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CAREER COUCH

Overqualified? Don't Be Overwrought

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN
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Q. During the recession, you needed a job and wound up taking one for which you are overqualified. Although you were initially grateful just to have the work, you now feel bored and depressed. Is there any way to change that?



Chris Reed

A. Start by changing your perspective, says Caitlin Kelly, author of "Malled," a book based on her experience as a retail sales clerk after losing her job in journalism.

"Don't focus on what you're not getting but what you are getting," she says. "I may have been overqualified for folding T-shirts, but I was underqualified for selling, being patient and working attentively with a wide range of people. It doesn't matter what the job is — there are always things you can learn and skills you can develop."

Hilary Pearl, founder of the executive coaching firm Pearl Associates in Greenwich, Conn, says: "Tell yourself the current situation isn't the end of your career. Don't overdramatize the negative aspects but try to view the situation more philosophically: life is a series of phases, and this is one of them."

Consider that because you're overqualified, you may be able to learn or do things on the job that might not have been possible in a more demanding position, says Sarah Hathorn, a career acceleration coach and chief executive of Illustra Consulting in Atlanta. "You could invest your extra time in learning different aspects of the business," she says, "and teaching or mentoring others in the organization."

Q. Is it possible to make your work more stimulating and challenging, even if your job responsibilities aren't likely to change?

A. Yes. Seek tasks and responsibilities that force you to learn something new or to work harder. "You may be operating on autopilot right now, but chances are people above you are stressed," Ms. Hathorn says. "Offer to take things off your boss's plate and let him know which projects or tasks you want to learn more about."

Always frame your request positively, saying that you love new challenges, rather than

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complaining that you're bored and underused, says Stacy L. Ethun, president of the Park Avenue Group, an affiliate of the executive search firm MRI Network.

Look at the company's organizational hierarchy and find the person who has the job you'd like, then offer to lend that person a hand, Ms. Hathorn says.

Find a mentor who can help you understand the company's needs and ultimately help you move to a higher level, says Rebecca Weingarten, a career coach and co-founder of DLC Executive Coaching and Consulting in New York. In your down time, educate yourself about the company and its industry. "Read corporate information, analyst reports and related news articles," she says.

Ms. Hathorn suggests researching new tools or processes used by other companies that could save yours time or money. "If your boss incorporates your suggestions," she says, "it will make him look better and make you a more valuable employee."

Q. *Can doing things you enjoy outside of work make you feel better when you're on the job?*

A. Absolutely. Because your job isn't overly demanding right now, you have more time for things you like to do but may have neglected in the past, Ms. Kelly says. "Spend more time with family, take your dog on long walks, do volunteer work in the community or sing in the church choir," she advises. We tend to define ourselves by our job titles, she says, but keep in mind that you are more than just your job.

Challenge yourself outside of work by taking on something you've always wanted to learn, by going to the gym or by dedicating more resources to a hobby or a side business. "You'll be a happier, stronger person and that will be reflected in your attitude every day," Ms. Ethun says.

Q. *How can you tell whether it's time to look for a position somewhere else?*

A. If the organization isn't promoting from within — or if others have been tapped for positions for which you were well qualified — it may be time to look elsewhere. It could be that there is a lack of opportunity for your particular skill set.

You may also find that the company's culture or mission isn't a good fit, Ms. Weingarten says. Ask yourself whether you like the way the company is run and the direction in which it's moving. "Can you see yourself there five years from now?" she asks.

Q. *How do you leave in a way that acknowledges your gratitude to the company and doesn't engender resentment?*

A. Give as much notice as you can — a month, for instance, is more considerate than two weeks, Ms. Pearl says. Meet privately with your boss and anyone at the company who has been important to you, and express gratitude for what you gained from the experience.

"Don't tell them all the things you could have contributed or talk about how you were underleveraged all these months," Ms. Pearl says. "You want to keep all those bridges open. You never know who your next boss will be."

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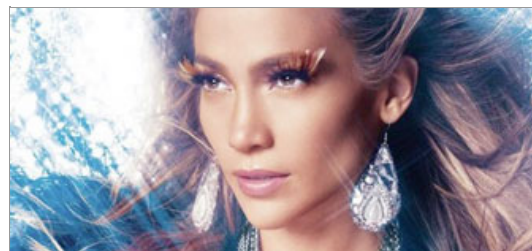
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