

Job Hunters with Gaps in their resumes need to write around them ~NEW~

As seen in the Wall Street Journal By JOANN S. LUBLIN

Last week, I explored common resume mistakes made by college students. But young adults don't own the issue. Plenty of older job hunters find it equally hard to devise winning resumes because they stopped working years ago to raise a family or retire early. Like college students, they're unsure how to best showcase their talents.

Re-entry wannabes often "draw too much attention to their unemployment rather than their employment by the way they lay out their resumes," says Kate Wendleton, president of the Five O'Clock Club, a career-counseling network based in New York.

That was certainly true of Kathy Friedman, a 47-year-old former marketing manager who stayed home for 14 years to rear two sons. Mounting a concerted job search last fall, the Rutherford, N.J., resident wrote a resume listing a Citibank stint that ended in 1988 as her most recent marketing job.

"It looks like you've been out of the working world for quite some time," a human-resources manager commented after perusing the resume.

Ms. Friedman revamped the document. Yet the revised version still highlights her protracted work-force absence by citing prior employers that now have different names. It states, for instance, that she was a Peat, Marwick, Mitchell auditor from 1977 to 1980. The big accounting firm, known as KPMG since 1999, officially dropped its Peat Marwick moniker years ago.

Upon seeing such an entry, a hiring official might conclude the applicant "must be very old or not with it enough to know that the employer's name has changed. You don't want to leave either impression," warns Patricia Cook, an executive recruiter in Bronxville, N.Y. She thinks individuals should supply each employer's present name followed by the discarded one in parenthesis. (Ms. Friedman replies that Ms. Cook merely confirmed something she had already figured out and will incorporate in the next version of her resume -- even though the omission didn't impede her job search.)

Returnees can also avoid excess focus on their long-ago work history by substituting length of service for employment dates. Thus, someone who ran an accounting department for seven years should say that, followed by a breakdown of specific accomplishments. It doesn't matter if the job ended 20 years ago, Ms. Wendleton says. Your resume "has to be truthful, but don't state things that would hurt your case."

Carolyn Brady's resume trumpets her 23 years with a Utah utility without divulging the years she worked there. "You don't do something that pinpoints how old you are," especially for "someone my age who has a gap," the 59-year-old former bookkeeper explains. Ms. Brady, now living in Eagle, Idaho, took early retirement in June 1998. She began job hunting last summer after ill-timed investments wiped out her \$253,000 nest egg.

The first business that received her resume offered her an interview. But Ms. Brady had already accepted an \$8.80-an-hour job at a nearby Wal-Mart, which didn't require a resume.

Returnees can further deflect attention from their resumes' employment gaps by using business lingo to describe skills acquired doing volunteer work. "Talk through your nonpaid experiences with professional friends and family members and have them tell you what strikes them as relevant," advises Allison Faucette, an associate at Dattner Consulting in New York.

The approach paid off for 53-year-old Sharon Dunn of Rocky Mount, N.C. She taught physical education and health for four years before resigning when her first son arrived in 1975. Rejoining the job market last year, Ms. Dunn applied to be an outreach worker for the county health department. It wanted a person who could interact well with low-income residents.

With her husband's assistance, Ms. Dunn put a "qualifications" summary on her resume that touted her "lifetime of community service and involvement focusing on the welfare of others." Among the volunteer activities she cited were multiyear roles as a soup-kitchen staffer, Meals on Wheels coordinator and crew leader for a low-income housing renovation project.

The agency hired Ms. Dunn in April 2002. She quit in November just before the position's funding ran out. She will resume job hunting once she updates her computer skills and plots her next career move. "I have a lot to offer," she says. "I just don't know exactly what it is." Meanwhile, career coaches caution, Ms. Dunn shouldn't alter her resume until she pinpoints her job objective.

Some experts also propose that re-entry candidates sprinkle a resume with the latest buzzwords for a targeted occupation. Doing so shows they know what's hot and helps a company's computer scanner catch key phrases.

What about Ms. Friedman? Her revamped resume prominently notes that she generated the first profit as volunteer manager of her synagogue's gift shop. And she is now selling ads at a suburban publishing chain. Yet she considers her resume a work in progress. "I have not been on a black-and-white career path," she says, and so preparing the perfect resume "is a very draining experience."