

## Complex Job Requires Simple Description

By Amy Lindgren

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When someone asks you to describe your work, do you freeze? Perhaps the opposite happens and you pour forth a torrent of complex jargon the listener only half understands.

Although social ineptitude might play a part, your awkwardness could be a symptom of something much more common these days: Your work is hard to describe.

I've been amazed lately, but not much amused, by the complexity of the jobs we hold. The lack of amusement arises when I try to write resumes for positions I can barely imagine and, frankly, never have heard of.

Gone are the days when I could look up jobs in the government-issued Dictionary of Occupational Titles and have a hope of finding a cogent job description. Now I must search the Internet, query Wikipedia, call in favors from recruiters and grill my clients under bare light bulbs, all in hopes of understanding what this person actually does.

The other day I laughed out loud when I stumbled on a trivia quiz asking which of our common surnames derived from early occupations. From the multiple choice answers it was easy to choose Smith, which has its roots in blacksmith, among other occupations.

Why the laugh? Because I got an instant and absurd image of our progeny bearing the names of current occupations. Imagine being christened Betty Businessanalyst or Ken Quantitativespecialist. The Third. Hah. As if a third generation would want to be saddled with a name like that. It would probably get shortened to Quanti to fit onto limited-field databases for credit-card offers.

This would be just another Andy-Rooney-type gripe if the consequences for your job search weren't so serious. Think about it. If the average person couldn't guess your job duties from your title, and you can't easily describe your work in terms relevant to the listener, how will you convince someone that your skills will transfer to their workplace?

The short answer is you won't. When an employer can't see how your current and past work experiences have prepared you for this one, the instinct is to move on to the next candidate. Your mission, then, is to educate your audience.

That means networking conversations, chats with friends, resumes, cover letters and, of course, your interviews themselves must all present your work

in clear terms that are relevant to the prospective employer. Here are a few steps to take as you try for that ultimate clarity.

**1. Think of your company and its product or service.** Suppose it is a medical device firm that develops, manufactures and sells implantable health aids. To which of those three major functions does your work contribute?

The first sentence in your conversational job description could start with that big-picture perspective: "I work in the research and development side of a medical device company. We make products used by heart surgeons."

**2. Now think about your specific role.** Suppose you oversee the programming aspects of some research projects, and supervise coders and database developers who help prepare the research data for analysis. Think you should say that? Given that your title could be anything from project manager to Senior Analytical Statistician, Level 2 (I wish I were kidding), the answer is yes. You should train yourself to give a one-sentence overview rather than a title.

**3. Next, think about your audience and where you want this conversation to head.** Suppose you're in an interview and you know the next job will deal more with managing staff from multiple cultures than with data analysis. You need to bring the interviewer's attention to that aspect of your background as early in the conversation as possible:

"My work involves a lot of data management, but the more important side is the management of people. My team includes people from several disciplines, and we have almost daily contact with our programming contractors in India, so I have to manage across cultures as well. I'm looking forward to building on that experience in the next company I join."

Want a way to remember these three steps more easily? Think in these terms: Where do (did) I work?; What do (did) I do?; What do I want? One sentence each and you're on your way to clarity.

A final tip: Don't say anything along the lines of "Do you follow me?" For one thing, the question almost always sounds patronizing. For another, if you have to ask, you've probably lost your audience already and the fault is yours. It's a sign that you have to work harder on your message.

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