

Explaining unemployment in the job interview

Taking care of family, changing career paths, going back to school, getting laid off — these are only a handful of reasons why some people are currently unemployed. You're not the first person to explain why you're currently unemployed when you get to the job interview. But how you explain your unemployment will have a big impact on your chances of getting the job. Here's what you need to know.

Assess the length of explanation needed

Some reasons you're currently unemployed — like taking care of a loved one or recently being a full-time student — are perfectly sufficient reasons on their own. In the interview, focus your answer on how you've been preparing yourself for this job opportunity. Have you recently been certified in an industry skill or working temporarily for a family friend? Keep the conversation on the responsibilities you've had during your unemployment. Hiring managers are primarily interested in being assured that you're ready to work and that there aren't any red flags, such as bad employer reviews.

If your unemployment status is more complicated than a personal leave from the workforce, though, the length and tone of your answer will need to accommodate that. You can still assure the hiring manager you're a reliable employee, even if there have been some past bumps in the road. As Jessica Steinberg, Talent Community Manager for ADP® says, "Any gap is acceptable. It's all in how you position it. Take one to two sentences to concisely explain why you were out, and any achievements you had while you were out of the workforce during the gap on the résumé."

Stay positive

Never bash your previous employer, even if there was cause to be angry. When the question "Why did you leave your past job?" comes up, whether you were fired or laid off, you can be frank about it and explain yourself — with tact. A key point to explaining more complicated situations is underlining the lesson you learned and how you benefited from the experience. If you were fired for repeatedly being late, speak to how you mastered time management. For personnel issues, explain that your

values and work ethic are important to you, and that they align with the company's.

Highlighting your passion for this type of work and the enthusiasm you have for this opportunity will also help to reassure the hiring manager. From their perspective, they have a vacant role and need to fill it with someone dependable. Appearing bored or disinterested won't help your case, but asking plenty of questions, showing your positive personality and creating a relationship with the hiring manager will help hiring managers see you as a potential fit.

Emphasize readiness

Before the interview, do your research. Know what the company does, what your role there would be (and make sure the employer's answer matches your understanding of the role), and investigate the organization's values and recent news and achievements. That way, you'll be able to connect the dots when you're talking about your own growth in your career, and the growth of the company you're interviewing for. "The best thing you can do is to talk about what you learned from the experience, how you've grown as a professional and how you'd apply any of those learnings to a new position," says Shawn Tubman, Vice President of Employment for Liberty Mutual®.

Addressing your unemployment in a job interview is not as uncomfortable as it might seem to you. In reality, hiring managers are familiar with every aspect of hiring and firing, and your story probably isn't the strangest they've ever heard. And the important fact is that you're here now. "Talk about the future," says Becky Havlicek, Senior Human Resource Manager at Merrill Corp. "Sometimes we do have bad experiences, but I would focus on why that next role is important to you, why that next company interests you and stay positive."