

SALTWATERHR



WHEN YOUR REPUTATION PRECEDES YOU

How to navigate job applications after a
difficult departure



DON'T PANIC

Careers aren't linear.

Most people will experience at least one role that didn't work out - redundancy, dismissal, a toxic culture, or a mismatch.

It does not mean you're unemployable.

What matters is how you reflect on what happened, use the experience to inform future choices, and move forward.

CV AND APPLICATIONS

It's natural to worry about how a tricky exit or break from work might look — but how you present it makes all the difference.

Don't include the reason for leaving on your CV

There's no need to explain "why" you left each role directly on your CV, especially if the reason is complex or personal. Focus your CV on:

- Job titles, dates, and employers
- Your responsibilities and achievements
- The value you added to the business

Use the cover letter to give brief, proactive context (if needed)

If the reason for your departure is likely to raise questions, e.g. short tenure, a gap, or a very recent end, address it calmly and positively. Example:

"After a recent change in circumstances, I've taken the opportunity to reflect on my next move and am now focused on joining a values-led organisation where I can build something long-term."

Keep it brief. The cover letter should focus mostly on why you want this job.

If you've had time out – own it.

Don't leave unexplained blanks. Add a short, honest line in the experience section or create a separate entry.

BE HONEST

Tempting as it is to tweak dates or fudge the details - don't. Employers value integrity.

If you get caught out later (and you often will during referencing or vetting), it can undo all the good you've presented.

You don't need to share everything – but be truthful about what's on your CV and in interviews.

Honesty builds trust.

You don't need to hide what happened but you don't need to explain it in graphic detail either. Use neutral language, avoiding emotionally loaded terms like 'toxic' or 'unfair', even if it felt that way.

Try:

🗣️ *"It wasn't the right fit long-term."*

🗣️ *"There were changes in the business and I took time to reset."*

🗣️ *"There were some challenges, and we agreed to part ways."*

OWN IT BRIEFLY, THEN PIVOT

You don't need to explain every detail of a difficult exit. Acknowledge it – then move the conversation on.

Have a short, practiced response you feel confident saying.

Structure it like this:

- Brief context

- What you learned

- Why you're now a better candidate

- What you're excited about next

🗣️ *“My departure followed a situation that, while personal and consensual, had an impact on how I was perceived internally and externally. It was a difficult experience, but one that taught me a lot about boundaries, accountability, and how actions can affect a business's reputation. I've taken time to reflect and handle the situation with integrity, and I'm now looking for an opportunity where I can bring my experience, focus, and professionalism to a fresh start.”*

You don't need to say more than that unless asked.

Stay focused on the future.

TAKE CONTROL OF THE NARRATIVE

Don't let one situation define your whole story.

Everyone has a career moment they wish had gone differently – but you get to decide what part of the story you tell.

Highlight:

- ◆ What you achieved
- ◆ What you learned
- ◆ How it shaped your thinking

Done well, this shows resilience, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence – qualities employers value.

LET THE RIGHT PEOPLE SPEAK FOR YOU

A less-than-perfect exit doesn't mean your reputation is ruined.

Even if things ended awkwardly with your last manager, there are often others who can speak to your professionalism, skills, and work ethic.

Think about former colleagues, previous line managers, clients, or even mentors who know what you're capable of.

A thoughtful reference can help balance out a difficult ending – and remind future employers of the bigger picture.

ONE MOMENT DOESN'T DEFINE YOUR CAREER

One bad exit. One wrong job. One awkward interview.

These things happen – and they don't cancel out years of experience, skill, and value.

A great employer will understand that things don't always end smoothly and will focus on what you can do for them going forward.

Your career is a body of work, not one single chapter.

FOR EMPLOYERS

Be Willing to Look Beyond the Exit

- ✓ Look beyond the circumstances of someone's departure.
A single job ending (even messily) doesn't define a person's entire career. Assess the whole candidate – not just the headline.
- ✓ Ask: is it actually relevant?
If a candidate left a previous role due to a culture mismatch or a one-off issue, does that genuinely impact their ability to succeed in your team?
- ✓ Focus on capability and fit.
Experience, skillset, values, and potential should carry more weight than a line on a reference or a blip in a career timeline.
- ✓ Everyone deserves a fresh start.
The best hires often bring hard-earned resilience, reflection, and clarity from tough experiences. Judge people on who they are now, not just what's on paper.



**“YOU CAN’T GO BACK AND
CHANGE THE BEGINNING,
BUT YOU CAN START
WHERE YOU ARE AND
CHANGE THE ENDING.”**

C.S. Lewis

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