

Confessions of A Resume Reader

You'll write a better document of you know how it's read

By Douglas B. Richardson

Can we talk ... before you write your resume, that great magnum opus that lauds your life, bowls me over with your accomplishments and tells me that you're unique?

Assume I'm a prototypical resume reader: a headhunter, recruitment coordinator, ad screener, human resources assistant and hiring manager rolled into one. You'll save a lot of grief by understanding the basic principles of how I process your resume.

How I Think

I'm not a bad person, and I try to do my job responsibly. However, I won't abandon my human nature and treat you with saintly objectivity. If you annoy me and I retaliate by discarding your resume, there's no appeal. No one double-checks my judgment or rummages through the trash and pleads, "Please! Save this resume!" You're gone pal.

Discarded resumes usually fall into two categories: Those that try my patience and those that tax my credulity. Resumes in the first category usually don't receive enough attention to merit entry into the second group. So let's be clear from the outset: If you fail to respect my time, make me impatient, try to con me, exaggerate or misrepresent, your resume is history, and so are your chances of employment with my company.

The First Great Principle

Look, I'm busy - always. So please, all you resume writers, give me a break. Our ad pulled 258 other responses, all of which have to be screened by Monday. I received resumes that are eight pages long with tiny margins, hand-lettered with Olde Englishe calligraphy, printed on bright purple paper or bound in simulated leather. On some resumes, the white-out liquid weighs more than the paper. I received 26 replies from "bottom-line oriented, shirt-sleeves go-getters," and 14 from candidates who want "a challenging position in a progressive company that will allow me to utilize my skills and experience, grow in my career and (oh yes!) contribute to the goals of the company." I have to read them all. Some fun.

The harsh reality is that no matter how much time and effort you put into writing your resume, it won't get a thorough reading the first time through. Initially, I'll scan it for 25 seconds. On the basis of that cursory review, I'll determine whether yours should hit the round file or merit more thoughtful reading - perhaps three minutes' worth. Scanning is tougher for me if your resume is hard to read, poorly organized or weighs more than a pound. I like wide margins, clean type (at least 10 or 12 point), clear headings, a logical format, bold and italic typeface that helps guide my eye, and selective use of bullets calling attention to important points. (Remember, a bullet is an aggressive visual stunt which says, "Look here! Now!" Twenty bullets in a row dilute the effect.)

Many experts believe a resume shouldn't exceed two pages. Some candidates use this rule as an excuse to load up the two pages like a rush-hour subway train. They resort to minuscule margins, and apply a Moby Dick narrative style to sweep into a detailed history ("I was born at an early age, and from that day forth I had a dream ..."), replete with adjectives, adverbs and polysyllabic words. This makes for hard reading.

Where's the Beef?

If, when reading a resume, my eyes can fly down the page stopping naturally on highlighted information, a little voice in my head says. "Thank you for understanding my job and how bored I get scanning all these resumes." By understanding my needs, you've kindled a little warmth in me. It can't hurt.

The most readable format isn't a substitute for content the doesn't deliver. It's no my job to be charitable. It's to be suspicious, cynical and conservative. This is to prevent us from hiring a pig in a poke. We're professional risk reducers! We look at everything in terms of risk: Who trusted you before? Was their judgment trustworthy? What did they trust you with? How long did they trust you? What responsibilities did they give you? Did you do anything with those duties? (I can make you responsible for flying to the moon, but did you get there?)

We resume readers live in fear that a glossy presentation may mask real problems with performance, personality or potential. We've been lied to in every conceivable way. One candidate claimed to be "a marketing representative for a major multinational transportation goods and services company." In reality, he sold snow tires at the Harrisburg, Pa., Goodyear tire outlet. We know you're trying to put your best foot forward, and we respect honest attempts to polish your apple. But we fear that underneath it all lies a rotten apple - or worse, no apple at all.

So don't take our ritual joust personally. You can brag as effectively as possible, but I'll try to poke holes in your claims. I'll look for excuses to screen you out, not in. If you survive the first pass, I'm pleased. I'm not out to get *you*. I'm out to reduce that stack of 258 resumes to five.

Make it to the second round, and I'll get out the fine-toothed comb and the BS meter. Does your sequence of employment, advancement and accomplishments make sense? Do I detect a note of defensiveness in an abstract phrase like, "Left after 14 years to seek new career challenges"? Did you make too many changes? On the plus side, did you consistently seek responsibility and new

challenges? Did you stay for the right amount of time in each position? If you survive this round, you win our joust and go to the castle to meet the princess.

A Clear Direction

What I'm looking for most is a clear-cut sense of career direction and momentum - or, at least, valid reasons why you made your job choices and changes. Don't assume, therefore, that if you dump a bunch of unorganized data on my desk, I'll fill in the gaps to make sense out of your past. That's your job.

Start by asking if you're spending too much time describing what you want, not what the company wants. Consider the time-honored practice of writing an objective. Who cares about your objective? For instance, *Objective: Growth-oriented position in an innovative, friendly environment leading to management responsibility.* We're looking for attributes that define you as a product capable of meeting the company's needs and priorities. Do you really think this abstract mush helps me understand what you're good for? What kind of "environment"? Manufacturing? Nonprofit? Sales? Management of what? Human Resources? Community affairs? C'mon, help me out here!

Saying "My objective is ..." is the same as saying, "I want." Since I'm more interested in what you offer than what you want, describing the product-you-in terms of a Profile or Summary of Qualifications makes more sense. Within the first few seconds, I want to know five things:

1. Your current level. Level is generally measured in terms of years of experience, title or other responsibility, which may tell me how flat or steep your learning curve is and how much I'll have to pay you.
2. The roles and functions you can perform.
3. Settings you've performed them in. If they're similar to ours, I'm likely to believe you can repeat your previous triumphs with my company. Your past settings also say a lot about the kind of places in which you want to work.
4. Past experience. That is, what have you done?
5. Current expertise. What do you know?

To provide this information, a concise synthesis will do nicely:

PROFILE: *15 years of diverse general management, operations and marketing experience with regional and national real estate firms and a multinational electronics manufacturer. Wharton M.B.A. with particular expertise in:*

- Real estate asset, property and turnaround management; leasing, marketing and operations.
- Financial planning, capital investment, budgeting and pricing.
- Strategic planning, business development and market analysis.
- Recruiting, training and management of interdisciplinary work teams.

This profile serves as an executive summary of the claims you promise to support with specific information in your resume. It tells me what to look for and teaches me, in effect, how to read your resume. It's not pushy or overblown; it has a nice objective ring to it. I like that because my defenses relax (slightly).

The Elements of Style

The impression you make in the body of the resume depends on the words and music. That is, I look both at what you claim and how you claim it. Like a diving or gymnastics judge, I deduct points for anything that jars my sensibilities, either content or presentation. You can blow it through single, humongous gaffe (misspelling your name the top of page two, or claiming "Ten years management experience" when you've only worked seven years), or through the cumulative effect several small negatives. This piece of truly lout writing would be sufficient:

Progressive experience in contribution to success of aggressively initiated cutting edge marketing initiatives through numerous constituent interactions and innovative research-oriented planning interfaces.

Whew! Score: 1.2 from the Russian judge. More syllables do not greater credibility make. This is pompous, verbose, turgid, self-important and grandiose. (For the record, it's "progressively-responsible not progressive, which was a political party based Wisconsin in the early 1900's.")

If you want to earn my respect, skip the varnish and adornments and let your accomplishments speak for themselves. Pretend you get \$1,000 for every adjective and adverb you leave out. Many are merely "invisible words" that don't provide real information. They don't register with us. We don't even say them, much less believe them. Typical examples include: "results oriented" "highly motivated" "significantly" and "dynamic."

If you must use an adjective, make sure it is quantitative, or at least objective (all, first, never, biggest, profitable, complete). Don't use qualitative or subjective terms: impressive, creative, excellent, major, significant, motivated. Anyone can claim these qualities. Since I have no way of knowing they're true, I discount them by at least 90%. The same hold true with such adverbs as proactively, aggressively, innovatively, uniquely, amazingly, incredibly, universally, cosmically and astonishingly.

I also knock off points for wimpy verbs: aided, participated in, involved with, joined, helped bring about. These don't tell me what you did, merely that you were there. Start thinking and writing in past-tense transitive verbs: wrote report, negotiated lease, managed sales force, conducted primary research, extinguished fire, won gold medal. I like past-tense verbs because they refer to events that happened and are therefore verifiable. Knowing this keeps you honest.

I also love numbers, mainly because they're objectively measurable. We can argue all day about what constitutes a "significant improvement" in sales. But if you write that you "increased new territory customer sales by 23% in seven months," I can draw a conclusion about whether that's significant. Second, numbers are inherently credible because they can be checked. And very large numbers make a lasting impression even if I forget what they refer to. For instance, I might not remember what that \$55 million transaction was all about or what you did, but I'll remain impressed by \$55 million of anything. For instance, instead of saying "press secretary of a large state agency" (yawn), say "Director of Communications for the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, a geographically diverse \$4.6 billion agency with more than 39,000 employees." Even though a press secretary might only talk with 150 of those employees, those numbers sure stick, don't they?

And this shows that I also respect titles since they suggest that someone else thought enough of you to make you responsible for something. Names of certain companies also carry more clout than others. (Would DuPont's demanding hiring process allow a complete turkey to work there eight years?) If you've got it, flaunt it. Resumes are no place for false modesty. If you can't mention an employer's name of some reason, describe it fully, as in "world's largest producer of high-technology fasteners" or "fortune 50 pharmaceutical manufacturer." Knowing who previously employed you can affect how I perceive you and the quality of your achievements.

As a typical resume reader, I prefer tight, matter-of-fact documents (the accompanying version may not be perfect, but I remember my defenses falling as I read it). It's also gratifying when the information is well-organized, so that each item hits my brain just when my mental organizing apparatus signals a need for it. This is a pleasant sensation, akin to the one I get when I pass the resume writer through the initial hiring screen and set up a job interview.

Mr. Richardson, a principal of Richardson & Co., a career management and executive consulting firm in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., is a frequent contributor to the National Business Employment Weekly.