

Overqualified candidate pool poses obstacles for job seekers, businesses

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BY MARGARITA BAUZA

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Shirley Hastings, 57, has her bachelor's degree in communications, yet she is doing data-entry work for a staffing company.

Mike Nickele, 55, has 25 years' experience in advertising, but he has resorted to freelance work because the laid-off father of two is struggling to find full-time work. Instead of sitting behind a desk, all of a sudden I have to learn how to get customers, how to get business. It's a real learning curve," said Nickele of Royal Oak.

In Michigan, a state with one of the highest jobless rates in the nation, it is a scenario that has become all too common: Workers are too educated and experienced for the jobs they do. For many people, job searches are becoming so frustrating that they are taking work out of their field or jobs considered subpar.

"When you hear unemployment statistics, they often underestimate the real level of the problem," said Ron Tracy, associate dean of Oakland University's business school. "Every situation is a little different, but at some level you need to put meals on table and pay rent." Hastings of Waterford said her résumé is filled with short stints doing clerical and data-entry work.

"It's been a bit of a revolving door," she said. "I know it probably looks terrible on my résumé. But I have to work. What am I supposed to do?"

Being overqualified is not just an issue for workers. Employers across the state are being inundated with résumés from job seekers hoping to land something to get them by. Not only do companies have to look at a large pool of highly qualified candidates, they have to also decide whether an overqualified person is a good choice.

Experts say companies have to weigh whether an overqualified candidate will be dissatisfied with the position, will be resentful about working out of his or her field or whether the person will leave the job quickly.

Chris Scharrer, executive director of Leadership Oakland, said she was not prepared for the flood of applications that came her way when she posted two part-time clerical jobs on online job boards. "We must have had 500 résumés, and maybe less than 1% had skills that were related to the job we were posting," she said. "We got cooks, butchers, a number of attorneys." Scharrer said she narrowed her search to people who had clerical skills. What happened next surprised her.

It became clear that many applicants had indiscriminately sent out their résumés. "I would call people and they acted like, what the heck did I want, who am I calling?" she said. After spending a considerable amount of time calling people back, she decided to hire two people she met at networking events. "They knew about your organization and they were a fit because their interests matched ours," Scharrer said.

Jill Jordan, a coach with Smart Women's coaching, said there is no such thing as being overqualified. "Those are assumptions," she said. "A person who is extremely confident can create a dialogue to highlight things that they've done. They can convey to an employer that they can get more bang for their buck." She added that it's all about how people feel about themselves. "If the person thinks the job is beneath them, they are not thinking of how they could do that job." Jordan said job seekers should articulate how they can adapt to new situations. They should be able to convince employers that they'll be an asset.

David Cassar, a human resources consultant with Capital H group in Troy, said there are ways employers can ensure candidates are the right fit. "You properly design deeply probing questions to determine why an individual would take a lower-level role," he said. Personality assessments also can show an employer how an employee finds energy during the workday and whether the employee is motivated by leading others.

Employees, on the other hand, need to convey that they have the skills and energy to do the job. "They should show employers that they're getting a good bargain, that you're willing to be flexible, that they'll bring experience and new points of view to the position," Cassar said.

Shalita Mann, a pastry chef trained at the Scottsdale Culinary Institute in Arizona, finally found a job in her field about a month ago after scratching by on jobs at a Meijer bakery and in customer service.

Mann, 35, of Clinton Township now works at the Wolfgang Puck restaurant at the MGM Grand Detroit casino. Her job search spanned almost two years. "It was very discouraging to come back and find there were no jobs here," she said.

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