



How to Explain "Job Hopping"

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

"Job Hopping"

Most people switch jobs and there is nothing wrong with doing so. However, if you're looking at your third or fourth job within the past few years, something is wrong. I see résumés from people attempting to do this all the time and, for the most part, I can't help such people. "Employer hopping" is taken into account by employers assessing your qualifications. Having moved several times in a short timespan can, in fact, impact your ability to [get a job](#) because it leads employers to question your loyalty and long-term commitment to what you do.

In addition, moving several times in a short timespan gives employers the indication that you may have moved because (1) your work wasn't well-received, (2) you may have been asked to leave, or (3) you're unable to get along with others in a work environment. None of this is to say that any of the above factors may be relevant to your reasons for moving in the past. It's important to realize, however, what employers are thinking and that their thoughts (without even hearing your explanation) will have a strong influence on their decision to interview you.

Your reasons for moving need to make sense. The reasons that typically make the most sense to potential employers are (A) quality or type of work, (B) structural changes with your employer, or (C) location. While these are the best reasons for making a move, it's important to note that people who've moved several times have done so because (A) their work wasn't well received, (B) they were asked to leave, or (C) they were unable to get along well with others in their work environment. If you mention any of these reasons to an employer, you are unlikely to get hired. It's important in any job search that you emphasize reasons for moving that aren't likely to prejudice employers against you.

I. REASONS THAT EMPLOYERS "BUY" FOR MOVING

A. Quality or Type of Work

It's permissible for people to move due to the quality or type of work they do. For example, an attorney might move to bring about a transition from litigation to transactional work (or vice versa). If that's the case, such a move makes perfect sense and employers won't be prejudiced against the employee for doing so. In addition, if you want to do more sophisticated work, that will also make sense. During the boom in corporate work in the late 1990s and the first part of 2000s, many corporate people from smaller [law employers](#) moved to larger law employers. Here, a suitable explanation for moving was almost always because they wanted to get more "public company work" or be staffed on larger deals. Explanations such as these were almost always considered permissible.

One of the most perverse reasons for moving that employers don't like to hear, is that you're interested in moving because your company doesn't have enough work. This is, in fact, one of the most common reasons that people move. The problem with giving this explanation is that an employer is likely to think that you're not given much work because (1) your work isn't good, (2) you aren't proactive enough in asking for work, or (3) the people in charge of doling out work don't like you. In explaining there isn't enough work at your current employer, you need to be clear with potential employers that there isn't enough work for anyone in your company and you're not alone. You also need to express this fact in a way that doesn't make it sound like you're attacking your current employer. Permissible ways to explain this is to mention that there have been key defections in your department, that major work that has occupied you for months (or years) has gone away, or that the employer has recently lost several major clients. However you explain this, you need to do it with tact and without appearing to attack your current employer. In addition, you need to be aware that the employer may be wondering, "Is this person short on work because something is wrong with him/her?" while giving any explanation.

Moving to get higher quality work or a different type of work shows ambition and a need for constant improvement. Most people can explain the need to move in these terms. Conversely, moving because you don't have enough work needs to be explained in a way that connotes ambition.

B. Structural Changes With the Employer

Many employers go through significant structural changes that have an adverse effect on employees. For example, employers merge, offices close, and key supervisors leave. When this occurs at the largest employers, many people hear about it in the business community. Each of the reasons discussed above are permissible reasons for leaving an employer if they're handled the correct way.

One way that smart job seekers can often explain moves is to say that because of significant structural changes in their current employer, they don't believe there are opportunities to advance. The former Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison's [real estate practice](#) in San Diego is a perfect example. In early 2000, this practice was staffed by two partners and three lower associates. One partner left in 2001 then it was staffed by one partner and three associates. In combination with a partner defection and other market forces, the amount of available work for the associates decreased quite dramatically. Because this wasn't a large practice area in the employer's San Diego office, it should be obvious there were few opportunities for associates in this office to make partner unless they had a significant book of business or the partner that was left had such extreme amounts of business that he needed to elevate an associate to partner in order to further grow his practice. In this instance, explaining this particular dynamic would make sense.

When structural employer changes do occur, employers are also looking for various "warning signs" that may indicate you're a potentially problematic employee. If a key partner supervisor leaves, the employer will often want to know why the supervisor didn't take you with them. Similarly, if an employer merges with another and your position is put at risk, the employer will want to know why there was no one to protect you. After all, if you made yourself indispensable, the key person would want to take you with him and important supervisors would presumably protect you during any merger. Because

employers will be thinking these things when they evaluate your candidacy, any explanations you give for your contemplated move should take these factors into account.

Employers experience serious structural changes quite frequently. Most lower level employees at employers that close or with companies where key supervisors leave, are quite successful in [finding alternative employment](#) quickly. To me, this is a very interesting phenomena; however, I believe the reason these people find new employment so quickly is related to the fact that—more so than with most other moves—the move can be explained by negative forces completely beyond the employee's control.

C. Location

Location is often an exceptional reason given for moving. The best location-related reason for moving is that you want to move back to your home city to be near either you or your spouse's family. Reasons that employers don't like to hear for relocating are (1) to get to better weather, (2) for a change of scenery, and (3) that you are moving to join a girlfriend or spouse.

Employers are generally quite receptive to people who are leaving to be closer to their family. This is especially so if you moved to a large city such as New York and are going home to a much smaller market. Spending your first few years of work in a major market can be explained as a product of your ambition to be exposed to the most sophisticated work possible before settling down at home. You can also explain this based on the fact that you thought this would be your only opportunity to work in a major market before settling down and you therefore enthusiastically embraced the opportunity. If you commenced your career in a smaller market and are now moving to a larger one that isn't where you grew up, the above discussion of quality of work should be used. The reason moving home to work is accepted so readily by employers is because it connotes a desire for stability. Individuals moving home to work are likely to remain with the same employers for a long period of time.

Employers don't like to hear that you're moving to get better weather or a change of scenery. Each of these reasons for moving raises the distinct possibility in the employer's calculation that you're unlikely to be stable with them. Employers all over the country have been "burned" by lower level employees who moved to a certain area only to be disenchanted with where they were living and move again. If move because of the weather, for example, this might indicate to law employers that the weather in a given city is more important to you than loyalty to your employer or the quality of work you're doing. If you're interested in moving to Los Angeles for better weather, what would you do if offered an equally paying job in Maui a few years later? Similarly, if you are tired of big city life and moving to a small town to work, what will happen if you decide you don't like the extreme of a small town and want to move to a more mid-sized town? You get the idea. Moving for reasons related to weather or scenery are never good ideas.

I see people each year who attempt to relocate to Colorado because they like the Mountains, Las Vegas because they like the nightlife, Paris because they like the culture, San Diego because they like the beach, Portland because they like the music scene, New Orleans because they had so much fun at Mardi Gras ... and on, and on, and on. In heated economic climates when employers were literally begging for people, I often made these placements with some frequency. My candidates were more than open regarding their specific reasons for relocating with us, and the employers hired them anyway. In a poor economic climate, though, employers are far more prejudicial and unlikely to accept such reasons. It's simply not in their best interest to do so. Indeed, few people who relocate for reasons such as this are likely to find happiness in their next positions.

Since this is somewhat of a sensitive subject, I've saved the discussion of relocating to join a spouse or significant other for last. At the outset, I should point out that the generalizations we are about to point out do not apply to all employers. Nevertheless, I'm repeating something that I've heard over and over from employers. Employers are not always open to you relocating to join a spouse or significant other because, in the employer's mind, it connotes that someone other than you is responsible for your career. If you're relocating to join a spouse who has found a better job, will you move again if he or she [finds a better job](#) a few years down the road? If your significant other or spouse doesn't like where you are currently living, will he or she like the next place you move?

At their heart, most employers crave people who can contribute to their overall stability. Employers do not like to have to contemplate that someone close to you may potentially influence their bottom line and your career at some unstated time in the future. In addition, the higher paying the job, the more likely it is to be extremely demanding. Most people practicing in large cities have a very difficult time holding together families given the demands of their jobs. While the demands of your profession are another topic altogether, employers generally expect their employees to be the ones with the primary job responsibilities and their spouse or significant other to be the ones on the sidelines supporting that effort. This statement sounds extraordinarily wrong and I'm not necessarily expressing approval for this line of thought. Nevertheless, this is how most employers think and it's something you need to keep in mind when explaining your reasons for moving.

The fact that relocating to join a spouse may be viewed as a "negative" by an employer needs to be understood as part of employers' overall desire for stability in the people they hire. Anything that doesn't suggest stability is viewed as a negative.

D. Conclusions

II. YOU SHOULD DO YOUR BEST TO AVOID SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME HIGHLIGHTING TO EMPLOYERS THE REASONS YOU HAVE FOR MOVING

You will have a very difficult time getting hired if you tell employers you're moving because (A) your work was not well received, (B) you were unable to get along with others, or (C) you were asked to leave. If you've moved several times in your career, after your third or fourth move, most employers will begin to presume that you're moving due to these reasons. While you need to be honest with every employer you speak with, you should also be very careful how you explain any move that involves one of these three issues.

A. Your Work Was Not Well Received

If you're contemplating moving because your work hasn't been well received, or if you've moved in the past due to this reason, it's important to do a very careful self-analysis before explaining this to any employer.

Every employer has different standards for their work. At many insurance defense employers, it's quite common to turn in work riddled with typographical and other errors. At some employers, a typographical error would be near cause for dismissal. At some employers, there are supervisors that are notoriously difficult to work with and set such a ridiculous standard that no associate could possibly meet it. When economic times are very rough, performance appraisals can

become unnecessarily harsh to the degree that they shouldn't be taken as seriously as they appear.

Most lower level, professional employees working for large employers have their work criticized with a high degree of severity. While few lower level employees speak about this, even the most talented of the bunch feel a great degree of inadequacy with respect to their professional abilities in a demanding organization, especially in detail-oriented large organizations. The reason large employers are so harsh in their performance reviews is that they're pushing their lower level employees to think in different ways and have an extremely high standard for their work. While many people are detail oriented by nature before they even go to college or professional school, the level of detail an employee needs to develop with respect to their work product and thinking processes is something most people don't learn in college or professional school. Most of this is taught through formal and informal reviews of work over time. Over time, an employee is expected to develop their skills to the point where their work doesn't need to be severely criticized. Generally, by an employee's third year of work, this should no longer be the case.

If you are in your first few years of work and contemplating leaving due to harsh criticism, or you're in a particularly demanding work environment, you should probably give yourself some time and attempt to improve to the level that is expected of you. This is something that most people do. The time that other people take to criticize your work should be something you appreciate, even if they appear somewhat hostile while doing so. As your work is further criticized, your professional abilities should improve.

If you moved or contemplated moving during your first few years due to criticisms of your work, it's probably not a good idea to bring this up. I would estimate that a majority of the people who move during their first few years do so due to harsh criticism. Most people facing harsh criticism simply don't speak with other people about it with a great degree of frequency due to factors such as internal competition or their own desire to keep this private and not be seen negatively by others. Sadly, many people move for this very reason during their first few years at a company and this movement is more related to their self-confidence and ability to take criticism than any actual problems with their development as employees. Since most people working for the largest and most prestigious employers are unusually accomplished to begin with, the level of criticism they receive during their first few years of work can be emotionally devastating.

After working for a few years for a large or demanding employer, you will be in a position to know whether the criticism of your work is justified. If this criticism is justified and you continue to make serious errors, you should probably do your best to find an environment you have reason to believe will not have as exacting of standards. This also raises issues such as whether or not you're a good employee, whether you're suited for what you do, and if it makes sense for you to continue. One important factor to remember is that some employers are more critical than others and just because your work is not well received by one employer, does not mean it will be poorly received by another. If this pattern continues to repeat itself after a few moves, however, then you need to be realistic that the problem may be your work and not the employer. If this is the case, it might be a good idea to consider whether you want to continue practicing at the same level.

B. You Were Unable To Get Along With Others

It's important to recognize that some degree of politics exists in virtually any employer environment, whether large or small. In fact, it exists in most office environments, including those outside your profession. The key to succeeding then is developing the skills to strategically navigate in these sometimes difficult situations. These skills generally develop over time with exposure to a wide variety of situations.

There are numerous different types of personalities and some people are more suited for certain work environments than others. Getting along with others is among the most important aspects of work, and employers want to hire people they believe will get along with others. Since people spend countless hours with each other at work, they do not want to be around (or hire) people that are likely to have personality conflicts with others. Employers are economic engines and people who are critical of the environment or other factors related to personalities in the workplace, are seen as people who put the employer in danger.

"Explaining" the political games you have encountered in your positions at past employers may not be a good idea when interviewing with prospective employers. First, it's generally not a good idea to "badmouth" your current employer to a potential employer. Depending on the type of environment you are leaving, you may only call into question your ability to integrate yourself into the environment at the employer who is interviewing you. During the interview process, employers are generally wary of candidates whose main complaint is some sort of personality conflict or general complaints. You should be clear that your reason for moving is not a problem with the employer environment as a whole, lest you come across as someone who works against the "system." Employers primarily, and perhaps most importantly, do want people who are hardworking, flexible, have the ability to deal effectively with other colleagues and with clients, and who ultimately have developed the key skills to understand and deal effectively with political situations within the workplace.

You're encouraged to take a strong look at the factors that influenced your past departures from previous employers. If they are mainly political, you should consider making a list of the characteristics you're looking for in your new employer environment. You should also consider whether your attitude and approach to problems at these previous jobs in any way contributed to your overall unhappiness and departure. Also, determine whether there's anything you need to change in your approach. We suggest this because of what was mentioned earlier--you will encounter this in every single professional environment, whether you make a move to a big, medium, or small employer. So it is important to learn through these experiences so you can enhance your ability to make a successful move this time.

C. You Were Asked To Leave

If you were asked to leave any of your past employers, this is generally not a good topic to bring up as a reason for moving. You need to understand that a large percentage of people have been fired at some point in their careers. How this is handled is the important thing.

The justification employers give for asking a lower level employee to leave are generally related to the quality of the person's work. Sometimes, this explanation is accurate and a lot of times it's not. You may be asked to leave due to your seniority, the fact that you're not working hard enough, or a major downturn in the employer's work load. In most respects, lower level employees are asked to leave because they don't get along well with supervisors or others in authority. Conversely, very few employers actually ask lower level employees to leave because they perceive their work quality as poor (although this is the explanation most frequently given by employers when they don't like someone).

If you've been asked to leave an employer, this sends all sorts of negative messages to potential employers. If you were asked to leave because the employer you were at didn't have enough work, you weren't going to make partner, the employer

will be thinking to themselves that not all lower level employees were asked to leave, so why you, in particular? There must have been something about you or your work that motivated the employer to ask you to leave instead of others.

You get the idea. If you're asked to leave an employer, you need to de-emphasize this fact in your discussion with future employers. Most employers will not directly ask this question in interviews and if an employer did ask you to leave, they will very rarely tell anyone who calls to check your references. It's interesting to us that the largest employers will often give the best recommendations to lower level employees they ask to leave. Smaller employers tend to give the harshest recommendations.

While this is something that's not often discussed, the largest employers actually want lower level employees to leave after several years of work because they depend on a constant stream of hungry lower level employees to show up and earn them large profits for several years then depart before being promoted and taking larger income or a share of the profits. Indeed, I have very rarely seen the most prestigious New York City [legal employers](#), for example, ever give a negative evaluation of the work done by one of their former lower level employees. Smaller employers, however, have less at stake and are often not as highly leveraged and dependent upon a constant stream of lower level attorneys.

III. CONCLUSIONS

If you've moved too many times within a short timespan, employers will likely conclude that you're likely to move again-- regardless of what it's like to work there. What's so unusual about this discussion of "job hopping" is that most of the reasons people actually move are wholly unrelated to the reasons that are actually acceptable (in the employer's eyes) for moving.

While this article could have spent a considerable amount of time discussing even additional reasons to justify moves, each of the acceptable reasons can be summed up in one sentence: I am moving, but I am a stable and good employee. Similarly, the unacceptable reasons for moving can be summed up in one sentence: I am moving because I am unstable and may not be a good employee.

THE LESSON

There's nothing wrong with changing jobs to pursue opportunities. However, too much job hopping can inhibit your ability to get a job and be difficult to explain to employers. When employers see a great deal of job hopping on your resume, it signals to them a lack of commitment; therefore, you must be careful in how you explain these job transfers in an interview. Whatever your actual reasons or motivations for moving, you must give employers the sense that you are a stable, dependable employee.

Read More About Saying Something Negative About Your Former (or Current) Employer(s)

- [The Five Must of Interviewing](#)