

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Readers:

Very often the solution to a career problem is the same whether you're 20 or 50, whether you are a man or a woman, and whether you earn \$15,000 a year or \$150,000. This month's column explores the exact same issue from several perspectives: being overqualified. These three letters are from recent reader queries.

Letter #1:

Dear Guru Don:

After years of trying to have a child, my husband and I adopted a lovely baby girl. Then, before she turned one year old, I became pregnant and, as my husband says, I "popped a natural." All humor aside, I simply could not continue in my career. So I was home for five years with our girls. Now I'm trying to go back to work, and everyone tells me I am 'overqualified.' I don't feel overqualified. I just want a job. I used to be a store manager for a drugstore chain. Now I can't get a job as a sales clerk. What's up with this? I don't want to run a store. I'd just like a part-time job. What do I do?

Sign me,

Mother Two Times

Letter #2:

Dear Guru Don:

My wife decided to pursue her doctorate at the same time as I saw things winding down where I was working. I could see that it was going to be a good time to jump ship. Frankly, I was not sorry to have a chance to move on. She applied all over the country, some places more attractive to us than others. She managed to get full funding at a very prestigious institution. The place she ended up is, to put it delicately, a bit rural. The university town itself is okay, but there's not much in the way of large employers around here. She's doing great in the program, but I'm having an awful time landing a decent job. There're just no jobs for a corporate controller around here. Well, to be fair, there are two possible employers for someone with my background, and they both took a pass on me. So I'm looking for an accounting position. But when people find out about my background, they can't say "no" fast enough. I am losing my confidence. I thought it would be easy to find something here, maybe not a big job, but something. Was I wrong?

Sign me,

Big Fish Out of Water

Dear Guru Don:

I'm not trying to get rich or be the boss of something. I'm just looking for a job! I worked my way up to foreman on a construction crew, where I used to supervise 10 to 50 people a day. Then I got injured when a concrete hopper pinned me to a wall. I lived on the settlement money for a couple of years, but now it's gone. I don't want to work construction anymore, anyway, but now everywhere I go they're telling me I'm overqualified. Today, I got told I'm overqualified to be a security guard. How in the heck can you be overqualified to be a security guard? I don't need much to get by, but I do want to go back to work. What do I have to say to employers to get them to give me a chance? I'm sober, polite, well dressed and, apparently, unemployable.

Sign me,

Good for Something

Dear Mother Big Fish Good for Something:

Employers use the term 'overqualified' when they are uncomfortable with a potential employee. Let's face it. Employers are biased. They have in mind the ideal person they want to hire. They can see that person's background, attitude, prior experience, commute distance, age, and appearance. And they absolutely believe that they are going to find that ideal candidate.

In fact, I can think of no more optimistic human being than a hiring officer. A few years ago a reader forwarded me a position announcement for a technical position that said, "Five years of experience required." The person who forwarded it to me included a note: "This technology is only 18 months old. No one on Earth has five years of experience!" That reminds me of a newspaper advertisement I once saved: "Secretary wanted. Master's degree preferred." Recruiter optimism knows no bounds.

So what do you do if you don't match that recruiting officer's vision of perfection? What if you're older, more experienced, or just different? Let's get back to basics. Why does anybody hire you? Because they like you and think you'll do a good job. If they don't like you, it doesn't matter if you'll do a good job, and if they don't think you'll do a good job, it doesn't matter if they like you.

The fact is that people often have very good reasons for downshifting, for stepping off the treadmill of ever-increasing achievement. These types of jobseekers are often told they are 'overqualified': older people who have not advanced very far compared to their peers, people with health problems, bored retirees, stay-at-home parents looking to return to work, burned out people who need a respite, entrepreneurs who crashed and went broke, narrowly but overly educated people who can't find the right egghead position, people whose spouses make obscene amounts of money (and thus don't really need much

income themselves), and ex-prisoners What the recruiter really means is ‘too old,’ ‘too slow,’ ‘too hard to manage,’ ‘likely to take my job,’ ‘likely to learn our business, start another company, and steal our clients,’ ‘difficult personality, rude, condescending, and with a bad attitude,’ and so on.

So, you have to use hidden job market techniques to get in front of the employer, and state your case for why the above objections do not apply to you. You’ve got to look right, avoid overdressing, and tone down any know-it-all attitude or power language. You’ve got to present yourself as humble, eager, and enthusiastic about this opportunity. Sometimes, you have to provide a rationale for why you are right for this job in spite of your depth of prior experience. Don’t brag about your accomplishments, in fact, downplay them. Explain how this job fits your needs perfectly, for where you are today. Make genuine and honest assurances that you won’t jump ship at the first better offer.

Once an employer sees you as easy to manage and reliable, you can fit into their vision of an ideal employee after all. A perfect example was a friend of mine, a retired college professor who wanted a little part-time job that would get him out of the house. He applied for a job as a cemetery attendant wearing clean but worn jeans, a too-long belt, a plaid flannel shirt, work boots that were past their prime, and a cap advertising a brand of tractor. The grounds foreman asked him what he used to do, and he said, truthfully, “I worked for the university.” So they hired him, and he loved his part-time job. What was his old job? He was a psychology professor specializing in nonverbal communication. Think about it.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher’s response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher’s Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn’t, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.

SideBar

Resources to Help the Overqualified

It can be difficult to write a resume if you are overqualified. Nuance is important. If you decide to seek help from a professional resume writer, start with these sources:

www.parw.com

www.nrwaweb.com

certifiedresumewriters.com

www.yourbestimpression.com

www.careermanagementalliance.com/searchdirectory.php

Or ask colleagues who have had success with a local professional.

Also, check out these books:

What Color Is Your Parachute? 2008: A Practical Manual for Job-hunters and Career-Changers, by Richard Nelson Bolles

Expert Resumes for People Returning to Work, by Wendy Enelow and Louise Kursmark

Back on the Career Track: A Guide for Stay-at-Home Moms, by Carol Fishman Cohen and Vivian Steir Rabin