

By Keri Schwab, Ph.D.

Completing Your Story

Explaining Your 'Colorful' Career History to Potential Employers

KATIE, A 26-YEAR-OLD VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR for an educational nonprofit, was on her fifth "job" since graduating from college and in the process of applying for a sixth. Her resumé read like a magazine article for 20-somethings: Six jobs to try before 30! She had served as an AmeriCorps volunteer, an international volunteer, worked a seasonal job with a film institute, completed a contract for an environmental group, and finally settled into a volunteer coordinator position. Next up, she was applying for an outreach position with an environmental non-profit. Well qualified and with excellent references, her biggest challenge was explaining why she was on her fifth job in as many years.

"I'm honest with the person I interview with. I let them know why I am applying to the job, and how long I envision myself staying there," Katie says, also noting that contract and seasonal positions are easier to explain.

Unlike the career trajectories of baby boomers—often working one job for 30 years—many young professionals in their mid-20s are eager to play the employment field and willing to change careers multiple times in search of the best fit in terms of responsibilities, opportunities for growth, colleagues, location, pay, and overall quality of life. But this willingness to bounce around can be a concern to managers who are more often interested in hiring someone who will not jump ship as soon as a better opportunity comes by. So how can young professionals with a lively resumé best represent themselves in a job interview, explaining frequent changes, while still leaving options open in case that dream job does come along?

The first step is to highlight your strengths. Point out that because you worked in so many positions, you have a variety of skills to pull from and apply to the new job. For example, you could highlight the diverse populations you worked with, computer skills learned, or experience with administrative tasks, from budgets to public relations. If possible, give the potential employer examples of what you learned, building yourself up as a diverse and talented

candidate.

Second, explain specifically how those strengths or unique qualities can benefit the organization. When explaining your background, focus on the skills that best match the job you are applying for. Next, choose a unique skill you learned in a previous job and indicate how that will benefit the team you could be joining, and the overall organization. Think of something that might make you stand out from other candidates, such as your ability to manage social media or the younger generation of business contacts that you have. Indicating the value you can add to an agency turns your past into a strength for the future.

Third, provide honest reasons as to why you changed jobs. If there were personality conflicts or you simply wanted a better job, fess up! But immediately turn the conversation into what you learned about yourself and work relationships from those conflicts, and how you'll use that knowledge to improve interpersonal relations with your future colleagues. If you merely jumped ship for a better opportunity, turn that into a conversation about professional growth. Employers typically want someone



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eager to learn, work hard, and do more than the bare minimum. Explain that you changed jobs because you were ready for more responsibility, opportunities to learn, or greater challenges. Growth should be desired by employers, so it might be a red flag if the employer frowns on this reason for changing jobs.

Another situation in which young parks and recreation professionals might find themselves is explaining a resumé lined with seasonal jobs. In this industry, it is perfectly normal to work as a river guide during the summer, ski instructor in the winter, and teacher of climbing in the fall. While seasonal job changes are more readily understood by employers, what might be necessary is to convince the hiring manager that you are ready to commit to a full-time position. Dr. Thomas Zimmer, assistant professor of leadership and outdoor education at Wyoming Catholic College, has experience moving

around in seasonal jobs as well as hiring full-time employees when he worked for a residential therapeutic treatment program. Zimmer says that such "bouncing" around within the industry should not be problematic, as long as it was for the right reasons. Saying you changed jobs because the season ended is much better than saying you quit early because you disliked the boss, or you were fired.

Next, Zimmer says, young professionals need to prove to an employer that they are ready to commit to a position.

"Ultimately, as an employer I am looking to see if there is a life changing event that truly will lead to a change," Zimmer says, giving examples such as a recent marriage, home purchase, return to graduate school, or baby on the way. Such events indicate that, "for one reason or another, you are ready to make a change in life," he says.

Zimmer's final advice for those

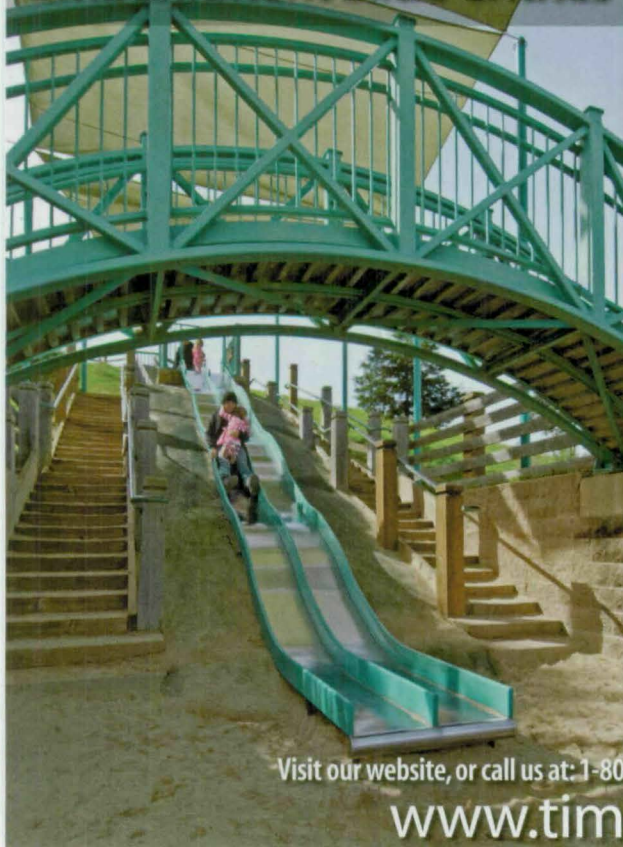
seeking a permanent position is to be honest with yourself and the employer about your intentions for the future.

"If you sell yourself dishonestly, they will find out, and you may not have the job that will truly work for you," Zimmer says. "Once you are ready to switch to a long-term position, you need to stick there long enough to make sure this job doesn't become a negative on your resumé. Its one thing to have a seasonal position on your resumé for three months, its another thing to have a job that looks to be long term, but you were only there for five months."

Overall, the best advice is to be honest about your strengths, interests, and future plans as you continue to seek the best opportunities for you.

KERI SCHWAB, PH.D., is an auxiliary faculty member at the University of Utah.

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