

Three rules for the unemployed job seeker

Written by Editor

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(ARA) - Everyone has heard that employers like to hire the currently employed, and there is a stigma attached to gaps in work history: generally, the longer the gap, the larger the stigma. This is a stigma potentially affecting 5.9 million people (or 42.4 percent of all the unemployed) who are defined as "long-term unemployed," according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, unemployed job seekers can follow a few rules to overcome any potential negative association with their work history. The rules aren't simple and job seekers need to practice, but the effort can make all the difference.

Rule No. 1: "Regardless of the reason for the gap in employment, be honest," says Jessica Renard, career services director at South University in West Palm Beach, Fla. As career services director she coaches recent graduates every day on career development and job searching skills.

"If you were part of a reduction in force, say so but without making any disparaging remarks about that employer. For example: 'Unfortunately, my industry was directly impacted by the downturn in real estate, causing my employer to reduce the workforce by 40 percent. However, since that time I have been keeping my skills fresh by' The key is to keep the conversation about your skills and how you can use them in the new position.

Rule No. 2: Be positive, even when you have good reasons not to be. "Don't ever complain about a former employer during an interview," Renard advises. "Even if you disagree with circumstances that led to your termination or you think you were treated unfairly, the interview is not a place to discuss it." Being honest and positive are not mutually exclusive; it is your role as a candidate to present yourself well and with integrity. "Tell them you are looking for a new position that will be a better fit for your skills and for their needs," Renard says. "It suggests that the prior situation, whatever the details, is acknowledged by you as a poor fit and you are focused and ready to find a better one."

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Rule No. 3: While Renard discourages anyone to list reasons for unemployment gaps on their resumes, the cover letter is a good place to be proactive. "Get ahead of the question before the interview," she suggests. "A well-written cover letter gives you the opportunity to build some context before the hiring manager ever sorts through your work history." The cover letter is a great way to clarify gaps in employment, so long as it follows the first two rules. This is where you can let potential hiring managers know you were taking care of family members or furthering your education, for example.

Those periods of unemployment can look bad and may be detrimental if you don't know how to proactively and honestly address them with hiring managers. Following these rules takes practice. You need to find a friend who will help conduct mock interviews with you. Film yourself saying these answers and see how concise and compelling you are in addressing the issue and highlighting your skills.

Finally, Renard suggests that you minimize long periods of unemployment by working a temporary job or by volunteering your skills to nonprofit organizations.

"Many people are concerned that taking a temporary job will make their work history look like they are unable to commit and simply bounce from employer to employer," says Renard. "But they miss out on some very real opportunities to maintain and build their skill sets. The same is true for volunteering. In both scenarios job seekers have great opportunities to showcase their work with hiring managers and others who value their skills and talents."