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RESPONSE

Overqualification Theory, Research, and Practice: Things That Matter

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Abstract

In our focal article, we contended that overqualified employees may present unique advantages to hiring organizations and that decisions regarding overqualified employees should be made considering the strengths as well as potential limitations of employing overqualified employees. In this response to commentaries on our original article, we identify distinctions researchers should pay attention to. Specifically, measurement of overqualification (whether objective or subjective measures are used), dimension of overqualification in question (overeducation, being overskilled, overintelligence, or overexperience), when and from whose perspective overqualification is assessed (before or after employment), whether overqualification occurs within the context of other overqualified employees, the degree of choice available to the job applicant in becoming overqualified, as well as the specific nature of the population being affected by overqualification are important issues that affect the theory as well as management of overqualification.

In our focal article (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, & Truxillo, 2011), we questioned the assumption that overqualification is always an undesirable situation for employees and organizations alike. To date, most of the extant literature on overqualification assumes that being overqualified for one's job automatically leads to boredom, disengagement, and potential departure of the employee. If having overqualified employees is an undesirable situation, then it would follow that organizations would and should try to minimize the occurrence of overqualification by hiring employees who are ''just right.'' We reviewed the existing and emerging literature on overqualification, and our overarching conclusion was that we still do not know enough about the effects of overqualification for organizations. But there may be reason to believe that hiring employees seemingly overqualified for a position may bring potential advantages.

The commentaries on our focal article served to challenge some of our assumptions, add additional points to consider, and provide a richer, more contextual approach to studying and managing overqualified employees. We are excited about the result, as the commentaries to our original

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article helped us articulate a more refined perspective and point out key research areas that should keep industrial–organizational scholars and HRM practitioners busy over the next few years. Rather than discussing each commentary individually, we have identified a number of underlying themes that we feel are important issues to consider as we collectively set a course for future research.

Measurement Matters

One of the underlying themes of the commentaries was the importance of paying attention to how overqualification is measured. Maltarich, Reilly, and Nyberg (2011) devote significant attention to this point, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between objective and subjective measures. This theme also emerged in the Fine and Nevo (2011) as well as Luksyte and Spitzmueller (2011) articles. Objective measures are those that compare one's knowledge, skill, and ability level to those of the job requirements, whereas subjective measures tend to ask employees whether they feel overqualified. An important point made by these authors is that these measures will have differential effects on the outcomes. Objective overqualification will affect the ease of movement, while subjective overqualification will affect the desirability of movement.

We agree that objective and subjective overqualification are different phenomena, and keeping this in mind may help to clean up much of the construct confusion in the overqualification literature. However, the classification of objective versus subjective creates the illusion of a clear-cut dichotomy of measures that we do not believe exists. Reality is much more of a continuum, and many of the seemingly objective measures in the literature are not without a degree of subjectivity. For example, Verhaest and Omey's (2006) article on overeducation provides an interesting case in point. They describe four types of measures of overeducation: direct self-assessment (asking employees directly whether they are overqualified), indirect self-assessment (asking employees their education levels and asking employees to report the requirements of their jobs), job analysis (where a job analysis is used to assess the requirements of the job, which is then compared to a person's qualifications to determine the degree of overqualification), and realized mismatches (having qualifications 1 *SD* higher than others in one's occupation). We can probably agree that the first is a subjective measure, but what is the second one? The latter two measures are objective, but we would argue that the fourth one is not really a measure of overqualification defined as possessing qualifications exceeding job requirements. Being *different* from one's coworkers is not the same as being *overqualified*, and the similarity-attraction phenomenon (Byrne, 1971) may better explain the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of ''overqualification'' operationalized as realized matches. As can be seen, instead of being a dichotomy, there are degrees of subjectivity in each measure. It seems that it is critical to consider the measure and type of overqualification while theorizing about this concept.

In addition to distinguishing between relatively objective and subjective types of measures, it is important to understand why individuals feel overqualified, even if this does not reflect objective reality. This is another key point in the Maltarich et al. (2011) article. We completely agree with their observation that perceptions may be colored by factors other than objective reality. Perceptions may be inaccurate, but that's also beside the point: As psychologists we know that perceptions affect a person's behavior, so it is critical to understand how they are formed. What causes the feeling of overqualification? Objective overqualification is probably one's influence over perceived overqualification, but one's overall feelings toward one's job, a sense of psychological contract breach, as well as self-serving bias are additional factors that could explain how perceived overqualification develops. The use of longitudinal methods, as proposed by Maltarich et al.

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(2011) as well as Fine and Nevo (2011), or experimental methods seems like promising methods to understand how perceptions and objective reality are related.

Dimension of Overqualification Matters

As pointed out in a number of commentaries, the literature could do a better job of specifying the dimensions on which overqualification could be assessed. Specifically, overqualification may refer to being overeducated, overskilled (as discussed by Fine & Nevo, 2011), overexperienced, or overintelligent (as discussed by Maltarich et al., 2011), among others. Although overqualification may be a convenient higher order construct capturing these different states of being, do they yield similar outcomes for employees and organizations? The answer is not clear at this juncture.

Feldman and Maynard (2011), in their discussion of why so many employees end up being overqualified for their jobs, referred to the use of diplomas as a surrogate measure of desired work-related traits. They noted that a college degree may signal content knowledge, future citizenship behaviors, and lower likelihood of counterproductive behaviors. This type of credentialism may explain how employees end up being overeducated for their jobs but not the emergence of overexperience or overintelligence. In fact, Feldman and Maynard's (2011) discussion of the role of recruiters' decision processes explains what may be going on when recruiters are faced with different kinds of overqualified employees. Overeducation may signal potential content knowledge and trainability, but overexperience may signal the possibility that one will try to do things one's own way and thus be less trainable. Overskilled and overexperienced employees who may apply to entry-level jobs may signal potential problems because recruiters may assume that these employees have left their previous jobs because they were not top performers. As Finkelstein (2011) pointed out, being concerned about overexperience may even be a result of ageism. In contrast, overintelligence will become visible to recruiters only if they are relying on cognitive testing during the hiring process. Supervising overeducated, overexperienced, and overintelligent persons could pose different management challenges, leading to differential reactions to different types of overqualified job applicants on the part of recruiters.

Given the potentially divergent outcomes of different types of overqualification for recruiters and employees alike, it seems clear that using measures of specific types of overqualification may increase the predictive validity of the models. Developing different measures for each type of overqualification and studying their effects on a range of different recruiter and employee reactions is an important future research direction for understanding the outcomes of overqualification for the employee and the organization.

Timing of Measurement Matters

In our focal article, we distinguished between apparent and emergent overqualification. We defined *apparent overqualification* as overqualification being apparent to the job candidate and recruiters during the hiring process, whereas *emergent overqualification* refers to realizing that one is overqualified or actually becoming overqualified after one is hired. Several commentaries built on the idea of timing of measurement of overqualification. A key point Fine and Nevo (2011) made is that findings from the current body of overqualification studies do not necessarily generalize to hiring decisions. Hiring decisions are based on the recruiter's beliefs that the candidate is overqualified, which is both preentry, and relies on a perspective different from that of the employee. If the organization is using a more objective way to measure qualifications (such as cognitive ability tests or tests of KSAs) and overqualification, the predictive validity of these measures needs to be established.

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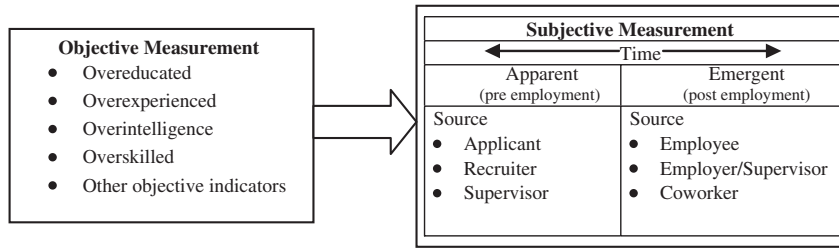


Figure 1. A multifaceted view of overqualification measures.

Timing of the measurement of overqualification and perspective of measurement are areas that should be considered in conjunction with one another. Specifically, overqualification may be assessed before an employee joins an organization (*preentry overqualification*) using relatively objective measures or subjective measures (recruiter, supervisor, or self-perceptions). Similarly, overqualification may be assessed after the employee joins the organization (*postentry overqualification*) using objective measures as well as subjective measures (supervisor, coworker, and self-perceptions). Most research on overqualification to date has utilized only self-perceptions of employees postentry. It is plausible that for different outcomes, different timing and perspectives would be more valid. For hiring decisions, supervisor and recruiter perceptions of overqualification seem key to understanding actual decisions to hire or not hire a job candidate. For performance outcomes, as well as adjustment to the group, supervisor and coworker perceptions postentry are critical. Preentry self-perceptions may interact with postentry self-perceptions such that, if employees knew before they were hired that they would be overqualified, they would experience lesser breach of psychological contracts, resulting in more neutral outcomes.

Extending overqualification research to include these different perspectives and different time periods should be a fruitful research direction for understanding the meaning of overqualification to different stakeholders. Moreover, this extension also has clear implications for selection, organizational induction, training, and performance appraisal of overqualified employees in organizations.

To summarize, overqualification research would benefit from differentiating between objective and subjective measures, as well as being more explicit about the measurement source and timing of measurement. There seem to be a large number of approaches to the measurement of overqualification, as we summarize in Figure 1. The degree of objectivity of the measure, dimension of overqualification, timing, and source of measurement need to be consistent with theorizing and are important issues that deserve explicit consideration.

Level of Analysis Matters

Sierra (2011) makes a key point that overqualification needs to be studied at multiple levels. In particular, her proposition that the effects of overqualification may depend on whether or not one's colleagues are also overqualified is intriguing and opens up exciting future research avenues. What would happen to those who feel overqualified for their jobs if their coworkers are also overqualified? They would probably accept the situation more easily and adjust their expectations. If they are the only one in their group who is or feels overqualified, it is plausible that they would feel different from their peers, reducing their allegiance to the team. As recognized by Sierra, whether an overqualified person feels different or like an out-group

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member largely depends on the context of overqualification.

An example to this phenomenon is college-educated baristas in a multinational coffeehouse chain. If everyone working in a particular store is educated over the minimum requirement, would they still feel overqualified, feel bored, and desire to leave? This situation is likely different from being the only college-educated person working in a fast food restaurant. Therefore, Sierra's (2011) suggestion to study overqualification by paying attention to the context of overqualification is significant. In fact, self-categorization theory may be used to generate hypotheses akin to those generated about relational demography. Individuals use visible elements such as status, education, and experience to categorize themselves and others around them. Then, using this information, they make judgments about their degrees of fit, as well as whether they belong (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Overqualified individuals working with overqualified others may still maintain a positive social identity, whereas overqualified individuals working with just-qualified or underqualified employees may have a stronger sense that they do not belong. Therefore, examining overqualification by paying simultaneous attention to one's coworkers seems important.

Sierra (2011) also cautioned that differential treatment of the overqualified may hamper team cohesiveness. She suggested that accommodations made for overqualified employees could be perceived as unfair by one's coworkers. An examination of the effects of overqualification for team outcomes, including team cohesiveness, is an interesting and important idea. Our views on how differential treatment of the overqualified affects the team are slightly different from those presented by Sierra. Research on differential treatment within teams suggests that differentiation is the norm, rather than the exception (Liden & Graen, 1980). Moreover, coworkers tend to respond negatively to differential treatment to the degree to which they are regarded as undeserved (Sias & Jablin, 1995). In fact, differentiation has been shown to be negatively related to exchanges among coworkers only when justice climate in the team was low (Erdogan & Bauer, 2010). In other words, unequal treatment does not equal unfair treatment, and a sense of fairness may coexist with differentiation. In any case, we believe that examining coworker reactions to overqualified employees is a very interesting and promising future research area.

The level of analysis issue may also be expanded to include country-level economical conditions. Part of the reason for the emergence of overqualified employees may be macroeconomic conditions that give rise to a large number of employees pursuing college degrees and the availability of fewer jobs that could utilize the talent and qualifications of the workforce. In contexts where overqualification is the norm rather than the exception, the effects of being overqualified may be different compared to economies that do a better job of utilizing qualified employees. Therefore, cross-cultural comparisons of the effects of overqualification may be an extension of the idea that levels of analysis matters in overqualification research.

Choice Matters—a Lot

Several commentaries directly addressed the issue of employee's choice in being overqualified. Is overqualification something that happens to the employee, catching them unaware, or is it a situation employees get into, fully knowing and understanding what awaits them? This issue requires more research attention than afforded to date.

Feldman and Maynard (2011) noted that individuals sometimes decide to take a job for which they will be overqualified because they are interested in building social capital. They gave the example of individuals who willingly take internships for which they are overqualified in order to build industry-specific expertise or connections that will get them a job in that field. Similarly, Maltarich et al. (2011) discuss the concept of intentional mismatch,

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recognizing that when making employment decisions, employees are trying to satisfy a number of different criteria and different aspects of their lives. College students take jobs with low cognitive demands so that they can focus on school. New parents take jobs with low cognitive and time demands so that they can focus on their families. Their behaviors at work will not necessarily be negatively affected because of overqualification, if they accepted, even sought their position.

Shultz, Olson, and Wang (2011) hint at the importance of choice by discussing different career stages of older workers and how they may affect the decision to take a job for which one is overqualified. They noted that at different stages of their careers, individuals will have different priorities. Flexibility and autonomy become more important than promotions and advancement potential for older workers. What matters to the employee in question may not be maximizing the match between one's skill level and job requirements. Extending this rationale, choosing to be overqualified will likely lead to different outcomes compared to overqualification imposed upon the person.

Culbertson, Mills, and Huffman (2011) challenged the notion that overqualified employees could experience less work–family conflict. They noted that while overqualification may make time-based work–family conflict less of an issue, strain-based conflict in the form of reduced job control may actually increase as a result of overqualification. They also noted that the wage penalty that accompanies overqualification may increase work–family conflict. Although we agree that overqualification results in more negative job attitudes, overqualification does not necessarily imply lower job control, and in fact job control has been shown to be orthogonal to overqualification (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009).

In any case, to date no studies have examined whether overqualification was intentional on the part of employees. In fact, the extant literature tends to focus on emergent overqualification. We are hesitant to extrapolate these prior findings to employees who are intentionally overqualified. However, there is some indirect research evidence that if employee work status matches what one desires, satisfaction tends to be higher. For example, Krausz, Brandwein, and Fox (1995) compared voluntary and involuntary temporary workers and permanent workers, and showed that voluntary temps had higher work satisfaction compared to permanent employees or involuntary temps. Similarly, we would propose that if employees willingly accept jobs below their qualifications with the understanding that they would perform simpler tasks, have more flexibility in their schedule, and work fewer hours, they would experience lower work–family conflict. Number of hours worked and role overload are significant correlates of work–family conflict (Byron, 2005) and as a result, coupled with choice, overqualification has the potential to reduce work–family conflict.

Furthermore, even when overqualification reduces satisfaction with the work domain, to the degree that it affects family satisfaction positively, the net effects on subjective well-being may still be positive. Research to date has shown that life satisfaction is a function of multiple domains, including family, health, leisure, and work (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004). By accepting a position for which they will be overqualified, employees may be trying to increase their leisure, family, and marital satisfaction, which would mean that while job satisfaction may decline, satisfaction with other domains may increase—and that their well-being and life satisfaction may go up as well. Therefore, we are excited about Culbertson et al.'s (2011) suggestion that integrating overqualification with the literature on work–family interface would be beneficial. We agree with their suggestions that this is a complicated relationship that requires researchers to consider choice as a contingency and pay specific attention to the characteristics of the jobs overqualified employees hold.

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Population Matters

Many of the commentaries make a convincing case that the overqualification phenomenon may operate differently for different populations. Feldman and Maynard (2011) discussed college students and laid-off employees. The motives of the college student who accepts an internship in order to gain experience and connections are different from the laid-off worker who accepts a job 20% below his prior salary to make ends meet. Shultz et al.'s (2011) discussion of different career stages of older workers suggests that as employees become older, different career motives become salient. Furthermore, their levels of embeddedness differ, which serves as a barrier toward departure for these employees. Aging employees were also the focus of Finkelstein's (2011) article. Finkelstein suggests that overqualified older workers are subject to stigmatization, and the employment barriers they face are different from the barriers to employment of other overqualified employees. In fact, she argues that the term ''overqualified'' may simply be aeuphemism for ''too old'' when talking about people in certain age groups. As mentioned earlier, overeducation, overexperience, and overskill are different phenomena with different meanings attached to them. In some cases they can be understood as less flexibility to adapt to the new ways of doing. Culbertson et al. (2011) suggest that the effects of overqualification should depend on the work orientation of the employee, while Luksyte and Spitzmueller (2011) discuss the different outcomes of overqualification for women.

In other words, the employment barriers faced by different populations of overqualified employees may be explained by different stigmas attached to each population. Furthermore, the extent to which overqualification results in negative attitudinal outcomes may also be population specific. In other words, a one-size-fits-all approach may not explain the complicated effects of being overqualified for different employee groups. We would argue that we cannot assume the generalizability of findings regarding overqualification from one population to another, and we need more research on different types of overqualified employee populations. Human resource practitioners would also benefit from more specific knowledge of overqualification for different groups of employees.

In conclusion, we have categorized the key points in the eight commentaries on our focal article on overqualification. In doing so, specific themes emerged. Measurement, dimensionality, timing, level of analysis, choice, and populations matter. Taking these points into consideration in future research should help us better understand just what overqualification is from different perspectives, at different points in the employment relationship, and in different contexts and populations. Practitioners should more fully consider how hiring or not hiring overqualified workers fits into their human resource strategies. Moreover, organizational induction, training strategies, job crafting, job performance assessment, and employee supervision, as well as team work management would clearly benefit from fully understanding this phenomenon. Doing so will serve to avoid knee-jerk reactions against or for hiring those who are deemed overqualified, and it will also contribute to making the best of a potentially bad situation for individuals and organizations.

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