

‘Tell your full story’

How to account for a gap caused by COVID-19 on your résumé

BY STEPHANIE VOZZA | Fast Company

Gaps in a résumé were once a red flag for employers, and job candidates have always been advised to have a solid reason for a period of unemployment. But with unemployment rates reaching an all-time high earlier this year due to the pandemic, chances are you may have had a job gap, too. Should you shrug it off? Or do you need to explain the gap on your résumé?

“We tend to think of long-term gaps in employment as a negative on our résumé, but with millions of people out of work, gaps are going to be more common,” says Sasha Yablonovsky, president of CareerBuilder. “Recruiters are aware of this, and they’ll be looking for job seekers to capture their meaningful — if alternative — experience and skill development with a focus on adaptability and skills that transfer across industries.”

Hiring managers will likely be empathetic to the situation because their own organizations had to manage the seismic shift COVID-19 delivered, says Christy Pambianchi, executive vice president and chief human resources officer for Verizon. “With millions out of work, the impact of the pandemic on the job market will be felt for years to come,” she says. “This is simply our new reality, and it has required us to dial up our humanity.”

If you’ve had a gap in employment due to a layoff or furlough, the experts say you should approach it this way:

Be transparent

While there isn’t a stigma for being laid off during the pandemic, it’s important to be honest and upfront, says Brianne Thomas, head of recruiting at the HR tech provider Jobvite. “Recruiters are information gatherers, so in any scenario, candidates should be open and honest with hiring teams,” she says. “This is the best strategy when navigating any type of conversation regarding previous employment experiences along with exit experiences.”

If you’ve been furloughed, you should approach it a bit differently because you’re technically still employed, adds Hari Kolam, CEO of Findem, a recruiting platform. “Next to your employer, put your start date to present, and then put furloughed in parentheses next to it,” he says. “Your cover letter will provide an opportunity for you to explain what’s driving you to job search while technically furloughed. You’re subject to recall, and that means you’re valued and wanted.”

Rebrand your unemployment

Identify and call attention to the skills or learning you have gained while unemployed, Yablonovsky says. “For instance, were you caring for family members or others in your community during this time?” she asks. “Because of this year’s unpredictable events, employers seek adaptability as a skill when they are looking for new hires. You have valuable skills to showcase that may be highly desirable to employers, related to budgeting, managing caretaking responsibilities, coordinating or volunteering with community relief efforts or mutual aid associations.”

Also highlight the ways you’ve taken accountability for your career growth and development, says Christina Luconi, chief people officer at Rapid7, a cybersecurity company.

“There are an abundance of tools and resources online,” she says. “If you are in an interview and are asked, ‘What have you been doing with your time since you were laid off?’ you’ll

want a substantial answer that goes beyond learning how to bake bread and binging the latest Netflix series. Taking the time to invest in developing skills and volunteering will go a long way towards crafting a story that screams, ‘I’m resilient. I made the best possible use of the time, and I’m ready to add impact to your company.’”

Approach your résumé as an opportunity to tell your full story, Pambianchi says. “Detail how you spent your time versus trying to explain or dwell on any gaps,” she says. “These details help connect the dots and build a better understanding of who you are as a person. With our personal and professional lives merging like never before, we expect to learn more about your life outside of work, which is a valuable gauge of your values and beliefs. I would much rather speak to a candidate on how they helped their 4th grader conquer multiplication or volunteered to sew masks for frontline workers than have them try to explain any lapse in employment.”

Refresh your résumé for a changing job market

If you experienced a furlough, your industry was probably one of the many hit hard by the pandemic’s economic impact, Yablonovsky says. “To increase your chances of landing a job, apply in industries where the pandemic has placed increased demand — like health-care and delivery services — by leaning into transferrable skills on your résumé,” she says.

To pivot to a new profession, you’ll need to make the case that you have the transferable skills. “For example, restaurant and hospitality employees can bring important skills in customer service to roles in call centers or remote customer support,” Yablonovsky says. “They also may be able to demonstrate skills that nicely transition into a retail role during the holiday season — skills in communication, managing wait times and long lines, and attention to sanitation guidelines.”

As businesses pivot and transition to their next normal, they are throwing out the rulebook, and the same should apply for anyone seeking a job or making a professional move, Pambianchi says.

“This is your opportunity to skill-up and rebrand, based on what the world needs now and in the near future,” she says. “Most job-seekers feel pulled in a million different directions trying to apply while balancing realities at home. Be fair to yourself in the job search and showcase your strong points to a potential employer. That will ensure you’re the best fit for the job, no matter how big the gap.”