

Conscious Careering



Laid off? Be ready to tell your story in the most positive possible light...

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If you're among the many professionals of late who have experienced the loss of a job, perhaps for the first time in many years, it will be important that you jump the learning curve and seek to master the art of job searching as quickly as possible. One of the first steps along this path, in fact, will be to come up with a highly effective response to the question that will be on every potential employer's mind: "Why did you leave your last organization?"

If you think this question is a simple one and that a brief, straightforward answer like "My company laid me off" will suffice, think again! In most cases, employers glean far more information from your answer to this question than you may realize. Not only will they be studying your response to determine whether you have a positive attitude, in general, and that you're adaptable to these kinds of setbacks, but they'll also be scanning carefully to make sure they don't inherit a problem employee from another organization. Remember, in the vast majority of cases, the hiring manager won't know much at all about your previous employer or what the real reasons behind your separation might have been. As far as they know, you may have been let go for fighting with your boss, poor performance, substance abuse, or even possibly for stealing from the company coffers. Sure, they may not ask you these questions directly, but these possibilities aren't usually far from their mind — so it's your job to educate them to the contrary and show them that you're a great employee coming to them with *zero* baggage.

Along these lines, I'd offer the following tips for constructing your own great answer to this difficult and multi-dimensional question:

1. Don't dance around the issue. Over the years, I've found that many job candidates feel the best response to the "Why are you available?" question is to avoid it entirely or to try and distract the employer from talking much about it. This is exactly the wrong approach, since it sends the signal that something questionable or nefarious truly DID happen in your last assignment! You know those politicians who end up resigning in the middle of their appointed term with a quick, brush-off explanation like "I'm resigning for personal

reasons?" That's how suspicious you'll sound, too, if you don't discuss your situation adequately or seem comfortable talking for at least 30-60 seconds about the reasons you're in the market for a new assignment.

2. Depersonalize the situation, if possible. If you've been caught up in a larger layoff or downsizing event, like many people, make sure to point this out so that the interviewer realizes that it wasn't just you that was let go. There's definitely "safety in numbers" in these situations and by discussing the total number of employees affected in a layoff — and the specific work sites and departments that were impacted — you'll reassure your prospective employer you weren't singled out personally for any reason.

3. Explain the business reasons behind the transition. Even if you don't agree with the rationale your last boss gave you to justify your separation, it will say a lot to your next employer if you show that you at least *understand* the reasons you were given. Coming across as oblivious to the reasons behind your termination will make you seem either like a perpetual victim or downright naïve—both qualities that will paint you as a risky hire. It should go without saying, too, that showing even the least bit of anger, bitterness, or hostility about the events that took place will eliminate your chances of getting hired completely.

4. Stress gratitude for the things you gained in your last position. Lastly, and perhaps the most important tip of all I can pass along when it comes to addressing your unemployment status, is to view these questions during the interview as a golden opportunity to sell yourself to your new employer—and immediately start distinguishing yourself from your competition. In my experience, most people become so consumed with "playing defense" around this issue that they miss a golden opportunity to impress employers by accentuating the glass-half-full elements of their situation. So think hard about the positive aspects of your last job and how your previous role has made you a better, more valuable employee to your next organization. Did you acquire some new skills? Learn a new industry? Work with some great people who are now part of your network? Whatever you can point to in this regard will go a long way to showing the interviewer that you're a resilient employee with an optimistic attitude -- and these qualities are ones (trust me on this) that *all* employers are seeking to hire in these uncertain times!

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