

Employment References and Education: How to handle incomplete degrees and negative references

Why honesty with formal credentials matters more than you think.

A job is listed in your CV. The dates and description are correct.

But the employment reference is missing.

Or:

A degree is listed in your CV.

But without a completion date or without indicating that it was discontinued.

The employer notices immediately. And thinks: Why is something being concealed here?

Why is an employment reference missing

In rare cases, no employment reference is issued. But usually there's another reason.

What we observe: Employment references are usually not shown when they contain negative wording.

Or because they were never requested, which is also a signal.

The problem: A missing employment reference raises more questions than a negative one.

Always request an employment reference

You have a right to it. Always! Even retroactively.

In Switzerland, this is regulated in Art. 330a OR. In Germany, this is regulated in §109 GewO and §630 BGB. In Austria, this is regulated in §1163 ABGB as well as more specifically in §39 AngG and §19 GAngG.

If it was actually forgotten, request it afterwards. Every gap is a pitfall. Even with employment references.

What if the employment reference contains unfavorable wording?

If that's the case once, it's not a disaster. Then you should provide an honest and understandable explanation.

You can add under the respective work experience in your CV:

"Certain passages in the employment reference require explanation. I would be very happy to address these points in a personal conversation."

Brief, factual, without drama. People can draw conclusions about your communication style and also a bit about your personality. How do you handle it when things don't go so well?

Important

No employment reference is worse than a bad employment reference. People are allowed to make mistakes. Even to do something poorly.

However, those who decide to cover things up or omit them entirely make it worse. There is nothing stronger than the truth. And yes, that sometimes requires courage.

Incomplete degrees

The same principle applies to education. If you discontinued a degree or training program, it should be on your CV.

Not because the discontinuation is a problem. But because concealing it is.

How to do it right

Weak:

Computer Science Studies, University of Zurich, 2018–2020

[No indication that it was discontinued]

Strong: Computer Science Studies, University of Zurich, 2018–2020 (without degree)

- Focus on practical experience: Transition to technical security role

You explain why. You provide context. You show that it was a conscious decision and not a failure.

Why this matters

Employers verify education. Especially in Switzerland.

If a degree is listed in your CV without a completion date or without indicating the discontinuation, it will come out at the latest when they ask for your diplomas. But then trust is already gone.

An incomplete degree is not a problem. But a concealed one is.

The three most common mistakes with education

1. Not mentioning the discontinuation. You write "XY Studies, 2018–2020" but conceal that you don't have a degree. Solution: Add "discontinued" or "without degree." Briefly explain why.
2. Not marking ongoing education. You write "Master Cyber Security, 2022–2025" but you're not finished yet. Solution: Write "Master Cyber Security, 2022–present (ongoing)."
3. Omitting irrelevant education and creating gaps. You completed a commercial apprenticeship before switching to IT and leave it out. Solution: Include it. One line. Shows that you've taken a path.

Transparency with formal credentials is non-negotiable

Employment references and education are verifiable. Anytime.

If you're not honest here, it will be noticed. At the latest during the background check. Or in the interview. And then not only is the interview over.

Then your credibility is over.

Review your CV:

1. Are employment references missing? If yes, why?
2. Have I discontinued education without marking it?
3. Are there ongoing education programs that aren't marked as "ongoing"?
4. Have I omitted education and thereby created gaps in my background?

If yes, correct it!

Next week: The red thread. Why this is so important in Switzerland and how to strengthen it.

This article is part of the CyberUnity CV series for Cyber Security Professionals in the DACH region.