

SUSPECT STAFFER

By ANNA JANE GROSSMAN March 13, 2006

WHEN Chirru Elf, moved from Binghamton, N.Y., to The Bronx two years ago to take care of her grandmother, the 31-year-old was gung-ho to find a big-city job.

"I figured I could do some kind of administrative work," she says.

So she dutifully sent out resumes, but when she got called in for interviews, there was one thing that always came up in conversation: She'd just spent five months in an upstate correctional facility for selling drugs.



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Out came this tidbit . . . and in came the rejections. Kevin, a 30-year-old graphic designer, feared he'd get a similar reception when he put together his resume last year in an attempt to get a job at an entertainment conglomerate. The rub? He'd spent the last five years designing porn DVDs - a fact even his family was unaware of, which is why he

asked we not use his last name.

A brief stint in prison or a few years doing something slightly blue are just a few of many possible black marks that mar otherwise qualified job applicants' resumes. Those three years when you bummed around Europe and the months that followed where you switched jobs nearly weekly? It all makes for good bar talk, but it doesn't sound so cool when you're trying to sell yourself as a model employee.

Your character-building past may very well not jibe with what an employer is looking for, especially with the multitudes of eager graduates entering the work force every spring with blemish-free resumes.

A checkered past, however, does not have to lead to checkered future employment. Here are a few ways to win a job - no matter what blunders you may have left in

your wake.

PROBLEM: YOU'RE A JOB-HOPPER

On your resume, instead of listing the dates you worked at each place, list everything together in a subcategory. "If you had five jobs, all in restaurants, just say 'Restaurants 2005-2006,' " says Wendy Enelow, a career coach whose specialty is people who have nonideal backgrounds.

"And under that, write 'Worked in several high-volume food-service operations. Gained excellent skills in customer service and cash management.' "

Once you do get an interview, you may have some explaining to do; the person behind the big desk will want to know why you worked in so many places during such a short time period. The key here is to make it sound like you were climbing a ladder, not just moving laterally.

"If asked, say, 'I left each opportunity because I thought the next one might be better, and I'm always looking to move ahead,' " says Enelow.

"That might not be true, but it sounds good!"

If the interviewer wants to know if you'll ditch this job when a better one comes along, make it clear that you won't. How?

"Say something like, 'I've researched your company, and this is really where I want to be,' " says Enelow.

This "research" may just be spending five minutes on the firm's Web site before you go in, but this may be all you need to sound eager and informed. When you fill out the formal applications, you'll probably have to list where you worked and when. "But usually by that point," says Enelow, "You're already hired."

PROBLEM: YOU WORKED SOMEWHERE THAT DOESN'T LOOK SO GOOD ON A RESUME

Had a job at KFC and now you're applying to work at PETA? Could be a problem. And anything adult-entertainment related can be tricky to explain, if you're not applying for a job working with Ron Jeremy. With a little skill, however, you can spin almost any past job so that it works to your advantage.

"You can talk in detail about all the work you've done, and downplay the fact that it

was adult entertainment or that it was in a conflicting industry," says Enelow. "Say, 'Yes, I've largely worked in the pornography industry, but the experience I got doing X, Y and Z was invaluable, and relates directly to what I would be doing in this job.' "

Greg Antonelle, founder of AimHire in Warren, N.J., advised Kevin, (the aforementioned porn-DVD graphic designer) to tell the whole truth to his perspective new employers when he interviewed. After all, his work at the adult entertainment company was extremely similar to the work he was applying to do - it's just that the subjects at the new job would be, well, clothed. He got the job.

"In those situations, using a middleman [like an employment agency] can help, because then you have someone to vouch for you," says Antonelle, who thoroughly checked all Kevin's references before he recommended him.

"He offered to show me samples of his recent work, but I declined," he says.

PROBLEM: YOU SPENT A WHILE DOING . . . NOTHING MUCH

Often, people returning to work after long periods of absence are doing so because they were sick, in the military or are raising kids - reasons that are all honorable and perfectly understandable. Eating doughnuts in your underwear and watching "The Price Is Right" while living off inherited cash? Yeah, not so honorable. But that doesn't mean you can't find something good to trumpet about your time in limbo.

"Use a resume format that puts a focus on your skills and qualifications, rather than your past jobs. You can call it your 'Qualifications Profile,' " says Enelow. "What's more, you can find workplace skills in virtually anything you've done in your life."

Bummed around Europe? "Say you've traveled internationally and are skilled in cross-cultural communications and dealing with foreign currency!" she says. And put down any volunteer work you've done. "There are no written laws that say a skill only counts if you were paid."

Also, stay away from words like "don't" "won't" and "can't," says Ron Krannich, co-author of the book "Job Hunting Tips for People With Not-So-Hot Backgrounds."

"You can always say you're willing to work on a probationary period for a few weeks or months, or that you'd work for nothing to show that you're capable even though you haven't held a paying job in a while," he says.

PROBLEM: YOU NEVER ACTUALLY GRADUATED

Telling the truth is crucial, because there's a good chance your employer will actually call the college registrar to confirm you got the degree you say you did.

"I recently worked with a programmer who was applying for a position at a chemical company. According to his resume, he'd graduated from Boston University 15 years previously," says Antonelle.

"When the company checked his background, however, they found that BU had no record of his degree. I confronted him about how many years he'd attended and he said, 'To be honest, I never went there at all.' I said, 'Why didn't you then write down Harvard?' " Antonelle says.

In the end, the company didn't hire him. "But they said he had all the right qualifications - had he just written that he had no education, they'd have hired him," he says. The lie, however, cost him the job.

No degree doesn't have to mean no job, however.

"Life experience counts for a lot," says Enelow. Stress the lessons you learned in life rather than in school. "If you did get a degree but took a very long time to get it for no good reason, you can make light of it, as appropriate, in the interview. Concentrate on being likable. A strong handshake, a nice smile, eye contact and a good outfit speak volumes."

PROBLEM: YOU'RE AN EX-OFFENDER

Whether you've been in jail for two days or two decades, it's likely something that will come up during an interview. However, keep it off your resume.

"The resume is designed to showcase skills and qualifications and get you in the door. It's not an autobiography," says Enelow.

"You don't want to show things that'll immediately exclude you from consideration." As Chirru Elf, discovered, the word "felony" doesn't look good on a resume - no matter what the font.

"The majority of people in prison have jobs, and you can put that down," says Enelow. "You're allowed to just say 'Groundskeeper, State of New York, 1998-1999,' " she says.

So what if the grounds you were keeping happened to be behind bars?

Elf, learned this and other useful tips when she contacted New York's Fortune Society, an organization that runs ongoing two-week seminars in which ex-offenders are coached on entering, or re-entering, the work force. She eventually got hired by the Fortune Society as a retention specialist.

"In the interview, you're the master of your own image. We tell people to talk about the transformative experience that the negative experience created," says David Nidus, associate vice president of programs at the Fortune Society.

"Stress that you've made mistakes, but that while you were incarcerated, you realized it was time to turn your life around, rather than spend the rest of your days wallowing in your past."

New York-based bronzesmith Jim Bowen, 66, spent five years in federal prison in the 1970s for selling drugs, and but he says he's never had a problem getting a job. The real secret, he says, is simple: Be good at what you do.

"If you're as talented as I am, no one cares about your pedigree."

ANNABELLE Gurwitch, author of the new book "Fired! Tales of the Canned, Canceled, Downsized, & Dismissed," believes that when it comes time to interview for a new job, you can always candy-coat the fact that you were, er, "let go." Here's how:

*** Spin the situation.** "Did you get fired because you never came into work because you were busy shopping? Say you and your boss just had time-management issues," she says.

*** Pick a word other than "fired" to describe what happened.** The English term "at liberty" sounds classy. You can also say you were "out-placed" - "because that sounds like you went someplace other than home." There's also the term "decruted." "People will be puzzled by the word, but won't ask what it means because they don't want to seem dumb," she says.

*** Did the place that fired you go out of business? Mention this.** "Then it just sounds like you were let off of a sinking ship, and there's no shame in that."