

Q&A Column

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Email Subject Line: Leaving A Job On Bad Terms: Your “Exit Statement”

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Headline : What To Say When Asked Why You Left Your Job

Summary:

Question: Several years ago I was let go from a job, no reasons given. I am now looking at changing jobs and I have come across the issue of “reason for leaving” on application forms. I have no problem until I get to the job where I was essentially fired. What should I write as the reason for leaving for that job?

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Headline : What To Say When Asked Why You Left Your Job

Dear Mark,

Question: Several years ago I was let go from a job, no reasons given just a hefty severance pay. I am now looking at changing jobs from my current employer and I have come across the issue of “reason for leaving” on application forms. I have no problem with any former employment until I get to the one where I was essentially fired. Could you advise what I should write as the reason for leaving for that job? Thanks.

Michele, Hamilton, Ontario

Dear Michele,

You’ve touched on an issue near and dear to anyone who has ever been asked “why did you leave your job?” The thing is, how do you let the new employer you’re applying to know what happened, without raising red flags and scaring them off, but also without telling an outright lie?

It comes down to having an acceptable *exit statement*. Ideally you should be able to recite your answer quickly and confidently. Then you can move on smoothly to the next question.

How do you accomplish this when referring to a position that didn’t work out? It’s generally best if you can attribute your departure to a structural change your old company made; one that affected more than just you. A good reply might sound something like this: “As you may have heard, my employer went through a large-scale downsizing at that time. My position was eliminated and a number of us were let go as part of the restructuring.”

If it’s a true statement it lets you sail through. Hey, it’s the company’s fault, not yours. And it wasn’t just you so no need to probe further, right? A note of caution though. If your position *wasn’t* eliminated, a shrewd Human Resource type might just try to rile you with a follow-up query such as “So if your position still exists, and a number of employees were retained to keep working, why do you think *you* were one of the people asked to leave?” Ouchies.

There are, of course, many other reasons for leaving an employer. Depending on your own circumstances, here are some different responses to consider.

- If you left voluntarily (e.g. you resigned) to accept another position

“I was looking for more challenge, and an opportunity to grow, which my previous employer just wasn’t able to provide anymore.”

- If you left voluntarily (e.g. you resigned) even though you didn’t have another job yet

“I felt it was time to explore a wider variety of options, which I wouldn’t have been able to do while employed as I was devoted to my work and thus extremely busy. Now I am focussed again and looking forward to this new opportunity.”

If you happen to have been terminated for a reason that might be awkward to raise (e.g. you were let go because there was a performance issue, personality clash, etc.—or else you were “terminated for cause,” meaning you were fired), and you’re pretty sure the employer you had trouble with will be contacted to confirm your story, it may be important to approach that employer and secure an agreed upon reason for leaving. Otherwise you could always risk telling a fib. But think twice because if it catches up with you later, it might be used in part against you as cause for dismissal.



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