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How to Explain Leaving A Job After Less Than a Year

By Perri Capell

Question: A job I took recently hasn't turned out to be what I expected. I am concerned that if I start looking, future employers may worry about my short-term employment. What can I do to present myself in a positive way?

Answer: You aren't alone. Many executives want to leave jobs that turn out to be different than what they thought. Recruiter Peri Hansen, a senior client partner for Korn/Ferry International in Los Angeles, says about two to three people monthly ask her about this issue. "It's a frequent question," she says.

Executives in this situation should try to stick it out with their employers for at least a year so they won't have a short-term stint to explain on their resumes, Ms. Hansen says. You told me separately you have been with your company for seven months. Sometimes it takes at least nine to 12 months to understand an organization's dynamics and settle into a role, Ms. Hansen says.

Ask other employees if they felt like you initially and if things changed for them after a year or two. Also talk with a mentor, peer or other trusted adviser about your concerns. Ask for their advice before making a move, she suggests. "Don't make your decision in a vacuum," says Ms. Hansen.

If you decide you can't stick it out, understand the reasons you are so dissatisfied. Also analyze why you accepted your current job and any mistakes you made that landed you in this situation. For instance, did you ignore warning signs or fail to research the employer prior to accepting the job? "Employers will want to know why you left and what you didn't like to understand your reasoning and whether a future job is the right one," Ms. Hansen says.

Some career advisers recommend that executives with otherwise good career histories omit a recent short-term position on their resumes. Don't do it, says Tim Jones, vice president of global human resources for Ixia, a Calabasas, Calif., technology company. "My advice is honesty is the best policy," says Mr. Jones.

But when talking with interviewers, don't lead with your chin. You may think that employers will focus on this short-term stint. "People are very worried about communicating anything they perceive as a

weakness about themselves," says Eva Har-Even, an executive coach with WJM Associates Inc., a New York-based executive development company. "They kind of obsess about it."

Employers are most interested in your overall career, though. To them, it's more important that you spent, say, five years with your prior company and eight years with the one preceding it, says Mr. Jones. "I only think badly [about a short-term job] if it reflects a pattern," he says.

Before interviewing, take stock of your strengths and plan to focus on them as much as possible. "You will only get an hour with an interviewer," Mr. Jones adds. "The majority of the time, you need to be talking about what you bring to the table, not the negative piece."

Review your accomplishments and what you can offer employers so you will feel more positive about yourself during job talks. Next, prepare a short explanation about why your current role hasn't met your expectations. As to exactly what to say, career experts offered different recommendations.

Ms. Har-Even suggests citing a general reason why it hasn't worked out. For instance, you might say that your job changed after you arrived due to a change in direction at the company. As a result, you can say that you aren't able to use your competencies, skills and other expertise as you had expected. "This way, you aren't blaming the company or sounding bitter," Ms. Har-Even says.

Another technique is to describe what you are looking for in your next position and say that these things have been lacking in your current role, says Mr. Jones. "That is about as negative as I would get," he says.

Ms. Hansen, meanwhile, says to be honest and specific about why you're dissatisfied and acknowledge what you might have done differently and what you've learned from this experience. "Present some maturity and perspective, as opposed to lobbing negative comments about the organization," she says.

Remember, most interviewers won't worry about your career misstep as long as you demonstrate that you have grown from it and aren't likely to job-hop in future.

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