

# The New York Times

CAREER COACH

## How to Overcome a Job-Hopping History

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**Q.** *You have an unstable work history, having held several jobs in a relatively short period. How can you try to prevent potential employers from holding your job-hopping past against you?*

**A.** **You can minimize the appearance of job-hopping by focusing your résumé on your career history rather than your job history, said Clark R. Beecher, a principal at Magellan International, an executive recruitment firm based in Houston.**

**“The biggest hurdle is getting noticed,” Mr. Beecher said, because recruiters usually screen out people with a choppy employment past.**

It is easier to overcome a choppy history if you are young and just starting out, said Ronald Mitchell, chief executive and co-founder of the career mentoring site [GottaMentor.com](http://GottaMentor.com). “It’s more acceptable for those under 30 to move around, so I don’t think they need to address it, unless there are big gaps in their résumé,” he said.

And, of course, you will have an easier time if your recent departures resulted from mass layoffs at previous employers. You can emphasize this point in your cover letter or add a few parenthetical words about it on your résumé, such as “(one of 700 employees downsized 11/01)” or “(company acquired by ACME in 1/09)” after the job title or company name, said



Louise Kursmark, president of Best Impression Career Services, an executive résumé writing service in Boston.

**Q.** *How should a résumé deal with short periods of employment?*

**A.** The dates of those jobs don't have to jump off the page. They can go in parentheses after the job title, the company name or at the very end of the job description, said Ms. Kursmark, who is also the author of "30 Minute Résumé Makeover." You can also use years only, rather than months and years.

It's also fine to eliminate one or two jobs from your résumé, Ms. Kursmark said. For example, if you took a position and two months later decided that it wasn't for you, it's probably best not to include it. "It's not that you're ashamed of it, but it's not the most relevant information you need to share in your résumé," she said.

If you do keep a job off your résumé, be prepared in the interview to explain why. As long as you're being truthful, she said, you can answer that the job "didn't add a lot of value and you wanted to include more meaningful experiences and accomplishments."

Use a cover letter to explain your reasons for switching jobs — something that is difficult to do in a résumé. But first, tell the employer why you are an exceptional candidate, summarizing your background — including the number of years you have been in the industry — and the results of your work.

After that, acknowledge that you have held several jobs in a short period and address each with a line of explanation. "Keep the explanations short," Mr. Mitchell said. "Remember, you are selling yourself, not defending your candidacy."

**Q.** *Aren't there some industries where moving around often is expected?*

**A.** **If you work with start-up companies, frequent job changes are almost de rigueur, because start-ups often fail or are acquired by other**

**companies. “Especially in the biotech and technology industries where there are many start-ups, it’s O.K. to move around,” Mr. Beecher said. If you do consulting work on a project basis, it is expected that you would be switching jobs fairly often.**

For certain technology positions, like computer programmer and software developer, the length of time at each job is “almost irrelevant,” Mr. Mitchell said. “The breadth of experience is far more important.”

*Q. How should you handle questions about your job history during an interview?*

**A.** Focus on your accomplishments and stress your years of experience, said Dean Bare, managing director of the Atlanta office of the executive search firm Stanton Chase International. Managers, he said, “value accomplishments that have been repeated.” He added, “If a person can demonstrate they have had repeated success in their jobs, they may be more attractive than a person with years of experience at only one organization.”

If you were fired from a job, discuss it in a way that shows you have come to terms with it, Ms. Kursmark said. “Don’t be defensive about it,” she said. “If you were at fault, acknowledge it, and discuss what you could have done differently.”

*Q. If you cannot persuade hiring managers to look past your job history, are there other ways to get an interview?*

**A.** This is especially hard at the executive and senior levels of employment. “A pattern of short jobs is a show-stopper,” said Michael Travis, principal of Travis & Company, an executive search firm in Newton Center, Mass. “No amount of résumé editing will help — there is simply no way to dress it up.”

Instead of answering ads, Mr. Travis advised focusing on networking because a personal connection is more likely to persuade an employer to give you the benefit of the doubt. Your network includes friends, family, current and former co-workers and former supervisors.

“You need someone who will give you a break,” he said. “That’s usually someone who knows you and your work and has a reason to take a leap of faith.”

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