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Dear Lalli
by
Wendy Lalli

Dear Ms. Lalli:

I thought I would write you about my situation. I've been unemployed for over five years, and am still trying to figure out a successful strategy for obtaining a new job. I'm a college graduate but ended up setting up displays at McCormick Place for several years. Then I went back to school to enhance my computer skills and was able to get an IT position. Unfortunately, the company decided to close the office I was in and my job was eliminated. Now it looks like the only way I can possibly get another IT position would be more training.

One choice offered me is a .NET program which is in New Jersey and costs around \$20,000. At my age, 49, it seems to be too much of a risk. I was wondering what you thought about taking some training in MS Excel? I've been applying for office jobs online with the job boards without any success. Most of them only require a high school education so I'm assuming I'm being rejected because of the MS Office requirement. This would seem to be a much more reasonable strategy for me, at least costwise.

I read where you state you also give career advice. I would really appreciate your views on this matter as I don't really know where else to turn. Hope to hear from you in the near future. Thank you.

Confused in Chicago

Dear Confused,

After reviewing your resume and talking to you on the phone about your situation it's clear that there are several problem areas in your presentation that have to be resolved as quickly as possible. Namely, as it is now, your resume has a number of large gaps in your work history. I realize that these occurred when you were either going to school or just not able to find employment despite your best efforts. Unfortunately, recruiters and hiring managers tend to regard any holes in a resume as a red flag indicating that the candidate is unreliable or worse. The easiest way to prevent such negative assumptions is to fill in these blanks.

Because you made a career transition from setting up exhibits at a convention center to an IT position, your resume is already a bit unconventional. I would suggest that instead of trying to describe your work history in chronological order, you use a functional or a hybrid (a combination of functional and chronological) format. This will allow you to focus the reader on what you DID versus what you DIDN'T do.

Start off by stating your employment objective. You should include the kind of company you want to work for (corporate, educational institution, research facility, etc.) and the job you want to do (record keeping, support, research, etc.) You can develop this description by pulling ten or so jobs off of www.monster.com that you'd like to apply for. Using the common verbiage in these postings, write your objective so it will sound like a good match for these jobs.

Following this comes a general summary of your skills and experience. In this section I would mention any awards or special honors you've earned, your special attributes and people skills (how well you work with others, if you're a self-starter, are good with details, etc.) and a list of the software programs you know.

Next, write a bulleted list of your accomplishments on the job. Always try to describe the work you did in terms of the impact it had on the success of the businesses you worked for. For example, if you worked faster than others at the convention center or were able to do something most of the crew couldn't do, you proved yourself to be more productive than the average employee. This is certainly an accomplishment of interest to an employer, whatever the job or company. Maybe you came up with a new way to keep track of the work being done that saved time and effort for yourself and others. Again, this would make a great bullet point on this list.

Although these accomplishments may not relate directly to computer programming, they do reflect a strong work ethic and problem solving ability. Employers often value attributes such as these even more than they do knowledge of a particular software program.

Now list the places you worked, titles and years you were there, making sure to cover every year of the last ten years. In your case, you may have to list the courses you took at different schools instead of jobs held to account for your time. To get more detailed information on how to create a functional resume, go to your local library and ask the librarian to recommend some books on the subject. There are dozens.

Regarding the possibility of getting more training, I think that going back to school is an excellent idea. But before you spend any money (and \$20,000 seems like an awful lot to me!) consider getting a better idea of what your strengths and interests are. There are several local non-profit agencies that can help you do this where you can get assistance free if charge or for a minimal fee. One is Jewish Vocational Services (www.jvschicago.org) headquartered at 216 West Jackson Blvd., Suite 700, Chicago, Illinois 60606. They have offices throughout the Chicagoland area but I suggest you contact their main office near the loop first. Just call (312) 673-3400 or send an e-mail to jvs@jvschicago.org. Ask them about vocational testing and individual counseling to help you get a better handle on what direction you should take and how to reach your goal.

Another great resource for this kind of help is the Career Transitions Center at 703 W. Monroe in downtown Chicago. They provide a wide range of services including networking, informational seminars and career coaching and can serve as a base of operations for your job search. The CTC Web site is www.ctcchicago.org. and the phone number is (312)906-9908.

I would also suggest that you contact the Dean of Admissions at some of the colleges to find out just what programs they offer and what scholarship or financial aid opportunities are available. DeVry, Triton College or any of the city colleges would be good places to get information not only on the school's curriculum but how their programs reflect the current job market.

Hope this has been helpful. The best of luck. Let me know how you do.

Yours,

Wendy