

# How to Address Gaps in Your Employment History

By Peter Newfield

Life would certainly be easier if your employment history could be perfectly presented on a resume. But for many job seekers, a few missing years can haunt you when sending these critical documents to recruiters and prospective employers. How do you tactfully and accurately address the missing years in your resume and cover letters?

**Non-work Related Absences.** The second most common reason for gaps in employment history is faced by job seekers with disabilities, illness, or family-related issues. Again, the advice is to not include any mention of your particular handicap, disability, or medical history in the resume: it is against the law regarding equal opportunity employment for employers to demand that information. Instead, the disabled job seeker should use a Functional Resume format to address gaps in years of employment or changes in fields of interest. Highlight your skills and accomplishments so that your overall experience and knowledge can be presented to your best advantage. Include any classes or technical training or part-time or volunteer work while you were rehabilitating from an automobile accident, caring for an elderly parent, or staying by the side of a seriously ill child. These work and training efforts should be included on the resume under "Additional Experience."

The most common reasons for unaccounted years on a resume include taking time off to have a baby/raise a family, going back to school for higher education or technical training, enrollment in the military, recovering from a traumatic accident or illness, caring for an elderly parent or sick child for an extended period of time, residence in a rehabilitation facility, or incarceration.

Clearly, some reasons are not viewed as favorably as others, even in this enlightened, politically correct employment era. But whatever the reason, do not make the mistake of including gaps in employment history on your resume. If you can explain the time away from employment and feel that it would be important for a prospective employer to know this information, include it briefly in your cover letter.

Although a standard Reverse Chronological or Modified Functional resume works best for those who have consistently climbed the ranks in a particular industry, these formats are not appropriate for job seekers with employment gaps. The best type of resume for individuals with gaps in employment history is the Functional Format because it provides the platform for you to showcase your varied strengths, talents, and experiences. It prevents a job candidate from being pigeon-holed into one specific field or level of experience or penalized for gaps in employment, per se.

For example, let's say you have been out of the workforce for several years and are now looking for a job. Your resume should start out with a brief "Summary of Qualifications," which is a three- to eight-sentence overview of skills and areas of experience. It would then present a section entitled "Areas of Strength," which either lists key words appropriate to your professional experience or is broken down into several distinct areas of experience with bulleted items. Maybe your "Areas of Strength" include Sales and Public Relations or Teaching and Office Administration. You can make each one a separate category and list three or four items under each heading to indicate your experience and skills in these areas.

The next section, "Professional Experience," lists related jobs, titles, and responsibilities. Do not omit the dates! By leaving off dates of employment on a resume, you will raise more questions than if you list dates from the 1970s or 1980s, do not include months.

In the time that you were not formally employed in your field, you may have gained additional experience while you were out of the workforce. Include this experience on your resume within a section called "Additional Experience." Were you Treasurer of a civic organization for the past five years? Were you an unpaid docent in

the local museum? Did you direct or plan activities as a volunteer for an after-school center? Were you a sports coach or Scoutmaster on the weekends or during the evenings? List this experience, dates, and responsibilities under "Additional Experience," then end the resume with a "Computer Skills" and/or "Education" section.

**Using the Cover Letter for Explanations.** If you feel that your particular circumstances should be expressed to the prospective employer or job screener, then you can briefly mention this in your cover letter. The value of a cover letter is the ability to present your intentions, qualifications, and availability to a prospective employer in a succinct, appealing format. While your resume gives the specifics on places of employment, responsibilities, and educational background, a cover letter is your first chance to make an impression on the job screener and personalize the attached information contained in the resume.

Never include negative information in your cover letter such as personality conflicts with previous employers, pending litigation, or sarcastic remarks like "I was making dirt!" If you bad-mouth past employers, interviewers will feel uneasy and may not call you in for an interview.

For example, a returning teacher may include a sentence or two in the cover letter such as: "As you can see on the enclosed resume, I have a Masters Degree in Special Education and have more than 10 years of teaching experience in the XYZ and ABC School Districts. While I have taken a leave from teaching over the past five years to raise my two daughters, I have recently begun working as a substitute teacher in several local school districts and am anxious to resume a full-time teaching position." The applicant is focusing the Personnel Director's attention on his or her 10 years of relevant teaching experience and is also providing information that he/she is pursuing current experience in the field through substitute teaching.

An operations manager who was downsized and took time off to go back to school in preparation for a career change may include the following information in his cover letter. "I would like to transfer my strategic planning and project management skills into the financial management arena where my interests are targeted. I have already completed six hours towards my MBA in Finance and would like to build a new career in the financial services field." Again, the job applicant is stating that he has skills and experiences in a different industry but that he is redirecting his efforts, attending graduate school, and seeking an entry into a new field.

Take the time to craft your resume and cover letter to accurately present your skills and experiences, and your efforts will be rewarded.