

Using Storytelling as a Job-Search Strategy

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Abstract

This article demonstrates and reinforces the role that well-told stories play in the success of the job-search process. Building on narrative theory, impression management, and an increased use of behavioral-based questions in interviews, well-crafted stories about work and educational experiences demonstrate skills applicants possess and convey them to interviewers in memorable ways. The article shows how to construct stories based on an applicant's experiences and shaped to the needs of a potential employer. Additionally, the article demonstrates how a job seeker can create a collection of personal stories that can be adapted to varying job interview situations.

Keywords

storytelling, job search, job interviews, narrative theory, impression management, behavioral-based questions

Stories and storytelling have been part of the human existence from the beginning of recorded history. Murals and paintings on cave walls dating back more than 40,000 years represent some of the earliest recorded instances of stories (Wilford, 2014). Although the exact meaning of these picture stories is a matter of speculation, it is clear that they were intended to convey messages to contemporaries as well as to their descendants.

Stories continue to serve important social purposes, capturing culture and ancestry, teaching values and morals, conveying traditions and history, and providing touchstones for what it means to be human. As Frank (2010) observed, "Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided" (p. 3).

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Storytelling also plays a crucial role in business and organizational settings across several disciplines. The use of stories in organizations has been touted in a variety of ways, including ingrain values and facilitating change (Denning, 2011), teaching ethics (Apostolou & Apostolou, 1997), developing and legitimizing leadership (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012), improving communication (Echols, 2014), holding stakeholders accountable (Chen, 2013), and influencing customers and stakeholders through persuasive presentations (Duarte, 2010; Simmons, 2006). In addition to being examined in management (Fryer, 2003) and marketing (Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos, & Olkkonen, 2012), the power of stories has been the subject of research in other disciplines, including sociology (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011) and psychology (Polyorat, Alden, & Kim, 2007; Wyer, 1995), as well as in scientific writing (Dahlstrom, 2014). In fact, the title of one book proclaims, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins* (Simmons, 2007).

This article explores the use of stories in a particular context: the job-search process in general and the job interview in particular. The power of stories is reviewed in terms of narrative theory, followed by a discussion of impression management (IM) in human resources management and the use of behavioral questions in job interviews. We then review a process for identifying and creating stories with impact. The article concludes with suggestions for how job seekers can use stories in interviews to respond to a variety of questions interviewers may pose, along with pedagogical implications to help instructors better assist students in being successful in the job-search process.

Theoretical Framing

Narrative Theory and the Power of Stories

The impact of stories comes from several elements. Stories serve as a “powerful delivery tool for information” (Duarte, 2010, p. 16). Building on the narrative theory developed by researchers such as Bruner (1986), Cohan and Shires (1988), Leitch (1986), and Prince (1980), a story is a “discourse dealing with interrelated actions and consequences in chronological order” (Gilliam & Flaherty, 2015, p. 133). The effective storyteller presents actions, linked with characters or individuals involved with the narrative, in a manner or order that emphasizes a particular point or action. In terms of the job-search process, it is conveying details and accomplishments of an individual through a coherent flow of events to a desired end.

Part of the power of stories comes through concrete, vivid details that help others to visualize or “see” what is being presented (Sykes, Malik, & West, 2013). Through stories, facts and data are humanized, providing a human connection critical to persuasion and change (Simmons, 2006). Research has shown that narrative processing—compared with analytical processing involving the recitation of facts or an argumentative approach—decreases a negative cognitive response while increasing someone’s sense of realism and positive affective response (Escalas, 2007). Perhaps most important, stories stimulate emotion as well as logic, reinforcing how others feel as well as what they think (Simmons, 2007). Stories engage an audience more deeply

and are ultimately more convincing than building arguments based primarily on facts, statistics, or the advice of experts (Fryer, 2003). For these reasons, perhaps nowhere in organizational settings do stories play a more significant role than in the job-search process.

Impressions Management

Given the power of narrative, the use of stories in the job-search process and job interviews is further buttressed by the theory of organizational influence called impression management. IM is the process of individuals influencing the image of themselves or others through social interaction and communication (Schlenker, 1980). Through self-presentation, individuals work to influence the perceptions of others—which is at the heart of interviewing for and obtaining a job offer (Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014). IM is acknowledged as a legitimate way to control perceptions and exercise influence (Auvinen, Lämsä, Sintonen, & Takala, 2013).

From the perspective of finding employment, students need to be cognizant that a successful job candidate must take an active role in self-promotion. A variety of cues in a job interview go into making a favorable impression, including nonverbal cues such as an appropriate handshake, frequent eye contact, and a warm smile. Building on the framework of IM and creating a positive impression, narrative theory suggests that the presentation of experience and facts can most successfully be conveyed in a story format. As one study asserts, storytelling can be an effective way to implement IM strategies (Bangerter, Corvalan, & Cavin, 2014).

Behavioral Interviewing

An additional development in human resources that adds to the importance of stories in a job interview is the movement toward structured interviews and behavioral-based interview questions. Organizations face the challenge of finding and hiring appropriate talent that meets the needs of the organization. Human resource representatives and hiring managers work together to assess job candidates, trying to determine those who will be most effective in the organization. Interviewing remains one of the most significant and preferred tools in making hiring decisions (Anderson, Salgado, & Hülshager, 2010; Huffcutt, 2010). Structured interviews typically have a set of predetermined questions that all candidates are asked, with some type of rating of the responses to the questions by the interviewer. Behavioral-based questions play an important part of structured interviews.

Behavioral questions seek to solicit specifics from the job applicant, often asking the person to demonstrate specific skills by providing examples from his or her past. Said another way, applicants are asked to relate experiences from their personal and professional lives that demonstrate their skills and abilities (Bowers & Kleiner, 2005). This movement toward behavioral-based interview questions underscores the importance of well-told stories in job interviews and signals the growing importance of stories in interviews (Bangerter et al., 2014). Research suggests that past behavior is a

good predictor of future behavior (McNeilly & Barr, 1997; Roulin & Bangerter, 2012) and that job seekers who tell stories well increase positive hiring recommendations (Bangerter et al., 2014).

For recent graduates and job seekers, storytelling can play a vital role in showcasing an applicant's prior relevant education and experience and matching these with the needs and stated aims of the hiring body. Articles such as "Best Practices in Preparing Students for Mock Interviews" (Hansen et al., 2009) discuss the need for students to practice the stories that they want to tell. Preparing students for real-world interviews requires that we adequately prepare students and job seekers to create and deliver their stories effectively.

The Process of Developing Stories With Impact

How does storytelling relate to the world of work and obtaining a job? Some claim that a cover letter's job is to introduce a résumé and a résumé's role is to obtain an interview for the applicant. The interview's purpose, then, is to provide an opportunity for candidates to share their knowledge and obtain a job offer. Although résumés and job letters may contain elements of stories, the focus of storytelling in the interview process is of paramount importance and the fundamental core of this article. The essence of an interview is, in fact, a collection of narratives about a candidate's education, experience, and knowledge and how these skills and experiences relate to the needs of the position being filled. The critical tasks for preparing for the job search and creating appropriate stories include the following:

- Make sure that applicants convey all the pertinent information during the job-search process, especially in a job interview.
- Assist candidates to identify the relevant skills they possess and to develop their own stories that are relevant to the position for which they are applying.
- Practice telling those stories in a concise yet engaging manner.

In accomplishing these ends, we propose a process that assists students in preparing stories for an interview, as shown in Figure 1.

The first task for any applicant should be to carefully review the job advertisement, and, if available, the job description. Applicants then need to evaluate the position with regard to the critical skills related to the position and the transferable skills they possess relative to these needs. Although this activity is time-consuming, it is important to help applicants determine the key skills connected with the job for which they are applying. This also helps in crafting an appropriate story to use in a job interview.

After analyzing the needs of the potential job, the job seekers must review their academic, volunteer, and work history to evaluate their various experiences in terms of the needs of the position of interest. Applicants should remember to evaluate all aspects of their life experience to have a range of skills identified that match the needs of the potential employer. Experiences may include academic projects and assignments, work experience, volunteerism, study abroad, internships, community involvement, and even familial and personal experiences.

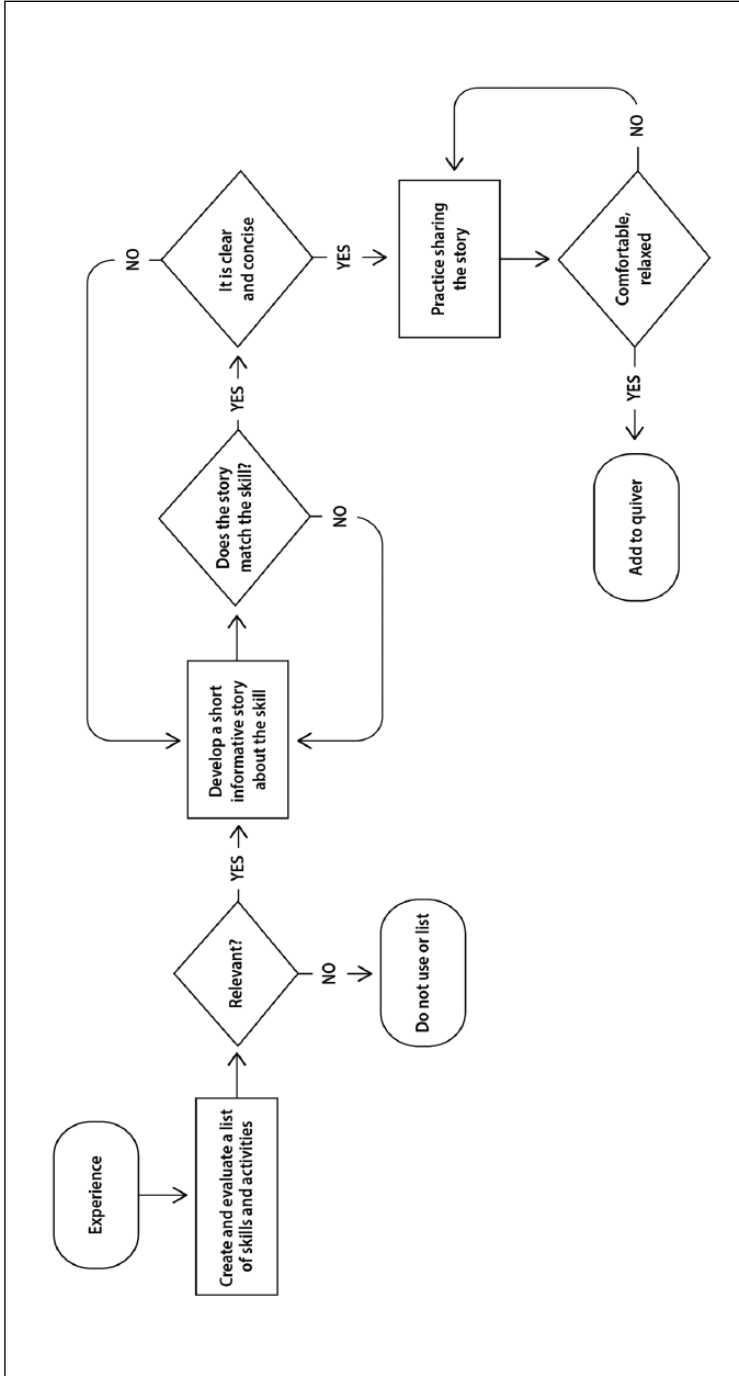


Figure 1. Process to create effective job interview stories.

From their skill evaluation, candidates should construct stories in such a way that demonstrates the relevance of their experience to the particular position for which they are applying. Applicants should identify stories that will have an impact on their potential audience, and therefore, they must make certain a story is relevant, reflective of the employer's needs, and clear and concise. As Figure 1 suggests, the job candidate asks if a skill is relevant and worth developing a story around. As a story is developed, questions like the following may be asked: Does the story match or demonstrate the desired skill? Is it relevant and timely? Does it match the needs of the advertised position? Are the critical aspects of the story relevant to skills and attributes conveyed, with the elimination of extraneous minutiae?

An example shows the practical application of helping students identify relevant skills and focus on needs related to a potential job. A recent student had a very typical résumé listing his education, work experience, and a few activities he was involved in from his collegiate experience. One experience listed included being a collegiate cheerleader. This was listed as a simple bullet point with no further elaboration on the skill set developed from this activity. The student wished to pursue a career in health administration. In meeting with the student, the instructor asked why this experience was included on the résumé and how this would be relevant for a potential health administrator. The student's immediate response was that it probably was not relevant and that he should remove this from his application.

Before he deleted the cheerleader item, the instructor encouraged the student to go through an exercise represented in Table 1. First, the student was asked to create a list of all the things that he did or learned from this cheerleading experience (see Table 1). Next, he evaluated whether or not an individual hiring or interviewing for a position of interest would find the skill set beneficial. If the skill or skill set was relevant, he could identify "proof statements" or story elements to create a story about that experience that demonstrated that particular skill. Either at this point or later while practicing the story, he would consider the kinds of questions an interviewer may ask that the developed story would address. Table 1 captures the results of his exercise.

This exercise showed the student that his cheerleading experience provided him an opportunity to create a story that used transferable skills and had potential relevance to a health administration job. Exploring ways he could use stories to respond to potential interview questions helped the student understand how the same story could be used to answer several different interview questions. If a job seeker has 6 to 10 of these well-developed stories, the stories can be used in a variety of circumstances to answer an array of questions.

Another student example shows how experience and skills can become the basis of multiple stories and how stories can be adapted to differing audience needs. In working through an employment unit in a business communication course, a student asked for advice regarding a position for which she was interested in applying. She would shortly be graduating with a degree in business and finance. She had researched a variety of organizations and was particularly interested in applying to work at a local bank. As part of her research, she identified that the bank hired all new employees as bank tellers. They believed that this provided the new recruits with the background to

Table 1. Determining Appropriateness of Skills to Develop Interview Stories.

Skill set	Relevant	Story/proof statements	Possible interview questions
Provided base stance for group cheer	No		
Memorized lyrics	No		
Provided team leadership	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Served as a team captain for 2 years Trained other team members Assisted with recruiting and evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your experience with management? Tell me about a time when you led a team. How do you motivate others?
Demonstrated teamwork	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Worked with an ever-changing team of 25 Developed working relationships with individuals of different races, ethnicities, and genders Embraced a support role to help others succeed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When have you used a team to succeed? How comfortable are you working with others? Describe a time when you were a member of a team and your role(s).
Showed dedication and commitment	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practiced every morning from 6:30–8:30 4 years of college while taking classes and working a part-time job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you manage work-life balance? Tell me what being hardworking means to you.

understand the company’s core business practices. Each of the new recruits would work as a teller for approximately 1 year and then would be eligible for promotion. The bank hired for all open positions, other than teller, exclusively from within.

The student felt that this position would be a wonderful fit for her skill set. The job was close to her hometown, had long-term career opportunities consistent with her goals, and had a competitive compensation and benefits package. She asked her instructor to review her application materials prior to submitting them for the bank teller position. By asking the student how her previous experience could relate to the job she wanted, the instructor helped her look at things differently.

Throughout high school, the student had focused on her studies and had never held a job. Once at college, she found employment with a fast food company. Her résumé reflected her job title: sandwich artist. Under that title was her bulleted skill set list:

- Baked bread
- Sliced meats and vegetables
- Swept the floor
- Waited on angry and irate customers

From her description, the reader could surmise that the establishment did not have any happy customers. More important, the question “Why would a bank manager need a teller who sliced meats and vegetables and baked bread?” could be raised.

When asked this question, the student replied that she was not sure of any benefits, but she really wanted the job, would work hard, and was sure that she would be good at it. The obvious problem was that nearly every applicant in the pile of résumés the bank would receive could promise the same thing. Very little set this soon-to-be college graduate apart. Follow-up questions regarding her duties and responsibilities at the job and the process introduced in Figure 1 yielded additional information. Her account of baking bread, preparing sandwiches, dealing with angry customers, and sweeping the floor lacked any vibrancy or uniqueness that would capture the interest of a potential employer; it also showed no relevance to the position at the bank.

Questioned more closely about certain aspects of her restaurant duties, the student began to make connections in a new light, as she considered the needs of the bank and the potential duties she would have as a teller. She would be responsible for making change with customer orders. She would need to balance the cash drawer at the end of her shift. Furthermore, once her cash drawer was balanced, she would be responsible for sealing the shift receipts into a tamper-proof bag and for completing a deposit ticket. Moreover, she had been trained to recognize counterfeit bills and fraudulent personal checks. Of course, she also had to deal with the angry and irate customers—as well as the happy ones.

Through this process, the student discovered relevant duties and responsibilities of interest to a bank manager. Consider the revised bulleted items for the résumé that became the core of a different, more relevant story:

- Collected payments from customers through cash, check, or credit cards
- Made change for cash customers
- Checked for counterfeit bills
- Balanced cash drawer and filled out deposit tickets
- Provided excellent customer service

These details then became the basis of a story, which elaborated on the skills she brought to the bank teller position. For example, if the bank manager were to ask about her experience with handling a cash drawer, she could then respond with her story about her expertise with making change for customers and balancing a cash drawer at the end of her shift. She may be able to elaborate on an experience when her cash drawer did not balance at the end of the shift and how she worked to resolve this issue.

When asked what she would do if she failed to get the bank job, the student replied that she would pursue a position as an assistant manager at a restaurant in her hometown. This led to a discussion of a different set of transferable skills that could be identified for a totally different job and company. She would focus on pertinent details for a different story: experience with staff scheduling, food safety and service training, compliance with hygiene and restaurant cleanliness practices, staff training, and providing excellent customer service. And if she did not get that position? Well, then she

would fall back to what she had been doing as a sandwich artist: bake bread, slice meats and vegetables, and provide customer service.

Where did the first set of bullet points originate? Like so many individuals, when the student sat down to apply for employment, she began by simply telling the same story that she had told so many times before when asked about where she worked. That familiar story found itself into her job search and became the default story that she told potential employers. In a 2009 TED Talk, Chimamanda Adichie discussed the danger of a single story. When we hear the same story over and over or when we tell ourselves the same story in the same way, it becomes our reality, even if that story is incomplete. The sandwich artist student fell prey to this phenomenon, seeing her experience only through a consistent but narrow lens. When she began to consider all of her experiences and how these related to the needs of other jobs, she was able to discover transferable skills that told a different story. The story told by the bulleted items on the résumé could be embellished as a short narrative example for a job letter and could become the basis of a response in an interview for employment.

The process of story development becomes a crucial activity in the job-search process. Once an individual has learned to analyze a series of facts from his or her own experiences and has practiced developing different stories and narratives based on the needs of an audience, then adapting these experiences to a variety of situations and narratives becomes easier, regardless of the method of conveyance.

Using Stories Effectively

For the greatest impact, a candidate should approach the interview with a thorough understanding of both the needs and desires of the hiring organization, as well as an idea of which stories may be appropriate to tell. This preparation not only helps applicants to evaluate the stories from their past that make the best impression, but it also enables them to approach the job-search process already knowing which stories they would like to share. They then need only to await questions that allow them to share or adapt one of their prepared stories in order to demonstrate their skills and experiences related to the needs of the hiring organization.

While developing the ability to find elements of a story in order to adapt to a potential job opening helps in writing a résumé and job letter, the technique becomes critical to answering questions successfully during an interview. Rather than drawing a blank and struggling to answer interview questions, if prepared, applicants complete a quick mental inventory of their developed stories and select an appropriate experience to share. The focus then becomes less on how a candidate answers the question and more on what educational or experiential stories best answer this question.

The storyteller can relate a familiar part of his or her history, focusing on important and relevant details, including quantifiable data and results and vivid examples that address the inquiry. The sandwich artist may develop multiple stories based on the facts she has provided as bulleted items in her résumé. She may use the details in a story if asked one of several questions: “Tell me about yourself,” “What qualifies you for this position?” or “What important work skills do you possess?”

This example provides a powerful lesson in considering how the details we choose to focus on lead to different stories. It is critical to be honest in the stories told, avoiding embellishment or obfuscating what really happened. People also should not misuse IM to portray themselves as someone they are not. Successful job seekers consider the stories that they want to tell and carefully construct the stories to convey important and relevant meaning to potential employers. As the sandwich artist/bank teller example suggests, each of us has varied experiences that can be presented differently, according to the needs of unique situations, audiences, and needs.

Our stories, once developed, can be used in multiple ways. Skilled interviewees, before arriving for an interview, know the things that they want the interviewer to know about them and their skills. They should already know the 6 to 10 stories that convey important skills, behaviors, and attributes that they hope to convey during an interview. The question may arise, “How can I know what I am going to say when I do not yet know what I am going to be asked?” In short, the answer is that we adapt stories to the questions posed. A good story, like the illustration of our sandwich artist, can be customized to a wide variety of circumstances. The sandwich artist could use the details of her work to create stories about her experiences with numerous job tasks, including scheduling, food preparation, teamwork, or handling money—all depending on the question posed. The appropriate narrative is simply awaiting a question that provides the frame of what the story should be.

An additional example helps demonstrate this process. An MBA student had worked as a trainer and an organizational development administrator for a multinational construction company. As part of this role, he led a project team to develop a solution for a recurring problem that was causing considerable workplace injuries to employees. These injuries were costly in terms of medical costs, lost work time, and fines. With the team, he successfully resolved the problem. This resulted in a story that demonstrated many of his transferable skills that could be marketed to future employers. In response to a prompt such as “Tell us about a time when you solved a problem,” he told the story as follows:

While working at XYZ Corporation, I was faced with a problem that resulted in many of our employees being injured on the job. We installed high-temperature industrial insulation. As part of this installation process, workers were required to push large panels of insulation onto pins that had been welded onto the metal structures. In performing this procedure, workers would many times skewer the palms of their hands on these metal pins. My task was to pull together a team consisting of laborers, foremen, safety officials, and trainers to develop a process to alleviate these injuries.

The team developed a protocol for the installation that would avoid exposure to the pins and created a training process for workers in the field. Additionally, the team implemented a reward program for work crews that avoided lost time injuries due to pin impalement. Over the course of three years, the program saved approximately \$1.2 million dollars in medical costs, lost-work-time payments, and fines.

The individual believed that this was a very powerful story to share with potential employers, one that provided concrete details and measurable data as to the impact of

the program initiated. The story provides excellent evidence of a past success that the job applicant wants to share in an interview. As such, it can be viewed from multiple angles. So, for example, if the initial question about problem-solving were not asked, the applicant may adapt this answer to a different question. The interviewer may ask about a time when the applicant worked as a member of a high-performing team or when the applicant took a leadership role in a previous job. In response to either question, the applicant could share the same story listed above. Additionally, the interviewer may ask the interviewee to share an experience in which he or she felt most proud. Again, the candidate could respond with the above story.

Developing stories in this manner provides an opportunity for applicants to prepare for their interviews with a collection of stories and skills that they are not only *prepared* to share but also *want to share* with potential employers. Applicants are then waiting to share each of these stories in their collection and are only looking for an appropriate question to which they can respond. Clearly, applicants can only use each story once per interview, so having a quiver of stories from which to choose provides the applicant with the ability to select a well-prepared story that is relevant and focused in order to best address the question asked.

A final component in telling effective stories during an interview, as shown in Figure 1, is to practice sharing the story. As with any oral presentation, practice is critical. The final part of the process described in the Figure 1 flowchart focuses on practice and delivery. Interviewees should have practiced stories enough that they are comfortable and relaxed in the telling, without the story becoming so rote that it sounds overly practiced. If they are familiar enough with the elements of the story, they can clearly and concisely tell the story. The story then becomes a part of their job-search practice that can be used and adapted to varying situations.

Conclusion

Using stories effectively in the job-search process can be powerful in securing a job, from making résumés and job letters memorable to providing actual evidence of skills in an interview. Stories allow a job applicant to show competence and transferable skills. Well-told stories provide a demonstrable narrative that is imminently more compelling and convincing than simple declarative expressions. The stories manage the impression an applicant makes on interviewers and creates a connection that is difficult to establish in any other way.

An illustration of the power of storytelling exists in the article itself. You may not remember some of the specifics contained herein, such as the second step of the process outlined in Figure 1. Yet it is quite likely that you may remember how much money the construction manager was able to save his organization or the skills the young sandwich artist used that became the basis of the stories she used in her employment opportunities.

Carefully evaluating our experiences is the starting point to finding material to create stories. As we identify specific instances of skills and abilities, the experiences can be strung together as a basic narrative. As more experience is gained, more stories can be developed to create a portfolio of stories. Individuals nearing graduation

should work to develop four or five stories that frame their experiences. These stories can then be adapted to changing situations and questions posed. In trying to hire qualified employees, organizations seek to solicit evidence that a potential recruit has the requisite skills. Employers seek evidence of individuals' abilities to solve problems, to work well with others, to overcome challenges and recover from mistakes, and a variety of other job-specific needs (Hansen, 2007). Stories provide evidence in compelling, memorable ways that manage impressions that help individuals get jobs. Stories also help manage impressions made on potential employers and provide an excellent response to structured interviews that rely on behavior questions. Well-told stories leave memorable impressions that convince potential employers that the job candidate has the needed skills to succeed. As suggested, those who tell the best stories do win (Simmons, 2007).

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