

“The “Overqualified” Lie

The unfairness and injustice of "the overqualified lie" is one of those issues that doesn't seem all that important to you when you are less than 30. It starts to appear as a speck on the horizon when you when you are under 40. But by the time your 45th birthday hits you square in the face, darn if it suddenly become one of the greatest evils and most prejudicial staffing practices — and certainly one that needs to be "stamped out" today!

"It is odious and foul to deny mature talent from finding a rightful place in the workforce. And now that it effects me, boy is it evil! Quick, when is the next 10k walk to end age discrimination? SIGN ME UP! Do we get T-shirts?"

For those of us who have been fortunate enough in their lives never to have experienced any pathological form of prejudice, bias, profiling, or unfair hiring practices based on something about us other than our qualifications to do the job, age is the great equalizer. It makes victims of us all.

You may have a smug little smile today about the "non-issue" of age discrimination. But just put a reminder in your Palm Pilot for the day before your 45th birthday and see if you still consider this a "no biggie."

To me, the ongoing practice of age discrimination is as foolish as it is unethical and illegal. Disqualifying potential talent for non-talent-based reasons is a sign, first of all, of poor recruiting standards and philosophies, and secondly, of an ineffective or corrupted HR/staffing department. I object to the practice for moral reasons, but I also am angered by the perpetuation of something that is so outright illegal and yet quietly tolerated by my own profession.

That it still persists at all is a real conundrum:

- The number of companies offering pensions is diminishing, so being "saddled" with somebody who will stay to "get their 20" is no longer an issue. No harm in risking vesting if there is nothing with which to be vested in.
- The salary increases that occurred in the 1990s for entry- and mid-level personnel compressed the salary ranges closer than ever before, making a senior hire with twice the experience — but only a 25% markup — a real steal.
- The mature worker with fewer home-based issues has a better attendance record and tends be "more on the job" when on the job, as opposed to a young mother or young father concerned about day care, baby sitters, nannies, and the other issues of younger parents and those who still have another end of a candle to burn.
- The mature worker, with fewer options and opportunities, is less likely to be a high turnover risk and is therefore a worthwhile investment in training. You will get a better return and a more current workforce.
- Older employees tend to be the more stable element of your workforce from a retention point of view due to their realistic career goals. Their dreams of

being the youngest CEO are set aside by the desire to keep a good job through balanced and consistent work.

- The diminishing workforce will put those companies able to attract and keep a larger percentage of the mature workforce in a better position to meet their critical staffing needs for the next decade.
- As the "pyramid" narrows, many highly qualified people who lack executive timber are still very capable and competent at the level they achieved. Lateral movement is not a sign of failure for those who have reached their peak level of efficiency.
- Some professionals either enjoy, or have accepted, their hands-on role in business, and excel at it due to either their love or acceptance of that level.
- With more mature workers interspaced in the company, there would be less need to develop and invent mentoring programs. Teaching by example is a function of a mature workforce.
- "Been there, done that" is a skill that comes with experience, also known as age. A company with a balance between its mature workforce and its new and rising workforce is co-enabling. The experienced can teach the lessons of time, and the new can teach new ideas and share the energy and optimism of the "not yet disappointed." Both sides get what they need most: "alternative experience and outlook" role models.

But there is another, even more compelling reason NOT to be identified as a "not mature workforce friendly" company: bad recruitment branding!

Don't kid yourself. The current lull in the staffing crisis is successfully obscuring the talent shortfall only from those with the inability to see anything but the patently obvious (in other words, the average corporate officer in HR/staffing). This current recession will end. The talent shortage will not. Be prepared or be caught by surprise.

With the current birth rate, one of the fastest growing domestic workforces in the U.S. will be the mature workforce. If you allow a managerial mindset to persist against hiring mature workers, you will not just be able to "click" a fix-the-problem switch when the crunch arrives and you cannot fill critical roles.

Yet why do so many in the profession turn a blind eye to "the overqualified lie"?

"We are not rejecting mature workers out of hand because they are old. It isn't because of a prejudice against workers over 45! I am not engaging in some latent physiological pleasure of getting even with my mother or father by rejecting mature workers. No, no, no...that would be unethical, immoral, illegal, and just too weird. Rather, we reject these candidates due to the fact that they are...er...ah...overqualified. Yeah, that's it! They are overqualified. Pure and simple."

So exactly what does overqualified mean? You don't want employees with greater skills?

Let's put that theory to the test:

- Would you rather spend \$10 on a hamburger or \$12 for filet mignon?
- Would you spend an extra 10% to upgrade your auto purchase from a Mazda Protégé to a Nissan Maxima?

- If you could have twice as much cubic feet in your home for 10% more in price, and benefit from the increased equity, would that be good?
- Would you pay a little more for twice the experience in a future worker? If they were under forty? If they were over fifty?

In business we always look to increase the advantage of any dollar spent, except when it comes to talent. We all jump at the chance to buy "two for one." However, we routinely fail in our duty as officers of the company to do our best to locate and acquire the best possible talent for the dollar spent when we permit age discrimination, thinly veiled, to survive as a corporate policy or ignored common practice.

The reasons usually attributed to not hiring the overqualified are not in and of themselves necessarily bad ones, unless of course you ASSUME them to be true due to the candidate's age and not due to an issue revealed in a screening process or an interview. There are good and professional reasons to not hire unqualified candidates that are both objective and subjective in nature, but none of them are the direct result of age.

If your managers reject mature workers due to personal prejudices against the mature worker or their uneasiness managing someone who reminds them of their mother or their father, what should worry you most is that there is no such thing as a "little prejudice." You either are prejudiced or you are not. If you or your managers have no issue refusing fair consideration to the midlife and mature worker, where do you stand on persons of color? Female executives? The handicapped? Single mothers? Where do you draw the line between acceptable inappropriate behavior and unacceptable inappropriate behavior?

The poet tells us, "In youth, we mock the things we are destined to be." Think about that the next time you hear that familiar song: "Happy birthday to you / Happy birthday to you / Your another year older / So your career is over too."

Have a great day recruiting!

This article originally appeared in "Electronic Recruiting Exchange".

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