqualified" and then is surprised when the manager provides feedback to the contrary! Managers may not even be aware that the employee has these feelings if the employee isn't being honest about how they are perceiving their roles. Both ideologies are embedded in the importance of being a strong manager & having honest working relationships with their employees, especially those employees who may view themselves as "overqualified".

SUMMARY:

The term "overqualified employee" is inappropriate and grossly mis-used in most instances. An employee is either "qualified" or "not qualified". Any manager who attaches such meaningless caveats to the experience, skills and capabilities of his or her staff members is doing a gross injustice both to the employee, as well as to the team, department, and organization.

Furthermore, any employee who begins to exhibit such tendencies should instead be counseled and guided accordingly by their managers. In addition, managers who are also true leaders should strive to nurture, counsel, groom, coach and encourage highly qualified employees to serve as examples and provide coaching and mentoring to less qualified employees. Long-serving, well-educated, and expert-level employees should always be made to feel valued in their organization. They should be encouraged to feel that they are a "senior level employee" because of the scope, depth and longevity of their knowledge, and should be recognized and compensated accordingly.

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