

OVERCOMING EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

- **Overqualified**
- **Under Qualified**
- **Re-entering The Work Force**
- **Disabilities**
- **Employment Gaps**
- **Dismissal From Previous Employment**
- **Incarceration/Criminal Record**
- **Mature Worker**

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Introduction

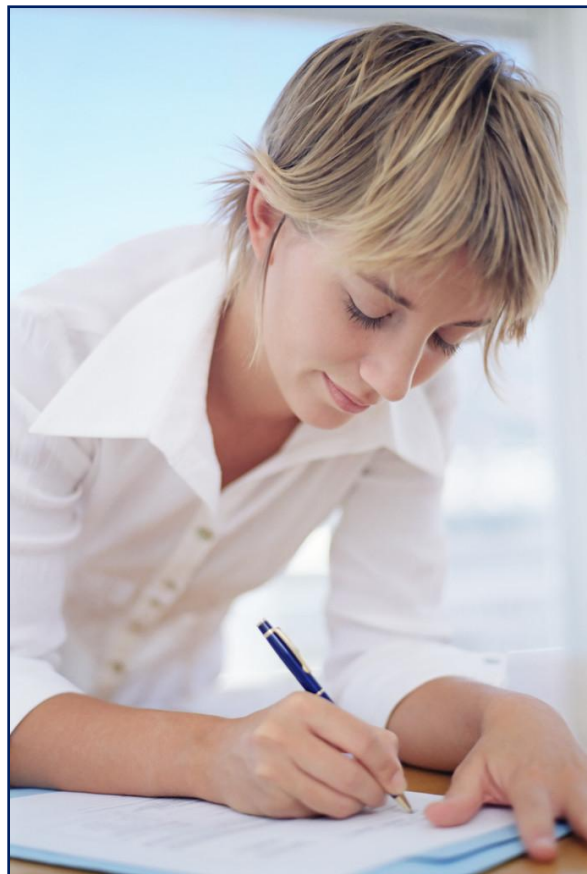
Many work seekers experience difficult and unexpected circumstances that can delay or complicate the process of finding employment. Effectively dealing with these *employment barriers* in the cover letter, resume, and interview can make all the difference.

★ The first rule to dealing with any *employment barrier* is to **customize each cover letter and resume to each employer and the job you are seeking.**

★ The second standard rule is to **remain positive.**

This handout will cover additional ways to help yourself deal with your circumstance, including

- Overqualified
- Under qualified
- Re-entering the Work Force
- Disabilities
- Employment Gaps
- Dismissal from Previous Employment
- Incarceration/Criminal Record
- Mature Worker



Overqualified¹

For highly experienced or well-educated work seekers, the message that they are overqualified for a position can be discouraging. Not only are they hearing “No” from an employer, they are also receiving the message that their experience means little at this time. Although this can be a frustrating barrier to finding employment, a few of these suggestions may help you to convince a potential employer that you are indeed the best person for the job. To understand the barriers in being overqualified, we suggest you put yourself in the shoes of the employer. Here’s how it may play out:

Employer: The employer wants to hire someone who has the skills and motivation to fill their position. Their ideal candidate will be someone who has worked in lower level positions and is ready to take on this new challenge, or someone who has already done this job, but is looking for a more established company or better opportunity.

Now, the employer looks at your qualifications and sees someone who has done work at this level as well as at a higher level. Rather than viewing you as an eager candidate who would be perfect for the position, they may think thoughts like these:

- Why isn’t he looking for jobs that are more suited to his experience? Wasn’t he successful in his last job?
- She’ll be bored within a year if we offer her a job.
- He says he wants to work here because he has heard good things about the company, but that will wear off in time.
- She will only be interested in working for us for a limited time, only until she found a better job.

Job Seeker: The way around the employer’s thinking is to have a good reason for taking a job at a lower level.

- For instance, people who have done this successfully explain to the employer that the travel was just too much for their family situation.
- Another reason was that the person wanted to get some experience in a different industry and was willing to take a step down to get it.
- In another case, people have said they wanted to work for a non-profit because it suited their personal values or wanted to work for a smaller company because they were tired of larger company cultures.

In each case the job they took was smaller and paid less than the one they left. When you have a good reason for the employer and they can relate to your situation, this may increase your hiring chances.

¹ This section includes information taken from the *JobDig Career Search* website, accessed Dec 01, 2006
www.jobdig.com

Preview the following suggestions for your cover letter, resume, and interview that will prevent you from looking overqualified for a position.

Cover Letter - Overqualified

- **Don't elaborate** on your 25 years of experience or the fact that you hold a degree and certifications. Instead, concentrate on the skills and education you have that are *directly related* to the position you are applying for.
- **Stay away from language** that reinforces how your qualifications exceed those that are required for the job.
- **Avoid trying to convince** the employer that being overqualified will actually be a positive decision. Save this pitch for the interview.
- **Give the person screening** the applications what they are looking for – confirmation that you are capable of handling the specific responsibilities that go with the work.

Resume - Overqualified

- **Consider using a functional format** (Please refer to our Resume handout on our resource shelf to learn more about resume formats) to draw attention to the skills and experience that are most relevant to the position you are seeking.
- **Stay away from itemizing** your entire work experience. Keep your documented work history to within the last 10 years. If it is directly applicable, other work experience could be included under a heading such as "Previous Professional Experience".
- **Try to focus on the parts** of your previous work that most closely relate to the position you are applying for even if they were less important in your work.

Interview - Overqualified

- **Be prepared to discuss** why you are willing to work in a starting position rather than a position you already have experience in.
- **When possible**, reinforce the attributes that will make you stand out from someone who has less experience. For example, having been responsible for budget management in the past has made you more aware of the importance of utilizing office supplies in an economic manner.
- **Be prepared to discuss** your commitment to the work, and try to alleviate the employer's concern that you will move on to something else as soon as a more challenging position becomes available.
- **If you are deliberately pursuing** a lesser position, explain why you will find less responsibility satisfying at this point in your career.
- **If the employer brings up the topic** of salary in the interview, remember that you may be offered a lower salary than you are used to.

Under Qualified

Many people in the early stages of their working lives find themselves under qualified for the positions they seek. Whether they are simply lacking a high school diploma, or have no actual work experience to complement a college degree, they may find themselves in a “Catch-22” situation. This may sound familiar - they can’t find work without experience, and until they are hired they will not be able to build on their experience. These suggestions may help the under qualified work seeker get their foot in the door. Note - A natural reaction for work seekers is to assume that more education or training is the solution to completing their work search. While this *may* be required, be sure to take a careful look at your transferable skills prior to making a school investment.

Review the following suggestions for your cover letter, resume, and interview that will prevent you from looking under qualified for a position.

Cover Letter – Under Qualified

- **Make mention** of the personal skills that apply directly to the position you are applying for.
- **Stay away from saying** things like “While I don’t have the experience you are looking for” or “Even though I haven’t used the software programs used in your office.”
- **You can put a positive spin** on your lack of computer skills by saying that you are interested in learning their programs and can easily be trained.

Resume - Under Qualified

- **You may want to consider** using a functional format where you can focus on the skills you have acquired through non-paid experiences. (ie. Volunteer/school projects...)
- **Highlight and give examples** that show your ability to learn, problem solve, and work well with others.
- **Mention your technology skills** and give specific examples of when and how you have used them.
- **Remember that volunteer experience** does count, and that many employers like to see a level of community involvement from potential employees.
- **Team sports, club memberships**, and other group activities can teach leadership, organizational and teamwork skills. If you mention them, remember to explain what you learned from the experience and how that relates to the position you are applying for.
- **Remember that references** from teachers and coaches may help to influence an employer’s decision.

Interview - Under Qualified

- **Give examples that show** your ability to learn new things quickly, and how to follow through with difficult tasks.
- **Be prepared to discuss** the advantages of hiring someone who is eager to learn “XYZ Company’s” way of doing things from a completely fresh perspective.
- **Talk about how** you have used your organizational skills and give specific examples.
- **Don’t sell yourself short!** Your volunteer experience may carry you a long way in the eyes of the employer.



Re-Entering the Workforce²

A long term absence from the paid workforce can be both difficult to explain and overcome. Whether you have been a parent working at home, or absent from paid work due to long term illness, it can be a complex (but not impossible) task to compete with those who have been able to continue their paid employment without interruption.

Cover Letter – Re-Entering the Workforce

- Avoid language that over-emphasizes the length of your absence from the paid workforce.

Resume – Re-Entering the Workforce

- **Choose a functional format** to best reflect your abilities and skills.
- **Don't forget to highlight** the “household management” skills that transfer well into the paid workforce i.e. budget management, organizational skills, conflict resolution, etc.
- **Remember to mention any boards**, committees, associations and volunteer opportunities you may have been involved with, as well as the marketable skills that you developed as a result.

Interview – Re-Entering the Workforce

- **Be prepared to discuss** what you did during your absence. If you participated with any volunteer activities or organizations during that time, explain how the experience contributed to your skill development.
- **If you were absent** from the paid workforce due to illness, discuss your clean bill of health and how you missed working during your break.
- **If you are a parent**, make sure that the interviewer is aware that you have very reliable daycare in place and a back-up plan(s) in case of emergencies.
- **Discuss how your absence** from the paid work force has reinforced your desire to return to work.
- **Show commitment to a career.** For instance you may say, “I am now in a position to devote quality time to my career.”

² This section contains information from the book 101 Great Answers to the Toughest Job Search Problems, pg. 129-129, author Stevenson, Ollie.

Disabilities³

The Canadian Human Rights Act and Provincial Human Rights Legislation, which outlaws discrimination in employment based on disability, protect all job seekers with disabilities and states that no one can discriminate based on disability. This does not mean that you will not encounter extra challenges in networking yourself to employers. If you have a *visible disability* you may choose to disclose it prior to an interview. Disclosure is a very personal issue and each person may have a different way of handling it. There are two organizations in Kamloops that specialize in providing information and assistance for disabled individuals who are seeking employment:

- **People In Motion** Phone: 250-376-7878 (Toll Free: 1-877-414-4241)
or view their website at: www.peopleinmotion.org
- **Open Door Group** Phone: 205-377-3670
or view their website at: www.opendoorgroup.org


Review the following suggestions for your cover letter, resume and interview that will assist you if you have a disability.

Cover Letter - Disabilities

- **Avoid identifying the need** for adaptive equipment until a job offer is on the table.
- **Consider not identifying your disability** unless you believe it to be essential information. In the event that you are applying with an equal opportunity employer, it may actually work to your advantage to list your disability.

Resume - Disabilities

- **Mention your skills** around using various types of adaptive equipment along with an explanation of how they enable you to complete your work tasks.
- **If you disclosed a disability** in your cover letter, you may want to include a section in your resume that identifies any special skills you have that enable you to complete your tasks such as use of voice recognition software, or TTY equipment.



Adapting to your own personal challenges can help you adapt to an employer's needs.

³ Suggestions courtesy of THEO BC (August 2004)

Interview - Disabilities

- **Remain positive and upbeat.** Your enthusiasm will be a strong attribute for the employer to recognize.
- **Use the interview itself** as an opportunity to convince interviewers that you have good interpersonal skills and will be able to maintain good relationships with co-workers.
- **Appear eager** about the position you are applying for, but not desperate to get any job. You will be a valuable worker in the organization – you're not asking for charity.
- **If you plan to disclose your disability** at the interview, plan ahead on what you will say, keep it short, and use examples where possible.
- **Stay focused on the skills** you have and your ability to contribute to the position.
- **Be prepared to discuss coping strategies** such as the use of adaptive equipment that you have used in past jobs, and how they enabled you to carry through with your work duties.
- **If you have dealt with a substance abuse issue**, don't feel that you need to share your experiences around your recovery process. An employer will be interested in how you can handle the work and will not want to take the time to hear details of a personal nature.
- **If the interviewer starts asking questions** that are too personal or inappropriate, gently bring the discussion back to the job and your ability to do the work.



Employment Gaps

Our modern workforce is full of contract, temporary and seasonal work. Many people find that while they have been employed for a significant amount of time, most of their work has been temporary, and their resume makes it appear as if they have moved from job to job. While this makes it more difficult to demonstrate loyalty and commitment, it is possible to convince an employer to hire you.

Review the following suggestions for your cover letter, resume and interview that will assist you if you have various employment gaps.

Cover Letter - Employment Gaps

- **Address your employment history** by explaining that you have worked in a number of short term contracts, or pursued temporary positions that allowed you to keep your skills current while pursuing full time work.
- **Mention how the variety** of employers and work settings has helped you to develop a diverse range of skills and experience. Don't forget to reinforce the specific skills that the employer is looking for.
- **If your work history** has included contract work, make reference to it.

Resume - Employment Gaps

- **Try to fill blank spots** with other information such as your volunteer commitments and community involvement.
- **A functional resume** will help you focus on your relevant skills rather than your work history.
- **Clarify each short term position** by citing whether it was a temporary assignment, six month contract, on-call work, work through a temp agency, etc.
- **Mention the unique skills** that each opportunity allowed you to develop.
- **If the work was for a very short period**, you *may* want to leave the position out, unless it applies to the position you are applying for.

Interview - Employment Gaps

- **Remember to focus** on how your diverse experience has helped to develop your skills.
- **If the position you are applying** for is long term, reinforce the fact that you are looking forward to long term employment and that a change from the short term work is a welcomed one.
- **Remember to mention** the reason for changing jobs i.e. contract completion, season closed, return of permanent staff, lay off, etc.
- **If questioned specifically** about your employment gaps, be honest. Employers will understand your circumstances.

Dismissal from Previous Employment

Sooner or later, many people find themselves unemployed for reasons that were not agreed on. Being let go is a difficult experience to go through, but it does not spell doom for any future employment. Moving on to other opportunities can be a positive experience if you focus on learning from your circumstances. Even the most difficult transition can be turned into a learning experience that will develop your skills and improve your employability.

Cover Letter - Dismissal

- **Make no mention** of the reason that you are looking for work.
- **Focus on** how your experience will meet the needs of the employer.

Resume - Dismissal

- **Highlight your skills** and experience in a combination format.
- **Stay away from citing** reasons for leaving your previous employment.
- **Avoid citing contact information** for the employer that let you go. With this information, it becomes very easy to follow up with an un-solicited reference check that may not work in your favour.

Interview - Dismissal

- **Wait to see *if* the interviewer** questions you on why you left your last job before you offer any reasons.
- **If you were let go because of “down-sizing”,** merger etc., don’t hesitate to offer that as an explanation.
- **If you were let go due to poor performance,** don’t feel compelled to mention that you “were let go”. Focus on the fact that it was time to move on, and that you learned from the opportunity.
- **If you are asked,** you can say that you left your previous employer because things didn’t work out, you found that you weren’t suited to the work, etc. Again, you want to stress how much you learned from the opportunity, and that things worked out for the best in the end. Not only did the position help to develop your skills, it led you to this exciting work opportunity!
- **Avoid the temptation** to “bad-mouth” or criticize your former employer. The interviewer(s) may understand that you had to move on, but they will not appreciate negativity towards your last employer even if they are the competition!
- **Focus on the positive aspects** of the job you were fired from. Even the most disastrous work opportunity has positive characteristics if you consider it hard enough.
- **Demonstrate how** you are a better worker now.
- **Provide specifics around** what you may do differently given what you have learned.

Criminal Record

Many people make mistakes and must live with the consequences. Your incarceration will not prevent you from working again, although it may make it difficult to secure employment that requires bonding or a criminal record check. You are not obligated to share details around a criminal record with an employer for every type of work. However, a gap in employment history may demand an explanation. It may be tempting to come up with an excuse or tell a white lie. In the end, you will be better off taking the honest approach. If an employer discovers that an employee lied in a job application or on their resume, it could be grounds for immediate dismissal. Your probation or parole officer may have more information to assist you with your work search. You can also contact the **John Howard Society** in Kamloops at (250) 434-1700 or view their website at: www.johnhoward.ca

Review the following suggestions for your cover letter, resume, and interview that will assist you if you have a criminal record.

Cover Letter – Criminal Record

- **Refrain from mentioning** your incarceration or criminal record.
- **Focus on how your skills** match those in demand from the employer.

Resume – Criminal Record

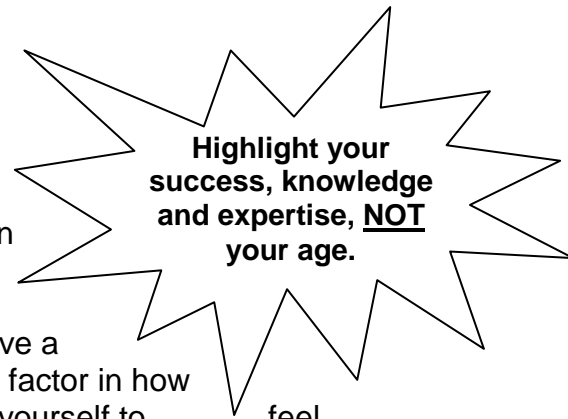
- **Use a functional format** to highlight your skills and experience rather than your work history.
- **Do not include detailed** information around your absence from the work force.
- **Fill paid employment** gaps with information on other skills you developed.

Interview – Criminal Record

- **Remain enthusiastic** about the opportunity, and refrain from thinking negatively.
- **Don't volunteer information** about your incarceration unless a criminal record check is mandatory.
- **Focus on your suitability** for the job, and your desire to contribute to the organization.
- **Your interviewer may understand** and appreciate the fact that people make mistakes. If your criminal record becomes a topic of discussion, focus on what you learned, how you have changed, and how it has helped you to become a better person.
- **If the charges have nothing** to do with the type of work you are applying for, explain that to the interviewer(s). For example, the fact that you had a possession charge when you were 19 may have little impact on your ability to work as an older adult.
- **You may have** to work harder than other work seekers to impress the employer. Remember that determination, honesty and enthusiasm are your best friends.

Mature Worker⁴

Our youth population gets smaller with each passing year, *but* our experience is always growing. This can be important to remember if you are a mature worker who is seeking employment. While it might be more difficult for a mature worker to compete for employment against young adults with current training, it is far from impossible. Mature workers often have extensive life and work experience that can give them an advantage in a work setting. However it becomes a challenge to sell this concept to some employers who may have a stereotype in mind for the position. Your attitude will be a key factor in how you are able to transition to employment. Instead of allowing yourself to feel resentment because you feel that younger workers have an advantage, focus on the fact that your considerable experience will be a greater asset to an employer once you can demonstrate your value to them. Here are some tips that may help you in this process. For more comprehensive information on this topic, refer to the “MidLife Career & Job Search” handout in the resource shelf.



Review the following suggestions for your cover letter, resume, and interview that will assist you if you fall under the category of “Mature Worker.”

Cover Letter – Mature Worker

- **You may want to reinforce** your availability, the fact that you no longer have child-care responsibilities, and that you have no other issues that would interfere with your employment.

Resume – Mature Worker

- **A functional format** will help you focus on your skills and abilities rather than your lengthy work history.
- **Limit your work history** to the most relevant work within the last ten years.
- **If older portions of your work history** are directly applicable to the position you are applying for, consider grouping them together in another section titled Other Relevant Work Experience or Previous Professional Experience and leave the dates out.
- **Draw specific examples** from your work history, and use them to describe the levels of energy, commitment and productivity you bring to the workforce.
- **Stay away from** citing graduation and completion dates in your training.
- **Ensure that you demonstrate** a level of comfort with computers by listing the types of software that you are comfortable using. (E-mailing your application will be an excellent way to demonstrate that you are “technology friendly”).

⁴ This section contains information from the book 101 Great Answers to the Toughest Job Search Problems, pg. 81 & 82, author Stevenson, Ollie.

Interview – Mature Worker

- **Many employers may** need an extra “push” to hire a mature worker over a younger one. In the interview, be sure to make an extra effort to show enthusiasm and energy.
- **Use the interview** to show your ability to establish rapport. You will need this skill to fit in with a younger staff, and the interviewer will be looking for it.
- **Remind the employer** that you do not have the parenting or social commitments that younger people may have.
- **Provide a variety of examples** from your work history (when appropriate) to explain how you have completed tasks similar or related to the position you are applying for.
- **Be prepared to discuss** your dedication to this position.
- **If you are questioned about** why you are interested in work that may have less responsibilities than you are used to, discuss the fact that your need for career progress may differ from a younger worker who may be eager to move on in a relatively short period of time.
- **Discuss examples** of how you learn new tasks, and how you have kept current with technology advances in the workplace.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

The information in this handout regarding *Cover Letters, Resumes & Interviewing* was taken from the following books, which are available at the Kamloops Work Search Centres libraries:

- **Best Resume for People without a Four Year Degree** by Wendy S. Enelow (pg. 38-42). Offers examples of how to highlight important aspects of your early career.
- **Job Interviews for Dummies** by Joyce Lain Kennedy (Chapter 20 – Questions About Special Issues)
- **Resume Workbook** found in Work Search Centres’ Resource Library
- **Resumes for Dummies** by Joyce L. Kennedy (Chapter 12 – Overcoming Deadly Dilemmas)
- **The Complete Idiots Guide to The Perfect Resume** by Susan Ireland (Chapter 5)