Articulating Skills in the Job Search: Proving by Example

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ARTICULATING SKILLS IN THE JOB SEARCH

Proving by Example

Karl L. Smart
Central Michigan University

NO MATTER HOW SKILLED students may be, those skills will not lead to a job if potential employers do not know the applicant has them (Crosby, 1999). Job seekers—using a strategy of age-old rhetoric—must provide concrete, detailed support to demonstrate the skills they possess (Lovelace, 2001; Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee, 2002). Because many recruiters feel that the best predictor of future performance is past performance, students seeking jobs must clearly demonstrate their skills and experiences, showing how the skills they possess meet the needs of the organization (Canter, 1998).

So how can students identify skills they have and demonstrate the accomplishments they claim? If students declare certain achievements, they must prove what they assert. Because companies hire people who clearly demonstrate their achievements, students must provide concrete, specific examples to give needed support (Daywait, 2002). This article provides a strategy to help students seeking jobs identify skills and articulate them in proof statements that are supported by detailed examples. Such achievement statements can be used in job letters as well as in interviews. Effective proof statements show rather than just tell potential employers of job seekers’ qualifications.

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IDENTIFYING RELEVANT SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES

Students begin the job search by reviewing information about themselves and assessing the skills they possess. The first step is for students to review their background systematically. Figure 1 suggests a rubric to help students think about areas that may relate to potential jobs.

Through reviewing their background, students begin to identify areas that may be of interest to potential employers. Students are often hesitant or bashful initially to say good things about themselves, and a variety of skills can be potentially beneficial, even those related to hobbies and personal family life.

After listing information in the seven areas of the personal background rubric, students can begin to explore the potential employment connections of the information by considering a series of questions:

• How might your positive characteristics benefit you in a work situation? How do family and friends describe you? What do people like about you?
• What information related to your family life or skills developed in your home might help you in working with others?
• What skills related to hobbies and interests could be transferable to employment situations?
• Are there specific achievements from your previous work experience you’re proud of?
• What information about your accomplishments and achievements helps you present yourself to potential employers?
• What experiences and examples demonstrate your values, and how might those values impact your performance in a job?

Skills and experience are the basic elements of the job search process, the essence of what the job seeker has to offer a potential employer. From filling in the personal background rubric and answering the associated questions, students will begin to identify useful skills and experiences they possess. The next step involves providing the proof through concrete, detailed achievement statements.

DEVELOPING ACHIEVEMENT STATEMENTS

Once students identify critical skills and experiences in the rubric, they can review their personal information and decide what is most relevant to the job they are seeking, for jobs go to those who can show that the
skills and experiences they possess meet the needs of the organization. After reviewing their personal background rubric, students select three specific achievements, skills, or values they are proud of and that they think are relevant to the job they are seeking. These three achievements are then listed on the achievement statement worksheet (see Figure 2). After listing the three achievements or skills, students should briefly describe them in short paragraphs. When using the form shown in Figure 2, stress that students should not fill in the proof words initially.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Area</th>
<th>Your Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. List five words that positively describe you:</td>
<td>1. 2. 3. 4. 5.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Briefly describe your family</td>
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<td>C. List your hobbies and interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. List three previous jobs (or self-employment)</td>
<td>1. 2. 3.</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. List three personal accomplishments</td>
<td>1. 2. 3.</td>
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<td>F. List your educational achievements</td>
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<tr>
<td>G. List some of your personal values</td>
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**Figure 1. Rubric for Reviewing Personal Background**
The basis of the achievement statements is examples of the students’ skills and experiences. Although employers value work-related skills, some students—particularly those with limited experience—may draw upon personal interests, hobbies, and family life to identify relevant skills. The key is to demonstrate how the skills are transferable to the potential job situation.

In selecting three examples for achievement statements, students should be reminded of the types of achievements that impress potential employers. Discuss examples of achievements that may fall under the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement Statement #1:</th>
<th>Proof Words</th>
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<th>Achievement Statement #2:</th>
<th>Proof Words</th>
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<th>Achievement Statement #3:</th>
<th>Proof Words</th>
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**Figure 2. Achievement Statement Worksheet**

The basis of the achievement statements is examples of the students’ skills and experiences. Although employers value work-related skills, some students—particularly those with limited experience—may draw upon personal interests, hobbies, and family life to identify relevant skills. The key is to demonstrate how the skills are transferable to the potential job situation.

In selecting three examples for achievement statements, students should be reminded of the types of achievements that impress potential employers. Discuss examples of achievements that may fall under the following areas:
• Improved quality
• Increased sales
• Reduced costs
• Retained customers
• Enhanced company reputation
• Improved productivity
• Established a more effective process
• Planned a complete program
• Improved employee relations
• Reduced time requirements
• Developed working teams

When possible, stress that achievements should be supported with measurable, quantifiable data. For example, if sales increased, by what amount? How large was the reduction in costs? What percentage did productivity increase? and so forth.

PROVIDING THE PROOF

Once students have listed their three achievements, have them break up into groups of three or four. Have one student read his or her first achievement statement and then, from a list of suggested proof words (see Figure 3), ask the other members of the group to suggest four or five proof words that the example the student has read demonstrates. Other group members may ask the student sharing his or her achievement to elaborate on the example, pushing the student to provide quantifiable details when possible. Students can make additional notes on their worksheet.

After students write the proof words suggested by the other members of their group for their first achievement statement, they repeat the process with the other two achievement statements. In turn, this process is repeated for each member of the group.

WRITING PROOF STATEMENTS AS 30-SECOND COMMERCIALS

With focused examples of achievements along with proof words, students are now ready to write detailed proof statements—the equivalent of short 30-second commercials about themselves. In job letters and in interviews, students are asked to share specific examples of their skills; proof statements fill that function. To show how the proof statements
should relate to potential jobs, you may want students to bring in an actual ad or job description for a job they may apply for. Ads and job descriptions usually list specific skills and qualifications required for the position. Suggest to students that they choose a proof word or two related to something mentioned in the ad or the job description, and then use the details from their achievement statement worksheet to

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**Figure 3. Suggested Proof Words**

develop the proof statement, a focused paragraph with a clear thesis and accompanying support for an achievement.

For instance, one student brought in an ad that indicated a successful job candidate needed to be able to solve problems. The student’s group had identified foresighted, innovative, and problem solver as proof words to describe the student’s working through a situation with a previous employer in eliminating back orders. Based on the student’s achievement statement, a proof statement was written as follows (emphasizing the need to solve problems mentioned in the ad):

I’m a problem solver. For example, when I was at Delphi Products working for Jayne Marshall, we continually dealt with a problem of too many backorders. After analyzing the situation, I discovered that orders went through several unnecessary steps. I presented a proposal to Jayne, and we eliminated much of the paperwork. As a result, we eliminated backorders by 20%.

Providing a specific, supported example of what the student had accomplished, the student used the proof statement in a paragraph of his job letter, prefacing it with, “In your ad, you mention a successful job candidate needs to be able to solve problems.” After the proof statement, the student went on to say that if he were hired, these problem-solving skills could help the company.

In addition, such a proof statement provides excellent content for students to use in response to interview questions, such as “Tell me about yourself?” or “Tell me about one of your strengths?” Both in written employment documents and in interview situations, concrete details help to demonstrate specific skills.

CONCLUSION

By creating proof statements, students better prepare themselves to demonstrate to potential employers that they possess experiences and skills necessary for success. The process helps students identify areas of relevant experience and form clear, succinct ways to communicate those experiences. Proof statements can be geared to focus on students personally; to respond to a general interview question; or to be used in providing concrete, specific details in job letters. In either situation, proof statements help to demonstrate professional, work-related accomplishments and specific skills employers value. Whatever the context, well written proof statements help students to articulate
concrete details about themselves, assisting them in providing the proof necessary to get jobs.

REFERENCES


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