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### **Stories that Illustrate Skills**

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

How do you convince employers that you possess the skills required to perform a job you want – especially if you are changing careers and have not yet demonstrated your skills in your targeted career?

By telling stories about how you've effectively use those skills in other contexts. This article tells you why and how to do so.

For years, we've touted the idea of portraying skills as transferable on resumes, cover letters, and other job-search communications. But even the job-seeker needs to support skills claimjs with real evidence of having performed those skills in the past.

Meaningless lists of their transferable skills in job-search communications, in fact, are a major peeve of columnist Liz Ryan, who complains in an article on Glassdor.com, that "people are not actually ambulatory sets of disembodied, abstract skills. Describing ourselves as packages of skills is about the worst way imaginable to get a hiring manager excited about us."

Ryan protests that hiring managers have no reason to trust job-seekers when they say they possess certain transferable skills. A hiring manager's concept of a given skill could be very different from that of the candidate claiming to possess that skill. The hiring manager has no way of know how a claimed skill will manifest itself in diverse situations. Perhaps worst of all, lists of transferable skills lack context.

The solution is to tell stories that put transferable skills in context and describe how the job-seeker deployed them. "We need powerful stories to convey our power, battle-tested and concrete, to the person who's reading our resume," Ryan says. Further:

Stories, in contrast to skills listings, are loaded with context. We'll tell the reader about that business dragon we slew (a cost overrun in Production, or a drop-off in attendance at our teleseminars) with plenty of detail about the situation we faced as we brought that dragon down. That's when our job-search pitch has power! ... Trumpeting our fabulousness sans context, proof or relevance is a waste of time. Use your stories, instead, to make it clear how you've made a difference for your employers in the past

And, author Alexandra Levit emphasizes that "the more drastic your reinvention, the more persuasive your story must be."

## Identifying Skills to Highlight in Your Stories

Here's how to tell stories that demonstrate the skills that employers seek in the type of job and industry you're targeting:

- ♦ Identify a dozen or so Internet job postings that typify the kind of job you seek.
- ♦ List keywords that describe the skills required for these jobs.
- ♦ Now, highlight all the skills keywords the job postings have in common and make a list of these frequently appearing skills. Another technique is to copy the text from one or more job postings you want to target and then create a "tag cloud," using one of several free, online tools. The skills words that appear the largest in the tag cloud are the ones that should get the most emphasis in your skills stories.
- ♦ For each skill listed, compose a story that illustrates how you have successfully demonstrated that skill or characteristic in your career – or even in your personal life.
- ♦ Be sure to compose stories that come from a variety of aspects of your life and career; don't focus on just one job or extracurricular activity, for example. Draw your stories from fairly recent experience. Employers want to know what you've done lately that could benefit their organization.

## Story-framing Devices with Examples

Keeping in mind that a successful story must be true and told in context, consider these ideas for story-framing so your collection of stories comes from various perspectives:

- ♦ A time in your life when this skill was tested.  
**Example:** I solve problems every day in my job, but one recent example I had that truly tested my problem-solving skills involved a woman who called me to question why we refunded part of her premium to her. She's a new policy-holder who was quoted \$2,900 for an annual premium and paid that amount, but in the computer, her annual premium was about \$2,500, so we refunded her the difference. My first hunch was she received a discount for paying in full, but when I calculated the discount percent, it was not adding up. After about two or three iterations of trying various combinations of discounts, I still was unable to figure out why the quote and actual premium were different and figured I was not looking for the right root cause. I decided to manually price her policy from the ground up, and during the process I happened to notice her birthday on her application was written ambiguously and could have been interpreted as 1925 or 1928. I calculated quotes for both ages and realized the reason for the difference. I honored the lower rate since the payment transactions were fully completed.
- ♦ A time when you failed to live up to this skill and decided never to let it happen again.  
**Example:** My leadership skills were called into question by my first evaluation as a district manager. I was rated much lower than I had ever been rated. I realized that, after having been promoted into a new position, I needed to learn a lot more. Determined to never again get a low rating, I learned as much as I possibly could by taking seminars, attending training, and reading books and articles; this quest for knowledge became the driving force behind my attaining the high rating I achieved for this year.
- ♦ A turning point in your development of this skill/characteristic.

**Example:** As an undergrad, I took a course on argument and advocacy and learned a very important concept called Tooling Modeling, which is a logical way of thinking with three parts: claim, grounds, and warrant. The claim is your point; the grounds consists of your proof, evidence, or backing; and your warrant is your logical leap that connects the two. The theory is naturally a little more complicated than that, but this way of thinking has been my bible for rational thought and was the single most valuable lesson I learned in college. I use this way of thinking when I am presented with problems that require decisions. I structure a rational, logical argument for each likely outcome. I can therefore see where weaknesses exist, either in the grounds or the warrant. I conduct a bump-and-compare between arguments to see which are the strongest, and I go with the most durable argument. I also take a practical approach to decision making in that I try to find out best outcome for the least price or cost.

- ♦ An example from your personal life (as opposed to career) of deploying this skill.  
**Example:** I realized I had solid problem-solving skills during my freshmen year after I went to the soup kitchen in Parkersburg to serve food to the less fortunate. I felt that I needed to do something more, so I had an idea that when everybody moved out of the dorms at the end of a semester, instead of throwing nonperishable food away, students could put it in a box, and I would take it to the local food bank so it could feed the poor. I ended up gathering about six carloads of canned and dry food that would have been thrown away.
- ♦ Patterns that have emerged in your development of this skill.  
**Example:** I have learned that my role is to do work that makes a difference in people's lives. For the first 20 years, I worked in television news, believing in the people's right to know. For the past six years, I've been in education, helping teachers and their students. My ultimate goal is to be head of a department.
- ♦ A strength or vulnerability from your past that led to developing this skill.  
**Example:** I have always had a fascination for how machines work, and whenever my family and I went on vacation, I would always try and get the window-seat on the plane, if only to watch the flaps and air-brakes in action during takeoff and landing. As I continued my education, I felt a compulsion to use my degree in a people-oriented profession. So, while I love machines, I'd like to contribute my engineering skills in a company that affects peoples' lives positively. I just like helping people.

### **More Story-framing Devices**

- ♦ A movie/story/book/event that exemplifies this skill for you.
- ♦ A person/event in your life that taught you the importance of this skill.
- ♦ A story of using this skill in overcoming one or more obstacles.
- ♦ A Cinderella story of having been an underdog who used this skill to emerge triumphant.
- ♦ A hero story in which you used this skill to do something unexpected to save the day.
- ♦ A humorous and probably self-deprecating way you've used this skill.
- ♦ A story about tasks and job functions related to this skill.
- ♦ A timeline of how you developed and sharpened this skill.
- ♦ Results you've achieved through using this skill.
- ♦ Lessons you've learned while developing and using this skill.

- ♦ Ways you've applied this skill in diverse situations.
- ♦ A time when you felt passionate and alive in your work (and the skill that made the feeling possible).
- ♦ One or more stories that you find yourself repeatedly telling about your work (identify the recurring skill[s] in these stories).
- ♦ If you could tell just one story to explain what you do in your work, what would it be, and what skill would it involve)?

(Thanks to story luminaries Annette Simmons, David Lorenzo, Steve Denning, and Cathryn Wellner for suggesting some of these frameworks.)

See more examples of skills stories in our sidebar, *Stories that Illustrate Skills*, which follows.

### **Final Thoughts**

Consider, too, the needs of your audience as you choose stories to develop. In *All Marketers Are Liars*, Seth Godin advises that the worldview in the stories you tell must match the worldview of your audience -- in this case, employers. Godin writes about story topics that always succeed with consumers. If we think of employers as consumers of the skills and experience that job-seekers offer, we can apply some of the same topics to story development: shortcuts you've taken to make work more efficient, ways you've generated revenue, how you've made the workplace safer, and even how you've made work more fun. Think creatively about the skills stories you tell.

### **Stories that Illustrate Skills**

Want to powerfully demonstrate to employers that you possess the skills you claim to have? Tell stories to show how you've used your skills.

These are interview-length samples; the job-seekers using these stories could edit them down to much shorter versions for resumes and cover letters.

### **TEAM LEADERSHIP**

I found myself applying to my university because my cross-country coach told me not to. He advised me to take the free-ride cross-country scholarship to another school. I reasoned that academics and cross-country would be too much for me to handle there. So I applied to my current university because I felt I could compete comfortably while also excelling in my academics. My high-school coach was not too thrilled. He said, "You are making the biggest mistake of your life." He went on to tell me that the other college had a better cross-country department, and I would be running with a nationally ranked team. I challenged my coach and told him that with leadership and devotion, any team can be nationally ranked. Of course he laughed at my statement and restated that I was making a mistake.

Once I enrolled at my chosen school, I saw that my coach had been correct about the facilities and the character of the people on the team. The team members were not motivated, not athletic, and needless to say, lost every race they entered. Three other freshman who had walked onto the team joined me in deciding to change the team members' attitudes. However, animosity was abundant between the upperclassman and the freshman. While we won races, the upperclassmen felt inferior, causing internal

conflict in the team. Regardless, I was determined to persuade the team to mesh well to create unity. Consequently, the upperclassmen quit the team. Still, after winning our state title, we advanced to the national level, where we were expected to compete against the college my coach had wanted me to attend. We won the meet against that school, beating them out of a third-place medal. The moral of this story is that when I was challenged to do the impossible, my devotion, character, team leadership, and tenacity persevered, while also helping the team.

## **GOAL-SETTING**

I grew up in a poor, broken home, yet decided that golf was my great passion in life. I creatively used my meager resources to buy golf clubs and later a junior membership for \$180 at a local club. Every day for two years, I walked through the woods to the golf course where I would play, practice, and compete throughout high school. I eventually got a job at the club so I could buy myself a few necessities. I wanted to play in college but was nowhere near the player I needed to be to play or even get on the team. So over the summer before college, I worked on my golf game to the point where I won almost every tournament I entered. I spent every hour I had during the day to make myself a better all-around player. I eventually walked on my freshman year and was exempted from qualifying because I played so well in my first outing. Through the years my decision to play golf has influenced every part of my life 100 percent.

I didn't give up on a dream, and although I am not competing with Tiger, I realized all of the good decisions I made were based on the fact that I loved the game, but better yet, didn't give up on a goal.

## **WORK ETHIC**

My stepfather was a role model and a strong influence in my life. He taught me about character; he taught me the tough lessons in life that some people learn too late or not at all. In one instance, he taught me the value of standing up for yourself. When the kids in his family (the "stepfamily") failed to accept me, he advised me that I would have to take the initiative to learn how to handle situations in which people passively exclude me -- that I would have to do something that could get their attention. I soon learned to gather a couple of people and start up a card game or another fun activity to direct the focus on the activity instead of clashing personalities. I later realized that through this process, I had learned creative techniques to influence group dynamics.

In another situation, he taught me the value of hard work. After volunteering to do yard work one day, I got tired of the project after mowing the lawn. Hot, sweaty, and tired, I started to leave before the project was done, and he told me I couldn't leave. After several hours of pulling weeds, watering, weed-whacking, fertilizing, trimming, and prepping flower beds while my father supervised from his comfortable lawn chair in the shade, I had learned that completing only a portion of a project is not acceptable when completion is expected; that there usually is a lot more work that goes on in the background of a finished product; that there will always be someone in that comfortable lawn chair watching others work - and that I wanted to be a supervisor in life.

## **DECISION-MAKING**

When I was a receptionist at a photography company, a man came in claiming to be the father of a student who was there to pick up the student's pictures. I asked him for

identification, and he said that he had forgotten it. Normally, if the student is present with the parent and verifies that it is the correct parent, then we give the pictures to them. That wasn't the case here. There was no student. I refused to give him the pictures, and he became angry and left. Later that day, a different man came in to pick up those same pictures. This man had photo identification with him, and I told him about what had occurred earlier that day. He told me that his child was being stalked, and that the family had a restraining order against that man. I took the stalker's image from our security cameras and posted a picture behind the counter that indicated that he was not to have any contact with the pictures of that student. My decision-making skills helped prevent a dangerous situation because he has continued repeatedly to come into the store posing to other employees as the parent of that student.

## **CUSTOMER SERVICE**

As a customer-service rep for a video-rental company, I once had an irate customer who left three messages on my voicemail in about 10 minutes demanding a call back. I contacted the customer, who was now even angrier because I had been in a meeting when her call came in. I listened to the customer explain that she was upset because she had purchased a loyalty program membership from us, and then several days later, we were giving away the same memberships at no cost. I apologized to the customer and asked her how I could help. She stated that she wanted her money back and she would no longer be a member. I agreed to refund her money. I then bought her a thank-you card and enclosed her refund and a free membership to our loyalty program. I also noticed that several times during the phone conversation, she had stopped to yell at her children, so I also enclosed two coupons for free kids' rentals. I thanked her for her business, apologized for not meeting her expectations, and invited her to bring her children in for a free video rental. I also enclosed my business card and asked her to call me directly if she was ever disappointed in any way while visiting one of our locations. She telephoned me when she received the card and told me that was the nicest thing any person had ever done for her when she was upset with a business. I again thanked her for her business and told her that she was my bread and butter. If she wasn't happy, then I couldn't be either!

## **MANAGING CHANGE**

I was a consultant, for a company that had been under the umbrella of a large government contractor that decided to sell off its commercial division to focus on its military applications. A venture-capital group came along and bought the company, which then lost its controller to the original owner, the government contractor. The newly purchased company had tried to replace the controller, but the new hires just didn't stick. It was a very challenging environment. I was there for six months and got them through their first year-end close and their first audit as the new company. I stayed with them long enough to where they got their new controller on board, and I got him settled in for a couple of months and fully trained. As a consultant you have to be smart and fast because the client wants to see results quickly. You've got to be able to very quickly absorb the basic organizational structure and learn the key players. Then you have to quickly learn their software and processes -- and look for ways to improve them.

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The strategic repositioning and closing of the training center where I am director of organizational development has been a significant change. A major contributor to the stress has been the high level of ambiguity during the past year and the fact that people are at different places in the grief and transition process at the same time. My style in times of stress and ambiguity is to try and find something productive I can do both personally and for the larger community. So, I have chosen to deal with this change by being proactive and leading an effort to offer career-enrichment programs at our sister training center. I've also collaborated with outside vendors to design a development program to support supervisors and staff through this transition, provided one-on-one coaching for the center's leadership, and provided individual sessions for teams. These sessions have been well attended, and I've received very positive and appreciative comments from staff members who attended them.

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In my current job, I am working on a project to increase efficiencies in the customer-service area, one component of which is to better control the way customer service handles the mail. I questioned the administrative clerk, who's responsible for receiving and distributing the mail, about how she does her job. She gathers mail from the P.O. box, reads the recipient, and passes mail around to be handled. I asked her what would happen if mail is lost. How would we track it? If someone doesn't handle the sender's inquiry in a timely manner, how can we know? I presented with her many questions of real and hypothetical situations where the ball was dropped somewhere so I could find out from her if she had a plan in place to deal with those situations. The clerk at first, felt confident in her work, took great pride in being industrious, and didn't feel passing mail around was a broken process, but after our conversation, she began to see the situation from my point of view and became receptive to new ideas and change. I needed and attained her buy-in so that I could create change and add value to her job. Together, we've developed a process to ensure that customer inquiries don't slip through the cracks.

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The bank in which I worked instituted a policy that centralized the lending process. An application was to be taken from the client and sent off to be approved or declined, processed, prepared, and returned to the branch to be signed by the client. While the process was streamlined, it also took away valuable face-to-face knowledge about the client and the loan. If the employee did not have any prior lending experience, he or she couldn't answer simple loan questions from the client. While I appreciated the newly created time in my schedule, I felt that the clients were being slighted. I proposed to my boss a small adjustment that would permit brief face time with the client. My boss implemented my idea, and now we have the best of both worlds, face-to-face time with clients without taking significant time away from the streamlined process.

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In my senior campaign-management job, I was the pinnacle person for a diverse group of project managers. I had many representatives from all the product bases constantly coming to me to develop databases of customers they could sell to. They wanted to know who they could market to. I would collaborate with them, asking questions like, what's the budget, how many pieces do you want to direct mail? Or do you want to call these people? What media will you use? I worked to ensure each group got all the

demographics it wanted. I'd pull the requirements into the data. And I'd be darned if the group didn't change its mind and ask for a different demographic. Or something unpredictable like a hurricane would mean the group couldn't mail to a certain region. So, I'd have to throw all the data back in to the pond and re-fish. And the changes wouldn't happen with just one group; they would happen with all of them at one time. I dreaded my pager going off at 7 a.m. because a project manager had a thought while sleeping last night: "Ooh, I would love to see how many prospective customers wear toenail polish." But whatever their requirement was, I said, "I'm on top of it." I enjoyed the analytic aspects and the busyness and the constant go, go, go. Change drives me. It's something I enjoy because it's an extra challenge.