



# Career Services

*"Your journey to career success begins here..."*

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## **For Job-Hunting Success:** **Track and Leverage Your Accomplishments**

Quintessential Careers: (adapted from [www.quintcareers.com](http://www.quintcareers.com))

by Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

Has this ever happened to you? You've been instructed to list your career accomplishments, and you can't think of any. Or you're asked in a job interview, "What accomplishments are you most proud of?" -- and you freeze up. You *know* you have had accomplishments, but you just can't dredge them up.

The inability to come up with accomplishments happens to lots of jobseekers. We know because we ask our resume and cover-letter clients to list accomplishments as part of the process of preparing their job-search documents. Although we stress that accomplishments are far more important than duties and responsibilities, a surprising number of clients are unable to articulate beyond the day-to-day tasks they performed in their jobs.

Accomplishments are the points that really help sell you to an employer -- much more so than everyday job duties, and you can leverage your accomplishments for job-search success at all stages of the process: resume, cover letter, interview, and more. Career counselor Michelle Watson notes that "employers are seeking success stories." In the Q&A interview she did with Quintessential Careers, Watson observed that "resumes are now focusing not only on 'regular' job descriptions, but also include concrete, measurable accomplishments. Physical portfolios, long thought of as tools for artists, will become commonplace as candidates strive to show their talents, not just talk about them."

Echoing that sentiment, resume writer JoAnn Nix recently gave this advice in an interview on the Guru.com Web site: "A resume should be accomplishment-oriented, not responsibility-driven. The biggest mistake that I see in the resumes people send me is that they list responsibilities. That doesn't grab anybody's attention. People aren't interested in your responsibilities. They already know the general responsibilities of a position so they don't want to know what you do from day to day. They want to know that you're a mover and a shaker: How you contribute to the organization, how you show initiative, that you can be a key player. That's what they want to see."

And if you don't believe resume writers and career counselors, take it from a hiring manager. On the HR.com Web site, KPMG Principal Mary Anne Davidson recently observed, "Candidates write about what their positions entailed and not what they actually did. So they tell us their job was to do XYZ. I know what controllers do. I know what recruiters do. I need to know what accomplishments you made in your role. This makes you different than another candidate."

To a great extent, if a job activity cannot be portrayed as an accomplishment, it may not be worthy of mention in your resume, cover letter, or in an interview.

OK. You're convinced. An awareness of the importance of accomplishments does no good, however, if you haven't been keeping track of all your wonderful achievements. So, Lesson One: The minute you start a new job, start keeping track of your accomplishments. Keep a log in a little notebook, or on index cards, in a computer database, on a little tape recorder, or on your palm device.

But what about all the jobs that have gone by in which you *haven't* recorded your accomplishments? Lesson Two: Use the following prompts to brainstorm all those terrific things you did. Try to list some accomplishments that set you apart from other job candidates.

- In each job, what special things did you do to set yourself apart? How did you do the job better than anyone else did or than anyone else could have done?
- What did you do to make each job your own?
- How did you take the initiative? How did you go above and beyond what was asked of you in your job description?
- What special things did you do to impress your boss so that you might be promoted?
- And *were* you promoted? Rapid and/or frequent promotions can be especially noteworthy.
- How did you leave your employers better off than before you worked for them?
- Did you win any awards, such as Employee of the Month honors?
- What are you most proud of in each job?
- Is there material you can use from your annual performance reviews? Did you consistently receive high ratings? Any glowing quotes you can use from former employers?
- Have you received any complimentary memos or letters from employers or customers?
- What tangible evidence do you have of accomplishments -- publications you've produced, products you've developed, software applications you've written?
- Think of the "PEP Formula," Profitability, Efficiency, and Productivity. How did you contribute to profitability, such as through sales increase percentages? How did you contribute to efficiency, such as through cost reduction percentages? How did you contribute to productivity, such as through successfully motivating your team?
- Quantify. Employers love numbers. Examples:
  - Increased sales by 50 percent over the previous year.
  - Produced total meal sales 20 percent higher than those of the other servers in the restaurant.
  - Supervised staff of 25.
  - Served a customer base of 150, the largest on firm's customer-service team.
- Use superlatives. As Donald Asher notes, you can impress employers with words such as "first," "only," "best," "most," and "highest."
- Use the SAR or PAR technique, in which you describe a Situation or Problem that existed in a given job, tell what Action you took to fix the Situation or Problem, and what the Result was. Some experts call this the CAR technique, in which C stands for Challenge, or the STAR technique, in which the T stands for Task. Resume writer JoAnn Nix notes that a sales and marketing manager could employ SAR/STAR/PAR/CAR technique this way: "Joined organization to spearhead sales and marketing initiative for newly developed territory. Led the aggressive turnaround of a poorly performing district and propelled sales from one to six million in 14 months." See more about this technique:
  - In our Interviewing Packet

Susan Britton Whitcomb, author of *Resume Magic*, one of the most highly recommended resume books on the market, calls accomplishments "the linchpin of a great resume." Her chapter on

accomplishments is one of the best sources for getting your accomplishments juices flowing. Here are some of her suggestions:

- Adding nuances to the Efficiency component of the PEP Formula, Whitcomb suggests listing ways you saved time or made work easier.
- How did you make your company more competitive?
- How did you build relationships or image with internal or external constituencies? How did you attract new customers or retain existing ones?
- How did you expand the business?
- How did you contribute to the firm's Return on Investment (ROI)?
- How did you help the organization fulfill its mission statement?
- And if you're really stuck in the accomplishments-listing game, you will likely find Whitcomb's *Resume Magic* valuable for the "Impact-Mining Questions" she offers for numerous specific career fields.

Finally, a word of caution: Resist the temptation to blow your accomplishments out of proportion. Accomplishments should be measurable whenever possible and always verifiable. Don't risk having a prospective employer call a former supervisor and ask, "Did she really save the company from bankruptcy?" and have your ex-boss say, "Huh?"

**Need help brainstorming your accomplishments?  
Use the Accomplishments Worksheet Below.**

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## **Job-Seeker Accomplishments Worksheet**

Resumes and cover letters need to be accomplishments-driven.

This worksheet is a companion piece to the article above. Although much of the material in that article overlaps this worksheet, you may wish to read the article.

Although resumes and cover letters should be accomplishments-driven (and should NOT focus on duties and responsibilities), many job-seekers have difficulty pinpointing their accomplishments. This worksheet will help you brainstorm the accomplishments that will help sell you to your next employer.

Note to individuals in jobs with not-for-profit organizations: Some of the questions below will not be relevant to people who've worked in organizations that are not concerned with making a profit. However, many other questions still are relevant to people like you, so answer as many as you can.

As you complete this worksheet, keep the following in mind:

1. Try to list accomplishments that are specific and measurable.
2. Quantify whenever possible. (Examples: Increased sales by 50 percent over the previous year; Supervised staff of 25; Served a customer base of 150, the largest on firm's customer-service team.)
3. Use superlatives and "firsts." Use words such as "first," "only," "best," "most," and "highest."

4. Consider the "so-what factor." For every accomplishment you list, ask yourself, "so what?" Does the item you've listed truly characterize your abilities and your potential for contributing to your the next employer's success?
5. Make sure each accomplishment is relevant to the type of job you seek.

Instructions for Accomplishments Worksheet: A series of brainstorming questions are asked below for your four most recent jobs. Respond to as many of the questions as you can for each job. For new graduates and others with minimal job experience, be sure to complete the school and unpaid experience section.

**A. YOUR CURRENT OR MOST RECENT JOB:**

1. In this job, what special things did you do to set yourself apart? How did you do the job better than anyone else did or than anyone else could have done?

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2. What did you do to make this job your own? How did you take the initiative? How did you go above and beyond what was asked of you in your job description?

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3. What special things did you do to impress your boss so that you might be promoted?

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4. And were you promoted? Rapid and/or frequent promotions can be especially noteworthy.

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5. How has the organization benefited from your performance? How did you/will you leave this employer better off than before you worked there?

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6. List any awards you won, such as Employee of the Month, President's Club?

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7. What are you most proud of in this job?

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8. Check your annual performance reviews for this job. Provide below any glowing or even complimentary quotes from your reviews. Did you consistently receive high ratings?

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9. Have you received any complimentary memos or letters from employers or customers? Provide below quotes from these letters that support your accomplishments.

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10. What tangible evidence do you have of accomplishments -- publications you've produced, products you've developed, software applications you've written?

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11. How did you contribute to this employer's profitability, such as through sales increase percentages? How have you helped your employer to make money? How did you contribute to the firm's Return on Investment (ROI)?

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12. How did you contribute to operational efficiency in this job, such as through cost reduction percentages? How did you help this employer or a part of the organization to save money, save time, or make work easier?

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13. How did you contribute to productivity, such as through successfully motivating your team?

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14. How did you make your company more competitive?\*

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15. How did you build relationships or image with internal and/or external constituencies? How did you attract new customers or retain existing ones?\*

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16. How did you expand the business?\*

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17. How did you help the organization fulfill its mission statement?\*

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18. If you had to ghost-write a letter of recommendation about you from your boss, what would be in it?\*

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19. How did you solve one or more specific problems in this job? What were the problems or challenges that you or the organization faced? What did you do to overcome the problems? What were the results of your efforts? Hint: Use the SAR or PAR technique, in which you describe a Situation or Problem that existed in a given job, tell what Action you took to fix the Situation or Problem, and what the Result was. (See more about this technique: In our Interviewing workbook)

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**B. YOUR NEXT MOST RECENT JOB:**

## Examples of writing accomplishments on your resume.

Duties and Responsibilities	Accomplishments
Was responsible for sales in Western Region.	Terminated two salesmen, yet increased sales six-fold in three months despite reduction in force.
As HR Director, was responsible for saving money on corporate benefits.	Shopped for a long-term disability insurance and found package that saved 10% over present costs.

If you can't remember your successes, then think of problems you've solved. Divide a sheet of paper into three columns, as follows:

Problems I Faced	Action Steps I Took	Results
Poor data processing caused delays over 120 days.	Established and managed data processing center. Evaluated processing. Moved company to new location.	Turnaround improved to 45 days.
Unable to track history of customers' sales and contracts.	Investigated and purchased PLEASE data base software. Created data base structure and report structure. Trained personnel in use of data base.	Able to produce reports on client sales patterns in less than 10 minutes.

DON'T SAY:	INSTEAD ...
"Work well under pressure"	Give a specific example of a pressured situation where you performed well.
"Thrive in fast-paced environment"	Give a concrete example of an accomplishment that demanded fast-paced activity.
"Real decision-maker"	Give one example of a decision you made that brought desirable, measurable results.
"Achievement-oriented"	Fill your resume with specific, measurable achievements.
"Outstanding leadership skills"	Give an example of a project that you led that produced outstanding results.

First Version	Second Version
As part of team, successfully completed project ahead of schedule and under budget.	As part of management development team, successfully completed performance appraisal ahead of schedule and \$10 MM under budget.
Was outstanding manager.	Received 3 promotions and 18 pay raises in 38 years. As supervisor, was rated in top 25% for last 5 years.
Input 40 orders per day to give customers faster service.	Input 40 orders daily, exceeding the average by 60%. Six to nine orders is satisfactory; more than 12 is considered outstanding.

