Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **4** (2011), 240–242.
Copyright © 2011 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. 1754-9426/11

Overqualified Job Applicants: We Still Need Predictive Models

SAUL FINE
Midot, Ltd.

BARUCH NEVO
University of Haifa

Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, and Truxillo (2011) describe several research advances that have been made in recent years, from multiple disciplines, which afford us a better understanding of the frequency, antecedents, and potential consequences of overqualified employment. These advancements notwithstanding, from the perspective of personnel selection, the field of overqualification remains greatly understudied. Erdogan et al. acknowledge this and appropriately end their article with a number of unresolved issues and possible directions for future research. We would like to raise an additional outstanding issue that we believe is fundamental to both selection theory and practice, irrespective of the possible positive or negative outcomes of overqualified employment: the need for predictive models of overqualifcation among job applicants.

Job Applicants and Valid Constructs

The absence of predictive models for overqualification is aptly reflected in the title of Erdogan et al.'s focal article, ''Overqualified Employees: Making the Best of a Potentially Bad Situation . . .'' This title makes two important inferences regarding the predominant attention that has been given to this topic in the literature. First, nearly all the work on overqualification has focused on employees, rather than job applicants, and second, that overqualification is something to be managed, rather than necessarily prevented. In these regards, Erdogan et al. suggest intervention strategies for reducing the potentially negative effects of overqualification. Although we agree that management interventions could be of significant value for dealing with overqualification among employees, we would argue that such an approach may be likened to intervening with *under*qualified employees to reduce their negative outcomes.

Alternatively, another approach to dealing with the phenomenon of overqualification may be via the use of valid selection solutions for identifying overqualified job applicants. That selection models of this kind have not been well researched is perhaps related to the fact that in order to reliably decide whether or not to hire overqualified job applicants, one first needs to objectively define overqualification in terms of valid knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characterisitcs (KSAOs). Until now, objective measures of overqualification have been primarily offered in terms of overeducation and have thereby failed to include some of personnel psychology's more valid constructs of job suitability, such as ability and personality. Therefore, not only are existing measures of overqualification greatly reduced to single

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Saul Fine.
E-mail: saul@midot.co.il
Address: Midot, Ltd., 11 Ben Gurion St., Vita Towers, Bnei Brak 51260, Israel

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2011.01333.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

dimensions, but they are ironically based on some of the least predictive constructs of job performance available. If education, for example, is known to be a generally weak predictor of job performance (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), it is somewhat unreasonable to presume that *over*education would be a good measure for personnel selection (as demonstrated by some of the weak validity results in the literature; e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000; King & Hautaluoma, 1987). Moreover, an argument could be made that if we use KSAOs to measure job *under*qualification and job qualification, should we not use these same constructs to measure job *over*qualification as well?

Such was apparently the deciding rationale in the case of *Robert Jordan v. City of New London and Keith Harrigan* (1999), which Erdogan et al. present as a classic example of overqualification. In that case, Robert Jordan's application for the job of police officer was rejected for being overqualified after he scored 2 standard deviations above the mean on a widely used test of general mental ability. Outside of that case, however, overqualification is rarely described objectively in terms of high test scores. As a result, predicting the outcome of hiring individuals in such cases is still very unclear.

Objective Measures and Nonlinearity

As opposed to measuring overqualification objectively, the great majority of psychological research has measured overqualification as an on-the-job perception or attitude, referred to as *perceived overqualification*. Although perceived overqualification can be informative for studying overqualified employees, it is, de facto, inappropriate for assessing job applicants. Therefore, studies focusing on the outcomes of perceived overqualification are not necessarily applicable to personnel selection, without first showing their relationships to objective overqualification. What's more, without including objectively defined measures of overqualification, the relationships already reported between perceived overqualification and attitudinal or behavioral criteria cannot necessarily imply causality. Perceptions of overqualification, for example, can cause job dissatisfaction just as job dissatisfaction can cause feelings of overqualification, whereas objectively defined overqualification might provide an important reference point for measuring both. Accordingly, in terms of selection, perceived overqualification should most likely be treated as a criterion (or mediator), rather than a predictor. Indeed, when measuring overqualification objectively in terms of high test scores, Fine (2007) found that cognitive ability and openness to experience were predictive of perceived overqualification and that perceived overqualification was then associated with work dissatisfaction. Still, there are currently no real guidelines for incorporating these attitudinal outcomes into actual selection decisions.

Developing selection decision guidelines for dealing with objectively defined overqualified job applicants can be further complicated when trying to predict job performance. On the basis of what we know about the consistently positive validities for ability measures in predicting job performance, for example, an interesting conflict exists between science and practice. Although science has generally taught us to give preference to applicants with the highest test scores, in practice, hiring managers may reject such applicants for being overqualified (Maynard, Taylor, & Hakel, 2009). Resolving this issue requires carefully investigating nonlinearity in the predictor–criterion relationship. In other words, we may need to re-ask ourselves the classic question: Is ''more'' always really ''better,'' as described by our ubiquitous linear models? Or, at some point in the test score continuum, do higher test scores fail to yield higher (and possibly even lower) job performance, as suggested by nonlinear/overqualification models?

Of the theoretical models that Erdogan et al. describe, this question is best answered by person–job fit theory (Edwards, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2011.01333.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, while person–job fit models can be nonlinear, current methods for measuring job fit in selection scenarios (e.g., profile matching) do not generally distinguish between low and high scorers, as would be needed to study overqualification. A more direct examination of curvilinearity in the predictor–criterion relationship may therefore be required. Specifically, if the predictor–criterion relationship is wholly linear, then measures of job fit (or overqualification) would not offer anything new to traditional selection methods. Take for example, general mental ability, for which meta-analyses have long since shown negligible amounts of curvilinearity for predicting job performance (Coward & Sackett, 1990; Hawk, 1970). Accordingly, many people might argue that because of a strong linear relationship, there is little room to consider overqualification in terms of high ability levels. Nevertheless, Fine and Nevo (2007) reasoned that while the ability–performance relationship may not be significantly curvilinear overall, as correlation coefficients really only represent the *average* relationship between a predictor and a criterion (Lee & Foley, 1986), correlations can possibly mask individual nonlinear *components* in the distribution. Indeed, Fine and Nevo found very low curvilinearity overall ($R^2 < .02$) in the ability–performance relationships among several independent samples, as expected. However, when isolating the test score ranges, they found that the nonlinearity was concentrated in the upper deciles of the test score distributions, causing performance levels to ''ceiling-off'' at various points above the mean. Fine and Nevo defined overqualification empirically as the points at which the upperscale test scores began to deviate from the linear regression and concluded that overqualified applicants would have been overpredicted by linear models as a result.

Assuming that overqualified employees behave differently to otherwise well-qualified employees, the development of objective measures and predictive models of overqualification can have potentially far-reaching consequences on an organization's personnel selection processes. Further developments in this area may help to improve selection decision accuracies as well as provide more realistic estimates of selection system utilities. Future research should therefore continue to examine nonlinear components in predictor–criterion relationships as a means to objectively measure overqualification and predict subsequent behaviors. In the meantime, the field of overqualification is, as they say, ''still wide open.''

References

Bolino, M. C., & Feldman, D. C. (2000). The antecedents and consequences of underemployment among expatriates. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 21*, 889–911.

Coward, W. M., & Sackett, P. R. (1990). Linearity of ability–performance relationships: A reconfirmation. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 75*, 297–300.

Edwards, J. R. (1991). Person–job fit: A conceptual integration, literature review and methodological critique. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 6*, 283–357.

Erdogan, B., Bauer, T., Peiró, J. M., & Truxillo, D. M. (2011). Overqualified employees: Making the best of a potentially bad situation for individuals and organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 4*, 215–232.

Fine, S. (2007). Overqualification and selection in leadership training. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies, 14*, 61–68.

Fine, S., & Nevo, B. (2007). A phenomenon of overqualification in personnel psychology. *International Journal of Testing, 7*, 327–352.

Hawk, J. (1970). Linearity of criterion-GATB aptitude relationships. *Measurement and Evaluation in Guidance, 2*, 249–251.

King, W. L., & Hautaluoma, J. E. (1987). Comparison of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and performance of overeducated and other workers. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 127*, 421–433.

Lee, R., & Foley, P. P. (1986). Is the validity of a test constant throughout the test score range? *Journal of Applied Psychology, 71*, 641–644.

Maynard, D. C., Taylor, E. B., & Hakel, M. D. (2009). Applicant overqualification: Perceptions, predictions, and policies of hiring managers. In O. T. Chen (Ed.), *Organizational behavior and dynamics* (pp. 13–38). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science.

Robert Jordan v. City of New London and Keith Harrigan. (1999). Civil No. 3:97CV1012 (PCD), United States District Court for the District of Connecticut.

Schmidt, F. L., & Hunter, J. E. (1998). The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin, 124*, 262–274.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2011.01333.x Published online by Cambridge University Press