



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SERIES · 2026

What Experience Really Means

Helping Job Seekers Show Employers What They Can Do

A Practical Guide for Job Seekers and Workforce Professionals

Why experience matters to employers

Job seekers naturally approach a job posting from their own perspective.

They may see: *Three years of supervisory experience required.* and immediately ask: *"Do I have three years of supervisory experience?"*

That is an important question. But another question is equally useful: *"Why does the employer want that experience?"*

Hiring involves uncertainty. Employers are making decisions using limited information, and a hiring decision that does not work out can carry real costs.

Those can include: recruiting and interviewing time; onboarding and training; lost productivity; additional supervision; mistakes or rework; customer problems; quality or safety concerns; disruption to other employees; and eventually restarting the hiring process.

Seen from that perspective, experience requirements become easier to understand.

Three years of supervisory experience, for example, may provide evidence that a candidate has already: directed the work of others; communicated expectations; trained employees; handled difficult situations; resolved problems; maintained accountability; and functioned successfully in a leadership role.

The number of years may therefore be one practical indicator of capabilities the employer considers important.

That leads to a more useful question:

What is the employer trying to understand, and what credible evidence do I have that helps answer that question?





Study the business, not just the job posting

A job posting tells you what the employer says they want. The business itself can help explain why they want it.

Before tailoring a résumé, spend a few minutes understanding the organization.

Ask: What does this organization do? Who does it serve? How does it create value? What appears to matter most in this environment?

Depending on the organization, that may include: safety; accuracy; quality; speed; reliability; customer service; productivity; compliance; cost control; responsiveness; innovation; or avoiding downtime and mistakes.

The same job title can mean very different things in different organizations.

Supervisor in a hospital

May be evaluated heavily on safety, reliability, documentation and coordination.

Supervisor in manufacturing

May be evaluated on production, quality, safety and process discipline.

Supervisor in hospitality

May be evaluated on staffing, responsiveness and customer experience.

The applicant should therefore ask: *"Given the business this employer is in, what would make someone in this role particularly valuable?"* and: *"What problems would this employer especially want to avoid?"*

Useful sources include the employer's website, products and services, mission, recent news, other job postings and public information about how the organization operates.

The purpose is not to become an expert on the company. It is to understand enough about the business to make the application more relevant.

Understanding Experience Requirements

The experience dilemma is not new. Employers want experienced workers; job seekers ask how to get experience without being hired first. The issue has existed for generations.

Today, job seekers have more tools for presenting evidence of capability — work samples, portfolios, alternative credentials, professional networks and AI. But the core challenge remains: **the employer needs enough confidence to make a hiring decision.**

The better question is not only *"Do you meet the experience requirement?"* but: *"What does this requirement tell us about what the employer needs, and what evidence do you have that addresses it?"*

That starts with recognizing that experience requirements do not all mean the same thing.

Experience as an indicator

The employer seeks evidence of competence, reliability and judgment. They are using experience as a proxy.

Related experience, strong work samples or demonstrated results may address the underlying concern — even if the background is not identical.

Experience as a necessity

The role genuinely requires technical knowledge, regulatory familiarity or safety-critical skills that take time to develop.

Related experience can strengthen the case, but it is not equivalent. The gap is real and should be acknowledged honestly.

- ❏ The objective is not to reinterpret every requirement in the applicant's favor. It is to identify legitimate evidence where it actually exists.





Use a simple test: Direct, Transferable or No Evidence

For each important requirement, classify the applicant's evidence into one of three categories.

DIRECT

I have actually done this or something substantially similar.

Example: The employer wants someone who has managed employee schedules. The applicant previously created weekly schedules for 18 employees and handled shift changes. That is direct evidence.

TRANSFERABLE

I have not done exactly this, but I have related experience that demonstrates the underlying capability.

Example: The employer wants supervisory experience. The applicant has never held the title "Supervisor," but has trained new employees, served as shift lead, assigned work and handled problems when the supervisor was absent. That may be relevant transferable evidence.

The applicant should describe what actually happened rather than claim experience they did not have.

NO CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

I cannot currently demonstrate this requirement.

This conclusion is just as important. If the employer requires a specific license and the applicant does not possess it, résumé wording cannot solve the problem. If specialized experience is essential and the applicant lacks it, the appropriate next step may be training, certification, apprenticeship or another position that builds the missing capability.

This simple classification keeps the process honest.

What Not To Do

Do not invent experience.	Do not turn transferable experience into direct experience.
Do not copy keywords without evidence.	Do not assume every experience requirement is flexible.
Do not make unsupported assumptions about an employer.	Do not overwhelm the employer with excessive material.
Do not provide confidential work samples.	Do not let AI make the final judgment about what is accurate.

The applicant remains responsible for every claim made.

Look behind the requirement

A practical process is:

Employer requirement → business context → underlying need → applicant evidence → résumé language

Employer requirement	What the employer may want to know	Possible evidence
Project management experience	Can you organize work, coordinate people, meet deadlines and complete projects?	A project managed from start to finish, including problems and results
Supervisory experience	Can you lead people, communicate expectations and maintain accountability?	Training employees, serving as shift lead, assigning work or resolving problems
Customer-service experience	Can you work effectively with customers when something goes wrong?	Specific examples of difficult situations and how they were resolved
Excel / data experience	Can you actually use spreadsheets or data tools to perform the work?	A tracking system, dashboard, analysis or spreadsheet the applicant created
Training experience	Can this person help others become competent?	Job aids, employee training, demonstrations or coaching
Managing multiple priorities	Can the person organize competing demands effectively?	A real situation involving several simultaneous responsibilities

The wording of the requirement may look similar across employers. The business context may make the underlying need very different.





Write and Target the Résumé Effectively

The résumé remains central to the job search. The opportunity is to make it more useful — and to make the connection to the employer's needs easy to see.

From responsibilities to capabilities

Before	After
Responsible for employee scheduling.	Coordinated weekly schedules for 12 employees, resolved shift conflicts and introduced a shared tracking process that reduced recurring scheduling problems.
Provided customer service.	Resolved customer-service problems involving orders, returns and delivery issues, including coordinating solutions with other departments.
Used Microsoft Excel.	Created and maintained an Excel tracking system used to monitor weekly inventory levels and identify recurring shortages.

The revised versions communicate more about what the applicant actually did. A résumé can demonstrate capability, not just list responsibilities.

Target the emphasis by employer

If the employer emphasizes scheduling, spreadsheets, customer problem-solving and working independently — those capabilities should be easy to find. Ask: *"If I were the employer, could I quickly see evidence that this applicant addresses my most important needs?"*

A manufacturer

Safety, quality, downtime

A retailer

Customers, inventory, reliability

A logistics company

Accuracy, timing, avoiding disruptions

This does not mean changing the facts. It means selecting and emphasizing the facts that are most relevant. Do not leave the employer to search for the connection.

Show Evidence of Capability

Sometimes the résumé alone is not enough. A résumé makes a claim — evidence supports the claim.

A résumé can say:

- Advanced Excel skills.
- Strong written communication.
- Process-improvement experience.

Evidence can demonstrate it:

- A work sample can demonstrate those skills.
- A writing sample can demonstrate it.
- A short example showing the problem, action and result can provide stronger evidence.

Evidence does not need to be elaborate. Three highly relevant examples may be more useful than a large generic portfolio. For each example, briefly identify: **Situation or problem** · **Action taken** · **Capability demonstrated** · **Result**.

Evidence is not only for creative occupations

Job seekers in many occupations can provide useful evidence:

→ Administrative

Show a sanitized spreadsheet or process guide.

→ Maintenance Technician

Document a repair and explain the diagnosis.

→ Manufacturing

Describe equipment operated, procedures followed, or an improvement made.

→ Supervisor

Provide a recreated training guide or project schedule.

→ Recent Graduate

Use a class project, volunteer activity, or independent demonstration.

→ Customer Service

Provide a short case example showing how a difficult situation was handled.

⚠ Evidence should always be appropriate to share. Do not provide confidential employer information. When necessary, examples can be recreated using fictional information.





AI can help with the analysis

Artificial intelligence can make this process easier.

A basic use of AI is: *"Write me a better résumé."*

A more useful use is: *"Help me understand this employer, what they need and what genuine evidence from my background addresses those needs."*

The job seeker can provide: the job posting; the existing résumé; the employer's website; and relevant information about the organization.

AI can help: identify the most important requirements; understand what the organization appears to value; consider what capabilities sit behind those requirements; compare those needs with the applicant's experience; classify evidence as direct, transferable or missing; identify language differences between the employer and applicant; suggest clearer résumé wording; identify possible supporting evidence; and identify requirements the applicant cannot credibly demonstrate.

A useful prompt is:

Review this employer's website and job posting. Explain briefly what the organization does, what appears to matter most in its business, and what capabilities seem most important in this position. Identify the five most important requirements. Then review my résumé and identify only actual experiences that provide evidence of those capabilities. Classify each as DIRECT, TRANSFERABLE or NO CREDIBLE EVIDENCE. Do not invent, exaggerate or assume experience I have not provided. Suggest clearer résumé wording only where it accurately describes my experience. Tell me which important requirements I cannot currently demonstrate.

Every proposed revision should be verified. AI can misunderstand experience or overstate a connection.

The rule is: **Use AI to discover and articulate evidence—not to manufacture experience.**

The Bottom Line

Understand the employer. Find the evidence. Make the connection easy to see.

What does the employer actually need?

Why does this experience matter?

What does the applicant genuinely know how to do?

What evidence supports that?

Can the employer see that evidence easily?

This approach gives the applicant a better opportunity to be understood — and the employer better information to make a decision.

