

Tips On Preparing Your Resume

Believe it or not, very few resumes are written and formatted in a way that is easy for the recruiter or employer to review. A clearly written resume that also makes good use of white space is “a breath of fresh air” to the reader. Let’s face it, with employers receiving 50 or 100 resumes for each competition, you must ensure your resume catches their attention within a 10-second glance.

The design of your resume must highlight the most important information about your work experience, skills and education. At first glance this information forms the image that employers have of your skills and abilities.

The job titles and skill headings should be a priority. Employers make snap judgments when glancing at your resume. If they see job titles and skills that are unrelated to the advertised job, they’ll likely make an immediate assumption that you are not qualified for the job you want.

Another minor point – if your education is more impressive than your experience, list it first. If the opposite is true, list your work experience first.

When listing your work experience, ensure you include the period of time you worked at a job that includes the months and year(s), not just the year (e.g. July 2002 – August 2004) – not just the year (e.g. 2002 – 2004).

When describing your work experience, use bullets, not sentences. Again, you only have a short period of time to convince the reviewer that you meet the shortlist criteria. Ensure your information is brief and to the point.

If possible, obtain a job description for the position for which you are applying. With luck, the job description will include selection criteria which form the basis of their assessment. Pay particular attention to the experience and education noted in the selection criteria. Then make sure you have exactly what they are asking for and clearly indicate this in your resume and covering letter.

As you write your resume, keep in mind the level of job and salary you want. Be sure to create an image that presents you at the appropriate level.

One common question I am asked relates to that period of time when someone has traveled, raised a family, or attended school full-time. During these periods, there is likely no “job” to document in the resume, resulting in a hole in the chronology. It is your choice whether or not to define what you did during this period of time. However, be aware that it will likely be noticed and questioned internally by the recruiter and/or the interview panel. I recommend including a brief line that describes what you did during this period of time so that your chronology is continuous.

Another common question is ideal length. While this will vary depending on the corporation you are applying to, I prefer the resume to be a maximum of three pages. Some people recommend two pages; however this is often insufficient room to adequately address your background. A third page (ideally half of that third page) is adequate.

Another item raised regularly is whether to present the resume information chronologically or functionally. That is, should you list the positions you've held and include a brief explanation of what you did in each position? Or should you format your resume by skill set (e.g. writing, issues management, event coordination) and list the positions in which you performed each function underneath each skill. I suggest summarizing the latter in the first page of your resume (skills/abilities), but use the remainder of the resume to back up these skills/abilities by demonstrating in which position(s) you performed these skills and for how long. That way, you fulfill the recruiter's requirement to, for example, find "3 years of communications planning experience"; or "1 year event coordination experience".

Additional Resume Tips:

Ideal Resume Components (in order)

Career objective

Include a one-sentence overview of what you are striving for.

Skills/abilities

Include 5 to 7 bullets highlighting your communications-related skills/abilities.

Education

List the post-secondary education you have completed and/or is underway. It is important to indicate if the education you are taking is not yet complete. Also, for example, if you have an MBA, include its major. If, however, your education is unrelated or not as relevant as your work experience, place this after your work experience.

Work Experience

This is the heart of your resume. Beginning with the most recent work experience, list the title of your position, your employer, and the term of your employment (including the month and year of the start and finish.)

Underneath this information, include 4 to 6 bullets summarizing your accomplishments or major responsibilities in this position. (Note: It is very important to include this information because it links your skills/abilities to a particular job held. Without this detail, your application will not be considered further.)

Volunteer Work/organizations (if applicable)

List the volunteer work you may have done. Indicate where you worked and include bullets that summarize your primary responsibilities/accomplishments. While this may not have been paid experience, it is experience nonetheless.

Professional training/workshops

Include the title of the workshop/seminar and the year in which you attended. You may wish to include the facilitator, but this is not critical – in fact, it is often viewed as “clutter”.

Awards

Include, if applicable, any professional awards you have received.

Hobbies/other interests

This is optional. While not critical to a resume, it gives the recruiter a sense of what you enjoy doing outside work. Be careful however, as listing too many hobbies may indicate to the reviewer that you place a greater emphasis on hobbies than on work.

References

“References available upon request” is usually sufficient. You may find that your references change between the time you complete your application and the time you are called for an interview. You should be prepared to either bring a list of current references to your interview, or provide current references following an interview (the latter likely being more realistic because you can contact your references for permission to use them only if it looks like the panel is serious about you). Also, unless your reference letters are highly unusual, place them at the end of your portfolio, rather than tacking them onto your resume.

Covering Letter

A cover letter is simply a letter of introduction. In this letter, you are explaining who you are and why you are writing to the recruiter. It is a matter of courtesy that you introduce yourself when you’re requesting something of them, in this case an interview.

A one-page covering letter helps the recruiter understand how your background suits the needs of the position you are applying on. Be succinct and clear. Ensure there are no typographical or grammatical errors. (Ideally ask another person to review your letter to make sure it is perfectly written.)

How to deliver your application

Pay particular attention to the instructions for submitting your application. If the recruiter requests that you e-mail it, then do so. If they give options (mail, fax, or e-mail), then mail or hand-deliver (don’t fax) your application on high-quality paper. If no instructions are provided, then call them to find out their preference for delivery.

How much time should go by before I call the employer?

This is another common question. It can take a few days or a few weeks to hear back from a company. In some cases, the company won't respond to your application unless you are assessed further (e.g. interviewed). I suggest waiting at least two weeks before enquiring. If there is a need to enquire, do so politely and respectfully. Be assured that your checking in on the status of the competition will get back to the panel. Any sense of "attitude" or impatience from you when you call to check on the status will be noted.

Interview Tips

Interviews can take many shapes or forms. Sometimes they are a two-hour discussion with the company president. Other times they are a highly structured interview with a 4-person panel. If possible, try to find out the format of the interview ahead of time (e.g. how many panel members; how long the interview will take; and whether or not there will be a written component.)

Do your research! Before your interview find out everything you can about the company and the position being advertised. This demonstrates to the recruiters that you are interested in the position and have spent some time researching their company. Believe it or not, very few people do this nowadays – so those people who do their homework really stand out.

Re-read your application, thinking through your own career and the questions they might ask you. (Hint: review the selection criteria or qualifications provided in or attached to the job description. Many interview questions are based on these criteria.) You should try to anticipate the general questions which they will ask and also prepare one or two brief questions to ask them at the end of the interview.

To do well at the interview you will need to convince the interviewer you are technically qualified to do the job. You will also need to show that you are sufficiently motivated to get the job done well and that you will fit in with the company's organizational structure and the team in which you will work.

Appearance and attitude

You should dress professionally and appropriately for the interview and should leave home earlier than you need to on the day of the interview - you may be delayed by traffic or for other reasons. Be courteous to all employees of the company. At the interview itself be positive about yourself and your abilities.

Practice

Practice makes perfect. All the information that you have obtained over the years about successful interviewing is wasted if you do not practice. You can know all the questions the interviewer will ask but if you do not practice, it would be as if you did not. Have a

friend go over potential questions with you until you are able to answer them promptly and completely. Try to think of a scenario that might be asked. While less popular nowadays, also think of the knowledge-based questions they might ask. Most importantly though, try to recall your recent experience and be ready with a number of situations you encountered in the past that match with the qualifications they are seeking.

Other things to do during the interview:

Give the interviewer a firm handshake.

Give the interviewer a firm handshake. Nobody likes a limp handshake but by the same token do not take the person's hand off either. While shaking, introduce yourself keeping eye contact at all times.

Smile.

Nothing is worse than an interviewee who looks depressed or indifferent. This may require some practice since you'll no doubt be more focused on the questions being asked than on your facial appearance.

Maintain Eye Contact at all times.

You are confident about yourself and your capabilities. Relay that. Do not stare out of the window or fiddle with your pencil. Be attentive. Also, move your eyes from one panel member to another. Try not to focus on one panel member, even if he or she is the person asking the question.

Speak Clearly.

Do not mumble your words. It portrays a lack of confidence. Sit upright and slightly forward.

Listen before you answer questions.

Make sure you have understood the question. If you do not, ask him or her to clarify it. Take a few seconds to collect your thoughts, then answer. When answering interview questions, ensure you always stay on track. A clear indication of "rambling" is when the interviewers stop writing.

Give the panel answers that "paint a clear picture".

If you haven't been provided with an opportunity to preview the questions privately, take a minute to formulate the answer in your head or on paper. Don't take too much time or the panel will feel uneasy. However, you want to ensure you are ready to present the answer clearly. Don't assume they know you or your capabilities. On the other hand, don't ramble on in hope that something you say will result in another point awarded to your score. If you feel uneasy about the question, ask for it to be rephrased, or rephrase it yourself and confirm your understanding with the panel. Nowadays, the questions are more "behavioral" or "competency-based" in nature, rather than simply knowledge-based. Therefore follow-up questions from the panel are much more common, resulting in more of a conversational style.

Ask questions.

At the end of the interview, ensure you have one or two brief questions to ask of the interviewer(s). However, ensure they are brief.

Say Thank You!

Be sure to thank the interviewers for their time and shake their hands again.

Portfolios

I always encourage people to bring a portfolio of their work that can either be examined at the completion of the interview, or (preferably) can be left for them to review after the interview.

Make arrangements to have your portfolio returned to you; or left at reception for you to pick up at a later date. Ensure that each sample you provide is accompanied by a brief explanation of your role in its development.

If the panel decides to review your portfolio while you are in the room, be ready to answer any and all possible questions that might come up. Your samples should not be casual – they should be examples of your very best work. They will stand as icons of what your capabilities are.

Portfolios are also excellent means of showcasing your work during informal meetings with potential employers. Always ask if there is sufficient time left in your informal meeting to look through your portfolio.

Best wishes on your next interview!

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