Perceived overqualification and withdrawal behaviours: Examining the roles of job attitudes and work values

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The current study examined a moderated mediation model of perceived overqualification and job search, with job attitudes as mediators and the competence and growth work value as a moderator. We also hypothesized a positive relationship between overqualification and actual voluntary turnover behaviour. College graduates from diverse occupations completed two surveys spaced 6 months apart (n = 368). Results suggested that perceived overqualification at Time 1 led to active job search behaviour at Time 2, both directly and through job satisfaction. The direct link was moderated by work values, such that the overqualification–job search relationship was stronger for employees who highly valued work which offered skill utilization and growth. Perceived overqualification was also predictive of voluntary turnover behaviour; those at the high end of the overqualification scale were over four times more likely to have left their position than those at the low end of the scale. Finally, those who left their original positions reported less overqualification in their new positions. The current findings extend the limited existing literature by establishing relationships between overqualification and withdrawal behaviours 6 months later, and also providing evidence that individual differences may influence reactions to being overqualified.

Practitioner points

- The current study found that employees who feel overqualified were more likely to be searching for a new job 6 months later, especially among those who strongly value work that utilizes their skills. Perceived overqualification was also linked to future actual turnover behaviour. Thus, organizations stand to potentially lose talented employees if they feel underutilized and underchallenged in their jobs.
- These trends are particularly true of employees who strongly desire work that takes advantage of their talents, suggesting that the most ambitious employees are likely to seek alternate employment if they feel underutilized.

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To retain these employees, supervisors first need to identify employees who might be feeling overqualified and underutilized, as these perceptions may or may not line up with ‘objective’ overqualification. The supervisor can then consider ways to empower the employee through increased involvement in decision-making or offering more advanced job assignments.

Both researchers and hiring managers have hypothesized that perceived overqualification – an employee’s belief that he or she possesses education, experience, and/or skills beyond the job requirements – can produce dissatisfaction, trigger job search, and ultimately result in turnover behaviour (e.g., Cable & Hendey, 2009/2010; Feldman, 1996; Maynard, Taylor, & Hakel, 2009). Perceived overqualification does, in fact, predict lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions (e.g., Maynard, Joseph, & Maynard, 2006; Wald, 2005), but the literature has yet to firmly link overqualification to actual job search and voluntary turnover behaviour.

Therefore, the central aim of the current study is to expand upon recent investigations of the perceived overqualification–withdrawal association (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; McGuinness & Wooden, 2009). We empirically evaluate two explanations for expecting such a link. First, among the overqualified, job search and turnover are driven in part by a need to find employment which better utilizes their skills (e.g., Feldman, 2011). Thus, we examine whether overqualification is more strongly associated with negative job attitudes and more job search for employees who highly value such skill utilization. Second, as perceived overqualification is expected to produce, first, poor job attitudes and then job search and withdrawal, we test the proposition that the effect of overqualification on job search will be mediated by job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

These relationships are worth exploring for several reasons. First, overqualification is a common experience; roughly one quarter of U.S. and European workers are overqualified (or at least feeling overqualified) for their current positions (e.g., Cable & Hendey, 2009/2010; McGuinness, 2006). Second, recent evidence suggests that overqualified employees may be high-level performers in spite of their unsatisfactory employment situation (e.g., Fine, 2007; Fine & Nevo, 2008; for a review, see Bashshur, Hernández, & Peiró, 2011), and organizations may lose valuable significant talent when overqualified employees quit (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, & Truxillo, 2011). Finally, past research has accounted for only about 5% of the variance in voluntary employee turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Given its prevalence and predictive power for job attitudes and turnover intentions (McKee-Ryan, & Harvey, 2011), perceived overqualification is an important potential antecedent of actual turnover behaviour in need of greater empirical attention.

**Overqualification as poor person–job fit**
Overqualification is the extent to which an employee has surplus education, experience, and/or knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs), relative to the requirements of his or her position (Maynard et al., 2006, 2009). The phenomenon of overqualification has only been investigated in a handful of studies in the organizational sciences (Erdogan et al., 2011). In past research, overqualification has been measured both objectively (e.g., by comparing one’s level of education to the educational requirement for the job; e.g., Madamba & De Jong, 1997) and subjectively via self-report measures (e.g., Johnson, Morrow, & Johnson, 2002; Maynard et al., 2006). Subjective measures are more commonly used in part because they are stronger, more proximal predictors of organizational behaviour which reflect the employee’s perception of the
situation (Erdogan et al., 2011) and thus the reality to which she responds (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011; Spector, 2006). Therefore, in the current study, we focus upon employee perceptions of overqualification as a potential antecedent of withdrawal behaviour.

Person–job fit
Researchers (e.g., Feldman, 1996; McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011) have consistently hypothesized that overqualification will be associated with negative outcomes for both the employee and organization. While a variety of perspectives have been employed for framing such hypotheses (see Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011 for a review), one that is particularly useful for understanding links between overqualification and withdrawal behaviour is person–job (P-J) fit, a particular model within person–environment (P-E) fit theory (Kristof, 1996). In the P-E fit literature, fit refers to the match between the characteristics of an individual and the characteristics of his or her work situation. Good fit is associated with positive outcomes for the employee and the organization, including positive job attitudes, job performance, and career success (e.g., Kristof, 1996; Ostroff, Shin, & Feinberg, 2002), while poor fit is associated with undesirable outcomes (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). The degree of match between the person and work environment is presumed to impact attitudes and behaviours through its effects on need fulfilment, satisfaction, and/or value congruence (Cable & Edwards, 2004).

Person–job fit in particular occurs when an individual’s KSAOs are consistent with the demands and characteristics of the job. French, Caplan, & Harrison (1982) and French, Rodgers, & Cobb (1974) identified two distinct types of P-J fit. Demands–abilities fit refers to the match between the requirements of the job and the KSAOs of the employee, whereas needs–supplies fit reflects the extent to which the goals, values, or desires of the employee are satisfied by the qualities of the job. By definition, overqualification is a particular case of poor demands–abilities fit, as the employee experiences a discrepancy in the form of excess education, experience, and/or skill relative to job demands. The perceived discrepancy is thus expected to result in negative job attitudes and withdrawal behaviours, including job search behaviour.

How overqualification leads to job search
Based on P-J fit concepts and past research on overqualification, we argue that (a) perceived overqualification will be positively associated with job search behaviour, (b) this relationship will be partially mediated by job attitudes, and (c) these indirect effects will be moderated by the extent to which the employee values work that utilizes his or her talents. Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that integrates these propositions.

Overqualification and job search
Past P-J fit researchers have linked various forms of fit to both job search (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1994, 1996; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995) and turnover intentions (e.g., Bretz & Judge, 1994; O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Relatedly, in their meta-analysis, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson (2005) identified a robust negative link between P-J fit and intent to quit ($\rho = - .46$).

There is ample evidence in the underemployment literature that overqualification is associated with greater intentions to leave the organization (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000;
Burris, 1983; Maynard et al., 2006; McGuinness & Wooden, 2009; Wald, 2005). However, there is less research on the related construct of job search behaviour. Recent business graduates in a job that did not use their expertise were more likely to indicate that they were currently looking for another job than graduates who were using their expertise in their jobs (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). Similarly, in a sample of executives re-employed following a layoff, Feldman, Leana, and Bolino (2002) found that perceptions of skill underutilization relative to their previous job were associated with active job search. Wald (2005) also found a significant association between perceptions of overqualification and reported job search. Therefore, the current research, while scant, does suggest a positive relationship between perceived overqualification and job search.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Among employees in the same jobs at Time 1 and Time 2, perceived overqualification at Time 1 will be positively associated with active job search behaviour at Time 2.

The mediating role of job attitudes

By considering models of employee turnover alongside the previously described concepts from the fit literature, we can begin to outline the process by which perceptions of overqualification may result in job search and, ultimately, turnover behaviour. Classic models of turnover (e.g., March & Simon, 1958) place dissatisfaction and low commitment at the heart of the withdrawal process, and these models often suggest that poor job attitudes arise from job characteristics which may be associated with overqualification. For example, Price (1977, 2001) and Price & Mueller (1981) argued that low opportunity for promotion, low autonomy, and a high degree of routinization negatively impact satisfaction and commitment, which ultimately drive search behaviour. More recent models of turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Maertz & Campion, 2004) also implicate poor job attitudes as important mediators in some paths to employee withdrawal from the organization (Hom, 2011).

The influential work of Mobley (1977) and Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino (1979) puts great emphasis on job satisfaction as a key mediator in the turnover process. One
particular aspect of this model relevant to overqualification is attention to the role of job-related perceptions in this process. These perceptions arise from a combination of work characteristics (e.g., job content) and individual characteristics (e.g., skill level, education, and aptitude) and are hypothesized to impact satisfaction with one’s job and expectations regarding future job outcomes, both of which then lead to job search and turnover.

Empirical findings support each link in this proposed causal chain (from perceptions to attitudes to behaviours) as it applies to overqualification. Overqualification has been linked to low job satisfaction (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2000; De Witte & Lagrou, 1990) and affective commitment (Feldman et al., 2002; Maynard & Joseph, 2008; Maynard et al., 2006), as has been found for low P-J fit more generally (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). And past research has identified job satisfaction (e.g., Swider, Boswell, & Zimmerman, 2011) and affective commitment (e.g., Somers, 2009) as predictors of job search behaviour. Therefore, we argue that the perception of overqualification produces dissatisfaction and low affective commitment to the organization, which in turn lead to job search behaviour. As such, our study is the first to examine job attitudes as potential mediators of the overqualification–job search relationship.

Hypothesis 1b: Among employees in the same jobs at Time 1 and Time 2, job satisfaction and organizational commitment at Time 1 will mediate the relationship between perceived overqualification at Time 1 and active job search behaviour at Time 2.

The moderating role of work values
Erdogan and Bauer (2009) noted a lack of research that examines moderators of relationships between overqualification and various outcomes. One assumption implicit in the literature is that all employees prefer a good match between their skill sets and their jobs and that poor fit consistently produces negative affective and behavioural reactions. However, Kristof (1996) argued that fit–outcome relationships would be ‘moderated by the importance of the characteristics on which fit is assessed … to the individual’ (p. 40). In the current context, this suggests that perceived overqualification would be most influential among those employees who highly value skill utilization at work. These employees should experience a lack of needs–supplies fit and thus hold poorer job attitudes and be at heightened risk for withdrawal behaviours.

Although no research has yet examined the possibility that work values may moderate overqualification–outcome relationships, the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) suggests that congruence between interests and values (e.g., a desire for skill utilization) and job characteristics (e.g., actual utilization) should predict job attitudes and withdrawal behaviours, and extensive research has generally supported this proposition (e.g., Bretz & Judge, 1994; Lyons & O’Brien, 2006). Similarly, image theory (Beach & Mitchell, 1998) posits that alternative job opportunities are evaluated against one’s current job based on value image – the extent to which one’s values match one’s job characteristics (Harman, Lee, Mitchell, Felps, & Owens, 2007). Finally, many researchers have identified individual values as important moderators of the turnover process (Price, 2001). In the light of these theoretical arguments, we extend past research by examining whether, among overqualified employees, those who most desire work situations that capitalize and build upon their KSAOs are more likely to seek employment elsewhere.

To test this hypothesis, we examine the competence and growth work value, which represents the extent to which employees prefer work that takes advantage of
their talents and offers challenge and professional development (e.g., Elizur & Sagie, 1999; Manhardt, 1972; Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999). Although seeing oneself as overqualified should weaken job satisfaction and affective commitment among all employees (and thus increase job search), this should be especially true of those employees who place a high value on work that utilizes and builds upon their capabilities. In fact, while we expect job attitudes to mediate the overqualification–job search relationship in general (Hypothesis 1b), we propose that these indirect effects will be conditional on high competence and growth value. We also hypothesize that the direct path from overqualification to job search behaviour will be moderated by this work value.

Hypothesis 1c: Work values will moderate the relationships between perceived overqualification at Time 1 and (a) job satisfaction and affective commitment at Time 1 and (b) active job search behaviour at Time 2, such that these relationships will be stronger for employees with a greater preference for competence and growth in their jobs.

Voluntary turnover and the quality of re-employment

A secondary goal of the current study is to examine the impact of perceived overqualification upon voluntary turnover and the impact of changing jobs upon perceptions of overqualification. Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) identified a negative, although small, link between P-J fit and actual turnover (\(\rho = -.08\)) in their meta-analysis. Empirical evidence on the specific relationship between overqualification and turnover behaviour comes primarily from analyses of single-item measures of overeducation or overskilling from large-scale labour surveys. Verhaest and Omey (2006) found that employees with surplus education were at higher risk to leave their positions. Also, McGuinness and Wooden (2009) found that Australian workers categorized as ‘severely overskilled’ had a one-year turnover rate of 16% as compared to a rate of 10% for those reporting a close match between their skills and the job’s requirements.

Only one study has directly examined the role of perceived overqualification in turnover behaviour. In a sample of retail sales associates in Turkey, Erdogan and Bauer (2009) found that overqualification was associated with higher rates of turnover, but only among employees who reported low empowerment. In the current study, we complement Erdogan and Bauer’s study by examining turnover behaviour with a sample of U.S. college graduates spanning different occupations. Different features such as culture (e.g., Peretz & Fried, 2011), industry-specific economic trends (Hulin, Roznowski, & Hachiya, 1985), and education level might reasonably affect the psychological process by which employees consider and engage in voluntary turnover. For example, college graduates are likely to evaluate their jobs in terms of fit with their career goals, whereas students who have not yet completed college (which comprised the majority of Erdogan and Bauer’s sample) may not necessarily view overqualification as problematic, because their careers have not yet started in earnest.

Hypothesis 2: Higher levels of perceived overqualification at Time 1 will be associated with higher rates of voluntary turnover at Time 2.
Finally, we explore the improvement in one’s work situation as a result of voluntary turnover. In most cases, employees who voluntarily leave their job for another should do so because of perceived advantages of holding a new job elsewhere. Among the overqualified, we argue that a process similar to the attrition phase described in the attrition–selection–attrition (ASA) framework (De Cooman et al., 2009; Smith, 2008) takes place, with individuals leaving for positions which hold the promise of better skill utilization. If perceived overqualification does indeed predict voluntary turnover behaviour, we should see lowered perceptions of overqualification in the new position. Alba-Ramírez (1993) found in a Spanish sample that most objectively overeducated workers over 30 who had left their jobs found later employment for which they were more adequately matched. Mavromaras, McGuinness, and Wooden (2007) and McGuinness and Wooden (2009) found that among employees who were categorized as ‘severely overskilled’ and had left for another position, roughly two-thirds reported using more of their abilities in their new jobs one and 4 years later, although many still perceived some lack of skill usage.

In sum, there is some evidence from labour economics that job change among the overeducated or overskilled results in better matches. In the current study, we extend the literature by examining this question with a measure of perceived overqualification which simultaneously taps all aspects of the construct (i.e., surplus education, experience, and skill).

**Hypothesis 3:** Individuals who leave their job voluntarily between Time 1 and Time 2 will report feeling less overqualified in their new positions than in their previous positions.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Recent alumni of a small public university in the north-eastern United States completed two surveys. Data collection occurred during a period of relatively low unemployment nationally (roughly 5% for both Time 1 and Time 2), just prior to the 2008 rise in unemployment triggered by the recent economic recession. A total of 574 alumni (10.2%) responded to a letter directing them to an online employment survey (Time 1). These respondents were sent another letter 6 months later asking them to complete the second survey (Time 2), and 421 of the Time 1 respondents (80.7%) also completed the Time 2 survey. Participants were entered into a drawing for $100 for each survey they completed. Removing self-employed respondents (6.6%) and those with incomplete data resulted in a final sample of 494 employees, 368 of whom completed both surveys.

Respondents were primarily female (73.1%), similar to the gender composition of the university (68%). Most respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 (67.5%) or between the ages of 35 and 49 (19.5%). Nearly all held either a bachelor’s (48.2%) or master’s degree (49.6%) as their highest educational degree. Area of study included the full range of liberal arts, science, fine arts, and professional disciplines. Respondents were largely employed in full-time, permanent positions (78%). Participants held jobs in a wide variety of areas (education, 36.1%; management; 11.5%; office and administrative support, 7.2%; community and social services, 7.0%; other, 38.4%). At Time 1, most respondents had been employed in their current position for over a year (78.1%).
Time 1 measures

Perceived overqualification
We measured perceived overqualification with the 9-item Scale of Perceived Overqualification (SPOQ; Maynard et al., 2006), which measures perceptions of surplus education, experience, and KSAOs on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree, e.g. ‘My job requires less education than I have’).

Competence and growth
To measure this work value dimension, we began with Meyer, Irving and Allen (1998) 9-item measure of competence and growth work values, which was based on an earlier measure by Manhardt (1972). Respondents indicated how important various job characteristics are to them (e.g., ‘Is intellectually stimulating’) from 1 (unimportant to me) to 5 (very important to me).

A review of the scale revealed some potential issues, including relatively low internal consistency ($\alpha = .65$; Meyer et al., 1998), underrepresentation of the skill utilization aspect of the construct (one item taps development of KSAOs, but no items specifically tapped usage), and several items which seemed conceptually distinct from ‘competence and growth’ (e.g., ‘requires meeting and speaking with many other people’, ‘satisfies your cultural and aesthetic interests’). We reviewed the items included in this scale for content validity, working from the conceptualization of competence and growth value as ‘preferring work situations which (a) allow one to utilize one’s education, experience, or KSAOs and (b) provide opportunities for stimulation, challenge, and professional growth and development’. Four of the nine items specifically tapped the latter aspect of the value. Therefore, we wrote two new items relevant to skill utilization, resulting in a proposed 6-item measure. All 11 items were included in the survey.

We evaluated the factor structure of three versions of the measure using confirmatory factor analysis: the original Meyer et al. version of the 9-item measure (Model 1), a full model including all original items plus the two new items (Model 2), and the proposed 6-item measure (Model 3). Results are provided in Table 1. The proposed measure (Model 3) had the strongest results in terms of absolute fit (i.e., SRMR = .020, RMSEA = .091) and comparative fit indices (CFI = .97). It also had the greatest parsimony, as indicated by the low Akaike information criterion (AIC) relative to the other two models. An examination of correlation residuals for this model revealed no particular pattern and none of the residuals exceeded |.10|.

To test for the distinctiveness of this measure from the overqualification measure, two nested models were compared: one with two factors (six items for competence and growth and nine items for SPOQ) and one with a single unidimensional factor. The fit of the two-factor model was significantly better, difference $\chi^2(1) = 943.82$, $p < .001$. Finally, the resulting competence and growth scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$). Given these findings, the 6-item measure (see Table 2) was used for testing hypotheses in the current study.

Global job satisfaction
We measured global job satisfaction with the 1997 revised version of the Job In General (JIG) subscale of the Job Descriptive Index (JDI; Balzer et al., 1997). This subscale is comprised of 18 adjectives; participants indicate whether or not each adjective describes
their job situation by responding either Yes, No, or ?(not sure). The recommended scoring procedure was used, whereby positive, unsure, and negative responses were given 3, 1, and 0 points, respectively. Items were summed to produce a total score, ranging from 0 to 54.

Affective commitment
We utilized Meyer, Allen, and Smith’s (1993) affective commitment scale, which includes six items measuring the emotional attachment employees feel towards their organizations (e.g., ‘This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me’). Participants responded using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Control variables
We chose three variables to serve as controls in our regression analyses: perceived underpayment, age, and gender. First, we included perceived underpayment because a job which does not utilize one’s education, experience, or KSAOs is also likely to pay less

### Table 1. Values of fit statistics for competing competence and growth value models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Model 1: Original scale&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Model 2: Full scale&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Model 3: Revised scale&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of items</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 ) (df)</td>
<td>145.399 (27)&lt;sup&gt;***&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>230.184 (44)&lt;sup&gt;***&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>43.00 (9)&lt;sup&gt;***&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA (90% CI)</td>
<td>0.098 (0.082–0.114)</td>
<td>0.096 (0.084–0.108)</td>
<td>0.091 (0.065–0.119)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRMR</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.020</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>181.389</td>
<td>274.184</td>
<td>67.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>From Meyer et al. (1998).
<sup>b</sup>Original scale plus two new items.
<sup>c</sup>Four original items chosen based on content validity plus two new items.

*<sup>p</sup> < .05; **<sup>p</sup> < .01; ***<sup>p</sup> < .001.

### Table 2. Factor loadings for the revised competence and growth work values measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor loading</th>
<th>1 Utilizes my skills and abilities&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>.84</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Encourages continued development of knowledge and skills&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Is intellectually stimulating&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Allows me to apply my education and work experience&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Provides a feeling of accomplishment&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Requires originality and creativeness&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Item created for the current study.
<sup>b</sup>Original item from Manhardt (1972) and included in the Meyer et al. (1998) scale.
than a job that is a good fit for the employee. Indeed, Maynard et al. (2006) found a significant, positive correlation between perceived overqualification and perceived pay level relative to one’s peers ($r = .20$). Therefore, in testing the influence of perceived overqualification on job search and turnover, it is important to account for the possibility that it is the low pay associated with overqualification that drives such withdrawal behaviours. Perceived underpayment was measured with a single yes/no item (i.e., ‘Do you feel that you are being paid less in your current job than others who have a similar education background [similar degree and major]?’). A slight majority of our sample (53.8%) responded affirmatively.

We also controlled for respondent age, as age is typically found to be positively associated with job attitudes (Ng & Feldman, 2010), overqualification is a noted problem among recent college graduates (e.g., Feldman & Turnley, 1995), and the age–satisfaction relationship may reflect an increase in P-J fit over a person’s career (White & Spector, 1987). Respondents indicated their age based on 5-year ranges that were provided (e.g., 20–24, 25–29). Finally, while past research has not found a consistent relationship between perceived overqualification and gender (e.g., Feldman et al., 2002; Maynard et al., 2006), we included gender as a control due to its significant relationship with both perceived overqualification ($r = -.16$) and competence and growth value ($r = .12$) in the current data set.

**Time 2 measures**

*Active job search behaviour*

We assessed this construct with Blau’s (1994) 6-item measure. Respondents indicated how frequently in the past 6 months they have engaged in various job search activities (e.g., completing an application, sending a résumé to potential employers). The responses on the scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently, 10+ times*).

*Perceived overqualification*

Participants reported their perceptions of overqualification as they did in Time 1.

*Turnover measures*

To assess whether participants had chosen to leave their initial job for another, we first asked whether they still held the job they held at Time 1. Eighty-one (22%) indicated that they had left both the job and organization. Among these respondents, we assessed how voluntary the turnover was with a measure developed by Campion (1991; $\alpha = .86$). Those who scored above the mid-point of the scale were categorized as having voluntarily left their job and organization ($n = 53$). This represents a voluntary turnover rate of 14.4%, similar to past research (e.g., Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004).

**Results**

Table 3 presents means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and coefficient alphas for the study variables. Perceptions of overqualification were associated with lower job satisfaction, lower affective commitment, as well as a greater rate of voluntary turnover behaviour 6 months later at Time 2. For those employees who were in the same position
Table 3. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female)</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Underpayment (0 = no; 1 = yes)</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–1</td>
<td>–4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Perceived overqualification</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>–16</td>
<td>–17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Competence &amp; growth value</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–4</td>
<td>–14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Job satisfaction</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>41.64</td>
<td>12.37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>–23</td>
<td>–47</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Affective commitment</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>–14</td>
<td>–36</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2 variables</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Perceived overqualification&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>–21</td>
<td>–17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>–17</td>
<td>–33</td>
<td>–33</td>
<td>(93)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Active job search behaviour&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–36</td>
<td>–32</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>(93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Voluntary turnover (0 = no, 1 = yes)</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–31</td>
<td>–18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Decimals have been left off for ease of reading; coefficients in bold are significant at \( p < .05 \). Coefficient alpha values are presented on the diagonal in parentheses for multi-item measures.

<sup>a</sup>Coefficients between Time 1 variables and this variable include respondents in all turnover categories.
at both Time 1 and Time 2 ($n = 287$), perceived overqualification at Time 1 was positively associated with active job search behaviour 6 months later ($r = .29, p < .001$). As in past research, perceived underpayment was positively, although only weakly, related to perceived overqualification ($r = .14, p < .01$).

**Perceived overqualification, job attitudes, work values, and job search**

We tested our moderated mediation model using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012). This macro allows for simultaneous testing of entire models that combine mediation and moderation to explore the conditional nature of indirect effects, as is now recommended by methodologists (e.g., Edwards & Lambert, 2007; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Participant age, gender, and perceived underpayment were included as controls for the entire model.

This approach also incorporates bootstrapping techniques for estimating indirect effects, currently preferred over the causal steps and Sobel test strategies (Baron & Kenny, 1986), which suffer from several problems including low statistical power (Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Bootstrapping involves empirically simulating the sampling distribution by repeatedly sampling (with replacement) from the sample itself and calculating the statistic of interest (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993). A 95% confidence interval is then created by ordering the resampled statistics and finding the cases that represent the 2.5 and 97.5 percentile to serve as the lower and upper bounds of the interval (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Accordingly, indirect effects were modelled using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamplings to generate 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals of the direct and indirect effects of overqualification (Time 1) on active job search behaviour (Time 2) for individuals in the same jobs at both time points. Figure 2 displays a path diagram of the results with standardized coefficients.

**Total effect of perceived overqualification on job search**

In Hypothesis 1a, we argued for a positive total effect of perceived overqualification at Time 1 upon active job search 6 months later at Time 2, and such an effect did exist.

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**Figure 2.** Standardized path coefficients for the direct and indirect effects of perceived overqualification (Time 1) upon active job search behaviour (Time 2) through job attitudes and moderated by competence and growth ($n = 268$). Participant age, gender, and perceived underpayment are included as control variables. †$p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.$
(β = .27, p < .001). Therefore, Hypothesis 1a is supported. Over half of this effect is direct (β = .16, p < .01), suggesting partial rather than full mediation.

*Indirect effects via job attitudes*

In Hypothesis 1b, we predicted that job satisfaction and affective commitment would each mediate the relationship between perceived overqualification and job search behaviour. This is represented in Figure 2 as the two indirect paths from perceived overqualification to job search leading through each job attitude. For job satisfaction, the 95% confidence interval for the overall indirect effect of overqualification on job search through job satisfaction (β = .08) did not include zero (.0142 to .1873), suggesting a significant indirect effect. However, a similar 95% confidence interval for the overall indirect effect of affective commitment (β = .04) did just include zero (−.0026 to .0986), suggesting a non-significant indirect effect. Therefore, Hypothesis 1b was partially supported.

*The moderating effect of competence and growth value*

Hypothesis 1c stated that the link between perceived overqualification and both job attitudes and job search would be stronger for employees with a greater preference for work that utilizes their talents. This is represented in Figure 2 by the path coefficients leading from the competence and growth value to the direct effects of perceived overqualification. As can be seen, the competence and growth value significantly moderated the effect of perceived overqualification on affective commitment and active job search behaviour, but not job satisfaction. Therefore, Hypothesis 1c was partially supported. We now explore the two significant interactions in turn.

The interaction between perceived overqualification and competence and growth value upon affective commitment is shown in Figure 3. As can be seen, the overqualification–commitment relationship was negative at both low and high levels of competence and growth value. However, the relationship was stronger for employees with a high preference for work that provides opportunities for competence and growth (β = −.20) than for those with a relatively low preference for such work (β = −.08).

Figure 4 displays the moderating effect of competence and growth value on the direct effect of perceived overqualification upon active job search behaviour. At low levels of competence and growth, the direct effect was not significant (β = .05, p < .05). However, perceived overqualification was significantly related to job search for those with average and high scores on competence and growth value (β = .13 and .21, respectively, both p < .001).

*Perceived overqualification and voluntary turnover*

To examine the proposed link between perceived overqualification at Time 1 and voluntary turnover behaviour at Time 2 (Hypothesis 2), we conducted a hierarchical logistic regression with turnover status (0 = did not voluntarily leave the organization, 1 = voluntarily left the organization) as the dependent variable. Results indicated that perceptions of overqualification at Time 1 predicted turnover status 6 months later after controlling for age, gender, and perceived underpayment (likelihood ratio test χ² (1) = 5.09, p < .05). The odds ratio for this effect was 1.24, indicating that the odds that an employee would voluntarily leave the organization increased by 24% for every 1 point
Figure 3. Competence and growth value as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment. ‘Low’ and ‘High’ refer to 1 standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively.

Figure 4. Competence and growth value as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification (Time 1) and active job search behaviour (Time 2). ‘Low’ and ‘High’ refer to 1 standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively.
increase in perceived overqualification (on a 7-point scale) 6 months earlier. Over one quarter (20 of 75, or 26.7%) of individuals reporting high levels of overqualification at Time 1 (more than one SD above the mean) had voluntarily turned over 6 months later, as compared to only 5.6% (four of 71) of individuals reporting low levels of overqualification (more than one SD below the mean). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

**Change in perceived overqualification after job change**

Finally, in Hypothesis 3, we argued that those who voluntarily left their jobs between Time 1 and Time 2 would report lower levels of perceived overqualification on their new job. Consistent with this hypothesis, voluntary leavers reported less overqualification in their new jobs ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.52$) than their previous ones ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.70$), $t (46) = 2.50, p < .05, d = .37$. A similar analysis of those who remained in their jobs revealed no significant difference, $t (268) = -0.36, p > .05$. Nearly half (48%) of voluntary leavers had a drop in perceived overqualification of at least a half point after the job change (vs. 26% for those who did not leave the organization).

**Discussion**

The current longitudinal study added to the limited overqualification literature by exploring (a) how work values moderate the association between perceived overqualification and active job search behaviour and (b) the link between perceived overqualification and voluntary turnover. This study is also the first in the overqualification literature to control for perceived underpayment, which allowed us to disentangle any effect of insufficient pay from the impact of underutilization itself.

Consistent with past research, perceived overqualification was associated with lower job satisfaction and affective commitment. Overqualification at Time 1 was also predictive of future withdrawal behaviours. Employees who perceived themselves as having surplus education, experience, and KSAOs for their jobs were more likely to search for a job 6 months later, and this relationship was partially mediated by job satisfaction. Using logistic regression, we also found that the rates of voluntary turnover were significantly higher among those who had reported feeling overqualified 6 months earlier. We also found that those who did leave their original job felt less overqualified in their new positions.

This research represents the first known attempt to examine individual differences as moderators of responses to overqualification. We found that the relationship between perceived overqualification and job search was stronger for those who strongly valued competence and growth at work. Specifically, among overqualified employees, those who valued skill utilization felt less emotionally connected to the organization and were more apt to be searching for alternative employment 6 months later. These findings suggest that a poor match between employee characteristics and job demands seems to trigger job search and turnover, but one’s desire for P-J fit can affect the strength of these relationships.

**Implications for future research and practice**

Given the current findings, research should investigate how other personal values (Schwartz, 1992), personality traits (Feldman, 2011), or self-assessments (Maynard, 2011)
may influence the relationship between overqualification and active job search behaviour. For example, overqualified employees with higher core self-evaluations (CSEs) may be more likely to actively search for alternative job opportunities than those with lower core self-evaluations due to their greater sense of agency and confidence in successfully securing an employment offer.

Supervisors concerned about losing talented employees first have to identify those who feel overqualified and strongly desire work that utilizes their education and KSAs. As supervisors may not hold the same perceptions regarding subordinate overqualification as the subordinates themselves, they may not even be aware when a worker feels that their skills are not being well utilized. Given past findings, expressions of boredom (Watt & Hargis, 2010), dissatisfaction, or detachment might hint at feelings of underutilization.

Supervisors might handle perceived overqualification in several ways, including using empowerment (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009) and idiosyncratic deals (‘i-deals’; Hornung, Rousseau, Glaser, Angerer, & Weigl, 2010) to allow the employee to take on more challenging tasks or projects. Employers can also be proactive in ensuring that new entrants to the organization do not hold unrealistic expectations through the use of realistic job previews (RJPs) or expectation-lowering procedures (ELPs; Buckley et al., 2002). Empirical investigations of the efficacy of these strategies in the context of perceived overqualification are lacking and sorely needed.

**Study limitations**

We finish by noting several limitations and suggestions for future research that would help supplement the findings of the current study. First, any single study is limited to the economic conditions at the time of data collection. This is particularly important to bear in mind when studying overqualification and turnover, because overqualification rates appear to fluctuate with the unemployment rate (Vaisey, 2006), and perceived job alternatives are likely to affect turnover intentions and decisions (Maertz & Campion, 2004). As mentioned, data from the current study were collected at a time when unemployment was relatively low. Presumably, in such a labour market, highly educated employees feel relatively good about their chances of obtaining alternative employment and see the value in expending effort to find a better job. Data collected during tight economic times might reveal that relationships between overqualification and voluntary turnover are weaker or even absent (Erdogan & Bauer, 2011).

The findings regarding the competence and growth work value were relatively modest. This may be partially attributable to the sample (i.e., college alumni with at least a bachelor’s degree), as college graduates may hold high expectations for skill utilization. Indeed, scores on our measure suggested a ceiling effect ($M = 4.37$ on a 5 point scale, $SD = 0.53$), which reduces variability and limits its predictive value. Stronger effects may be found in samples that include employees at all levels of education, and alternative measurement methods (e.g., ranking this value relative to other values) may better discriminate between those with a high versus a very high desire for skill utilization.

Finally, the finding that those who voluntarily left their original positions reported significantly lower overqualification in their new positions could be interpreted multiple ways. While employees’ new jobs may indeed better utilize their education and talents, the investment of effort in securing new employment (perhaps involving a change of residence) may produce a need to psychologically enhance one’s view of the new job. In other words, discovering that one’s new job is no better than the old one is likely to produce feelings of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), and convincing oneself of the
benefits of the new job helps relieve this dissonance. Future research could help separate out these two possibilities by simultaneously assessing both objective and subjective overqualification of employees before and after voluntary turnover.

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**References**


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