

BEP 375 – Online Job Interviews (Part 2)

Hello and welcome back to Business English Pod for today's lesson on doing an online interview. Today, we're going to look at how to talk about a gap in your resume or employment history.

It's actually not that unusual to have a gap in your resume. Many people get laid off and then spend several months trying to find a new position. Other people have a gap because of family or health issues. And others require time to find a job after relocating.

While a gap in employment isn't unusual, many job-seekers feel it looks bad and is hard to explain. But it doesn't have to be. And it doesn't have to become the only focus of an interview. So how can you ensure a gap doesn't overshadow your upsides?

For one thing, it's good to explain a job loss concisely. Secondly, it's a good idea to show how you developed yourself while you were unemployed. If you can do these things, then you can move on to other aspects of the interview. That might include explaining why you like the company where you're applying, and asking diplomatically about work flexibility. It may also mean asking for clarification when you don't understand a question clearly.

In today's dialog, we'll continue listening to an online interview with Rachel, who's applying for an operations manager position at a property management company. In this part of the interview, she has to explain a gap in her employment. Let's hear how she answers questions and asks some good ones of her own.

As you listen to the dialog, try to answer the following questions:

1. What is the basic reason Rachel lost her previous job?
2. How did Rachel develop her skills while unemployed?
3. What two things does Rachel like about the company where she's applying?

Vocabulary

To glitch: if technology “glitches,” it has small and sudden problems; “Sorry Adam but my sound is glitching... let me try my headphones and see if that’s better.”

Hospitality: an industry that includes hotels, food and drink services, and events; “With the decline in tourism and travel, hospitality has suffered greatly.”

To be hit hard by something: to be strongly negatively affected by something; “Oil companies have been hit hard by the government’s new carbon tax.”

To amalgamate: to join two or more businesses or organizations into one; “Instead of competing with Oryx Inc, we’ve decided to amalgamate and create a truly dominant single company.”

To fold something into something: to combine something with something else; “I like your idea for a chat function, but I think we should fold that feature into our next big update rather than doing it now.”

Laid off: to end someone’s employment because there isn’t enough work for them; “With air travel down by over 50%, thousands of airline workers have been laid off, and it’s unclear whether they’ll ever return.”

Decimated: destroyed; “The plant was completely decimated in the fire, so we’re looking at raising the capital to rebuild it.”

Behind: in the past; “Well, I think the worst of the economic crisis is behind us, so we can all breathe a little easier.”

To bounce back: to recover or become healthy again; “Yes, we saw a 20% drop in sales in Q2, but the numbers bounced back in Q3 and in Q4 we might see a great increase.”

Keen for: excited and willing for; “I feel I’ve learned a lot in this position, and now I’m keen for more leadership responsibilities.”

Relevant: connected or related to; “My experience as an agent for professional athletes is directly relevant to this new position working with touring musicians.”

Workforce: the workers of a company, industry, or country as a whole; “With so many young people joining the workforce, companies have their pick of fresh talent.”

Secure: safe and stable; “Despite all the cuts we’re seeing in different parts of the company, my manager has assured me that my position is secure.”

Project management certification / PMP: a Project Management Professional, or PMP, is someone who has attained certification from the Project Management

Institute; "I've been studying hard for my project management certification and hope to pass the exam on my first try."

Present day: now or the present; "I understand the concerns about the staff conflicts last year, but can we focus our attention on the present day, when things are actually better?"

Appealing: attractive; "Open and collaborative workplaces cultures are generally very appealing to the younger generation of workers."

Values match: if people or organizations have a "values match," they have similar principles; "Because we both believe strongly in service excellence, I think June and I have a good values match and will work really well together."

To prioritize: to say that one thing is more important or should be done before another; "Given the financial pressures we're under, I feel we should prioritize marketing and sales over research this quarter."

To pay off: to bring some benefit or value, for an investment of time or money; "All this training is really paying off, as our staff turnover has gone down and customer satisfaction has gone up."

Commitment: a promise or stated responsibility to do something or act in a certain way; "Many companies are stating a strong commitment to improving diversity at all levels of their organizations."

Dialog

Kevin: Okay, so Rachel, you mentioned before that you left... you stopped working at Century... in July, yeah?

Rachel: That's right.

Kevin: And can I ask... Woa, hold on a sec, my video is **glitching**... Okay... there. So yeah, can I ask why you left?

Rachel: Well, **hospitality** was **hit** really **hard** by the pandemic, as you know. Century was looking for ways to reduce costs, and... they started **amalgamating** regional offices. They **folded** ours **into** northern California, and our whole team was **laid off**.

Kevin: That's tough. I know some industries have been **decimated** by all this. So... does this mean hospitality is no longer part of your future?

Rachel: Part of my future?... sorry, just so I'm clear, you're asking if I'm certain about leaving the hospitality industry?

Kevin: I guess that's right. You know, all your experience is in hospitality, so just curious if that's **behind** you now?

Rachel: Hospitality has been really good to me for sure. But I don't see it **bouncing back** any time soon. And at this point I'm really **keen for** something new, but still **relevant** to my skills and experience.

Kevin: Fair enough. And, let's see... that was July... so how has your time out of the **workforce** been?

Rachel: Well, I don't think the pandemic has been exactly easy for anyone, but I think I'm fortunate. My husband's job is **secure**. And I've stayed busy. Last month I completed my **project management certification**. Something I've wanted to do for a long time, and... yeah, I guess this gave me the time to do that.

Kevin: That's great. And welcome to the **PMP** world!

Rachel: Thanks!

Kevin: Now... and this is kinda taking us back to the **present day**... you're applying for this position with Allied, so... why Allied? I mean, what's **appealing** to you about not just the job, but our *company*?

Rachel: Two things stand out for me... For one, I know you have a big focus on people, and on relationships. That's important to me. So yeah, a good **values match**. And I've read about your approach to training and development. I was really happy to see that.

Kevin: Good to hear. And I can honestly say it's a great place to work. **Prioritizing** training and development has really **paid off** for everyone. It's an important **commitment**. But enough of that for now... I haven't given you much of a chance to ask anything yet. So... is there anything you'd like to ask me?

Rachel: Lots! But maybe I'll just start with... yeah... so I know you folks are at least partly back in the office. So... will this position require five days a week at the office? Or is there some flexibility on that, given all we've learned about remote work and such?

Debrief

Now let's go through the dialog again and look at the language and techniques Rachel used during her interview. Note that "Century" is the name of the hotel chain where Rachel worked previously.

Kevin: Okay, so Rachel, you mentioned before that you left... you stopped working at Century... in July, yeah?

Rachel: That's right.

Kevin: And can I ask... Woa, hold on a sec, my video is **glitching**... Okay... there. So yeah, can I ask why you left?

Of course, technical challenges are a regular feature of online interviews and meetings. As Kevin demonstrates, it's a good idea to just deal with the problem directly and let the other person know you're having technical issues.

Once Kevin has dealt with the video issue, he asks a question that many people fear: why did you leave your previous job? Let's hear how Rachel responds.

Rachel: Well, **hospitality** was **hit** really **hard** by the pandemic, as you know. Century was looking for ways to reduce costs, and... they started **amalgamating** regional offices. They **folded** ours **into** northern California, and our whole team was **laid off**.

Rachel doesn't sound too embarrassed. Nor does she overexplain the situation. Instead, she states confidently and concisely what happened at her previous company. The pandemic had a big impact and the company wanted to save money by downsizing, so they "folded" or combined her team with another one and she was laid off.

An explanation about job loss doesn't have to be long and drawn-out. You need to learn to explain it clearly, directly, and concisely. Let's practice some more ways of doing this.

- When the new CEO came in, we simply had different ideas about the strategic direction of the company.
- The company wasn't able to make it through the recession, so I was laid off.
- They decided to outsource design, so there wasn't a place for me anymore.
- To be honest, it just wasn't the right role for my strengths and skills.

Now let's hear how Kevin responds to Rachel's explanation. And note that "hospitality" is an industry covering hotels, restaurants, and event planning.

Kevin: That's tough. I know some industries have been **decimated** by all this. So... does this mean hospitality is no longer part of your future?

Rachel: Part of my future?... sorry, just so I'm clear, you're asking if I'm certain about leaving the hospitality industry?

Kevin actually seems pretty understanding of Rachel's situation, given how different companies have been deeply impacted – or “decimated” – by COVID-19. But what he wants to know now is whether hospitality is “part of Rachel's future?”

The question isn't perfectly clear or direct. And when you're faced with a question like this, it's best to ask for clarification. Rachel does this by apologizing, stating she wants to be clear, and then restating the question in her own words. Let's run through some other ways of clarifying a question.

- I'm sorry, could you provide a bit more context to the situation?
- Just to be clear, are you asking me about my ideal job?
- Could you give me an example of what you mean?
- Do you mean a change I made or a change someone else made for me?

So, besides restating the question, you can just ask for more explanation or further examples. Now let's hear how they discuss Rachel's move away from the hospitality industry.

Kevin: I guess that's right. You know, all your experience is in hospitality, so just curious if that's **behind** you now?

Rachel: Hospitality has been really good to me for sure. But I don't see it **bouncing back** any time soon. And at this point I'm really **keen for** something new, but still **relevant** to my skills and experience.

Kevin: Fair enough. And, let's see... that was July... so how has your time out of the **workforce** been?

As you can hear, Rachel is making it clear she thinks her skills and experience are relevant. Talking about your own skills and experience like this shows a lot of maturity. You don't have to wait for the interviewer to ask you about your skills.

And Rachel will use this topic to answer Kevin's next question, which is about her time “out of the workforce,” or while she was unemployed.

Rachel: Well, I don't think the pandemic has been exactly easy for anyone, but I think I'm fortunate. My husband's job is **secure**. And I've stayed busy. Last month I completed my **project management certification**. Something I've wanted to do for a long time, and... yeah, I guess this gave me the time to do that.

Firstly, notice that Rachel doesn't complain. She actually turns her situation into a positive by saying she had the chance to do some training she'd wanted to do for a

long time. In particular, she studied for her “project management certification,” a standard credential in the project management world.

If you have an employment gap, it’s good to be able to talk about how you developed your skills during that time. What are some other ways we can do this? Let’s try a few more examples.

- I actually found the time to take a financial management class at college.
- Over those six months, I taught myself how to code in Python.
- I’d always wanted to learn graphic design, and finally I had the time.
- It wasn’t a waste at all, since I was able to complete my MBA.

Now that Rachel has explained her employment gap successfully, Kevin wants to move on and talk about the “present day,” or current situation. Let’s listen.

Kevin: That’s great. And welcome to the **PMP** world!

Rachel: Thanks!

Kevin: Now... and this is kinda taking us back to the **present day**... you’re applying for this position with Allied, so... why Allied? I mean, what’s **appealing** to you about not just the job, but our *company*?

Kevin wants to know why Rachel is interested in his company specifically. In your preparation for an interview, you should definitely think of a good answer to this question. You know it’s coming, so make sure you’ve got a couple of clear and specific ideas for a response, as Rachel demonstrates.

Rachel: Two things stand out for me... For one, I know you have a big focus on people, and on relationships. That’s important to me. So yeah, a good **values match**. And I’ve read about your approach to training and development. I was really happy to see that.

Rachel doesn’t hesitate in identifying two important things she likes about the company. By saying she’s read about their approach to training, she shows she’s done some research and actually knows something about the company. And by talking about a “values match,” or shared beliefs, she shows she will fit into the culture, which is something every interviewer is considering.

Let’s practice some more ways of summarizing why you are interested in a company. Notice these are specific reasons, not just things that are true of any company.

- I think you guys have done an amazing job of promoting excellence.
- It would be great to work at the cutting edge of drug research.
- A big thing for me is your total commitment to quality, which I find exciting.
- I’ve read a lot about the company’s work in the community, and I love that.

Rachel's comments about the company sets up a situation where Kevin is agreeing with her.

Kevin: Good to hear. And I can honestly say it's a great place to work. **Prioritizing** training and development has really **paid off** for everyone. It's an important **commitment**. But enough of that for now... I haven't given you much of a chance to ask anything yet. So... is there anything you'd like to ask me?

Kevin reinforces the idea that training and development is an important "commitment," or responsibility, at his company. He then offers Rachel a chance to ask questions. And once again, this is something you should be ready for. Let's hear how Rachel responds.

Rachel: Lots! But maybe I'll just start with... yeah... so I know you folks are at least partly back in the office. So... will this position require five days a week at the office? Or is there some flexibility on that, given all we've learned about remote work and such?

Saying you have lots of questions shows you're interested and curious. But you may not be able to ask all of them, so choose a few important ones. One thing you might consider asking about are work arrangements, such as flexible schedules.

The important thing when asking about work flexibility is to do so diplomatically, or politely. Rachel does this by asking "will this position require" traditional work hours, rather than "will *I* have to," which makes it sound like an inconvenience. Then she asks "is there some flexibility?" And she gives context for that question by discussing the move toward more remote work.

What are some other ways of asking politely about work flexibility? Let's run through some more examples.

- I'm curious whether there's any room for flexing the office hours?
- So are there any allowances for things like working from home?
- Is everyone on a 9 to 5 schedule, or is there some flexibility there?
- Could you tell me a bit about the approach to scheduling and how much choice there is?

Well, it appears that Rachel has dealt quite successfully with the gap in her employment during the interview. She explained her situation calmly and clearly, so Kevin moved on to talk about the present day. And overall, Rachel did a good job of building rapport with Kevin.

Now let's practice some of the language we learned in today's lesson. Imagine you lost your job after ten years with the same company. Now you're having an online interview for an HR position with a new company. You'll hear a cue from the interviewer, then I'll give you a suggestion for what you can say in response. We'll guide you through each step in the practice and provide an example answer for each response.

Ready? Let's give it a go.

Cue 1: So, ten years is a long time at one place. Can I ask why you were laid off?
Start by saying that unfortunately the company downsized, and your division was cut.

Answer: _____

Cue 2: I see. That must have been pretty tough to deal with, right?

Now ask, just to be clear, whether she is asking if you were disappointed to be laid off.

Answer: _____

Cue 3: Yes, you were there for ten years, it must have been hard to be unemployed.

Next, say that you actually saw it as a chance to get certified as an HR professional.

Answer: _____

Cue 4: That's good. And so now, I'm curious why you think our company is a good fit?

Now say that you've read a lot about their commitment to ongoing training.

Answer: _____

Cue 5: Yes, that's something we're very proud of. Including in the field of HR.

Finally, say you're curious whether that means they might be open to flexible work schedules.

Answer: _____

Answer 1: Well, unfortunately the company downsized, and my division was cut.

Answer 2: Just to be clear, you're asking if I was disappointed to be laid off?

Answer 3: Well, I actually saw it as a chance to get certified as an HR professional.

Answer 4: Well, I've read a lot about your commitment to ongoing training.

Answer 5: So then, I'm curious whether that means you might be open to flexible work schedules?

Now let's practice some of the vocabulary we've covered in this lesson. In a moment, you'll hear a series of sentences with a word replaced with a beep. Repeat each sentence, *including* the missing word.

For example, if you hear:

Example Cue: When the company closed the Chicago office, I was <beep> off.

You can say:

Example Answer: When the company closed the Chicago office, I was **laid** off.

After each response, we'll provide the correct answer. Let's begin.

Cue 1: After a tough first quarter, it's great to see our sales **<beep>** back.

Answer: _____

Cue 2: The airline industry has been absolutely **<beep>** by the pandemic.

Answer: _____

Cue 3: A recent study shows that 12% of the **<beep>** is thinking of changing jobs.

Answer: _____

Cue 4: I'd like to find a new job where my skills and experience are still **<beep>**.

Answer: _____

Answer 1: After a tough first quarter, it's great to see our sales **bounce** back.

Answer 2: The airline industry has been absolutely **decimated** by the pandemic.

Answer 3: A recent study shows that 12% of the **workforce** is thinking of changing jobs.

Answer 4: I'd like to find a new job where my skills and experience are still **relevant**.

We've reached the end of this lesson, the second in our series on online interviews. We've learned how to concisely explain a job loss and how to clarify questions. We've also looked at how to talk about skill development and why you want to work for a company. Finally, we've covered how to ask diplomatically about work flexibility.

Thanks for listening and see you again soon!

Language Review

A. Review Quiz

For each question, you must choose the sentence that best fulfills the given language function or purpose.

1. How could you concisely explain previous job loss?
 - a) I'm really not sure what happened there, but it was definitely upsetting.
 - b) Our company had to close two offices, and mine was unfortunately one of them.
 - c) Well, this all started in about February of 2018, when my supervisor and I started having difficult working together...
2. What is a good way to ask for clarification about a question in an interview?
 - a) What was that?
 - b) Well, let me see. I think you're asking about my aspirations, so here's what I'd say...
 - c) Just so I'm clear, are you asking about my hopes for the future?
3. Which of the following illustrates talking about useful skill development during unemployment?
 - a) During that period, my golf ability improved immensely.
 - b) I spent a lot of that time improving my public speaking skills.
 - c) I found it very difficult to choose just one thing to focus my learning on.
4. How might you summarize why you like a company you're applying to?
 - a) What I'm really drawn to is your commitment to innovation and talent development.
 - b) Seems to me to be a really good company overall.
 - c) I'm now in a position where I really want to move into the marketing side of business.
5. What would be a diplomatic way to ask about work flexibility?
 - a) Can I basically choose my own hours of work?
 - b) I'm looking for a place where I can set my own schedule.
 - c) I'm curious if there's any flexibility in working hours and scheduling?

B. Vocabulary and Idioms

Fill in the blanks with words from the box below. Be sure to put any verbs in the right tense.

**bounce
present**

**secure
keen**

**pay
hit**

1. Given our successes in Europe last year, I think our German operation is very _____, but I'm concerned about our Korean situation.
2. Finding a good mentor has really _____ off in terms of learning and networking.
3. Our balance sheet provides a snapshot of the _____ day financial position, while our income statement shows the past year's activity.
4. House sales have gone down over the winter, but real estate professionals expect them to _____ back in the spring and summer.
5. Our competitors have been _____ hard by the new taxes, but we've been planning for it for years.
6. Hey Ryan, if you're _____ for an up-close look at our new facility, I can give you a little tour tomorrow.

Study Strategy

During a job interview, talking about changes, transitions, and gaps in your work history can be challenging, but it doesn't have to be uncomfortable. Virtually everyone has left positions, lost jobs, and experienced periods of unemployment. The important thing is to be able to talk about it confidently and concisely.

Think about your own work history. Make a list of jobs that you've had in the past, and write down the reasons you left those jobs. Next, make a list of periods in your life when you have been unemployed, and write down useful things you did during those times.

Now, with a colleague or friend, imagine you are in a job interview. Your partner can choose a job loss or period of unemployment on your list and ask you to talk about it. You can respond by explaining what happened, briefly and confidently. When you've gone through everything on your list, switch roles and let your partner try.

Answers

Listening Questions

1. Rachel lost her job because her company combined offices and laid off staff.
2. While she was unemployed, Rachel completed her project management certification.
3. Rachel likes the company's focus on relationships and training.

A. Review Quiz

1. b; 2. c; 3. b; 4. a; 5. c

B. Vocabulary and Idioms

1. Given our successes in Europe last year, I think our German operation is very **secure**, but I'm concerned about our Korean situation.
2. Finding a good mentor has really **paid** off in terms of learning and networking.
3. Our balance sheet provides a snapshot of the **present** day financial position, while our income statement shows the past year's activity.
4. House sales have gone down over the winter, but real estate professionals expect them to **bounce** back in the spring and summer.
5. Our competitors have been **hit** hard by the new taxes, but we've been planning for it for years.
6. Hey Ryan, if you're **keen** for an up-close look at our new facility, I can give you a little tour tomorrow.