

How To Handle Short-Term Jobs In Your Resume Work History

Adding structure to your job search can be a key component to helping you succeed, especially when you've had short-term jobs.

The company was called Shortstop Ltd. You worked there for only three months. Now it's a blip on your work history, and you're wondering: Should you leave it on your resume, or should you leave it off and be stuck with a work-history gap?

In general, the rules of thumb for short job stints are these, according to Steve Burdan, a certified professional resume writer who works with Ladders:

- If a given job lasted less than six months, you can leave it off of your resume.
- If a given job fits into your recent past, i.e. the past year or two, and it lasted six to 12 months, you must put the job description into your Work History section.
- For jobs that lasted six to 12 months and are buried in your past work chronology, leave them off.
- If a job last at least 12 months, you should put it on your resume.

Beyond the rules of thumb, however, are qualifiers and exceptions:

Use years only in work history

Many people tend to put both months and years on their job listings because they feel obligated to be precise in their work chronologies. Such thinking is a hangover from the earlier days of a job seeker's work life: the pre-resume time when candidates filled out job applications that required the months and dates of your employment history.

One reason to leave months off is to give yourself elbow room to leave off jobs with less than six months of tenure. Another is to keep hiring professionals from nitpicking.

"I don't want some HR guy picking through and nitpicking and trying to account for every single month," Burdan said. "Why wake that sleeping dog?"

Avoiding the 'job-hopper' label

But what if you have two six-month positions within a single year? Burdan recommends choosing only one of the two to list in a work history for a given year.

"Typically, you don't want to put two short-term jobs together," he said. "The default impression two short-term jobs give is... a job-hopping tendency. In that situation, I would in fact leave off one of the two."

Burdan cited a hypothetical example: a job seeker in his mid-30s who's been employed for 10 to 15 years. During that time, he has had eight jobs, two of them for six months or less. If those short stints are left in the work history, it increases the likelihood that a reader will conclude the candidate won't stay anywhere for long.

In such a case, Burdan recommends winnowing down work history to the best job descriptions. Were a job seeker to have three positions over a 1.5-year time window, he would typically try to pick only one, or at most two, positions to cover the given chronology.

Special cases

Contract work: A series of short gigs done under contractual or freelance circumstances should be bundled up in a section labeled Contract Experience. Burdan recommends compressing such work to be precise without sacrificing veracity.

Relevant but dated experience: Resumes typically cover no more than 15 to 20 years of work history. Work history that's relevant but older than that should be bundled into a section titled Previous Experience.

Multiple short jobs with the same employer: Fast-moving companies often promote their best employees fast and furiously, shifting them from one task to the other as needs and priorities shift. The resulting patchwork of short-term jobs is a tribute to an employee's versatility but can be difficult to parse and may even be mistaken for job-hopping by the inattentive resume reader.

Handle this special case with formatting. If you've been at a company 13 years and have had 10 positions, list the company flush left and then at flush right, list the accumulative dates: 1995 through 2008, for example. Then break out the most recent, most advanced three or four positions, bolding the position titles, describing each job, and listing achievements and bullet points just as if the listings were all for separate companies. Have the last position cumulatively cover the most distant dates and all the relative positions there under and have its last bullet point read, "Promoted through levels of progressive responsibility."

This keeps your resume from delving into the distant past and more junior positions, Burdan said.
Resume truth or consequences

Does leaving off short jobs constitute lying? No. Such editing is at the opposite end of the truth spectrum from lying, which boils down to making things up.

In fact, leaving short stints off a resume is not only permissible truth-wise, it helps to transform the document into a lean and mean marketing tool. "Most often, 95 percent of the time, leaving a six-month job off will not only tighten a resume up, but [it accounts for the fact that a job seeker wasn't] at a job long enough to have a positive impact," Burdan said.

There's always an exception to the rule, however: Sometimes short stints produced solid results that the job seeker can document.

Such productive short stints are typically rare, but they do merit inclusion on the resume.

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