

# Conscious Careering

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**Looking for work?  
Make sure to focus on  
your bright future, not  
your past...**

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Wow, what a career you've had! Fifteen years ago, you were the youngest person ever promoted into the management ranks at the company where you worked. Following that accomplishment, you opened the company's new Shanghai office and led a major turnaround of one of their key divisions. Then, a mere three years ago, you received the company's coveted "Employee of the Year" award for all of your distinguished contributions. Given all of these accolades, how could it possibly be that you've now found yourself unemployed for a protracted period of time, unable to land an offer or even get called back for a second interview?

As a career coach, I find that this scenario is unfortunately not all that uncommon, and often reflects a key mistake that many job seekers make in their search for a new assignment—which is to focus exclusively on past exploits, as opposed to future solutions.

Realistically, however, you won't find a single employer out there seeking to hire somebody *whose best days are behind them*. Today's hiring managers are looking for bright, motivated individuals who are engaged in the present, excited about the future, and ready to go to war to help their next employer overcome the obstacles it faces. Companies are not (and never have been) in the business of hiring and paying people "residual wages" to reward them for the great work they've done in the past. Seems obvious, right? If so, then, why is it that so many job hunters still focus almost *entirely* on talking about the past throughout each and every step of the hiring process?

Well, for starters, one can lay a lot of the blame at the doorstep of the traditional interview model. While many companies are desperate (even in this economy) to find candidates who can address their emerging challenges, the vast majority of firms still target their interview questions entirely around a candidate's previous work history. It's therefore only natural that most job seekers assume that their past is the primary topic employers care about. Don't be fooled by this phenomenon, however. Even when hiring managers ask you to talk about your work history, they will still have only limited patience for listening to an autobiographical recitation, and the more you

can get them talking about their future needs, and what you can do to address them, the more successful you'll be in competing for offers.

Another odd twist? Over the years, I've observed that the more successful a person has been in their career, historically, the more likely it is they'll make the "past vs. future" mistake and emphasize their glory days to a detrimental extreme during the hiring conversation. In part, this is due to the fact that such folks usually have a longer and deeper list of achievements to share than the rest of us. But as it turns out, there's another ironic wrinkle in play, too, which is that most workplace superstars don't actually *have* as much experience selling themselves as the average professional! High achievers are often so accustomed to being recruited from assignment to assignment by internal sponsors, as well as external headhunters, that they tend to make rookie mistakes (such as spending too much time discussing past successes) when faced with the rigors of a more traditional and competitive interview scenario.

Another category of job seeker that needs to be on guard against this pitfall? Older, more experienced professionals. While candidates in the early stages of their careers will naturally be more oriented toward talking about their future, since they've still got most of their working days ahead of them, individuals who have crossed the halfway point of their working lives are prone to letting backwards-looking energy creep into the conversation. Not only have most older workers already experienced and enjoyed a modicum of success, which leads to a "rest on one's laurels" tendency during the interview stage, but they also tend to be thinking to a larger degree about retirement—and this mindset can come across more than people realize. So if you fit into this category, monitor your responses carefully to make sure you're not discussing your career as if it's already in the rear-view mirror. Doing so will only increase the possibility of age discrimination and damage your success rate.

Long story short? At the end of the day, while these tips may seem obvious, those of you out there who have been frustrated with a chronic lack of job hunting success should take a hard look in the mirror—and ask whether you just might be spending too much time looking backwards, not forwards, in your discussions with prospective employers. If so, change your outlook and start talking as if your best days are yet to come. You might be amazed at how the people across the desk start to perk up!

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