

Bring causality into your career story

“The Queen died, and then the King died.”

With this sentence, the author E. M. Forster explained the difference between a story and a plot: causality. In the first version, two events sit side by side – without any connection. That is precisely what I often observe when my clients describe their professional journey. So how does the same sentence sound when it carries meaning?

Peter Näf

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“The Queen died, and the King died of grief.”

With this image, I finally found a concise formula to explain to my clients that their answer to the question “Could you briefly introduce yourself?” in a job interview is more than a repetition of what is written in their CV: it is both meaningful and a significant opportunity.

A written CV is essentially a sequence of professional stations that do not necessarily relate to one another. Only when it becomes clear how they build upon each other does a coherent overall picture emerge.

When context changes everything

One client had two consecutive roles, the more recent of which was less senior than the previous one. On paper, this looked like a step backwards. His explanation changed the entire picture: after a family break, his wife returned to work, and he took on more childcare responsibilities. At the same time, he wanted to move from financial services into manufacturing – and consciously accepted a temporary step down as an investment in that transition. Suddenly, it made sense.

Another client appeared inconsistent because of several short job tenures. Only in conversation did it become clear that, after many years of highly autonomous work, she had not realised how controlling certain leadership cultures can be. Twice, the fit was simply not right. Without this context, she might have been labelled erratic; with it, her development became understandable.

These examples show: do not omit supposedly delicate points. Explain how they contributed to your development.

Give your CV meaning

In a book by George Saunders (see recommendation below), where I came across the sentence about the King and the Queen, he describes working with young writers. He claims he can make a reliable prediction about which of them will eventually find a publisher: it is those who have learned to establish causality.

Are people also more successful when they can create causality – and therefore meaning – in their own career stories? They are certainly more satisfied. In this context, the debate about “meaning” in working life takes on a new dimension: meaning is not inherent in the job itself, but in what you are able to see in it.

The prerequisite is that you assume authorship of your own life story – that you live your own script, rather than the one others have written for you.

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