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Navigating the Job Hunt

ESSENCE identifies ways for Black women to stay current, get back on track and account for long-term gaps in employment BY JAYME S. GANEY | ILLUSTRATION BY JESSE LENZ

While she couldn't quite put her finger on it, Genevieve Daniels,* a 35-year-old community development worker in Bloomfield, New Jersey, knew something was up when her bachelor's degree in political science and master's in urban affairs—not to mention her commitment, passion and wealth of experience—didn't yield any call backs during a yearlong job hunt. "The handful of interviews I did get were from employers who didn't have a single Black person on staff," she says. Still, there were no offers. Complicating matters were stretches of unemployment in her résumé due to past positions having been funded by grants. She assumed people in her field knew such

gaps were par for the course. Daniels reached out to a human resources professional for advice. What she found was that those gaps in her résumé really mattered. "Over the last five years I'd had gaps of six months to a year," Daniels notes. "And no one was going to hire me if I didn't explain them." To help fill in her most recent yearlong period of joblessness, Daniels decided to go back to school to study food systems. While she ultimately had to move back in with her mother, she has had calls for grant positions and part-time work since then.

A 2011 research report by UCLA reveals that potential employers think less of unemployed job candidates no matter how briefly they've been out of

work. And it doesn't matter whether they were laid off or had quit. When searching for a job while unemployed, you're fighting the perception that your experience is outdated. That's grim news for the 12 percent of Black women who are jobless. Workers over 50 who are between jobs also face an uphill climb, as employers tend to see them as tired and set in their ways, says Marsha Haygood, employment coach and president of StepWise Associates (stepwiseassociates.com), a career and life coaching company. The key is to project energy and friendliness, be exceptionally competent, be flexible and know what's happening in your industry. Here's a primer on how to break through the unemployment stigma and land that job.

Set the right goal

"Know where you want to work and articulate specifically what you want to do," says Haygood. Then examine your interests and find what drives you. Create a one-minute pitch to explain it to colleagues you encounter.

Fill in the gaps

To fight the perception that your last company didn't think of you as essential, you must fill in any missing work history, says Geoffrey Ho, lead researcher of UCLA's The Stigma of Unemployment study, which shows that gaps lead to hiring discrimination. Darnell Clarke, author of *Employmentology: A Practical Systematic Methodology of Finding Employment by a Hiring Manager* (The Clarke Group), recommends that you create a business identity—not named after you—and obtain a business license. Whatever work you do in the interim (temporary, part-time, contract) will now go under that consulting business on your résumé. If you decide to launch your own venture, go to the small business administration (sba.gov) for information on starting and managing a business.

Get off-the-job training

According to Clarke, budgets for training employees went out the window about 20 years ago. Hiring managers don't want to hear that you're a quick learner; they want to know that you >

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have the skill set and can apply it once hired. Find internships, courses and fellowships that will give you the training and experience to compete.

Stop talking in the past

Employers don't care about your last job. They care about how you're going to perform and what you're going to do in this one, says Haygood. Study up on the company and bring ideas to the table to help them determine exactly where you will start if they hire you. They need to see the immediate benefits.

Use the right language

Your words—whether they come out of your mouth, through your e-mail or from your résumé—should display your drive and knowledge, says Haygood. Include industry and company lingo and terms associated with the position you're seeking, she adds. This will show that you understand the current business concepts, and will make the difference between your résumé landing in the Review Candidates pile or in the trash.

Get an adult internship

Returnships (for those reentering the workforce) and prep programs that offer experiential learning can keep your skills and your network current. iRelaunch (irelaunch.com) hosts reentry programs and networking events around the

country. Platform to Employment (platformtoemployment.com) offers skills assessment tests, career-readiness workshops, coaching and paid internship placements.

Think like the company

The unfair truth is that you are a dollar spent, a dollar made or a dollar saved. In this economy and in every industry, you are currency that is going out the door (salary and benefits), coming in the door (efficiency and cost-effective services) or multiplying (adding to the company's bottom line). Even top performers get downsized when the company's bottom line is in trouble. Always bring moneymaking or money-saving suggestions.

Fight discrimination

If you think you've been discriminated against, Paula Brantner, executive director at Workplace Fairness (workplacefairness.org), says to visit your local human rights office and fill out a form detailing your experience, which can be sent to the company. She advises you get an attorney if you plan to pursue action. Also contact the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission at 800-669-4000 or visit eeoc.gov with concerns. Laws are still being considered to protect long-term unemployed and older workers from discrimination.

How to Stay Positive

EVEN IF YOU'RE UNEMPLOYED, IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP YOUR BRAIN—AND ATTITUDE—POWERED UP. SOME TIPS:

SAY AFFIRMATIONS

Replace negative thoughts about your situation with positive ones, like "I'm worthy of a great job," "Today will be productive" and "My interview will go well." Write down the statements, post them on your computer, and repeat them daily.

RECOGNIZE YOU ARE WORKING

The hunt for a gig—networking, using social media, sending résumés, checking e-mails, making follow-up phone calls and interviewing—is a job in itself. Managing those tasks puts you in work mode, so give yourself credit, keep up your routine, and take lunch breaks as you would at an office.

MOVE AND MEDITATE

When interviewing, you want to project a relaxed and confident demeanor. "Walking four times a week for 30 minutes each time produces the same results as anti-anxiety pills," says therapist Diane Lang. Also try meditating by tracing the movement of your breath as you inhale and exhale.

THE INTERVIEW SCRIPT

WHEN YOU'RE UNEMPLOYED, TIME IS NOT ON YOUR SIDE. ELLEN GORDON REEVES, AUTHOR OF *CAN I WEAR MY NOSE RING TO THE INTERVIEW?* (WORKMAN), OFFERS CRAFTY ANSWERS FOR DIFFICULT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1 What was your reason for leaving your last position?

The strategy: Don't lie, but avoid being bitter (always a red flag) or implying incompetence on the part of the company.

Your response: "There were companywide layoffs—it wasn't my choice—but once I got over the shock, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I had time to take new courses and to figure out what the right job opportunity for me would be."

2 I noticed your last job in this field or at this level was more than six months ago. Convince me you can perform at the same level and better.

The strategy: Like an athlete who is always training for the next competition, make sure your narrative has zero gaps.

Your response: "I have strengthened my skill set by volunteer-

ing with xyz, blogging as an xyz expert and doing pro bono work at xyz organization. In addition I have gained new X skills [relevant to this open position] by shadowing/training under Y and taking Z courses."

3 How long have you been looking for a job?

The strategy: This is not about the time frame. This is an opportunity to allay the concern that you've been home, doing nothing, talking to no one and being depressed.

Your response: "I've been looking for the right job and devoting my time to finding a good fit. Since I had the chance to really focus, I have been honing my skills, building new ones and connecting with people in the field. And I am so excited and ready to start doing what I know is the right job for me."