

## Overqualification at Work: A Conceptual Integration of Predictors and Outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

Perceived overqualification (POQ), defined as employees' perception that their education, skills, and experience exceed job requirements, has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary labour markets. While prior research has largely examined either the antecedents or the consequences of POQ in isolation, a comprehensive theoretical integration remains limited. The present conceptual paper aims to develop an integrated framework that explains how individual, job-related, and organizational factors lead to perceived overqualification and how POQ subsequently influences employee attitudes, well-being, and behavioural outcomes. Drawing upon multiple theoretical perspectives, including Person–Job Fit Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, Equity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, the Job Demands–Resources model, and Conservation of Resources theory, this paper proposes key mechanisms through which POQ affects job satisfaction, performance, counterproductive behaviours, turnover intention, and career outcomes. By synthesizing fragmented findings into a unified framework, this paper contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding of perceived overqualification and offers practical implications for organizations seeking to manage overqualified employees more effectively and sustain positive work outcomes.

**Keywords:** POQ, Labour Markets, Equity Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Overqualified Employees.

### Introduction

The success of any organization mainly dependent on its workforce. It is widely known that when human resources are utilized efficiently to their fullest potential, organizations can achieve their objectives. In recent decades, managing employees has become more challenging for managers, as many staff members are overqualified for their roles. Overqualification is one of the major issues faced by organizations. It occurs when employees have higher levels of education, skills, and abilities than their jobs require, limiting the full use of their capabilities. Harari et al. (2017) dubbed overqualified employees as "big fish in a small pond." Overqualification is thought to be the root cause of low employment or high unemployment. (Demir et al., 2024;Ma et al., 2020). Alternatively, they may feel compelled to accept this condition in order to escape unemployment (Moreira Gonçalves Neto & Eduardo Borges-Andrade, 2024;Dar & Rahman, 2020).

Overqualification can be defined in two ways: objective and subjective. The objective view focuses on the actual mismatch between an employee's education, skills, and experience and the job requirements. The subjective view, known as perceived overqualification (POQ), focuses on how employees personally feel and recognize that they are more qualified than their job requires. (Pan & Hou,

2024, Maynard et al., 2006). Scholars increasingly emphasize perceived overqualification because it better reflects individuals' subjective psychological perceptions and personal differences (An & Zhang, 2024; Hu et al., 2015). These subjective evaluations form the basis of overqualification and activate employees' cognitive and emotional reactions, which effectively predict work attitudes and performance (An & Zhang, 2024; Liu et al., 2015). Overqualification has both positive and negative implications for employees and organizations. On the positive side, overqualified employees possess higher levels of knowledge, skills, and experience, which can enhance task efficiency, problem-solving ability, creativity, and service quality. Their surplus human capital may contribute to improved productivity, innovation, and knowledge sharing, particularly when jobs provide autonomy, skill utilization, and opportunities for job crafting. Organizations may also benefit from faster learning curves and greater adaptability among overqualified workers. However, extensive research highlights that overqualification more frequently produces negative outcomes. Employees who perceive themselves as overqualified often experience feelings of skill underutilization, boredom, frustration, and relative deprivation, which reduce job satisfaction, work engagement, and organizational commitment. These negative psychological states can increase turnover intentions, counterproductive work behaviors, and emotional exhaustion, while weakening motivation and job performance over time. Additionally, overqualification may hinder career development and create interpersonal tension in the workplace.

Although sociologists, labour economists, and education researchers have studied overqualification for many years (Erdogan et al., 2017), it is still a relatively new topic in organizational behaviour and human resource (HR) management. The primary objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the literature related with predictors and outcomes of overqualification which has expanded substantially over the past decade, in order to encourage future research. The integrated pattern of relationships examined in this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

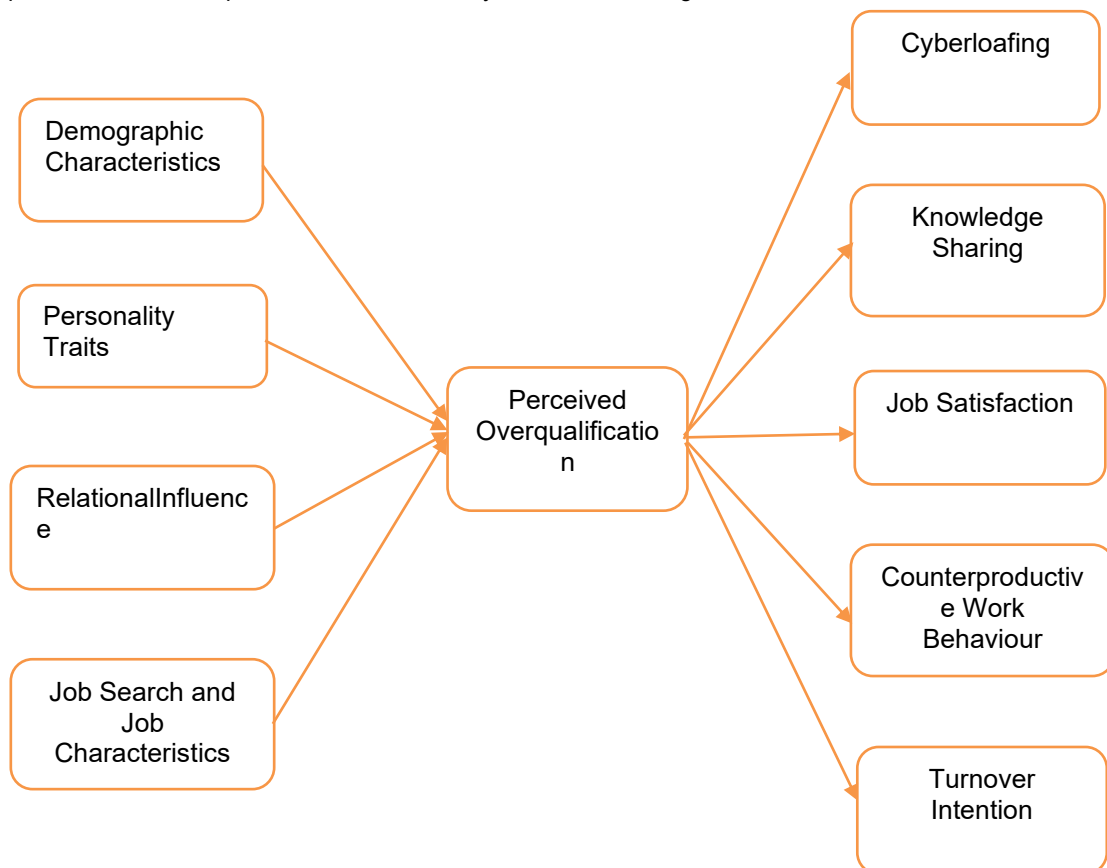


Figure 1

### **Predictors of Overqualification**

This issue can be examined by considering why individuals accept jobs for which they are overqualified and the motivations underlying their acceptance of positions below their capacity. On the one hand, individuals may take such jobs to avoid unemployment due to a lack of suitable employment opportunities or because of mobility constraints, such as commuting difficulties or caregiving responsibilities. On the other hand, from an individual choice perspective, work is multidimensional, and preferences for certain job attributes may lead individuals to accept positions below their qualification level in exchange for other valued features, such as work–life balance, job security, full-time employment, or lower work intensity. Additionally, some individuals may accept overqualification temporarily to gain work experience, receive on-the-job training, or develop specific skills and competencies they currently lack. In these cases, overqualification may be transitional rather than permanent.

#### **Demographic Characteristics:**

Both education and tenure Overqualification at Work shown substantial relationships with perceived overqualification, despite a meta-analysis of the literature suggesting that age and gender are unrelated to perceived overqualification (Harari et al. 2017; erdogan& Bauer,2021). As anticipated, there is a slight correlation ( $\rho = 0.08$ ) between perceived overqualification and greater education. To put it another way, certain workers who have completed more formal education tend to believe that they are overqualified, but this perception is not unique to these workers. According to Harari et al. (2017), perceived overqualification was negatively correlated with employment duration, with more recent hires feeling more overqualified. This is an amazing observation that could indicate that new degree holders' perceptions of overqualification are momentary. It is conceivable that recent college graduates with little to no experience can start their first employment with high expectations about how much they will be able to use their qualifications and talents, as well as overconfidence in their own abilities. On the other hand, since new hires are still in the early stages of adjustment, organizational insiders could refrain from providing them with many opportunities to carry out duties where they can fully utilize their skills. Lastly, it is feasible that new employees are more likely to recognize that they are overqualified and take action to resign in order to secure a more suitable position(erdogan& Bauer, 2021).

#### **Personality Traits**

Perceived overqualification is impacted by individual personality qualities, just like other workplace perceptions. According to research, this perspective is influenced by neuroticism, narcissism, and frustration(Wibowo et al., 2025; erdogan& Bauer, 2021; wiegand, 2023). People with high levels of neuroticism are more likely to experience stress and discontent, which increases their likelihood of believing that their employment does not fit their skills(Wibowo et al., 2025;liu& wang, 2012). Narcissistic people typically have an exaggerated perception of their skills, which makes it more likely that they would believe their credentials surpass the requirements of their jobs(Wibowo et al., 2025;erdogan& Bauer, 2021). This is in accordance with research by Wiegand (2023), who found that people with high narcissism levels are much more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (cwB) when they feel overqualified.

#### **Relational Influence**

Alfes et al. (2016) proposed that perceptions of overqualification may emerge from employees' interpersonal relationships within their work groups. Using two samples from the Netherlands, their study provided evidence that leader–member exchange (LMX) quality and team cohesiveness were negatively associated with perceived overqualification. However, the cross-sectional nature of the research limits causal inference and leaves open the possibility of reverse causality. Nevertheless, from a theoretical perspective, high-quality relationships with supervisors and team members are likely to enhance opportunities for skill utilization, thereby diminishing perceptions of overqualification(Erdogan & Bauer,2021).

#### **Job Search and Job Characteristic**

Research by Liu and Wang (2012) demonstrates that persons who engage more proactively in career planning and job hunting generally report reduced levels of perceived overqualification. This is also affected by work features, since more complicated positions frequently offer enhanced opportunity for people to use their skills and expertise. Conversely, when positions lack adequate challenge or complexity, employees may perceive themselves as unable to effectively utilize their abilities, leading to heightened feelings of overqualification (Wibowo et al., 2025; erdogan & Bauer, 2021).

### **Outcomes of Overqualification**

Overqualification refers to a situation in which employees possess higher levels of education, skills, or experience than their job requires, making it a growing concern in contemporary labour markets. This mismatch affects not only employees but also organizations, as it can lead to several negative workplace outcomes. A substantial proportion of workers across different countries perceive themselves as overqualified, highlighting the widespread nature of this issue. Therefore, understanding how overqualification influences job-related outcomes is essential for organizations seeking to improve employee performance, engagement, and satisfaction. Research consistently indicates that perceived overqualification is negatively associated with job satisfaction. Employees who believe their abilities exceed job demands often experience dissatisfaction because their skills are underutilized. This mismatch may generate feelings of boredom and frustration, as tasks fail to provide sufficient challenge or personal fulfillment. Such emotional reactions can reduce employee engagement, weaken organizational commitment, and diminish motivation. When employees feel that their capabilities are wasted, they are less likely to exert additional effort, which ultimately undermines productivity and overall performance.

Perceived overqualification also influences workplace behaviour and interpersonal dynamics. Employees may respond to boredom and frustration by engaging in counterproductive behaviours that harm organizational functioning and workplace relationships. These behaviours often emerge as emotional responses to negative work experiences and may contribute to a toxic organizational climate, affecting both individual morale and team effectiveness. A strong relationship exists between overqualification and job boredom. Repetitive and unchallenging tasks intensify disengagement when employees perceive a gap between their qualifications and job requirements. Boredom increases the likelihood of deviant behaviours as employees attempt to cope with unpleasant work conditions. This cycle of mismatch, boredom, and negative behaviour presents a significant challenge for organizations.

Job crafting, which involves employees proactively modifying aspects of their work to better align with their strengths and interests, can help reduce the negative effects of overqualification. By reshaping tasks, relationships, or perceptions of work, employees may regain a sense of meaning and satisfaction, thereby lowering boredom and disengagement. Encouraging job crafting allows employees to take ownership of their roles and enhances their overall job satisfaction. Managerial support also plays a crucial role in addressing overqualification. When managers recognize employees' abilities and provide opportunities for growth, development, and meaningful contribution, employees are more likely to feel valued and motivated. Open communication and supportive leadership can reduce dissatisfaction and lower the risk of negative behaviours. Overqualification further affects employees' psychological well-being. Prolonged feelings of underutilization may generate stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, reducing overall life satisfaction and work happiness. Organizations that acknowledge these challenges and implement supportive practices can promote healthier work environments and improve long-term employee well-being and productivity.

### **Knowledge Sharing**

By assisting their coworkers through knowledge sharing, overqualified employees can also have a good impact on their colleagues. Employees that acquire specialized knowledge about their job duties contribute to the organization's growth and success (Khan et al., 2022; Jayasingam et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). Employees that are overqualified continue to assist others and provide them with the skills, information, and expertise they need. Employer are also provided opportunities to use their skills and expertise to the fullest extent possible (Li et al., 2021b). Additionally, overqualified employees sometimes feel that they should be paid more because they invested a lot of time, money, and effort in obtaining their certifications (Khan et al., 2022; Erdogan et al., 2020a). Erdogan and Bauer (2009) claim that this feeling of entitlement might lead to actions like hoarding information, where overqualified people suppress critical information as a means of disengagement or to preserve a perception of superiority in the workplace (Khan et al., 2025; Li et al., 2022). People who are overqualified frequently feel underused in their positions, which makes them unhappy. This discontent may result in a reluctance to share knowledge and a detachment from organizational objectives (Khan et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2023). Because they were not encouraged or motivated to share their extra knowledge and talents with their coworkers, organizations did not get profit from their overqualified personnel (Khan et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2022b; Li et al., 2021a, 2021b).

### **Job Satisfaction**

Perceived overqualification (POQ) has been widely examined in relation to job attitudes, with research consistently showing that employees who feel overqualified tend to hold negative attitudes toward their jobs. Among these attitudes, job satisfaction is most frequently studied and is generally found to be lower among employees who perceive themselves as overqualified, across different cultural and national contexts.

This negative association can be explained through relative deprivation theory, which suggests that overqualified employees feel deprived of jobs or opportunities that match their skills and qualifications. When individuals believe they are not receiving outcomes they deserve, they are likely to experience feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration. In the workplace, such feelings often translate into reduced job satisfaction. Empirical evidence indicates that experiences of relative deprivation strongly and consistently predict lower job satisfaction across occupational groups.

### **Cyberloafing**

Cyberloafing is a new type of unethical behaviour in the workplace, because it violates the organization's work norms, uses the company's network and computer resources, and employees engage in private activities not related to work, leads to delays in work assignments and decreases in operational efficiency (Wang et al., 2025; Lim, 2002). It adversely affects the organization's finances, image, and growth (Wang et al., 2025; Ching and Thurasamy, 2017). Overqualified workers may reallocate their resources—such as time and energy—to other pursuits, especially during times of light workload, if they discover that their innate capacity for psychological development and self-realization cannot be fulfilled. Employees with POQ are more likely to indulge in cyberloafing due to the Internet's widespread integration into work and leisure. Because it is less noticeable and disruptive than other behaviors (such as conversing with coworkers, being late, or leaving early), this type of CWB, which includes activities like maintaining personal emails, online chatting, and shopping, is becoming increasingly prevalent at work. (Wang et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2022).

### **Counterproductive Work Behaviour**

The term "counterproductive work behaviour" (cwB) refers to intentional acts by employees that endanger the company, their coworkers, or other people in the workplace (Wiegand, 2023). According to research by Luksyte et al. (2011), workplace deviant behaviour (cwB) and perceived overqualification are positively correlated. People who believe their credentials surpass work requirements are more likely to act in ways that are harmful to the company. Yet, despite the fact that these people frequently exhibit objectively high performance, they frequently experience discontent, which makes them more likely to use cwB as a way to express their frustration. According to Erdogan and Bauer (2021), cwB may seriously impact businesses by increasing absenteeism, decreasing productivity, and harming their brand. Such harmful actions can disturb the workplace, lower employee morale, and harm organizational performance as well as the company's reputation (Erdogan & Bauer, t. 2021; Wiegand, 2023).

### **Task Performance**

Task performance constitutes the fundamental aspect of employees' duties, encompassing the work behaviors essential for the successful execution of their responsibilities (An & Zhang, 2024; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). However, inconsistent findings have been found in previous studies on the connection between task performance and perceived overqualification. Research has revealed a strong inverse relationship between task performance and perceived overqualification (Deng et al., 2018; Li et al., 2019; van Dijk et al., 2020). A substantial indirect positive association was discovered by Lee et al. (2020) between task performance via relative deprivation and task mastery and perceived overqualification. According to a meta-analysis, Harari et al. (2017) discovered that there was no significant correlation between task performance and perceived overqualification. This implies that the impact of perceived overqualification on task performance may have different conduction mechanism boundary conditions.

### **Turnover Intention**

Employees with high perceived over-qualification think they are "oversized and under-utilized" from a cognitive standpoint. As a result, they think it is challenging to find prospects for growth in their existing positions, which may cause them to consider leaving. An employee may become dissatisfied and believe that their present job is keeping them from realizing their goals if their expertise and abilities are not properly appreciated (Chen et al., 2021; Fine and Nevo, 2008). More precisely, researchers note that

people's employment positions have greater Intention to leave when they are more bored at work (Bochoridou & Gkorezis, 2023; Harju et al., 2014; Reijseger et al., 2013). Boredom at work is thought to be a contributing factor in the relationship between individuals' inclination to leave their jobs and their perception of being overqualified (Bochoridou & Gkorezis, 2023).

### Conclusion

Perceived overqualification is not merely a harmful mismatch between employee abilities and job requirements but a complex and dynamic phenomenon that can generate both negative and positive outcomes. This paper integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to explain how individual, job, and organizational factors shape employees' perceptions of overqualification and influence their attitudes, well-being, performance, and career development. The framework highlights that overqualification operates through cognitive, emotional, motivational, and relational mechanisms, and its consequences depend on how employees and organizations respond to it. By broadening the focus to include multi-level antecedents, diverse behavioural and career outcomes, and contextual boundary conditions, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of overqualification. It also emphasizes the need for longitudinal and multilevel research to examine its evolving nature. Practically, organizations can transform overqualification into a developmental opportunity by providing learning opportunities, supportive leadership, and transparent career pathways. Overall, the paper shifts the perspective from viewing overqualification as purely detrimental to recognizing it as a contingent state that can either hinder or enhance employee and organizational growth.

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