

Why you shouldn't apply downwards

Highly qualified jobseekers often broaden their labour market by applying for roles for which they are overqualified – as I described in my article “Help – my job market is shrinking!”. However, there are further reasons why candidates are drawn to positions that do not match their level of qualification.

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Many people apply downwards involuntarily: their self-confidence has taken a knock. Grief over losing a job, the hurt caused by poorly handled dismissal interviews (see the article “How not to conduct a termination meeting”), and the fear of no longer finding an appropriate role often lead to self-doubt. As a result, many only dare to apply for positions that are well below their actual level of qualification.

Pay attention to your self-image

This does not leave a good impression with recruiters. After all, they may conclude that these candidates are not top performers – otherwise they would be applying for more demanding positions. It is therefore worth using storytelling to bring your own success stories back to mind to rebuild damaged self-confidence.

A second reason for applying downwards is an incorrect perspective: when thinking about a new role, many people unconsciously focus on the initial phase – and that almost always feels overwhelming. In the early days of a new job, we must learn a great deal and find our way quickly in an unfamiliar environment. Instead, when considering a new position, candidates should focus on the period after a few months and ask

themselves: after thorough onboarding and growth on the job, can I be successful in this role?

As with any goal-oriented approach, your focus should be on the destination – medium- to long-term success – rather than on the first steps when starting a new job (see the article “Keep your eyes on your goals – not your opponents!”).

Let your gaze wander into the distance

Companies usually recruit with a time horizon of several years. It is therefore perfectly normal for new employees to grow into their role. If you were already fully productive on day one, you would risk becoming overqualified after a short time – and with that, facing the danger of boreout.

That said, from my experience as a headhunter I know that many organisations neglect this point and, from a short-term perspective, aim for 100% coverage of the job requirements instead of the 70–80% recommended in theory.

Even so, make sure to offer something in return for those requirements you do not yet fully meet. Many candidates fail to show how they intend to grow into the role and compensate for missing qualifications. This is where success stories help – stories that demonstrate how you have acquired new knowledge in the past and successfully worked your way into new roles.

The optimal direction for applications is therefore – at least slightly – upwards.

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