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CareerLine Q & A

by Jack Wilson

ACM's career consultant, Jack Wilson, answers questions from students about their forthcoming careers in computing and information technology.

Q: I keep getting different advice about the length of my resume. Some people say it should be kept to one page, others say two pages is now the norm. What is your advice?

A: Up until a few years ago, I would have said either one or two pages (never more than two) is acceptable; not to try to force it one way or the other; just let it come out the way it naturally would. In a sense I still believe that, but my reasoning has changed somewhat with the changing times. And the people who are giving you different advice are both right, but under different circumstances.

I have found that the one-page resume tends to be better received by recruiters or potential employers who are NOT predisposed to read it, where the resume is sent to them unsolicited. In this instance, you are using it to initially introduce yourself to the readers, who may be very busy and need only to get an overview of your knowledge, skills, and experience to determine whether they may have an interest in you. And if they do, they will usually call or respond in some way.

Where the resume has been solicited and the recipient IS predisposed to read it, you can effectively use a more expansive version, as long as two pages if you have enough information to fill them. As a graduating student however, you may have had limited work experience or few jobs to talk about, so don't stretch it two pages if you don't need to do so.

In essence, I have been recommending that candidates with enough to cover in terms of skills, employers, jobs, academic achievements, and professional activities, have both a one-page version for unsolicited introductions and a two-page version to use when you are asked to send your resume or when more information is desired. They should be in the same format and type font, with a decent type size and an even balance between the white space and printed matter. These suggestions apply regardless of whether you are sending the resume by e-mail or in hard copy.

Q: In a recent interview I was asked by the interviewer if I had any questions, and I was at a loss to think of any. Obviously I was not prepared for this, so could you help me with some questions I might ask in the future?

A: It's always a good idea to do as much research as possible on the company before any interview. This may lead to some questions, but try to stay away from anything sensitive until you have the right time, place and person to ask. In any questioning, try to maintain a positive and open attitude toward the interviewer, showing genuine interest in his or her answers.

Here are some areas that you might consider:

Is there a job description for this job? What are some of the important tasks? To whom does the position report? Is it a new job or one that was previously filled?

Who are the people with whom I would interact in this job? Is it part of team of people, and if so, what does the composition of the team look like?

What are the major challenges in the area in which I would be working? Are there current goals or objectives to be met?

What sort of process do you employ for new hires? Is there an orientation or training period? Are there opportunities for continued training and development?

How is individual performance measured and evaluated? Would I have the opportunity to participate in setting objectives?

Do have a career planning and career development process? How does it work? How do employees find out about job opportunities in the company? Is there an expected time frame for remaining in a job before progressing to more responsibilities?

These questions are offered merely to give you an idea of some areas to explore. Obviously, you should let the interviewer set the direction and not be overly intent on getting in a variety of questions if the interviewer shows an interest in controlling the discussion.