

Avoiding the 'Age' Designation

January 28, 2012

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The longer you're out of work, the more transitioning professionals will wind up in the "age" trap.

Too much of a good thing is wonderful, said Mae West. But when you're sitting across the desk from a hiring manager who is 30-something, all they see is their "mother" or "father" or even a grandparent. Relevant work experience, advanced degrees and credentials - while prerequisites for many jobs - can disqualify as well as qualify. If a candidate previously held a role at a higher level than the one she's seeking, or her education or certifications exceeds a position's stated requirements, she's unlikely to pass the initial software-driven screen most employers apply before even looking at an incoming resume and are categorized as "over-qualified." This is the shorthand for "too old."

That's the evident meaning when a hiring manager or HR person says an opening is "too junior for you," when you know it pays four times what you made in your last job. (This happened to me a few times.)

Is It Really About the Money?

While most of us think that our previous high salary is the issue, money isn't really all that much an issue in the decision. Of course, age and years of experience map to a candidate's compensation requirement, hiring managers think more about culture and fit. They're more concerned with the harmony of the existing team, who might be significantly younger. That's why overqualified applicants whose compensation need is well within (or even below) a position's budgeted range might be rejected. This is the first time in the history of our country that four generations are in the workplace simultaneously. And they're not always getting along in a professional environment.

Washington Post personal finance columnist **Michelle Singletary** recently dubbed "over-qualified" as "a scarlet letter on (a) resume." In an April column headlined "Landing a Job When Your Resume's Too Good for It," she offers tips for avoiding "the 'O' word." Two of them are significant: "Simplify" your resume and don't act as if the role is beneath you. Ms. Singletary says "If you have an advanced degree such as a master's, don't list it" if the position doesn't call for it. She also advises you to "watch your attitude." If an employer feels that you see the role as beneath you, they worry that you'll up and leave once you find something more suitable. You're definitely not being considered!

Reinvent Yourself

If you enter the job search as the person who you WERE, it won't work in today's workplace and hiring practices. Forget about what you were, and change who you want to be to meet today's expectations. Forget your title. Forget your level of achievement at your last job. And forget how much you were paid. Focus on your strengths and seek roles that align with what you feel you're strong at. If you make your past the bottom line, you'll be the dinosaur in the job market. If you're older than 45, the workplace is expecting you to reinvent yourself anyway

We love to present ourselves as a list of accomplishments. Instead, make a list of what the potential employer NEEDS.

Will I Be Challenged?

Hiring managers love to ask the overqualified if the position will be challenging to them. Be prepared to answer all those sneaky questions that really point to your age:

- Are you too accomplished to be content with starting from ground-zero again?
- Are you just interviewing for this entry level job until you find something more challenging? Are you just looking for a paycheck that will support you until you find your dream job? Is this job just potentially to minimize the gap in your resume?
- Will you be able to fully participate in the team, even though you have years of experience? Or do you think you'll resent having to roll up your sleeves at this point in your career?

If you are fully prepared with well-crafted answers, you can overcome the real concern – your age. Remember, you still have youthful ideas.