What to do with gaps in your work experience

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Listing your professional experiences on your resume is a difficult task. There are so many elements to consider: job titles, time frames, key responsibilities, transferable skills, etc. The process becomes even more difficult if you have gaps in your work history. Your potential employer will not have a way of knowing why there is a three and a half year gap in your professional experience just by reviewing your resume, for example. The employer may wonder if you skipped over one of the jobs you held because it doesn't meet your career objective, or they may assume that you didn't work at all during the time frame that is unaccounted for on your resume. Any gaps in your employment history will need to be explained in writing; thus, don't skip any information on purpose.

There are a few general rules about resume gaps:

- Any unaccounted time that is shorter than three months doesn't need to be explained. Having 60-90 days in between jobs is not too unusual, and often goes unnoticed within a resume. However, any gaps extending beyond three months should be addressed in your cover letter or e-mail. Whether you had personal or professional reasons for not working, the gaps in your employment history need to be explained as you don't want to leave the employer to make their own assumptions.
- Be honest! We can't stress this matter enough. If you are honest with your potential employer, you will not have to worry about them checking your references, doing a background check, or surprising you with questions in an interview.
- Don't exclude months of your employment from the job listing. You are better off explaining the gaps in your resume than trying to cover them up. Honesty is really the best policy when it comes to your resume.
- If you have held jobs that are not applicable to your career objective, list them on your resume anyway. Rather than create gaps in your resume, explain why you held jobs outside of your field in your cover letter or in an email to your potential employer. Again, whether the reasons are personal or professional, explain yourself honestly and don't leave room for assumptions on the part of your potential employer.
- Regardless of the reasons for the gaps in your professional history, it is important that the tone in your cover letter and your resume remains positive. Do not sound apologetic – life happens and you don't need to be sorry for taking time off of work. Be positive, and show your potential employer that you never lost focus on your career.

While we all agree that life takes unexpected turns and respect that there will be circumstances that create gaps in our resumes, we can always consider the following actions in order to stay competitive within our field:
- Apply our time and experience to volunteer positions, community projects, and consulting or freelance work.

- Take a class at a community college or at the community center that improves your work-related skills and allows you to interact with people with similar professional backgrounds.
- Read about the new developments in your field. Get a subscription to a professional publication/magazine, or get the newly published books that discuss changes or improvements in your profession.

Most of all, be honest and stay positive. You can’t change your work history, so do your best to show your employer you are a perfect candidate for the job by focusing on your experience and your education, highlighting your achievements and your qualifications.