

When job seekers are 'overqualified,' gender bias may come into play

January 31 2022, by Emerson Dameron and Chrisitne Clark



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When you're looking for a job, any number of factors can work against you. When you're passed over for a job you seek because you're told you're "overqualified" it may be initially flattering, but it's most likely not what you want to hear. But does being labeled as "overqualified" keep you from getting the job? According to new research from the University of California San Diego's Rady School of Management, it may depend on your gender.

A new paper published in *Organization Science* reveals hiring managers are suspicious about overqualified male candidates' motivations; they're deemed "flight risks" and passed over for fear that they'll decamp for better opportunities. But overqualified women are more likely to be hired despite their excessive qualifications. Hiring managers make assumptions about overqualified women that reduce concerns about flight risk; for instance, they may assume overqualified women are leaving their previous roles due to gender discrimination.

"Our research suggests that overqualified women and sufficiently qualified men will tend to be hired for the same jobs and ranks," said Elizabeth L. Campbell, assistant professor of management at the Rady School and lead-author of the study. "This means female employees will be systematically more qualified than men who work in the same roles. Generally speaking, this means women aren't getting the same return-on-investment for their qualifications compared to men and that women are likely to end up with jobs below their qualification level, relative to men. It also suggests firms might not be hiring women for positions that fully utilize their expertise and experience, which isn't good for the firm's performance in the long run."

In conducting research for the paper "He's Overqualified, She's Highly Committed: Qualification Signals and Gendered Assumptions about Job Candidate Commitment," Campbell and co-author Oliver Hahl of the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University designed experiments to make comparisons across equivalent candidates. The candidates' qualifications were adjusted in terms of work experience and current rank. This creates two types of candidates: the "sufficiently qualified candidate," with only the necessary qualifications and the "overqualified job candidate," with more skills, experience and other qualifications beyond what the job requires. Hiring managers evaluated profiles of job candidates and assessed their fit for an open position. Sufficiently qualified and overqualified candidate profiles were identical except for having either a stereotypically masculine or feminine first name.

"Gender neutral names and non-binary candidates were not incorporated into this [study design](#) to reduce the complexity of this initial experimental examination, although this is an important direction for future research," Campbell said.

Campbell and Hahl's study focuses on how hiring managers evaluate candidates. "Research shows that job candidates are evaluated on two main dimensions: their skills and qualifications and their commitment to applying those skills to benefit the firm," Campbell said. "Firms want to hire job candidates who are highly capable and likely to be successful in the position. But firms also want candidates who will be committed to helping the firm succeed over the long term."

But hiring managers don't have all the information they need or want when evaluating candidates. "Hiring managers make inferences about candidates' capability and commitment based on limited information," Campbell said. "An overqualified job candidate might check the box on capability, but it's not as obvious to hiring managers if they check the

box on commitment. This prompts them to think about the motivations and we find evidence that the assumptions they make about candidates' motivations differ based on gender."

When making decisions in uncertain situations, people tend to fall back on unconscious biases and stereotypes without realizing it. Hiring managers are no different. "Our paper is focused on understanding the process of evaluating job candidates and how it is influenced by gender bias," Campbell said.

The finding that surprised the researchers was the difference between how hiring managers rationalized decisions to hire overqualified women but not overqualified men.

"Hiring managers thought overqualified men would feel that they're 'too good for this job' and leave as soon as something better came along," Campbell said. "But they didn't have this concern with overqualified women for two reasons. First, they fell back on gender stereotypes about women valuing relationships more, which quelled concerns about flight risk. Second, they rationalized overqualified women's motivation and guessed they would be willing to take a relatively lower ranking position in a new firm because they're trying to leave a company that has unfair barriers to their advancement."

These findings suggest organizational initiatives focused on increasing awareness of [gender discrimination](#) might not be sufficient to eliminate gender bias from hiring decisions.

"Our evidence shows hiring managers had women's possible experiences with discrimination in mind," said Campbell. "And yet we still observed overqualified women and sufficiently qualified men are likely to be hired for the same [jobs](#). This means inequality is perpetuated despite it being at the forefront of some people's minds."

The authors conclude that systemic changes to hiring processes may be necessary to mitigate the effects of [gender](#) bias in hiring.

"We find women need to have more qualifications than what is necessary for a job which is consistent with evidence documenting [women](#)'s relatively slower ascent up the organizational hierarchy compared to men."

More information: Elizabeth Lauren Campbell et al, He's Overqualified, She's Highly Committed: Qualification Signals and Gendered Assumptions About Job Candidate Commitment, *Organization Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2021.1550](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1550)

Provided by University of California - San Diego

Citation: When job seekers are 'overqualified,' gender bias may come into play (2022, January 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-job-seekers-overqualified-gender-bias.html>

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