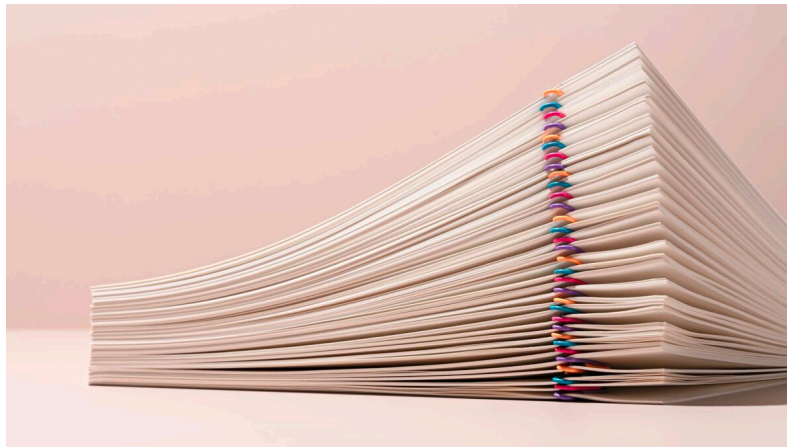**Harvard Business Review**

Resumes

4 Resume Mistakes to Avoid When You Don't Have Much Experience

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Summary. Understanding the common mistakes job candidates make on resumes, and how to overcome them, can set you apart from your competitors. The first mistake is including irrelevant work experience. Instead, only add roles that are relevant to the position you're applying... **more**

Resumes. Love them or hate them, you will probably need one when you apply for a job. The resume has a specific tactical role to play in your search — to get you the interview. You need to make sure it checks a few boxes to do that work because, even if you take advantage of your network, sooner or later, you will need to share your resume with the hiring manager.

While there's plenty of advice that covers how to craft a strong resume: make it easy for AI to scan, focus on relevant skills, and include keywords from the job description, among other tips — less has been shared about what you should avoid. But understanding the common mistakes job candidates make and how to overcome them is just as important as knowing what makes a resume stand out. It can be the difference that sets you apart from your competitors and helps you land that interview.

Here are four common mistakes people make when crafting a resume, how to avoid them, and what to do instead.

1. Including irrelevant work experience.

In my first recruiting job, I hired 100 employees within a year and read through thousands of resumes. A few years later, as a manager, I hired several direct reports, and now, as a coach, I enhance the resumes of my clients. One mistake I often see people make is including too much irrelevant experience.

While your past work experiences are important and make you who you are, not all of them need to be on your resume. Focus on what is relevant to the job.

If you want to apply for an entry-level marketing position, for instance, and your work experience includes being a cashier, a babysitter, and an intern in the marketing department at a tech company — only include that last role. You risk diluting your strongest experience if you place it at the bottom of the list or surround it with other, less applicable work.

Double down on that internship and make a strong statement by expanding on the contributions you made to the company during that time. Include any metrics that demonstrate the impact of your work ("grew Instagram channel by 20%"), and as noted earlier, focus specifically on the skills mentioned in the job description ("conducted research on market trends").

If your resume feels sparse, include the other experiences under a separate category called "additional work experience" or add a section that highlights volunteer activities that exemplify skills you might use in the role.

Be sure to choose activities or work that is recent. For example, if you were the finalist in a school competition 10 years ago, that might not be as relevant today. I was on the Romanian junior national volleyball team, and though that was relevant early in my career, I don't include it on my resume now — it was a long time ago. I do, however, sometimes bring it up during interviews to establish a connection with an interviewer who was also a professional athlete.

Treat your past experiences the same way: Include the most relevant ones on paper and keep the others in your back pocket, in case they may be useful to bring up later, during the interview.

2. Wasting time customizing your resume.

You may have heard the advice "customize your resume for each role you apply to." While it's in your benefit to adjust your resume to better match the job description, over-tuning your resume for every application can be a waste of time — and end up slowing

down your search. This is especially true if you're focused on securing a particular position that has a standard job title like "marketing coordinator," "sales associate," or "administrative assistant."

As long as the jobs you're applying for fall into the same category, you likely don't need to rewrite your entire resume for every application. But you do need to have a strong resume that will stand out in a multitude of similar applications.

How do you do it?

To save yourself some time, here's a more efficient strategy:

Let's say you want to apply to "marketing associate" jobs at various companies. First, find and save 10 to 20 job descriptions for "marketing associate" positions at organizations you might apply to. Enter the combined text of those descriptions into a GenAI tool like ChatGPT. Then, give the GenAI tool the following prompt: "What are 10 to 20 of the most common responsibilities across these job descriptions?"

As a last step, update your resume, highlighting experiences, skills, and accomplishments that reflect those common responsibilities. Again, the goal is to closely mirror the responsibilities from the job description and include keywords that will make your resume noticeable.

If your resume says, "Supported the acquisition of new clients," and the common text from the job descriptions is, "Participated in sales activities to promote the development of new business channels," you can tweak your language to: "Contributed to sales activities to acquire new clients and develop new business channels."

If you do this exercise, you will have a solid resume that you rarely need to update, allowing you to speed up your search and increase your chances of getting an interview at more than one organization.

3. Overdesigning your resume.

Your resume will be one of the tens or hundreds the recruiter and the hiring manager see. They (or an AI tool) will spend just a few seconds scanning it before deciding whether to move you to the interview stage. Too often, job candidates make the mistake of overdesigning their resumes or including creative designs that make them hard to follow.

To give you an idea: When I was a recruiter for high-volume jobs, I scanned each resume in a few seconds, looking for the words that matched my job opening. If the resume had an ingenious design, it took me a few extra seconds to situate myself on the page, and most often, I did not have those extra seconds. An unusual layout can also disrupt applications submitted through a tracking system. In this case, your resume will become a random mess by the time it reaches the recruiter.

So, save your creativity and nuance for the interview stage. You can make the recruiter's job easier by keeping your resume straightforward and well-organized. If you're an entry-level applicant with fewer relevant roles to highlight, aim for a length of one-page. Once you have more than five or 10 years of work experience, having two pages is okay, and often, necessary.

Keep the design simple, even boring. Programs like Microsoft Word have simple templates you can use for inspiration. I recommend using a standard template, and organizing your resume along these lines: statement of purpose, skills, education and courses completed, work experience, certificates earned, and volunteer activities (if relevant). If you have work experience you want to highlight right away, switch education with experience, as experience has more weight.

Finally, make an effort to maintain a consistent and professional formatting style throughout your resume. Inconsistent fonts, styles, or spacing can make your resume appear unpolished. I recommend using clean fonts that are easy to read like Arial, Cambria, or Times New Roman. And if you have just one sentence crossing over onto a second page, find a way to bring it up to the previous page.

4. Coming off as a novice.

When reading resumes, one detail that tends to jump out to me — in a negative way — is an odd email address. Some emails have funny or offensive words, others include numbers that seem like the applicant's birthday, and others are an apparently random set of letters and numbers.

You might argue that the email address is not related to the job; but it says something about the effort the candidate put into learning the rules of resume writing. Creating an email address is free, and you can create a new one that you use for professional activities, like applying for jobs. A professional-looking email should include the name of the applicant and be on a domain that is not outdated.

Another tip: Do not name your resume file "resume." Your resume may be the only resume you have, however, recruiters see thousands of resumes, and a resume called "resume" is destined to be misplaced. Instead, name it so it in a way that can easily be connect back to you, such as "Your Name_Resume."

Lastly, submit your resume as a PDF. Each time you submit your resume in a Word format, you are taking a risk. An application tracking system might mess with the formatting, leaving the recruiter with a bulk of disorganized text. That does not always happen, but why take that risk when you can easily avoid it?

It's true that you are more than your resume. And there are other parts of the job application process where you will have free reign to display your personality and uniqueness. But a resume is not one of those places. Avoid these common mistakes, and your resume will be more likely to shine and play its tactical role in your job search — getting you that interview.

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