

Part 2. Mind The Gap: Why Interviewing To Find Out What You Don't Know Is So Important

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Welcome to Part 2 in our two-part series on hiring family office personnel and domestic staff, Part 1 covered the need to establish a foundation with applicants that the information they have provided to you to date is truthful. The next step is to address omissions.

At the beginning of the hiring process, employers are “spoon fed” information from applicants through an application or resumé. That is why gathering facts not provided by the applicant or the job broker is important, especially an applicant’s work history. Those facts can mean the difference between hiring the right or wrong candidate.

Applications and resúmes ask an applicant to list work experience, but sometimes an applicant will have gaps in his or her employment history. The purpose of exploring gaps in employment is not to discount someone for having gaps; rather, the goal is to discover what occurred during that gap so you have a full picture of the applicant’s experience.

For example, a prospective nanny who volunteers to work with children in Africa may not have listed her volunteer work because it was not a paid position; but her volunteer work is relevant to knowing her full work history, skill levels, and commitment to the job.

What qualifies as a gap really depends on the job. People will have times they do not work, so my rule of thumb is that gaps that extend beyond a year are worth exploring, possibly six months, if it involves a highly technical position.

The list of possible responses to having a gap is endless. Here are a few of the important ones and how you should respond.

Some responses, which refer to starting a family; staying home with children or aging parents; ill children or spouse; or an accident or disability, should be accepted “as is” and bear no weight on your decision whatsoever. Counting this type of situation as a strike against an applicant could lead to charges of discrimination, but it also makes no sense. Many excellent candidates make the choice to spend time with their family, particularly in times of trouble.

However, it is okay to ask the applicant how he or she was able to keep up their skills during that time, if relevant to the position, and to ask why the applicant decided to make a change and work outside of the home.

If the applicant responds that he or she was unemployed, that also should bear no weight. In today’s market, there are many qualified applicants who lost their jobs because of economic conditions and are ready to “get back in the saddle”.

You should ask about the applicant’s job search. Where did the applicant apply for a job? Did the applicant consider a new career, go back to school, get more training or consider temporary or part-time work? The issue is not whether someone was unemployed because that can happen in a cyclical economy. The issue is did the applicant work hard to find work or better themselves during this period? Someone who works to find a job by improving his or her education or skills demonstrates perseverance when times get tough.

If the applicant’s response is deployment as part of military service, then thank the applicant for his or her service and move on. You may ask for proof of the service and deployment if the applicant makes it into the top tier of candidates, so long as you ask for proof regarding other applicant’s gaps, not just for applicants who served or are serving in the military. For example, if someone states they went back to school, then you should ask for proof of attendance.

If the applicant’s response is that he or she was self-employed, that should also not act as a strike against a candidate unless you believe the purpose of the omission was to mislead you about that experience. You can and should ask why the applicant chose not to list that work on the application because self-employment is “employment.” Your goal is not to discount applicants who tried to make it with their own business, because many view self-employment as the hardest job out there. Instead, your goal is to find out what type of work the applicant did, did the applicant have success, and why did the applicant choose to start working for someone else.

It is important to note that some candidates may be embarrassed to list a failed business on their job applications. Most start-ups fail for hundreds of reasons, with underfunding being the most common. Candidates who fail at a business

are in the same position as Abraham Lincoln and many other successful people. Most entrepreneurs are people with ideas who are willing to put it all on the line to help themselves and their families.

The one answer that should be carefully explored is if an applicant fails to list employment with another employer. There are many acceptable reasons for why a candidate may have decided not to list an employer: the work was part-time or a temporary; it was a long time ago or for only a short period of time; it was work for a relative or family business; or it was not the type of work he or she now performs or wants to do in the future.

However, if the reason for not listing was because the applicant did not want you to know he or she worked for someone because they were involuntarily terminated or because the applicant worked for a competitor, that is important information worth knowing and illustrates why you should mind the gaps in employment.

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