

What to Do When You're Told "You're Overqualified"

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Just two years ago, 58-year-old Alan Pike and his colleagues were turning away business at their Boston-based PR agency, Collaborative Communications Inc. Today, Mr. Pike is an out-of-work executive, looking for a position as a vice president at a comparable company. Since 2001, he has spent countless hours trolling the Internet, seeking a new gig. He's even expanded his net and sought out jobs that were not quite executive level, but he's been rebuffed and sometimes told he's "overqualified."

"It seemed like most of the positions available are junior," Mr. Pike says. "The ads say, 'Must have three-plus years' experience and a valid driver's license.' That's code for a kid with a car."

In the current employers' job market, many job applicants are complaining they're being told: "You're overqualified." But recruiters say that executive-level candidates shouldn't let this brand of rejection derail their job searches.

"Generally, the term 'you're overqualified' is a cop-out," says Shel Hart, vice president of Spherion Corp., a Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.-based staffing-services and consulting firm that recruits interim executives. "We're in an increasingly talent-deficient marketplace, even with the current unemployment levels. That anyone in this market would say that I want somebody underqualified or just on par would be fairly silly."

Tips and Tactics

Silly or not, older executives often hear that answer during interviews. But such job seekers can adopt strategies to cope with these rejections. For instance, recruiters suggest, the recent corporate scandals give executive job seekers an opportunity to position themselves as experienced and ethical, as reflected by their past roles.

Firms these days put "a high premium...on their reputation, especially at the senior level," says Barry Honig, president of Riskon Inc., a Tenafly, N.J.-based executive recruiter for the financial-services and pharmaceutical industries. So it's in an employer's interest to demonstrate that "someone of impeccable integrity is watching the store," he says.

Additionally, executive recruiters say, candidates should strive to gently coax more information out of interviewing managers. If told they're overqualified, they should ask why. The answer might be surprisingly simple. "Maybe the prospect is [unintentionally] giving off signals that they're not really interested in the job," says Patti Branco, president of Management & Training Solutions, a Ventura, Calif.-based employment consulting firm which advises firms in the financial-services sector.

Ms. Branco says that when interviewing prospects she often asks whether they would accept a job at the level above the job she's interviewing them for. "That backs them into an honest answer," she says. "You can see what their thinking is."

'Risk Management'

But be sure to stress that the job fits your career goals as well. Employers are -- sometimes rightly -- leery of someone taking a position that's a huge step back for them, rather than an onward-and-upward career move, says Renee Arrington, a partner in the Ft. Worth, Texas, office of executive recruiter Ray & Berndtson.

Some employers worry that highly experienced applicants might jump ship if something more suitable comes along, says Ms. Arrington. "So this is risk-management for some companies," she says, adding that they wonder how happy candidates will be in lesser roles. "If the company decides to make an investment in you for which you may be overqualified, there's the concern that you might become restless, or you might not find the work challenging," says Ms. Arrington.

As a job seeker, you have to overcome employers' ingrained misperceptions. Do so with facts and excellent communications skills, recruiters suggest. "I've interviewed people who've had 10 years of sales management experience and simply want to go back to being a broker," says Ms. Branco. "But they've presented that to me in an honest way -- and showed that they have a real enthusiasm for selling. That works."

Hiring managers sometimes more favorably view applicants who are willing to take a step down to make an industry switch. "That way, people know that you're looking for the opportunity to learn the business," says Ms. Arrington. "It's a little more acceptable. It's a learning experience." That's been the case for many executives in the telecommunications and Internet industries who are moving into other fields, she says.

Proving Your Worth

If the hiring manager still balks, other tactics may be worth trying. Some executives are offering to work in new jobs as part-time hires for, say, 30 hours per week, to show employers their serious interest in making the move. "Maybe you can come in as a consultant on a contract with that employer," says Ms. Arrington, who has placed executives in temporary jobs with the expectation that the roles would grow into full-time positions in the future. "You can then demonstrate your skills and your value on a defined project. Once you've made your connections and built your own network in your company, there's a much higher likelihood that [the job] could become a full-time role."

Mr. Pike is consulting for a number of companies while keeping in touch with his network of contacts. "There is a company or organization out there that will come into my crosshairs, and we'll both know relatively quickly that we need each other," he says.

Some job candidates may be concerned that the "overqualified" label may be a code word for age discrimination, but Burlingame, Calif.-based job-search consultant Carole Martin thinks the label "overqualified" isn't used in this regard. It's possible that some candidates are passed over because they seem out of touch with business conditions, she says. This may be because they aren't up on the latest industry lingo, and this shows how dated their knowledge is. "Keep abreast of the latest jargon -- talk their talk," says Ms. Martin. "And be concise and to the point. Use relevant information, not old industry 'war stories.' "

Jeff Christian, president of the Cleveland-based executive recruiter Christian & Timbers, advises candidates arrive at interviews with the mindset that they're already employed by the firm and have 20 new ideas to help make money or increase market share. "The way you can set yourself apart is to ask insightful questions, give insightful ideas and get the other person talking about the business and industry," he says. "That gets them excited about you. [Employers] are looking for people who are energetic and passionate, can get things done and are intelligent. If you get them excited, the question of whether you're overqualified will never even come up."

Indeed, Mr. Christian says that he has broken the code of "you're overqualified," and its meaning can be easily understood by savvy executive job seekers. "It's code for people they don't like; people who are dumb; people who can't get things done; people they think have low energy; people whom they think are boring; or people they would not have fun working with," says Mr. Christian. "It covers all of that. If you're dumb enough to accept that answer, you shouldn't have the job to begin with."

-- *Mr. Koprowski is a free-lance business journalist in Chicago.*