

# Harvard Business review

## How to Explain Job Hopping in an Interview

by [Emma Waldman](#) September 2, 2024



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### Summary.

As job hopping becomes more common and less stigmatized, why do some hiring managers (and media outlets) still perpetuate the stereotype that millennial and Gen Z workers are disloyal to their organizations? When we look closely at the motivators behind job hopping, there are several factors to consider — beyond disloyalty. Since the pandemic, work-life balance, mental health, flexibility, and competitive salaries are top-of-mind for young workers. If you're one of the many job hoppers struggling to explain the multiple roles you've held in the past, there are a few ways to approach this predicament. Should a potential employer ask about the "job hopping" areas of your resume, try to think of it as an opportunity. It's a chance to help your interviewer better understand your motivations while highlighting what you're looking for long term.

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Last month, I met my friend for coffee, where I was introduced to a popular term used in the world of HR: frequent applier. My friend, let's call her Joy, is the head of hiring at a DC-based consulting firm where she often receives resumes from "frequent appliers," or applicants who've held multiple jobs over a short span of time and apply to a series of new roles in rapid succession. This practice is more commonly known as job hopping.

“We tend to give frequent appliers less consideration than candidates who have been in the same roles for decades,” she told me. “Job hopping demonstrates disloyalty at work.” This sentiment was shared by the CEO of a Chicago-based recruiting firm, who recently told [The New York Times](#), “Employers start to question the candidate’s decision-making ability and judgment.”

## What’s Wrong with Job Hopping?

My conversation with Joy stuck in my mind over the next few weeks, as I was once a job hopper myself. I held four different roles at four different companies before I turned 27. It took me that long to find a job that aligned with my values and where I felt happy at work. I never once considered my decision-making skills or judgement to be compromised. In fact, I thought my ability to prioritize my wellbeing was a strength. It was a logical choice that benefited my health and my wallet. Job hoppers secure an average pay raise of [8.5% compared to 5.9%](#) for those who remain in the same role.

In the past decade, job hopping has only increased, particularly [among the youngest generations](#). Gen Zers plan to switch roles [at least three times](#) over the course of their careers, which is more than any preceding generation. Only [13%](#) intend to stay with their current employer beyond four years and [83%](#) outwardly consider themselves to be job hoppers — as opposed to their older counterparts who are more likely to stay [in the same role](#) for years.

This made me wonder: As job hopping becomes less stigmatized, why do some hiring managers (and media outlets) still perpetuate the stereotype that [millennial](#) and [Gen Z](#) workers are disloyal and entitled? The proclivity to give job hoppers less consideration when they apply to new roles insinuates that their motivations are flawed: unfaithfulness, indecision, or poor judgement. This attitude has roots in a different time when job hopping [was more frequently seen in a negative light](#).

When we look closer at the motivators behind job hopping, there are several factors to consider. [Since the pandemic](#), work-life balance, mental health, flexibility, and competitive salaries have become top of mind for many workers — especially those just entering the workforce. I’d argue that, often, their perceived lack of loyalty is driven by a desire to find a workplace that checks (at least) a few of those boxes paired with their willingness to [hold companies accountable](#) when they promise — but fail — to do so. Gen Z is labeled the [accountability generation](#) for a reason.

We must consider that job hopping sometimes stems from a company’s inability to meet the changing needs of their employees, align with their values and goals, and support their

long-term growth. After all, we've seen [time](#) and [time again](#) that [loyalty to a workplace doesn't always pay off](#). Some people actually argue that being [overly loyal to an employer](#) is harmful.

While it's ultimately on hiring managers and HR professionals to shift their attitudes towards the growing number of "frequent appliers," it can be frustrating for job candidates who are deemed red flags for pursuing a good job match.

If you're one of the many job hoppers struggling to explain the multiple roles you've held in the past, there are a few ways to approach this predicament. Should a potential employer ask about the "job hopping" areas of your resume, try to think of it as an opportunity. It's a chance to help your interviewer better understand your motivations while highlighting what you're looking for long term. If the job is a good fit, the hiring manager will likely be interested in what you have to say — a [2023 Learning Workplace Report](#) from LinkedIn revealed that 93% of organizations are concerned about employee retention.

Here are some common reasons for job hopping that might resonate with you, and how to explain them in a respectful and informative way while also advocating for yourself and your expectations of a new role. With some practice, you can make your point and come across as a strong candidate.

## **Reason #1: A Changing Financial Landscape**

It's costly to put down roots in major cities where [many attractive roles](#) are located. In the greater Boston area, for example, the median price of a single-family home is currently [\\$960k](#) and the average rent is [\\$3,300](#). If you're a young person who's already in debt, you might find it difficult to afford [these high prices](#) on an entry- or even mid-level income. Consider that, since 1983, college tuition costs have increased by [861%](#), [medical care by 468%](#), and [housing by 219%](#). Additionally, financial aid is down by 6% since 2013, inflation rates are abnormally high, and more than [half of us left school with debt](#).

Many of us don't have the luxury of picking and choosing where we want to work. So, if companies aren't offering competitive wages to employees living in some of the most expensive cities in the country, then those of us looking to make ends meet cannot afford to stay and grow at these companies long term. I began my career as an editorial assistant at one of the "big five" publishing houses in NYC, where my starting salary was \$35k (standard for publishing at the time). As I was new to the job market, I didn't have the leverage I needed to negotiate for more and I didn't have the option of waiting for a higher

paying job to come along. I had loans and rent payments due. I accepted the position and ended up leaving after a year. I couldn't sustain it.

A company invested in your growth should pay you a living salary. If this hasn't been the case in past roles, explain this to hiring managers. If they don't understand your financial situation or judge you for it, this might not be the best place for you to work.

### **What you can say:**

"I really enjoyed my previous role, but the cost of living in New York City was too high, and I wasn't making a competitive living wage. That's why companies that offer fair compensation are so important to me. I'm really looking for more stability in my next position. I'd love to put down roots and work somewhere that is invested in my long-term development."

### **Reason #2: A Mismatch in Values**

Many millennials and Gen Zers know what matters to us and want our values reflected in our day-to-day work, whether that be environmental stewardship, driving social change, or even salary transparency. This sentiment is mirrored in the [2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey from Deloitte](#), which reports that 44% of Gen Zers reject a potential employer that doesn't align with their personal beliefs, and 50% reject internal projects or assignments with current employers that don't align with their values. Moreover, 21% of Gen Zers would consider other jobs if their employer is not engaged in social issues, and 75% are more likely to consider other jobs that better align with their values, according to a [2023 report from Oliver Wyman](#).

It's also become easier than ever to determine whether our values are misaligned and to hold companies accountable for their actions. In addition to the prevalence of social media, apps like [Blind](#) and [Fishbowl](#) are popular, anonymous employee chat systems where users [post the unadulterated realities](#) about what's happening at work: "How much money are you making?"; "I'm getting promoted but the company offered me stock instead of a salary increase, should I accept?"; "Does our organization actually care?"

Perhaps you previously worked for companies that withheld pertinent information from employees, like intended layoffs, false advertising campaigns, leadership struggles, or greenwashing. These digital applications offer radical openness within organizations, encouraging employees to share their experiences and allowing us to make more informed choices about our places of employment.

As an example, one Chicago-based Blind user in the pharmaceutical space told me that earlier this year, they reached out to colleagues using the app to determine whether anyone else at the company was experiencing sexist treatment from a particular manager. More than a dozen others chimed in with similar experiences. Realizing it wasn't an isolated incident and learning that leadership was aware of the issue and failed to do anything about it, they chose to leave the company.

So, if you job hopped from an organization that wasn't transparent with you or didn't align with your core values, there are gracious and honest ways to share this with potential future employers. Should the hiring manager shoot you down for being transparent — particularly about a serious issue — it's likely a warning and a company you want to avoid anyway.

### **What you can say:**

“It's taken several years of trial and error to determine the type of work environment that I thrive in and find a role that really aligns with my values. From what I've learned about your organization, it seems that our values of open communication, employee transparency, and betterment of the community are a great match. On that note, can you tell me a bit more about your team and company culture?”

### **Reason #3: A Lack of Flexibility or Work-Life Balance**

It's no secret that most millennials and Gen Zers value work-life balance and flexible work arrangements. We can attribute this to multiple factors: entering the workforce during the pandemic and becoming accustomed to remote setups (for Gen Zers), an emphasis on wellbeing and mental health, a higher value placed on autonomy, and even a rising cost of living which might keep us from settling in the big cities where jobs are based.

While [nearly half of Gen Zers and most millennials](#) say their jobs are still central to their identities, many of us aren't willing to sacrifice our welfares and are seeking ways to maintain work-life balance. One way to prioritize wellbeing is to work within a hybrid model, which is becoming more popular every year. As of 2023, [12.7% of full-time employees](#) work from home, while 28.2% work hybrid. Remote work is also correlated with a better work-life balance, with [71% of remote workers](#) stating that the set up helps to balance their work and personal lives. In addition, mental health can be [negatively affected](#) when work-life balance is low — and mental health is now [one of the most important considerations](#) for Gen Z workers when looking for jobs.

If you previously worked somewhere that required you to be in the office five days a week or made you feel overworked to the point of burnout, you might have left to find a workplace that supports a hybrid arrangement or offers more mental health resources. Perhaps you decided to pursue a role at the [16% of companies](#) that are currently operating fully remote, without a physical office. The right company will match your desire for a more balanced life — you just need to communicate it to the hiring manager in a graceful way.

### **What you can say:**

“In my former position, it was the norm to work 60-hour weeks. I loved the work and didn’t mind occasional overtime — I understand that it’s a part of some roles. But I found that level of overtime unsustainable. Eventually, it began to impact my wellbeing and productivity. On the weekends, I was too stressed and worn out to enjoy time with family and friends. I proposed a hybrid schedule to my employer to help me find a better work-life balance, but it was declined.

While I entirely respect their choice, in the end, I had to do what was right for me. I had to prioritize my mental and physical health. That was one thing that stuck out to me about your organization. I saw in your mission statement that you put employee health first and believe balance is core to a great culture. Working for an organization that really cares about its people is an important career goal of mine.”

### **Reason #4: A Lack of Freedom of Expression**

Millennials and Gen Zers are more willing to [accept and encourage](#) the discussion of formerly taboo topics like race, gender, sexuality, and religion in professional spaces. Because of this, conversations about these topics aren’t only growing more normalized at work, but are often expected by younger generations. The acceptance of other people’s identities is one of our defining traits. A quote taken from a [McKinsey study on Generation Z](#) sums it up perfectly: “We each have our own style and way of being, but what binds us is that we accept and understand everyone’s styles.” Many of us [look for workplace cultures](#) in which people of every race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, dis/ability, class, personality, and educational background can be vulnerable, authentic, and learn from one another. Unfortunately, this expectation doesn’t often translate into reality.

In a [2023 culture report](#) from Deloitte, 60% of respondents noted having “covered” at work during the past twelve months, and 60% also described their covering as detrimental to

their sense of self. Covering is any action taken to mask your identity (like altering your physical presentation, lying about your age, not bringing a same sex partner to a work function, or minimizing behaviors that might signal you're part of a marginalized group). Covering makes people feel unseen and has a negative impact on [our mental health and productivity](#).

If you've found yourself at a company that claims to care about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) but fails to act on that claim — either by lacking safe spaces like employee resource groups, not acknowledging newly recognized national holidays like [Juneteenth](#), or [refusing to normalize](#) the use of pronouns, among other misalignments — you may have decided to leave to seek out a place where you feel comfortable being your authentic self. All this to say, your reason for leaving is valid, and the right company for you will understand that.

### **What you can say:**

“There was no working group for people of color in my former role. As I'm part of a marginalized community, I place a higher value on an employer that recognizes the unique obstacles we face in life and at work, so I decided to look for a job with a company that offers resources and support to workers like myself. Beyond the role itself, which I think aligns well with my skillset, your commitment to DEI is something that attracted me to your company. In the long term, I want to be at an organization where I feel accepted and comfortable showing up as myself.”

### **Wear Job Hopping as a Badge of Honor**

I tend to agree with this sentiment from a [2023 Oliver Wyman workplace report](#): “...if other generations viewed job-hopping as a stigma, Gen Z wears it like a badge of honor.” When shaping my career, I drafted a list of the things I needed from an employer long-term: a competitive salary, values alignment, work-life balance, and freedom of expression. It took four jobs for me to find it.

Work is a major part of our identities, we spend [a third of our lives](#) doing it. Whether you're labelled as “disloyal” or not, know that the underlying drivers of your choices matter more than a stereotype. Don't be ashamed of hopping around until you find a place that supports you well into the future.

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