

# Should You Hire Overqualified Workers?

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Recently, I was shopping for a new car. My dealer offered me one with a bigger engine than I wanted. I'll never drive over 70 MPH so I don't need an engine that can get me up over 100 MPH, but he says he can let me have it for the same price as the one with the other engine. Things are tough in the car business right now. Should I take it?

My outsourcing vendor offered to staff our team with only level 2 agents, instead of the combination of level 1 and level 2 we are getting now, if we renew the contract for another year. He'll do it at the same price. Is there any reason I shouldn't accept his offer?

Clearly the answer in both cases is to accept the offered improvement. I will get more for the same price. Who wouldn't see that as a good idea? Wouldn't we all jump at it? Then why are some managers so reluctant to hire workers who have more talent and experience than what the position requires when they can get them for the same price?

## What Is An Overqualified Worker?

Generally when someone is labeled as "overqualified" it means they have a more extensive and more impressive resume than the hiring manager expected. Regardless of their ability and willingness to do the job, they frequently are screened out by HR and the hiring manager never sees the resume. That is unfortunate for a variety of reasons.

- HR may not know how much additional qualification is acceptable so they rule out everyone beyond the minimum requirements the hiring manager set.
- Individuals with more than the required qualifications never have an opportunity to demonstrate that they are the best candidate.
- The hiring manager spends time training and developing a less qualified person and passing up someone who could have done the job well almost from day one.

## Why Is An Overqualified Worker A Bad Thing?

Some managers are reluctant to hire overqualified workers for many reasons. Some are valid in some cases. Some are not.

- **Too Expensive**  
This is the most common reason given for not hiring overqualified workers. In some cases, this is valid. In most cases it is not. If the company posts the salary (or salary range) for a position, it is appropriate to assume that anyone who applies for the position is willing to do the work for that salary. Yes, a more experienced worker may ask for a higher salary because they know how much more they can contribute, but if that's the best salary you can offer, they will do the job for that salary and do it well.
- **Hard To Train**  
Many managers, especially new ones, worry that if they hire someone more experienced, that person will want to do things their own way rather than the way the manager wants. It is a question you need to get an answer from the candidate for, but that should be during the interview process, not used as a screening tool. If they want to do things their way, dump them and move on to the next candidate. However, if they say they can suggest things based on their experience but are certainly willing to follow company procedures, you have the best of both worlds. You may get a better way from them and, if not, they will do it your way anyway.
- **Skills Not Current**  
Again, this is something the manager should ask about in the interview process, not something to use as a screening tool. If anything, an overqualified worker probably has better skills because they have broader skills, both technically and inter-personally. You can teach them any new techniques they need to do the job and you can take advantage of their greater ability to multi-task and to get more done because of their ability to work across functional boundaries.
- **Will Be Bored**  
This may seem like a broken record, but rather than using this possibility as an artificial reason to screen out an overqualified worker, this is something the manager should ask about during the interview. And as you will see in the Overqualified Worker Grid below, sometimes bored is a good thing.
- **Will Leave When Things Improve**  
Yes, they may leave when things improve, but so will other workers. It is up to you as the manager to make them feel appreciated and motivated so they, and their knowledge, will stay with you after things turn around. A Gen Y friend of mine, who currently manages a small team, pointed out that his peers expect to change jobs 20-30 times in their careers. An overqualified worker may actually be a more stable, long-term choice.

## Fit This Into A Decision Matrix

There is a grid on the next page that compares manager's skills against workers motivation. This simple four-square matrix can help you decide whether to hire an overqualified worker. While this grid is shown as two types on each axis, there is actually a range from one side to the other.

### The Decision Matrix

The grid at the bottom of this page compares manager's skills against workers motivation. This simple four-square matrix can help you decide whether to hire an overqualified worker. Remember that in order to hire the best candidate you will need to get some of these overqualified workers past HR's screening, but with an understanding of this matrix you will be able to do that.

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### Overqualified Worker Types

What type of an employee the overqualified worker is will only come out during the interview process. The manager must ask the right questions and carefully listen for the answers.

A senior manager friend of mine calls employees "barn burners" and "place holders". She is making the break in the wrong place. Some employees take a job only as a means to the next job. These people are continually driven for more. In the matrix I label them as "employee wants promotion", but in many cases they are "employee has to have a promotion now". These are good or bad depending on your management skill as we will discuss in the next section.

Most employees are just happy in their job. They would be happy to take a promotion if it came along, but they aren't going to push anyone out of the way to get it. These are always good overqualified workers to hire.

### Underqualified Managers

The biggest obstacle to hiring overqualified workers is underqualified managers. Someone who got promoted beyond their skill level just tries to hide. They don't want to make mistakes or to be noticed. They don't want anyone in their team to do anything because it might reflect badly on the manager. These managers don't stop to consider that something done well by their team reflects well on them. They are too busy protecting their own job. These are the managers who hope HR screens out the overqualified workers because they are scared of them.

Good managers, however, welcome overqualified workers. They know that in order to get promoted, they have to have someone ready to take over their job. These managers welcome overqualified workers because they know these employees will make them look good and are a stepping stone to their own promotion.

Good managers also know that to get promoted, their team must produce beyond expectations. An overqualified worker, even if only for a year or two, can make major contributions both in terms of personal output and of mentoring other employees in the group. That's why good managers hire overqualified workers.

Early in my career I worked for a great manager. RER lead the team and everyone contributed. He hired one and then another individual who I thought were too old, too overqualified. Both were extremely motivated and extremely capable. I learned a lot form both of them. The team did very well. Morale was high. The manager was promoted to Vice President and his career just kept going.

Unfortunately, RER was replaced by BLP. BLP was in over his head and spent more effort holding down the people on his team than he did in leading the team forward. Morale plummeted. Productivity dropped off. I couldn't take the inactivity so I left. BLP's career ended in that job.

### The Bottom Line

Good managers hire the best workers they can afford. They often hire overqualified workers. They aren't afraid of workers who might be older or smarter or more experienced. They manage the skills of their employees to help the team produce at its best level. That gets these managers promoted. Be RER not BLP and you will go far.

### Overqualified Worker Grid

		Manager's Skill	
		Manager wants to be promoted	Manager protecting own job
Worker's Motivation	Employee wants promotion	<b>A - Hire Overqualified</b>	B - Don't hire overqualified
	Employee happy in the job	<b>C - Hire Overqualified</b>	<b>D - Hire Overqualified</b>