

Science AMA Series: I'm Berrin Erdogan, professor of management at Portland State University. I do research on overqualified employees and their experiences at work. I am here today to talk about my experiences and my research. AMA!

BerrinErdogan¹and r/ScienceAMAs¹

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Abstract

Hi reddit! I completed several studies examining how feeling overqualified at work affects morale, well being, performance and retention. A recent paper I have forthcoming in Journal of Management examines how coworkers react to these workers. Companies often debate whether it makes sense to hire the overqualified job applicants, often struggle with the stigma attached to it, and employees deal with this demoralizing perception. I study over-qualification among new college graduates, as well as employees in various industries. Let's talk about it! I'll be back at 4 pm EST to answer your questions. AMA!

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BERRIN_ERDOGAN [R/SCIENCE](#)

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One thing that I hear frequently is that companies are less likely to hire overqualified workers because they feel that the worker will leave as soon as he finds something better. Is there any truth to this?

[kerovon](#)

Yes, there is some truth to this, but there is also some evidence that this is a conditional relationship. Past research has shown that when employees perceive themselves as overqualified, they are more likely to search for a new job. Those who are objectively overeducated for their jobs also are likely to change jobs more quickly. Finally, there is a positive correlation between perceived overqualification and turnover intentions. This could be because they are bored but also because they have the qualifications to actually leave.

My own research as well as that of others also has shown that there are conditions under which feelings of overqualification do not translate into higher turnover. For example, in a study conducted in a retail setting, we found that empowerment plays the role of a buffer. When employees have autonomy, and when they feel that they have the ability to influence their work environment (rather than being expected to take a passive, cog-in-a-machine approach to work), their turnover rate is no different from others. So ultimately it may come down to how companies treat their workers rather than their qualifications when they decide whether to stay or leave.

I was told at a job interview that If i put on the application that I made more at my last job than the new job is willing to pay, the new job will not hire me because they don't think I would work as hard for less.

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My question is how do I ever get a job in this environment.

[shroomigator](#)

Anecdotally, I am hearing of companies who no longer ask this question as it works both ways. It can be used to keep out someone who used to make more, and it could also be used to pay someone less than other comparable candidates just because it is a step up from a prior position. One option is to not answer this question, but also emphasize why you are interested in this position, such as being interested in the values of the company, what type of contributions you can make to the company etc.

How do you separate feeling overqualified from being overqualified? How do disorders like narcissism play into your work?

Also : Would you mind linking a few of your key papers in the post?

[lasserith](#)

My papers may be found here, under my personal website: <https://www.pdx.edu/sba/berrin-erdogan>

This is an interesting question – I am not sure if there is an objective reality of being overqualified. There are more objective looking metrics to be sure. For example, those in labor economics and education literatures often look at the difference between one's education level and education level required by the job. These metrics assume that everyone at the same education level is equally qualified (disregarding differences in content and quality of education) and also assume that everyone holding the same job title ends up performing the exact same duties.

Self ratings and other ratings of overqualification have moderate overlap. For example, in an ongoing project, my research team found a correlation of .35 between self ratings and coworker ratings of overqualification. Personality traits play a role (including narcissism), but also the individual may be in a good position to see their own skills and job demands as well. I would say that each metric has its place in the study of overqualification, with self ratings being more important to predicting job attitudes and turnover, and other ratings predicting selection decisions, performance ratings, and other people's reactions toward the focal person.

If employers fear having overqualified employees, is this what drives unfair performance reviews and overall treatment at work?

My experience has been that you can't make the bosses happy, regardless of performance, because they don't *want* to promote/ lose good people, or give out raises. The system seems very counter-productive.

[chevymonza](#)

I think this really depends on the company culture and manager's style/competence. Feelings of overqualification have the potential to affect how others treat the employee. In my own research I found that one contingency is the individual's political skills, with overqualification having no negative effects on coworker treatment of the focal employee when the employee reported having higher levels of political skills (such as the ability to get other people to like them or put others at ease).

I'm a PhD about to start applying to restaurants and coffee shops.

What would you say is the one key thing to help from falling into a vocational existential crisis?

What have others done to not feel like the last 4/6/10 years were a waste?

[Prof. Acorn](#)

What research shows that the negative effects of overqualification on attitudes and well being are not inevitable. At the same time, what you are describing is a particularly severe case, which is not often studied in academic research. What we know is that receiving emotional and social support from friends and family matters. Negative effects on job attitudes often can be buffered via job autonomy and having a high-quality work relationship with your manager. Oftentimes, holding a job that is several levels lower than your skill level leads to status deprivation, so having other outlets off the job where you can meet your status, competence and growth could potentially be helpful.

Hi Professor!

So, it is an interesting stigma because one of the things we are told as graduates or incoming graduates is that we need to be the absolute best candidate we can be which requires us to 1) take on more degrees and courseloads and/or 2) become interdisciplinary in our work and training to the point we lose focus.

At the end of the day, at the end of the day, I am given the impression that graduate students are forced to "overcompete" with each other which leads losers to be overqualified because they are forced to find jobs related to their dream positions but don't necessarily require all that expertise. Attach the stigma that those who take those jobs will quickly leave as soon as a better opportunity opens up, and you have a recipe for a lost-cause for many outgoing graduates nowadays.

Mentors are doing their best to train upcoming apprentice and junior scientists into being as competitive as possible for future positions. But I remember my boss saying to me that P.I.s need to start taking birth control. That they're training and overtraining students for jobs that just aren't there. I get the idea that science should be choosing the best and the brightest, but that doesn't fix the main problem: 1 dozen best and bright candidates, 1 position.

What do you think about this birth control idea? Given that many tenureship applications and other university obligations force the academic pipeline to remain flowing, would you think that this could be a reasonable fix if universities were to shift paradigms and essentially implement more rigid quotas on incoming graduates? I think this might shock many labs who rely on student research, but if it will essentially improve employment prospects for newly-qualified researchers, would this be a reasonable solution?

[feedmahfish](#)

Interesting perspective... I see the problem, but I see challenges in the idea of quotas. This would likely require cooperation by all universities in question. Students are also admitted to the program for jobs 4-5 years down the line, which may not be a static number. Finally, even though the overtraining may not lead to a dream job, it often still leads to a good job, and wages better than those with less training. I am not aware of research on this for the Ph.D. market, but there is research on whether a college degree pays off for those who end up in jobs that do not require a college degree. The consensus seems to be that it does; even though the college premium on their wages is less than those grads who end up in college level jobs.

Quite frankly, this is a subject I'd never thought of before reading your AMA. I'd like to learn more so I hope you don't mind me asking some amateurish questions :

1) What criteria do you use for measuring overqualification?

- 2) Can the feeling of overqualification be compensated for by specific privileges or benefits?
- 3) Is overqualification a self-diagnosis? If yes, how far can this be trusted to be objective?

[Oh-never-mind](#)

Oftentimes we use a questionnaire asking them about their perceptions that they have skills, abilities, education that are neither required nor utilized on the job. Yes, there are factors that seem to compensate. Two that I have identified in my own work are a sense of empowerment at work and having a good fit with the organization's values and corporate culture. We oftentimes examine self ratings, because they are typically a good predictor of employees' attitudes and behaviors. So in a sense they are not objective, but they are relevant to the outcomes we are interested in predicting.

I don't consider myself over qualified but consider the majority of people I work with as under qualified. This includes many extremely high paid consultants from a big name consultancy. It's my experience that everyone is just blagging it these days. Would you agree that skill levels now are lower than they have been historically for skilled professions?

[1s44c](#)

I think this may depend on the field and I am not aware of trends, but one reason for this may be that people have more depth in one skill rather than knowledge of multiple skills, which may make them very good at one thing but less adaptable to perform a variety of different jobs or transition across jobs.

Surely there are some people that desire to be overqualified in any given work environment for insecurity purposes, anxiety, etc? Leverage? Politics? Location? Family situation?

I believe there are many reasons beyond that. I have seen them personally in my company. I do general contracting. Largest, and most complicated job, is a 2-3 story educational facility around 40-50 million. We generally have superintendents who run those jobs without a college education, just decades of experience. We had a guy come in wanting a job who has never built a project under 100million. He specialized in large bridges, large civil projects, city building, etc. We initially refused him due to "being overqualified," but he came back and demanded a job after a few more job interviews. He wanted to settle down and stay in one area and raise his family without having to worry about moving. He also wanted to be noticed in a company. Now he builds a 45mil building every 2 years for us, gets paid well for it, and could do it all with a blindfold on. Him and another overqualified person in our company are the 2 most loyal guys we got.

[constructorofthings](#)

Great point! Not a lot of research on this, but scholars often talk about having choice in the matter as a contingency of whether feeling overqualified will be problematic or not. For example, if the person willingly goes into a situation due to a desire to spend more time with family or reduce stress inherent in their jobs, the outcome is different for them. What seems to have worked in your example is that the employee was able to articulate a great reason for their interest, which dealt with the problem of "would this person stay."

Bottom line: is it better for a company to hire someone who is overqualified, and not challenged by their job (perhaps even bored) or to hire someone underqualified but motivated, who grows into the position?

[dumandizzy](#)

How about hiring someone who is overqualified and motivated? It is very easy to think that someone who is underqualified will be motivated to grow and develop, but there is no guarantee for this. There are plenty of people who are underqualified and unmotivated!

The main risk when hiring a clearly overqualified person is that they will simply see this job as a stepping stone and will leave quickly. At the same time, they often have skills that are beneficial to the company. So the question is, whether the person has a good reason for wanting this job, whether the job can be expanded to absorb some of the skills of the person, how costly turnover is, and whether the person can make contributions to the company even if they are more mobile. Regardless of who is chosen, I think it is important not to assume that overqualified = will be bored and underqualified = eager to learn.

What was an unexpected conclusion that you came to as a result of your studies?

[cold fusion92](#)

What was surprising to me going into this field is the abundance of untested assumptions! For example, I heard a lot about overqualification being a detriment to job performance, or overqualification being a recipe for quick turnover, but none of those assumptions were actually tested and supported by research. Plus, what I learn every day is that the answer to any question on overqualification usually starts with “it depends...”

Have you looked at the role of race, class, gender and implicit bias in perception of overqualification? Some employers are likely to judge an employee not only on their education and experience, but also on how they look and sound. Moreover, discrimination might mean minority employees are more likely to be overqualified for the roles they have. It would be interesting to hear your thoughts/findings in this area.

[Convershaken](#)

I think this is an interesting research direction. I have not examined these in my own research. Some researchers theorized that oftentimes older workers will be judged as overqualified for the job. There is also some research that shows that immigrants typically have higher overqualification rates. Scholars explain this as trading extra skills for some skills they may not have, such as the absence of country specific experience may be substituted by surplus education. Understanding how managers and recruiters form perceptions of overqualification is definitely an interesting area of future research, but we do not have much at the moment.

What do you think is the worst thing about being over qualified and hiring those types?

[Endless_Vanity](#)

For the person who is overqualified, the feeling that one is deprived of the job one deserves is a disturbing feeling. We call this “relative deprivation.” Even though the job is objectively not bad, it is beneath the skill levels and qualifications of the employee. Giving the example of education, going to college creates expectations regarding what type of a job the person will have upon graduation with respect to status, salary, work environment etc. If the person ends up at a lower level position, they are thinking that they are deprived of something they should have had. It has negative consequences for well being, and health.

For the hiring organization, you get more skills, but someone who is more of a flight risk. Whether this is a problem depends on a number of things. My own research showed the degree to which the person is given autonomy, the degree to which the person fits the company culture, the degree to which the person will work with other overqualified employees (rather than being the token overqualified person) all matter. There is research that reveals some negative outcomes such as counterproductive work behaviors, but pretty much all this research shows that the negative effects of overqualification only emerge under certain specific conditions.

What sort of relationship, if any, has been noted between the employees feeling overqualified, and jobs being posted with high application requirements for basic positions? The classic joke is along the lines of "Entry level position, five years experience required." Is there just a glut of highly qualified people, and the resultant inflation in requirements for new hires has led to a glut of employees who feel overqualified?

I work with some extremely well respected senior-career professionals in major scientific fields, and many of them have said that they wouldn't be able to get their own job if they had to apply for it again today. As an early-career person, that's pretty demoralizing, since I know perfectly well that I'd be capable of handling some of these positions, and any position I can actually get will be one for which I am overqualified.

[keplar](#)

There is definitely some evidence that as the number of qualified people increase, some jobs may start inflating their entry-level qualifications. So some high school positions have become de facto college jobs because of the availability of college level applicants. I see the frustration, and unfortunately, there are no easy solutions. If most applicants have a lot of experience, choosing the person with no experience, even though the person could handle the job, may be a riskier position for companies. At the same time, the overqualification that results from skills inflation is not as detrimental to the well being of the person because the employee ends up working with similarly credentialed individuals (even when it is still overqualification, the feeling that you are not the only person in that situation seems to act as a buffer).

Should a worker who has been out of a job for a year accept a role that they're overqualified for? I'm particularly curious if this would make their resume look bad to employers.

[FOTW-Anton](#)

It depends. There are definitely long term career consequences to accepting a position for which you are highly overqualified. Labor economists argue that overqualification (mostly in the form of overeducation) can be a stepping stone for a better job, or it could be a trap that is hard to get out of. I am familiar with more research supporting the second perspective. Even when overqualified people change jobs, their next position may not be a better match. If there are advancement opportunities within the same company where you can demonstrate your skills and contributions, that would likely be ideal. If you are sure this position would be temporary, you would also need a way of keeping your skills fresh. Pursuing additional certification or volunteer opportunities where you still have the ability to develop and keep your skills current could be useful in your next job hunt.

Are there any personality traits or conditions that are overrepresented among those who feel overqualified (e.g. Asperger's syndrome)? If so, does this affect the interpretation of your research data?

[KorreltjeZout](#)

I am unaware of an Asperger's syndrome link. There are some personality correlates, such as openness to new experiences, boredom proneness (positively correlated with perceived overqualification), positive affectivity (-), neuroticism (+) and narcissism (+). None of these are so large that we could say overqualification is simply a reflection of one's personality though.

How do you adjust for personality types in examining qualifications? A type A personality will continually compete against others because they feel that's how they "win". It doesn't necessarily mean they are qualified for the work.

Meanwhile a type B is more relaxed and could be quite overqualified, but if they never say anything how does the employer know that they are undervalued?

[dweatherford](#)

Great question - there are studies examining the link between perceptions of overqualification and personality types, including narcissism, neuroticism, positive affectivity (being in a positive mood most of the time), among others. There does not seem to be a very high correlation between personality and perceived overqualification, so the research does not support the idea so far that perceived overqualification is a proxy for a personality trait. At the same time, I am not aware of studies looking at Type A, and I think it is an important one to study, so thank you for pointing it out!

Have you found a way what to do as an employee when feeling overqualified and therefore not challenged by your work, even if you work for a nice company and get a good payment?

Or with other words: what should someone do who is extremely bored by his job but likes the company, the colleagues, the boss and the money? Ask for a different kind of work is btw. also not possible. Are there any kind of tricks to counter the "bore-out" syndrome?

[Imolari](#)

This is a good situation to be in, if you have to be overqualified! There is task crafting. It is not possible in every job and every company, but instead of seeing a job as something fixed, you could look for ways of enlarging and enriching the job. This requires a good partnership with the manager, and a shared understanding that crafting a more challenging job for you is appropriate.

Assuming this is not possible, serving as a mentor could be helpful. Sharing your expertise with newcomers and other colleagues when needed is oftentimes motivational and counteracts some of the harmful effects of overqualification. Also, finding an off the job outlet for your additional skills where you can be creative and challenged is thought to be a good buffer.

What was the most surprising thing you've found during your research?

[thatsconelover](#)

What was surprising to me going into this field is the abundance of untested assumptions! For example, I heard a lot about overqualification being a detriment to job performance, or overqualification being a recipe for quick turnover, but none of those assumptions were actually tested and supported by research. Plus, what I learn every day is that the answer to any question on overqualification usually starts with "it depends..."

Have you considered the difference in *feeling* overqualified and *being* over qualified at a job? If so, what're your thoughts/findings?

[AndyBoyLettuce](#)

This is a tough question to answer - being overqualified may refer to more objective metrics such as whether one has more education than what was advertised among position requirements. These measures have their own problems, because they assume that all college degrees are the same, and all positions that require a college degree are equally demanding and engaging. So my own sense is that so called objective metrics have their own limitations. What is interesting is that a person's own perception of overqualification has moderate overlap of how other people see the person, with correlations around .35 in my own research. I think this makes sense, and self vs other rated overqualification are useful for predicting different outcomes. Self ratings are more relevant to explain the person's own attitudes and reactions to the job, whereas other ratings are more relevant in predicting decisions made about the person (such as whether to hire the person).

Do you have any advice to overcome the challenges that arise for both parties? (Ie the overqualified employee and the employer)

[abargis](#)

For overqualified employees who have to stay in their positions, trying to seek additional responsibilities in the form of task crafting, negotiating to expand one's autonomy, mentoring newcomers to the organization are some of the ways in which they could utilize their skills and avoid the worst implications of feelings of overqualification. For the employer who is managing an overqualified person, trying to absorb the additional skills and qualifications this person brings by providing opportunities for growth and allowing these employees to make an impact would possibly help manage the challenges.

What made you interested in this field? What is the most interesting or surprising thing that you can tell us that you have learned in your studies?

[BsbIButtsDriveMeNuts](#)

I was designing a study on leadership. The idea to study overqualification came as a result of my conversations with the HR director of the company, where they mentioned hiring many more college grads than in the past. I started reading on this topic and found out how little it was studied in management and industrial/organizational psychology at the time. This was in 2008 or so, so it was timely!

What I found most surprising is how little we actually know about this topic, and how confident hiring managers seem to be that we know a lot. This Reddit conversation is fascinating to me; even though I have been researching this topic for a while, I can see there are several questions I am answering with "you know, I am not aware of any research on this question yet..."

Do you know why companies think hiring an overqualified person is bad? They will benefit from the person's qualifications and experience yet they are worried about hiring? It doesn't make sense to me.

[physicsdudewa](#)

You are correct, and I would not say that all companies have a bias against hiring overqualified applicants. There is some qualitative work on this subject, and there are a few assumptions companies seem to be making: They would leave quicker, they would ask for more money, they would be a challenge to manage, they would act superior to coworkers, and there is something wrong with them (why are they interested in this position?). There are many jobs where hiring surplus skills at a discount would be great and these skills can be utilized for the benefit of the company. Other companies may be right to be sensitive to this issue (what if this person comes, leaves quickly and takes my clients with them?). I think it makes sense to treat overqualified applicants case by case, rather than avoiding them on principle.

Does intelligence quotient factor into being qualified/overqualified? Also, does ageism play a factor either older or younger? For instance, if someone is in a position that requires 10 years of experience and they have been doing that type of work for 15 years since age 18, but it is a position that the average person would assume is held by a 40 or 50+ year old (a director position of sorts).

[tranding](#)

I am not aware of studies examining the ageism-overqualification link, but it is part of conversations and discussions in this field. It has been theorized that how recruiters react to overqualified applicants may vary based on the age of the person.

Intelligence is an interesting topic. Most overqualification literature examines having qualifications such as education, training, experience and other skills that exceed job requirements. At the same time, there are a small number of studies that looked at "cognitive overqualification" which is having intelligence and cognitive abilities that exceed what the job requires and utilizes. It is moderately correlated with perceived overqualification, and is related to job attitudes and performance. So it is definitely an important concept, with implications for organizational behavior.

How do you define "overqualified"?

Is anyone who naturally excels necessarily overqualified? I'm thinking of people who are very smart and creative but don't hold any credentials.

[pongsirioput](#)

Overqualification is a type of underemployment. We usually ask if the person's skills, abilities, education and experience exceed job requirements. A related concept which is another type of underemployment is "cognitive overqualification". This is having cognitive abilities that exceed job requirements. When we discuss overqualification, we typically are not referring to cognitive overqualification, but it is a concept recognized and studied in the literature. It has positive effects on job performance, but negative relations to job attitudes.