

THE FIVE-YEAR RESUME: A CAREER PLANNING EXERCISE

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For most college students, lack of career planning wastes time and resources and may result in years of “career drift.” Lack of planning can also lead to deception once students begin seeking career-related employment. Faced with a competitive job market, some students inflate and exaggerate their resumes. The five-year resume exercise helps students avoid these difficulties by developing a future orientation toward their career goals. Students create the resumes they would like to have in five years. This exercise encourages both self-management and proactiveness. The exercise, sample questions, and a template are provided. Illustrations of student feedback, benefits, and suggestions for faculty are presented.

Keywords: *career planning; career management; five-year resume; career; exercise; career; college student; resume; career drift*

Alice: Would you tell me, please which way I ought to walk from here?

Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to go to.

Alice: I don't much care where.

Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't matter which way you walk.

—Louis Carroll (n.d., p. 89)

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The day I entered graduate school, a professor told me that I was there because of what I had done five years ago and that where I would be in five years would be determined by what I did today. I was surprised by this statement. The link between the present and the future is obvious for most but noticed by few. This lack of awareness is true of most students' efforts at career planning.

A frequent lament of many parents, faculty, and even of students themselves is that students do not plan their careers beyond picking their college or university and choosing their major. Although students will eventually decide on and pursue career goals, their efforts are often quite haphazard. Rarely do they realize that what they do today has implications for their professional development and future career opportunities. This lack of realization leads to a failure to plan and limits their ability to be proactive in their career pursuits. Indeed, a future orientation in one's vocational development is a sign of maturity, yet little has been done in career planning to address this concept or promote a future orientation in career counseling (Savickas, 1991; Whan, 1995). When students are encouraged to take a future orientation, they develop a better sense of the continuity between their past, present, and future (Marko & Savickas, 1998).

Research has shown that many college students are uncertain about how to establish a professional career (Collins, 1998). Many of those entering the workforce are poorly informed and subsequently ill prepared. For instance, research has shown that newcomers to the workforce are not knowledgeable about potential careers, opportunities for career advancement, or what their specific skills and interests are (Brousseau & Driver, 1994; Lyon & Kirby, 2000).

The first author has used this exercise for more than 20 years with more than 1,000 students and has found it helped them better understand the importance of career planning and showed them how to be more proactive in developing and managing their professional development. The exercise asks students to design their future in synchrony with their desired objectives concerning life, family, and environment. Students create the resume they envision having in five years, including the jobs, positions, experience, education, and references the student would want to have by then. This process helps students visualize their future on paper. The differences between the current resume and the five-year resume identify the goals to accomplish within the next five years, and these goals create a series of targets in developing an action plan. Such planning leads to greater career success and overall life satisfaction.

The resume format is used because students are quite familiar with the resume, and it plays such a critical role in their future employment. Practical exercises in resume writing are routinely provided in colleges and are rated most highly by college students when compared with other pedagogical

activities (Schroth, Pankake, & Gates, 1999). The current resume represents a professional snapshot of who the student is. The five-year resume, in contrast, is a picture of who the student wants to become professionally. The starting point in creating the five-year resume is in identifying where one is now, where one wants to be, and how one is going to get there. In this way, the five-year resume helps to make career planning a conscious and systematic process. It serves as a map to guide students in making employment and career-related decisions and in creating action plans to help them achieve their career objectives. The use of five years is somewhat arbitrary. In reality, any number of years could be used, but we have found five to be both a manageable time period and the minimum needed to be of practical usefulness.

This exercise may be of interest to individuals who are trying to actively plan and manage their own careers and to professionals who work with students and have an interest in helping them to develop professionally. The first author has generally used this exercise as part of a management or human resource class taught to sophomores, juniors, seniors, nontraditional students, and graduate or professional students. The five-year resume could also be used as a stand-alone exercise for career exploration.

This exercise also addresses two other career-related issues some students face: career drift and misrepresentation. Career drift usually occurs in the absence of personal proactiveness and self-initiative. By not planning their careers, most students' efforts at professional development become unstructured and fragmented. Their careers appear to be rudderless, falling to the mercy of various forces, all seemingly out of their control. From our perspective, it is important that an individual creates his or her future rather than merely accepting it. Jack Welch, ex-CEO of General Electric, expressed this point this way: "Manage your destiny, or somebody else will." Proactiveness decreases the likelihood of sitting back and letting something or someone else manage your destiny.

Paradoxically, despite their lack of planning, research suggests that students want both more career planning time with advisers (Alexitch, 1997) and approaches that use an interactive method in order to help them explore career goals via academic planning (Broadbridge, 1996). Lyon and Kirby (2000) advocated the perspective that professors have an obligation to help students develop the skills necessary to be successful and satisfied in their future careers. This includes the intellectual and content-related expertise acquired from their classes, as well as the skills related to career exploration, job search, and professional development. We, too, believe it is the responsibility of professors, advisers, and counselors to help students actively with such planning and to provide them with the tools they need to focus on their future and help provide the direction they greatly require.

The five-year resume, although introduced by an adviser, counselor, or professor, emphasizes the importance of career self-management, an expectation consistent with most organizations today (Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & DeMarr, 1998). From this perspective, the organization is responsible for providing the resources and possible opportunities, but the individual has to show the initiative and proactiveness necessary to make the best use of what is provided. This orientation is also consistent with the concept of the protean career (Hall, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994) as well as the increasingly boundary-less nature of professional careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Self-direction, self-initiative, and proactiveness are by-products of this exercise.

The second career-related issue addressed by this exercise is misrepresentation on students' resumes. Many students reach their senior year only to find that their resume lacks the punch of their competition. Because it is obviously too late to go back and do the things they should have done, students omit, fabricate, or exaggerate their accomplishments, experiences, or education (Hall, 2000). Simply put, they lie on their resumes. Lies are almost always grounds for elimination from the applicant pool or dismissal if the individual is subsequently hired. Many times such misrepresentations occur because students did not think to do what they needed to in the past, in order to obtain the type of employment they want in the present. To avoid this situation, we routinely recommend that freshmen and sophomores review the resumes of successful seniors and alumni in their major and examine current job ads as well. This process allows the younger students to see what will be expected of them in the future before it is too late.

This article presents instructions and six steps involved in the five-year resume exercise, including a template for student use, followed by tips and recommendations for faculty and career professionals. We then discuss benefits that students have derived in completing this exercise and conclude with some observations based on the first author's use of this exercise for more than 20 years.

Student Instructions and the Six Steps in the Five-Year Resume Exercise

The *first step* is to create a current resume that identifies where students are professionally and educationally. The current resume serves as the starting point for career planning and represents where students are now and what they have achieved to date. Instructions for the current resume are in Appendix A.

The *second step* is to create a resume that represents what students want their resumes to look like in five years. The new resume should include any

additional educational credentials and degrees, memberships in professional organizations, job titles, professional certifications, honors, awards, previous jobs, publications, presentations, and volunteer activities. Appendix B provides a template of the five-year resume that we give students for this part of the exercise. It includes a number of questions for students to answer.

Students identify information for their five-year resume in a variety of ways, including interviews, ads, exercises, and mentoring. We do not recommend that the students try to create their five-year resume in a vacuum; indeed, they cannot.

1. We encourage students to talk to professionals in their desired field. These interviews help students identify what is possible and necessary for them to achieve their career-related goals.
2. Most students acquire resumes of individuals who have or have had the position(s) that they aspire to.
3. Some students use old want ads to identify jobs they would like to have in the future. Once the position has been filled, they query the employer as to what the successful candidates had on their resumes.
4. Younger students often focus on what their resumes would look like upon graduation. In this instance, students talk to seniors who have been recognized in their field by the faculty or who have been highly sought after by employers.

For students who are unclear about their career goals, we recommend career counseling and an exercise in career exploration. One career exploratory exercise is the Career Wheel (Laker, 2002). Through this exercise, students validate or invalidate their beliefs and assumptions about the careers they are contemplating or actively pursuing. The goal of the Career Wheel is to help students make a more informed career/job choice. Although it can help students identify potential careers, its primary purpose is to provide students with a systematic plan for exploring the careers in which they are interested. The Career Wheel exercise relies on both self-reflection and on making contact with professionals in the field. It uses informational interviews in the true sense of the word, rather than as ploys to seek employment (Laker, 2002). A second approach for exploring career opportunities is to view potential careers through online mentoring (Whiting & de Janasz, 2004). This approach also allows the student to explore a variety of careers and career paths.

The *third step* is for students to determine their short-term and long-term goals. Students identify long-term goals by conceptually subtracting what is on their current resume from what is on their five-year resume. (See Appendix B for illustrations.) The difference identifies what they need to achieve in order to reach their five-year goals. These goals then serve as a basis for developing a series of short-term, specific milestones that need to be accomplished in order to achieve the long-term goals.

These milestones should reflect both what is valued by individuals and their perceptions of what potential employers will value. These milestones help to both guide behavior as well as validate the actions and resources needed to achieve them. Research on goal setting has found that to be most effective, goals should be specific and measurable (Locke & Latham, 1990). In identifying their goals, it is extremely beneficial for students to measure their progress in accomplishing these goals. The questions in the template in Appendix B can be very helpful in showing students how to measure progress. The measurement of career progress in this exercise should be based upon the student's specific action steps or career-related activities, as identified in the fourth step. In almost all cases, the measurement of goals should be individualized, not normalized, and should have meaning to the individual student rather than to another person.

The *fourth step* is to create a series of action plans and identify the resources needed to complete these action plans. In order for students to do this, they need to address the following questions: What is going to be done? When will it be done? What resources will be needed (time, money, emotional and physical support, experiences, and opportunities)? If an internship or practical experience is necessary, students need to ask: When will it occur? Who will it be with? Who can help with acquiring such an experience? The five-year goals can then be broken down by year, by what will be accomplished in each of the 12 months of that year, and then into each of the 4 weeks of each month, and so on.

All decisions concerning education, career, internships, job choice, and other actions should support and be in alignment with overall goals. For example, students might forgo a party to do well on a test, to get higher grades in college, to get into graduate school. They may take a "prep" course to obtain higher scores on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), or Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). They may save money one summer in order to take a nonpaying internship the next. Such planning helps students to link their present decisions to their long-term goals. Without identifying what those career goals are, the students' decisions in these areas would be guided by a variety of factors, many of which could ultimately hinder or even derail the students' pursuit of their career goals and possible opportunities.

The *fifth step* is for students to discuss how they will implement their action plans. Goals can and do change, and students will need to make adjustments in their action plans, but they still can follow through in a sequential fashion. We have found it beneficial for students to periodically examine their action plans to see if they are on target or if their target has changed. Some choose to do this at regular intervals, others after major events in their life. Action planning is a dynamic process and thus is subject to change; the five-year resume serves only as a starting point.

The *sixth step* is to have students summarize what they have learned from this exercise. Students prepare a final paper that outlines how they have performed each of the six steps of the project and the conclusions they have drawn. Most students use this summary to reflect on their experience and either validate or invalidate their career choices. At this time, we also ask each student to evaluate the exercise by answering the following four questions:

1. What difficulties did you have in completing this exercise?
2. How did you resolve these difficulties?
3. What do you consider the benefits of this exercise?
4. What do you consider the disadvantages of this exercise?

Tips and Recommendations for Faculty and Career Professionals

This exercise is designed to be a semester-long project. A shorter time frame seems to be considerably less beneficial for the students. The exercise requires a great deal of self-reflection and time to ponder and clarify career goals and the path to achieve them. This time also provides the students with an opportunity to contact various professionals in their field by using their school breaks and vacations to interview people near their homes or elsewhere.

One needs to provide the opportunity for weekly or biweekly discussion of the exercise. During the semester I often have the students discuss their experiences in completing the exercise as well as any problems that they might be having. I usually ask the students to discuss their experiences as part of a dyad or triad. Then as a class, they summarize their experiences and their comments on the board or on a flip chart. I found that students vicariously learn from each other and that frequently one student's success can go a long way in encouraging another student to try something different. During this time, the faculty can also provide any necessary guidance or support to a student or students, or present a pertinent story or illustration.

This is not an exercise of convenience. The professor should encourage students to identify the specific individuals or type of people that they would get the most out of talking with. Too frequently, students want to interview only those people that they already know or who are physically or emotionally convenient. The criteria for interviewing someone is not the ease of completion of the exercise but, rather, who would provide the student with the greatest benefit of information. The student usually needs to go beyond the personal, professional, or organizational worlds with which he or she is most familiar. I usually present stories and illustrations

from previous classes of students who were successful in completing this exercise. Such illustrations are especially beneficial in helping students develop greater self-efficacy and thus go beyond their comfort zone.

Most of these illustrations focus on individuals who were initially quite anxious about contacting someone that they did not know. These illustrations are usually quite vivid and describe how the students' feelings of anxiety, doubt, or uncertainty can immobilize them and lead to avoidance and procrastination in completing the exercise. I have collected and read students' thoughts prior to contacting someone and their relief and surprise once their efforts have been successful. I have also had students from previous classes come and discuss their experiences in completing the exercise. The illustrations point to the lack of experience that most students have in this area and how their lack of experience leads to dysfunctional and fearful thinking. I also help my students prepare and practice what they will say or write to prospective contacts. In some instances, I suggest that they initially contact someone that they know personally, such as a parent or sibling of a friend. I will have them discuss this experience with the class and then have them, through successive approximation, identify and contact people that they do not know. With few exceptions, these efforts always prove successful.

This exercise helps students to expand their awareness of various career-related activities and development. In creating the five-year resume, many students discover the significance of career development and management activities. One area frequently discovered is that of the professional organization. As undergraduates, most students see such extracurricular activities as merely additional lines on their resume. As they pursue the potential benefit of such organizations for their future, they see exactly what they can obtain from such professional affiliations. Besides the obvious networking and social opportunities, students learn that professional organizations also provide educational seminars and resources, employment listings and referrals, opportunities for pro bono developmental projects, internships, leadership opportunities, and opportunities to share common problems and successes. In reflection, many students have told me that they feel quite fortunate to discover these benefits sooner rather than later in their career, or even not at all.

This is a self-directed learning experience. The faculty must explain to the student what self-directed learning is, and the student will then define what he or she should do within the framework of the exercise.

This is not your career. It is very critical that the faculty not project their own values and judgments onto the career aspirations of their students. From our experience, some rather motivationally and intellectually gifted students chose career objectives that seemed too much below what they could reasonably aspire to, and others chose career objectives too far above.

However, one has to remember that these are their careers, and our role is to provide guidance, not judgment.

A traditional evaluation of this exercise is difficult. We found it extremely difficult to evaluate the content of the five-year resume in the traditional sense of looking for a correct or desired response. Instead, we focus on whether and to what extent the student completed each of the various steps of the exercise. All six steps should be part of the evaluation process. Students are also required to seek input from our Career Planning and Services program on campus. They review and advise students in the creation of their current resume. We have also required students to take their five-year resume to a separate professional in the field for that individual's review and input. Judging the efficacy or benefits of this exercise should not be restricted to only whether there is a demonstrable impact on their stated career-related goals. The success of this exercise is not that they achieve the objectives that they listed on their five-year resume per se but that they understand and appreciate the value of career planning and that they can be proactive in terms of their career management. Many students, upon completion of this exercise, come to the conclusion that they are pursuing the wrong career and switch majors, a decision that is better made sooner than later and a testament to the effectiveness of the exercise.

Student-Identified Benefits of the Five-Year Resume

Through our experiences, we have found this to be a novel way of helping students become better aware of the significance of planning in the process of effectively managing their careers. Most students come to realize that what they do today influences where they will be tomorrow and that this will make a difference in their personal and professional lives. Students were routinely asked to evaluate and comment on the effectiveness of this exercise. In general, students found this exercise to be beneficial in three significant ways. First, students have found the five-year resume to be an excellent way to identify career-related goals and to subsequently create an action plan for moving toward those goals with confidence. Students also found it easier to put their goals on paper with this exercise than through previous efforts because the written goals become more tangible. Second, this exercise made the students think of what kind of additional education, professional experience, and activities they would need to acquire in order to achieve their career objectives. Through this exercise, most students realized for the first time that their professional education and development must continue after college or graduate school. Finally, students saw this exercise as a good way to initiate important career-related

discussion with significant others both in their personal and professional lives. In this way, the exercise led to the involvement of others in their career development, and they frequently acquired mentors and internships through this process. These benefits are illustrated by the following sample of students' comments.

This assignment gave me an opportunity to organize my thoughts, goals, and dreams into a plan, sort of a checklist for the future. When I see on the paper what I want to accomplish and where I want to be, it is easier to determine the steps to get there. I see this exercise as a way of looking at my values, priorities; [it's a form of] self-analysis.

I found the Five-Year Resume exercise to be very beneficial. My desire to advance didn't really have a foundation on which to work from. I didn't have a "true" blueprint that accurately identified the goal. . . . This was a fun and interesting exercise, and I am glad you assigned it.

This exercise really helped me to examine my future. Have I taken the right steps to be in that position? What additional steps do I need to take? I enjoyed the assignment, and it helped me organize my career goals.

I found it very challenging to think out the step-by-step details of my career advancement. I always knew where I wanted the final rest point to be, but I never really took a long look at what specific direction I would use to get there.

I found that this was a very challenging and eye-opening experience. What I liked is that by writing down my goals, I have a very good chance of achieving them. With my day-to-day activities I would not have taken the time to do this very important exercise. This exercise "reenergized me."

I am not sure if this is where I will be in five years, but it gives me some sort of basis to try and gear my future. It really made me think about my future and where I wanted to be in five years. This exercise forced me to look at my life and set goals for the next five years. It made me realize that I am the only one that can take care of my career plans.

Though I have a general idea of what I need to do to reach a position of greater responsibility, I have never discussed with my supervisor the specifics about the training I need or the time frames in which to accomplish certain steps in the development process. I have since done so.

I found this exercise to be both rewarding and challenging. It forced me to really think about my personal and professional goals. It really made me visualize where I could be in five years as well as determine what I needed to do to get there. Questions like would I be married and where would I live made me think about personal goals that I have put on hold while attending college. It forced me to take a look at all aspects of my future.

I feel the key part of this assignment was the personal assessment of my current skills and how they needed to match or possibly be enhanced to the skills required for those positions I aspire to in the future.

The assignment helped me to uncover those areas I would need to develop in order to reach my goals. It also enabled me to realize that these goals are achievable provided I follow a plan. The five-year resume helped me map out such a plan. This exercise, overall, left me feeling very excited about my future! It made me realize that the real world is not very far away.

It's amazing—I actually decided to use vacation time to get some useful experience at a client's business.

Summary

The five-year resume is a tool designed to assist students in both preparing for and designing their future. This exercise asks the student to visualize their future by designing a resume that they would like to have in five years. One's current resume defines both where they have been and where they are now. The five-year resume defines where they want to be, and the action plan identifies what they need to do to prepare themselves for their professional future. As evidenced by the students' comments, this exercise encourages a great deal of reflection. For some, such reflection can be difficult or anxiety producing. This response is understandable because this exercise implicitly forces students to question what they are doing in terms of their future career. Many students do not realize the future implications of their present actions and decisions, and they need faculty and other professionals to actively teach them how to plan. Planning forces the individuals to link their present life decisions to their overall career goals and objectives. The key is to help students realize that career planning can affect their future. The major goal of the five-year resume is thus to empower the students by engaging them in the process of self-analysis, self-direction, and self-management.

The five-year resume is only a starting point. Career planning is never final; it must be structured and yet must always remain flexible. It has to be structured to enable one to identify and pursue the steps or activities necessary to accomplish one's goals. It must be flexible because career planning is a dynamic process. It is doubtful that most of the students' resumes in five years will look exactly like the ones they have created in this exercise. For many, their goals will change as the individuals' needs or circumstances change. More frequently than not, the greatest benefits from this exercise are in the questions it raises in the students' minds, enhancing their sense of empowerment to seek answers to those questions and in becoming aware that what they do today affects where they will be tomorrow.

Appendix A

Student Instructions and the Steps in the Five-Year Resume Exercise

The *first step* is to create a current resume that identifies where you are professionally and educationally. The *second step* is to create a resume that represents what you want your resume to look like in five years. Appendix B provides a template of the five-year resume that can serve as a guide to help in completing this part of the exercise.

You can identify the entries for your five-year resume in a variety of ways. You should not create your five-year resume in a vacuum. It is important to talk to a number of professionals in your desired field in creating this resume. You may also acquire the resumes of individuals who presently have or have had the position(s) that you aspire to possess. You may use old want ads to identify jobs you would like to have in the future. You may also want to talk to seniors who have been recognized in their field by the faculty or who have been highly sought after by employers. If you are unclear as to what career you wish to pursue, there are a variety of ways that you might explore possible careers. One career exploratory exercise is the Career Wheel (Laker, 2002). The reference for this exercise appears below.

The *third step* is to identify your short-term and long-term goals. You identify these long-term goals by conceptually subtracting what's on your current resume from what you have on your five-year resume. The difference is what you plan to achieve in order to reach your five-year goals. These goals then serve as a basis for developing a series of more short-term, specific goals that would need to be accomplished in order to achieve your long-term goals. Research on goal setting has found that to be most effective, goals should be specific and measurable. It is extremely beneficial that you create some way of measuring your progress in accomplishing these goals.

The *fourth step* is to create a series of action plans and identify the resources needed to complete them. You need to address the following questions: What is going to be done? When will it be done? What resources will be needed (time, money, emotional and physical support, experiences, and opportunities)? If an internship or practical experience is necessary, you need to ask: When will it occur? Who will it be with? Who can help with acquiring such an experience? Your five-year goals can then be broken down by year, by what will be accomplished in each of the 12 months of that year, and then into each of the 4 weeks of each month, and so on. All decisions concerning education, career, internships, job choice, and other actions should support and be in alignment with your overall goals.

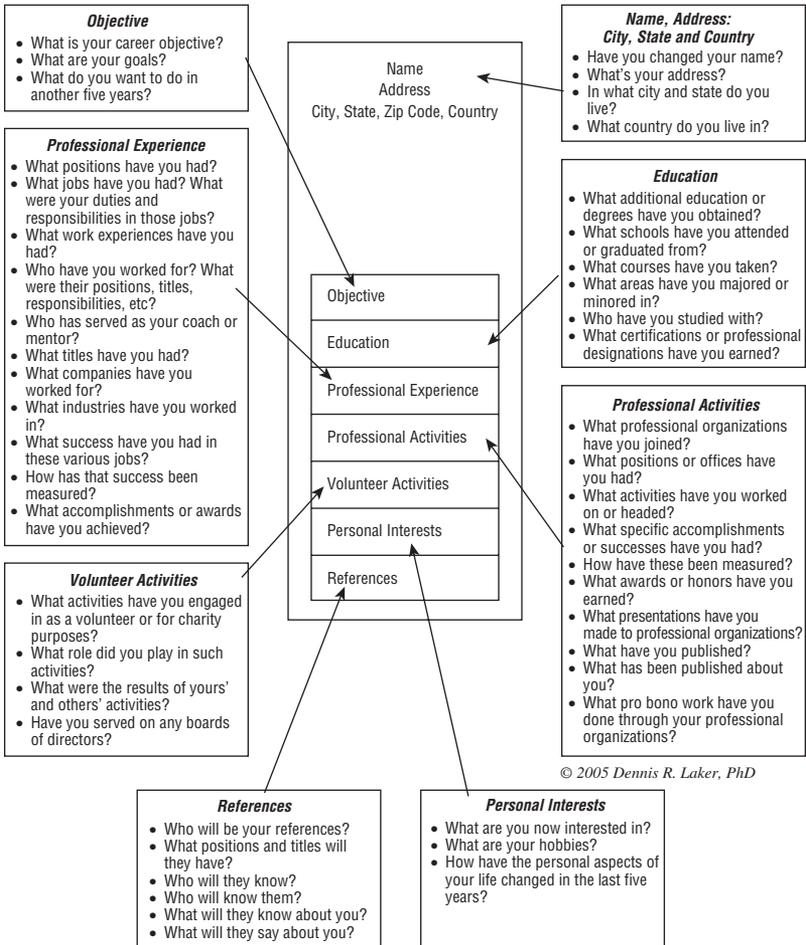
The *fifth step* is for you to discuss how you will implement your action plans. Remember: Action planning is a dynamic process and thus is subject to change; the five-year resume serves only as a starting point.

The *sixth step* is for you to summarize what you have learned from this exercise. You need to prepare a final paper that outlines how you have performed each of the previous five steps of this exercise and the conclusions you have drawn.

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Appendix B Five-Year Resume Questions



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