



Overqualified human resources, career development experiences, and work outcomes: Leveraging an underutilized resource with political skill



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ABSTRACT

We argue in this paper that overqualified employees represent an underutilized human resource that has the potential to be leveraged in impactful ways to enhance both personal and organizational effectiveness. Our proposed framework suggests that if organizations provide opportunities for employees to engage in career development experiences (i.e., job crafting, informal leadership, mentoring relationships), politically skilled overqualified employees will capitalize on these opportunities and utilize their additional knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience to make unique contributions, providing valued human resources to the organizations. Furthermore, the politically skilled overqualified employees' capitalization on opportunities to undertake career development opportunities will result in positive outcomes for both the employees (i.e., increased job satisfaction and reputation) and the organization (i.e., increased organizational commitment). Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

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Employees who are overqualified for their jobs are by no means a new workplace phenomenon, but it is a phenomenon that has increased in recent years as a function of both economic and social issues. The problem that has emerged is that because of anecdotal, hear-say, and innuendo evidence (i.e., and nothing more in the form of empirical data), hiring managers' attitudes (e.g., Green, 2013) often have led overqualified employees to become an underutilized human resource. Scholars have proposed that many factors (e.g., attributes of the applicant, social categories, and labor markets) may lead to the categorization of an applicant as overqualified, and that if the job is not knowledge intensive, or if there is not an established internal career ladder, hiring managers are more likely to categorize the applicant as overqualified (Martinez, Lengnick-Hall, & Kulkarni, 2014). As a result, they often are passed over in hiring decisions by interviewers in favor of much less talented candidates (Bewley, 1999), and when they are hired, their talents are rarely fully utilized in the way they could be in order to translate into effectiveness.

A major problem that emerges is that, in many cases, when overqualified individuals get hired, their additional human capital is never fully exploited or leveraged in ways that can enhance their own value to the organization, or contribute to increased effectiveness of the organization (Allen & van der Velden, 2001; Watt & Hargis, 2010). We suggest that organizations take flexible approaches to job crafting, informal leadership, and mentoring, as these activities represent career development experiences for the overqualified that can turn them into a highly valued human resource. This is because, when given the opportunity to undertake such career development experiences, the overqualified may demonstrate valuable extra-role capabilities, realize great personal benefits, and, in turn,

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become committed to the organization. The theory and research implications of this conceptualization intend to promote further empirical research on this important topic. The practical implication is to transform the overqualified from a liability vestige of economic downturns, into a valued asset that when effectively leveraged, can be a source of competitive advantage to organizations.

1. Theoretical model and background literature

The model we propose focuses on a very select group of employees, the overqualified, about which there has been considerable debate and speculation among both scholars and practitioners in recent years. Unfortunately, the speculation regarding this group of employees has been more negative than positive. Thus, we make an alternative argument, that the overqualified can represent an underutilized and potentially valuable human resource, that when properly utilized, can represent key contributors to organizational effectiveness.

Acquiring human resource talent with the ability to perform beyond a pre-determined set of tasks is becoming essential to organizational success (Cascio, 1995). Several scholars have proposed that organizations rethink traditional job analysis (e.g., Singh, 2008), and recognize idiosyncratic differences that can inform the development of work role agreements beyond a simple pre-determined job description (e.g., Stewart & Carson, 1997). In Fig. 1, we suggest that the overqualified may bring additional knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience to the workplace, which we argue represent special talents that can be leveraged to assist others and the organization.

We propose that organizations relax their job descriptions and allow overqualified employees opportunities to ‘job craft’ in ways that take on more duties and responsibilities that become part of their jobs. Then, we suggest that the potentially strong knowledge and skill base of the overqualified can enable them to engage in mentoring relationships, thus providing education and learning experiences that transmit both declarative as well as procedural knowledge to others (e.g., Campbell, 1990). Then, we argue the overqualified’s potential additional knowledge and skill base can enable them to serve as informal leaders, again assisting less knowledgeable and experienced employees regarding specific education about job execution, as well as providing planning and guidance. Furthermore, it is the political skill of some overqualified that explains the relationships we discuss in the model, and which enables these individuals to both recognize contextual opportunities, and then to capitalize on them.

Informal leadership roles and mentoring relationships are related activities that both can provide a degree of pseudo-seniority for overqualified employees. In the case of mentoring relationships, the overqualified take on roles in which they would provide guidance and support to protégés (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). In the case of informal leadership roles, the overqualified utilize their distinctive competencies and experience to encourage colleagues to follow (Hill, 2004). In both positions (i.e., mentoring relationships and informal leadership roles) the overqualified do not need to hold formal senior roles in order to provide guidance, transfer knowledge, and gain support from colleagues. The overqualified employees’ additional skills, education and experience provide them with the resources to capably take on these visible and influential roles, without formal promotion. However, we argue that it is the political skill of some overqualified employees that enables them, when encouraged to job craft, to recognize opportunities to utilize their additional skills and experience via mentoring and informal leadership, and succeed in these expanded roles (Wihler, Blickle, Ellen, Hochwarter, & Ferris, in press).

This set of activities (i.e., job crafting, mentoring, and informal leadership) we construe as proactive career development experiences that, when properly implemented, can ultimately result in both positive individual and organizational outcomes. The politically skilled overqualified employees’ success throughout the proactive development experiences can positively affect their satisfaction with their newly expanded job responsibilities, and increase their reputation in the eyes of others. In turn, the overqualified’s increased satisfaction and personal reputation may lead to a greater commitment and attachment to the organization.

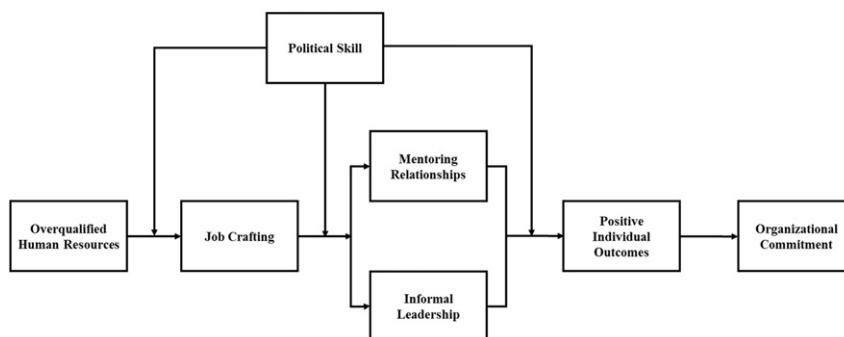


Fig. 1. Overqualification, career development experiences, and work outcomes.

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