

How to handle a job rejection for being overqualified

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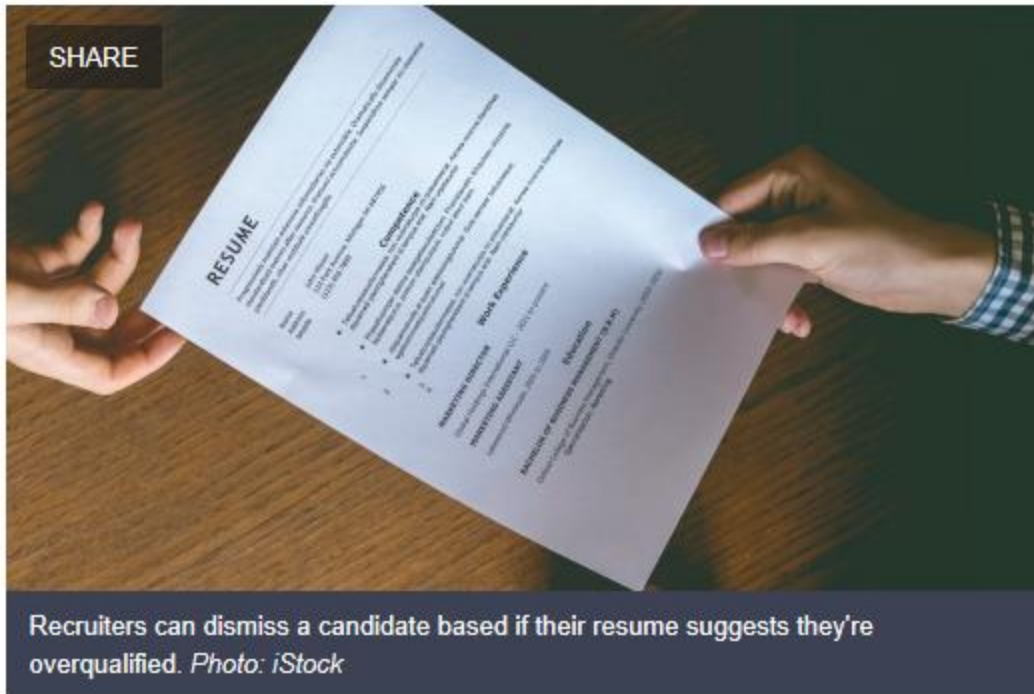


When your skillset works against you. *Photo: iStock*

Held senior positions in the past but now struggling to get another one, even a few rungs down the ladder?

It's a narrative that's all too familiar to many one-time high fliers finding themselves locked out of lower level opportunities they'd be happy to accept, because they're deemed to be overqualified.

So, how can those who've enjoyed considerable career success in the past convince recruiters and employers they'd be willing to settle for more modest roles, responsibilities and remuneration?



Back to basics

With difficulty, says Nicholas, a 50-year old, Oxford-educated investor relations specialist who's trying to do just that.

Formerly a partner in a Sydney based private equity firm, he raised more than \$US2 billion for the firm over a 16-year period. When the business hit the rocks in 2017 he began looking for another full-time gig but has found himself at a disadvantage to other, less well credentialed candidates.

"In the private equity industry, you don't get too many people who have raised such a large amount of money and raised it overseas, as opposed to from the Australian superannuation industry," Nicholas says.

"So, I'm constantly getting feedback saying, 'wow, you're too senior for this'."

A cut below, a step ahead

He's secured two short-term contract roles, one via a recruitment company, the other through his network, but would prefer the stability of full-time work.

Although he'd be happy to take one of the many interesting, smaller-scale roles he's applied for and is sanguine about the prospect of a pay cut – "I'm not financially strapped so I'm not really out to try to get the biggest salary I can get. What I want to get is something that is as challenging as what I used to do, intellectually" – getting the opportunity to put his case to prospective employers has been a challenge.

"I really haven't had that chance anywhere," Nicholas says. "I've wondered, how do I do that because it is a funny one, where you say, 'I used to do this...but I'm more than prepared today, to just sit back a bit and help out.'"

The interview process

Human resources specialist Karen Gately says executive candidates are behind the eight ball if they apply for positions less exalted than those they're held in the past.

Typically, they'll have two hurdles to overcome – securing the interview and convincing their prospective employer they're genuine about committing to the role and not merely looking to use it as a stepping stone back into the big league.

"Recruiters and HR departments will tend to cut you out straight away," Gately says.

"They might have 50 applications, they look at yours, why are you going backwards, what's that about, did they fail, it's all too complex... move on to the next candidate.

"In making this kind of transition, you're more likely to get those opportunities through your network, where you actually get the opportunity to tell your story around why you're going down the path you are."

Rather than hoping it won't come up, Gately says candidates should tackle the issue directly. She advises ringing recruiters and explaining your rationale for wanting to take a backward step and having a credible story to share with interviewers, should you make the shortlist.

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One suggestion is to contact the employer direct and explain your reasons for applying. *Photo: iStock*

Have a strategy

It's vital to identify the likely barriers and consider how you'll overcome them, agrees corporate psychologist and executive coach Virginia Mansell.

"It's about how you sell yourself in to get the interview and when you get the interview it's really saying, 'here's my current motivation, these are my aspirations, they've happened because of these reasons and, yes, I do have this high level experience but right now I know that I like doing the technical part or I need to leave at 5 o'clock to go home and want a lower responsibility job'," Mansell says.

"Whatever the reason is, it's about being able to read the assumptions that the customer is [making] and addressing them one by one."

No bites

For former construction industry executive Andrew Montgomery, attempting to do so has been a demoralising process.

He's applied for 350 jobs in the past year and believes his two decades of experience running multi-billion-dollar supply chains and international safety programs have gone against him in the majority of instances.

While he scored a couple of interviews for senior executive positions on par with his previous gig, companies advertising equivalent roles on a smaller scale have passed him over.

"Anything below my level didn't even get a bite – no one was interested," Montgomery says.

Find your niche

It's a frustrating experience, knowing you're capable of doing the jobs on offer to a very high standard, being prepared to lower your salary expectations significantly and not getting a look in, Montgomery says.

He recently began working as a leadership consultant, a role obtained via a connection in the cycling community, and says it's proving a good solution to the overqualification conundrum.

"The other things didn't work out but I've stumbled across the perfect solution for me," he says. "The work I'm doing is the work I enjoy the most. A lot of the heavy grind is largely removed when you consult in an area you enjoy."