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JOE SEARCH

Out of Work, Not Out of the Running

“I’ve been looking for a job” is no way to account for your time on unemployment.

By Debra Donston-Miller

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Solving the Unemployment Catch-22

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

CATCH-22 also catch-22 (kacht' twën-të-'tō', kacht' -') n. 1. a. A situation in which a desired outcome or solution is impossible to attain because of a set of inherently illogical rules or conditions.

It may be the biggest frustration among the many stresses of a prolonged job search while unemployed: the sinking sense that the longer you’re out of work, the harder it is to convince hiring managers to give you a chance.

And unfortunately, it’s more than a feeling. HR professionals readily admit they’re leery about candidates with lengthy, unexplained gaps on their employment records (although the current recession has reduced some of the traditional stigma attached to those stretches).

Don’t throw in the towel, though! The key to escaping the unemployment Catch-22 lies in explaining with power and conviction what you’ve done during your time away from work. In this package, experts talk about how you can turn this negative perception into a positive by demonstrating your initiative and professional focus even during a period between engagements.

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What did you think of this package? Got a story of your own to tell? Have ideas for future coverage? Please write Editor-in-Chief Matthew Rothenberg at matthew@theladders.com.
OUT OF WORK, NOT OUT OF THE RUNNING

GAPS

THE LONGER YOUR UNEMPLOYMENT lasts, the harder it is to get a job or even an interview. That’s the perception of many professionals who’ve been out of work for extended periods.

It’s also reality, according to recruiters and hiring managers who admit they’re likelier to pass up job seekers with significant, unexplained gaps in their work histories.

Those recruiters see the stigma attached to lengthy unemployment as less damaging during recessionary times, since the experience is more common. The average period of unemployment now stands at 211 days, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and higher earners average even longer without work. But long stretches without work will still count against you if you don’t handle the situation correctly.

Winning over hiring managers and HR pros requires you to account for your time out of the workforce, recruiters told TheLadders.

“I don’t think that it is the gap in employment that will hurt people; I think it’s how they answer the question of what they were doing with their time,” said Kris Alban, director of strategic partnerships for iGrad, an organization that helps college graduates navigate career and financial challenges. “Were you using the time effectively, or were you catching up on old episodes of ‘Lost?’” asked Angela Lussier, author of “The Anti-Resume Revolution.”

In addition, there are ways you certainly shouldn’t account for your time: “I’ve been looking for a job” is not sufficient, said Mandy Minor, a resume writer and marketing strategist at J Allan Studios in St. Petersburg, Fla. “There’s really no excuse, other than mental-health issues such as depression, for someone to just sit at home.”

It’s critical for job seekers to show prospective employers that a long period between full-time jobs has been filled with some sort of productive and relevant experience. Employers understand that the employment situation is bleak, but they want to hire someone who has shown initiative during the time he or she has been between jobs.

Volunteer

The most common suggestion from recruiters and hiring experts is to work part-time or as a consultant, or volunteer in a way that is relevant to your career. If you engage in an activity that fits your career path, there’s no reason a consulting or volunteer position can’t fill that time in your resume. (Read more about turning volunteer service into career opportunities.)

“If you volunteer in a situation where you can utilize your day-to-day business skills, then I think it’s a great idea and a great way to further your career because you’re essentially doing a job and are not just sitting around,” said Rahul D. Yodh, an executive recruiter with Link Legal Search Group in Dallas. “At the same time, you’re building some contacts, and you never know where that will lead. If you can get a high-enough volunteering position, then that’s probably the best route to take.”

The same holds true for consulting and contract work, said Cheryl Palmer, president of Call to Career, an executive-coaching firm.

“Performing contract or temporary work makes it easy to explain what the job seeker has been doing on the resume and

‘How I Spent My Unemployment’

Here are six ways to show recruiters that you’ve made productive use of that period between jobs.

By Debra Donston-Miller

IN THE WAKE of one of the worst economic downturns in our nation’s history, big gaps between gainful employment tenures aren’t unusual or unexpected. But that doesn’t mean they’re simply being ignored by prospective employers.

Instead, hiring managers are interested in people who have shown the initiative to fill those gaps productively, said experts who spoke with TheLadders. Here are six tips to demonstrate that time between jobs has been time well spent. (And, if it’s been tough to do more than look for work during that time, here are some things you should think about doing.)

- Relevant job-related volunteer experience can be included chronologically on your resume. Treat volunteer work like you’re getting paid for it. In that way, “you tend to focus your efforts on customer service and achieving results, which is what any and every employer is looking for in the talent that they’re trying to attract,” said John Haynes, a senior HR professional and life and business coach. Unrelated volunteer experience can still be included on your resume, but it should go in a separate section.
- Contract or temporary work will help you stay current with your field and show employers
cover letter as well as in the interview,” she said. “This type of work also has the added benefit of giving the job seeker some income. And another benefit is that it puts the job seeker in a better position to find out about openings. If a full-time position becomes available in the company where the job seeker is doing contract work, it is very likely that the job seeker will be offered the position, since he or she is already a known entity to the company.”

There is no prohibition against listing consulting and volunteer positions in line with full-time work on a chronological resume, hiring experts told TheLadders. (There are also ways to use the resume format, such as using years instead of months, to de-emphasize the time period. Click here to read more.)

Experience outside the box

If you can’t find a volunteer or contract position that correlates exactly with your area of expertise, do what you can to align the experience with the jobs you are seeking.

For iGrad’s Alban, it’s less about having a good reason for the way you spent your time. “I feel the best way to handle this question is to tell a good story that demonstrates how you used creativity in your job search. Even if it didn’t work, we like that you demonstrated some out-of-the box thinking.”

Author Lussier recommended creating your own opportunities when none exist. Besides volunteering, devoting yourself to a hobby, interest, training or education can be a palatable answer for how you spent your unemployment.

Lussier also stressed the importance of “getting in front of people,” whether by joining a professional organization or making a public appearance: say, volunteering to give a presentation on a subject you know well. In short, anything that can enhance your resume and provide opportunities for networking is a good thing.

“That’s really where the best opportunities come,” Minor said, “when you put yourself out there.”

Time is short

If you haven’t been doing any of these things during your extended job hunt, it’s not too late. But the prospect of an uptick in the economy means you will soon be facing competition from employed but unhappy workers.

“The reason why market competition gets even worse for the unemployed at the beginning of a market recovery is because all the unhappy employed people finally get the courage to jump in, and recruiters will pick the employed over the unemployed,” said Caroline Ceniza-Levine, a career expert; writer; speaker; and co-founder of SixFigureStart, a career-coaching firm.

To compete, Ceniza-Levine said, the unemployed need to match the advantages of their employed counterparts, including an air of confidence as well as current knowledge of top competitors and sector trends. If an unemployed person can demonstrate these attributes, she said, “they will appear as valuable as an employed person and help get over that hump that favors the employed candidates.”

If you’ve been looking for work for months, it will be discouraging to hear that things may get still worse before they get better, but that’s all the more reason to ensure that you’re making every effort to fill that resume gap.

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that you have not been idle since your last permanent, full-time job, said Cheryl Palmer, president of executive-coaching firm Call to Career.

• If you’ve been unemployed more than a year, consider using a functional or creative resume instead of a traditional, reverse-chronological one, said Sandra Lamb, a career, lifestyle and etiquette expert. (Click here to read more.)

• Think about the ways in which networking has equipped you with new skills or sharpened some existing ones. Did you mentor a fellow job seeker? Help someone edit her resume? Act as de facto social-media manager for a Facebook group? Even if the experience is not appropriate for your resume, you can certainly speak to it in a cover letter and (hopefully) during an interview.

• Include any and all training and education you have acquired. Emphasize your desire to continue to hone your skills while out of work.

• With the job market brightening somewhat, dissatisfied employees will feel it’s safe to start jumping into the waters again, said Caroline Ceniza-Levine, a career expert, speaker and co-founder of SixFigureStart. Make sure you can compete by demonstrating a steady record of accomplishment as well as knowledge of top competitors and up-to-date industry trends.
Candidate Forgiveness

At current rates of unemployment, being without a job bears less stigma. It’s called “candidate forgiveness,” and companies are in the mood to practice it.

By Andrea Sobel

WHERE DO YOU FIND the silver lining in the darkest economic cloud since the Great Depression?

It’s hard to think of positives. Supposedly, the roads are less crowded as fewer commuters make their way to and from work. (Although that certainly doesn’t seem to be the case here in Los Angeles!) Those of us who are employed might have a better selection of office furniture and supplies to choose from now that the competition is diminished. But all in all, there is very little to celebrate when more than 15 million Americans are unemployed.

There is one upside for current job seekers: Being unemployed has become so common that recruiters and hiring managers are less likely to consider it a negative. We call it “candidate forgiveness”; while it’s traditionally easier to find a job when you have one already recruiters today are more willing to overlook the fact that a candidate is unemployed when he applies for a position.

As a recruiter, I can attest to the difficulty I have had selling an unemployed candidate to a top-notch company when employment numbers are more robust. In a strong economy, recruiters prefer “passive” candidates — those who were employed and not looking. I’ve drawn a lot of analogies to dating in my articles about the job search; this scenario would resemble the guy who already has a girlfriend and seems like the perfect boyfriend. If you missed last year’s dance, you need not apply for prom king.

But circumstances have changed, and so have the sentiments of recruiters. With so much great talent on the streets, finding the right candidate is more about finding the right skill set and less about whether the candidate is employed or unemployed. In fact, it’s harder than ever to poach an employed candidate away from seemingly stable employment.

But this period of candidate forgiveness won’t last forever, and some of the circumstances of unemployment are more forgivable than others. Take advantage of candidate forgiveness while you can by framing your employment in the best possible way for the recruiter.

Some key points:

- It is important to clarify that it was a company-wide layoff. It’s even better to know the numbers — “50 percent of the staff” or “over 1,500 people.”
- Have strong references lined up (preferably supervisors) who can back up your story. Obtain their personal e-mail addresses before you part ways so you can stay in touch down the road.
- Contact your references so that they know who might be calling and the position you are considering. Get their permission to use them as references. (If you are hired, be sure to follow up with a thank-you note.)
- Be prepared to compromise. Decide what benefits or working conditions are important to you and which are superfluous. Set standards where you think they’re important, but be realistic, too. It’s not 2007 anymore.
- While it is most important to get back to work, if you have a choice, pick the job that will continue to enhance your skills. This will be of value in your next job search or if you are ever laid off again.

Yes, this recession has leveled the playing field for unemployed candidates, but you should use this to your advantage while you can – before the economy recovers. Let’s hope that’s soon.

Career Advice from TheLadders

- How to Explain Employment Gaps, Sabbaticals and Negatives on Your Resume
- Chronological Resume Format v. Functional Resume Format
- How to Treat Volunteer Assignments on Your Resume
- Volunteering Opportunities Pay Off