

Q&A Column
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Email Subject Line: Explaining Why It's Taking So Long To Find Work

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Summary:

Question: I have been actively seeking employment for 11 months. During interviews I am constantly asked to explain why there is such a long gap. I am afraid this has caused a negative perception in the eyes of a prospective employer. How can I work around this without lying?

Zena A., Toronto, Ontario

Landing Page copy

Headline: Explaining Why It's Taking So Long To Find Work

Dear Mark,

Question: I have been actively seeking employment for 11 months after having my position as Director of Operations eliminated. During interviews I am constantly asked to explain why there is such a long gap. I am afraid this has caused a negative perception in the eyes of a prospective employer. How can I work around this without lying?

Zena A., Toronto, Ontario

Dear Zena,

Since I don't know your specific circumstances, I'll start by making some general assumptions:

- you have been looking for work steadily over the last 11 months
- you're seeking a job at pretty much the same level, or higher, than the one you held before
- it is taking you longer than anticipated to become re-employed

Employers will definitely want to know about this 11 month period. Their concern is that you've been stagnating – or else they may be worried that other employers are seeing something they're not about your employability. Normally, however, this topic wouldn't come up until you're in an interview and the employer asks "So when did you leave your most recent position?" At that point, when you answer honestly, it will reveal that indeed a significant period of time has transpired since you were last working.

The best way to explain this gap is to phrase it in a positive way, as much as possible. For instance, you might start off by saying that, after having worked continuously for so many years before getting downsized, you chose to take the first three months and strategically review your options. There was no sense jumping right back into something until you were certain which direction you wanted to pursue. It's even better if you can legitimately say that you worked with a career coach during that period.

Then you can say it took a month or so to prepare your targeted marketing materials (e.g. resume, cover letters, transitional business card, list of networking contacts, and a catalog of potential employers you'd really like to work for). That takes us to about March of this year, by my

reckoning. You might then add that you spent about three months in work search mode. You made solid progress but didn't find exactly what you were looking for.

Then along came summer. Since this was the first time in many years you've had the summer off, you chose to slow down your job hunting and focus on spending time with your family. Now that September is here you are back in all-out search mode: Refreshed, raring to go, and ready to put all your energy into helping an employer, like the one you're interviewing with, improve its processes and increase the bottom line.

What else would help your cause? If you did any volunteer work or took relevant upgrade courses in the last year or so. If you traveled somewhere interesting that you could talk about. And any other activities that would indicate you have been actively engaged in a variety of ways.

No need to lie or distort the truth. Just tell your story confidently, and remember that many employers will appreciate that you have been taking your time to find the right fit, instead of plunging into the first opportunity that came along just to be working again.

P.S. It also helps on your resume to leave off the months you were employed and use the years only. That way it's up to the employer to determine how long you've been out of work.