

IT Professional's Resume Makeover Guide



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TechRepublic
1630 Lyndon Farm Court
Suite 200
Louisville, KY 40223
Online Customer Support:
<http://techrepublic.custhelp.com/>

Credits

Editor In Chief

Jason Hiner

Head Technology Editor

Bill Detwiler

Head Blogs Editor

Toni Bowers

Senior Editors

Mark Kaelin

Jody Gilbert

Selena Frye

Mary Weilage

Sonja Thompson

Graphic Designer

Kimberly Smith

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Writing a successful resume

1

Resume tips for experienced IT pros

By Randy Barger

You're an experienced IT professional. You've been around the block and done it all. You think your resume is packed full with great stuff because years ago, you read all the articles on how to build the perfect resume and you've been following most of that advice ever since. Any employer should take one look at your resume and hire you on the spot, right?

That's what I used to think too. I'm not a resume expert, but I thought I had a killer resume. Then, three potential clients in three month's time nixed me because they thought I was "light" in areas where I was actually a specialist.

If that isn't a wake-up call, I don't know what is. So I called a close friend of mine, who is an IT manager at a large company. He knows my abilities, he's an IT geek at heart, and he's seen a ton of resumes. He looked at my resume and said, "Yep, I'd have thrown it right in the trash." I called a couple more friends in similar positions. "It could use some improvement," one of them told me. Ouch. At least they were honest. Basically, I had a resume that would sell me as an administrator or engineer, but not as an architect or consultant, which was the type of work I was looking for.

I began gathering comments and suggestions from these guys and completely rebuilt my resume from scratch. What I learned in this process is that building a resume for experienced IT professionals who want to land higher-level IT jobs is quite different from building the average resume to land entry-level administrator jobs.

I am going to share eight resume tips that sum up what I have learned.

Resume pointers

Most of the standard rules for building a resume still apply: Make sure you have a readable format, proofread for spelling and grammar errors, keep it simple, etc. However, experienced IT pros need to follow some more specialized guidelines. A few of these tips may actually contradict your previous notions of what to include (and exclude) on your resume. They certainly contradicted mine.

- ➔ **Keep your list of "core skills" short and sweet.** When you've worked with a lot of different technologies, you want to show the world all you've done. However, having a long list of core skills actually gives the impression that you know only a little bit about most of those things and that you're a generalist, not the specialist that the potential client/employer needs. Keep this list to a handful of key skills or possibly eliminate the list altogether.
- ➔ **Don't list certification exams.** At the very least, minimize the impact of this list. The average IT pro might want to list exams passed to build up a resume, but for the IT veteran, this actually marginalizes real-world experience and accomplishments.
- ➔ **Quantify projects and results.** For example, if you do an Active Directory implementation, specify how many sites, domains, and servers were involved. If you design an e-commerce system, specify the increased percentage of sales that resulted from the project. Tell the potential client/employer exactly how you helped a previous company that you worked for.

- ➔ **Bullets, bullets, bullets.** Don't use paragraph style writing to describe your projects, tasks, and duties. Bullet-point every major accomplishment or project and leave out the minor things. (Your resume is already going to be too big anyway.)
- ➔ **Include examples of work, if possible.** For instance, maybe you've written articles for an online magazine, or perhaps you built an e-commerce site. Include links to pertinent examples so potential clients/employers can see firsthand what you do.
- ➔ **Highlight major accomplishments.** If you're a high-tech consultant, you may have a lot of smaller projects and clients. Maybe you were hired as a "grunt" for a couple of short-term assignments but had a major project last year. You can't exclude the small stuff, or potential clients/employers will question what you've been doing. But you can minimize the impact by focusing attention on the bigger things. Some ways of doing this include using a slightly larger font, boldface, or italics, or even drawing a thin border around the major accomplishments. But don't go overboard—subtlety is still key.
- ➔ **Seek advice from actual managers.** Recruiters, agents, brokers, and human resource personnel are all different from managers. Managers want to see results, and they usually know how to spot a weak candidate. If managers think your resume reflects someone who can't do the job, you'll never get anywhere. Run your resume by some managers you know and have them critique it for you.
- ➔ **Know when to stop.** If you list all your experience from all the jobs, contracts, or projects you've handled, your resume will be more like a book. Find a place to stop listing your experience. If you feel you must at least acknowledge previous experience, try making a separate section and just bullet-point where you worked and what your title/function was. Of course, you'll usually want to do this only for the less-accomplished jobs that you don't want to highlight on your resume.

IT resume: List accomplishments, not responsibilities

By Toni Bowers

One of the biggest mistakes people make when compiling their resumes are that they list job responsibilities instead of accomplishments. I can, for example, depress keys on a piano in a systematic way but that doesn't mean I can play a song. It's important to make distinctions in your resume.

Take a look at your resume. You should be able to take everything that starts with "responsibilities included" and replace with or add to the actual positive outcome you brought about. Resume experts call this PAR (Problem-Action-Results) but I don't consider every change that can be orchestrated in an organization to result from a problem. The best employees find ways to improve or streamline existing conditions before they become problems.

So here's the difference between a responsibility and an accomplishment:

Responsibility: Overseeing installation of new anti-virus software and critical system updates.

Accomplishment: Substantially increased security and performance of systems by implementing new anti-virus software and critical system updates.

There is also the danger of listing an accomplishment without explaining the impact that accomplishment had on the company. For example:

Good: Developed disk-cloning procedure for streamlining OS system implementation and security properties configuration.

Better: Reduced workstation set-up time by 50% by developing a disk-cloning procedure for streamlining OS system implementation and security properties configuration.

Employees don't always have exact numbers to back up an achievement. For example, it's hard to figure a percentage of time or money saved if you're not privy to that level of intel. In that case, you can use terms like "Significantly reduced..." or "Substantially increased..."

Why you should keep your resume two pages or under

By Toni Bowers

One of the hardest things to get people to do when they create their resumes is to keep it to a manageable length. I don't care how many times I say it, or how many statistics back it up, some people just will not keep their resumes down to one or two pages. I could have 1,000 hiring managers swear on a stack of bibles that they never look past the second page, and people will still argue this point with me.

So I'll bravely attempt this one more time: A resume should not be more than two pages long. Why? Because it is a marketing document, not an autobiography. You will not get a job based on your resume. You will get an interview based on your resume. You will get the job based on the interview, in which you can expound on your job experience to your heart's content or until the interviewer grows a long white beard and keels over.

Also, keep in mind that the sheer volume of your experience does not impress a hiring manager unless that experience is directly related to the job at hand. Some people have trouble differentiating between what is important in their minds from what is going to be important to a hiring manager.

That year of web design experience you got was most undoubtedly valuable to you personally, but to someone who is looking for a network administrator, it may just be distracting.

An equally important thing to remember in creating your resume is to write your accomplishments, not your duties. And try to qualify these as much as possible. Was one of your job duties tech support? Put that down but put it in terms of a big call volume. Did you lead a tech rollout? Mention the cost of the rollout and that it ended on time or on schedule. Maybe it involved coordinating several disparate groups across the company.

A neat trick to use is after you write any accomplishment, ask yourself, "So what?" What value did you bring to the company because of that duty? Even if you can't really exactly quantify a time or money savings, you can round an amount down (e.g., 20 percent, thousands of dollars, etc.)

Unfortunately, this world has a what-can-you-do-for-me mentality and you'll see that most acutely in a manager who is sifting through 30 resumes for one job opening. Don't make your resume a chore for a hiring manager to read.

Five tips for keeping typos out of your resume

By Dave Johnson

You know what they say: The difference between landing a job and not even getting the interview is inserting “Career break in 1999 to renovate my horse” into your resume.

Everyone knows how important it is to ensure your resume is error-free, but that’s often easier said than done. What you need are some tips and strategies for eliminating those embarrassing typos. Here are five surefire ones you should practice before the next job interview, as reported by [The Washington Post](#).

Note: These tips are based on [an entry in BNET’s Business Hacks blog](#).

1: Review it later

You can’t confidently correct a resume while you’re writing it, because you see what you intended to write, not what’s really on the screen. Wait several hours or, even better, a day or two.

2: Get someone else to edit it for you

Not a replacement for reviewing it yourself, but a second set of eyes is essential for seeing your words fresh and impartially.

3: Print it out

It’s easier to see many kinds of errors on the printed page that you’d miss on a computer screen.

4: Read it aloud

Just like a printed resume looks different from what’s on the screen, reading it out loud sounds different from reading it in your head. When you actually hear the words, you’ll notice that some things just don’t make sense.

5: Read it from the bottom up

Reading your resume out of sequence can disrupt the logical flow that helps your brain make sense of things that are grammatically incorrect or have other language problems. Also, you’ll see the end with fresh eyes, whereas ordinarily you’ll be burnt out by the time you reach the end and more likely to miss errors.

More resume resources

- [Never underestimate the power of a resume typo](#)
- [Five quick tips for building a job-winning resume](#)
- [Resume pet peeves you may not know about](#)
- [Your resume will be tossed if...](#)
- [Nineteen words that don’t belong in your resume](#)

Rid your resume of these useless words

By Toni Bowers

The biggest communication mistakes, in my opinion, come from people's efforts to appear intelligent. It is why so many people misuse the first person singular pronoun "I." (It is *I* when it's a subject and *me* when it's an object.) But for some reason, people are insecure about using the word *me*. My guess is because the ultimate and most obvious indication of poor grammar is when *me* is used when it shouldn't be, as in "Me and Tom went to school together." So people overcompensate and avoid using *me* when it's perfectly appropriate. They'll say, "They went to the movie with Roger and I" instead of "They went to the movie with Roger and me."

So, what in the name of all that is sacred is my point, and what does it have to do with resumes? People tend to use terminology in resumes that they *think* sounds better but, in actuality, is merely vague or off-putting. Here are some examples of terms you should avoid in your resume, where space is of the essence.

Utilize. Why the word "use" has fallen out of favor as of late is beyond me. If you used your knowledge of database administration to save the company some money then just say it. "Utilizing" your knowledge doesn't make it sound better.

Impacted. You affect an outcome, you don't impact it. Maybe it's just me, but the word "impact" instantly puts me in mind of a blowhard who sits in meetings using buzzwords, while everyone else is out affecting an outcome. When you dress up words, it makes the reviewer wonder what you're trying to hide.

Assist, Contribute, and Support. There is not a hiring manager alive who would be able to discern from your resume exactly what you mean when you say you supported an initiative or contributed to a project. Contributing to a project could mean anything from writing and enforcing the project plan to just opening the door for the actual project manager when his hands were full with a box of donuts. If you use these words, follow up with your specific responsibilities.

Successfully. Do I have to tell you how many interpretations there are for this word? When you say you "successfully" completed a tech implementation, do you mean you came in at budget in the time allotted with few post-implementation issues? Or maybe your idea of successful was that you got through the project in your lifetime without killing any of your co-workers in the process. Be specific about success. Use metrics to qualify it.

Anybody else have any resume terms they could do without?

More words to leave off your resume

By Toni Bowers

I've covered the topic of words to avoid in your resume and cover letter before. Here's an update.

Awesome, amazing, phenomenal, cool, spectacular, etc. I would personally like to see the word amazing purged from the vernacular altogether; sometimes it seems like that's the only adjective people know. All of these words, besides making you sound like a teenage girl, are subjective, meaning that they are your interpretation of an IT project or skill. Unless the interviewer can see that for himself or herself, it's not really going to mean much to him or her anyway.

Liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican, monotheistic, polytheistic, atheist, agnostic, etc. I'm not telling you to deny your views or leanings, but the resume is not the place to state them. When people are vetting resumes, they're not above throwing out those that represent people with beliefs that are different from theirs.

Healthy, chronically ill, diabetic, habitually pregnant, or any mention of a physical condition at all. This kind of information is illegal for prospective employers to ask about, so why volunteer it?

Five resume tips for IT consultants

By Chip Camden

Whether you spell it resume, résumé, resumé, or curriculum vitae, you need to craft a document that summarizes your IT consulting skills and experience. For one thing, you might be asked to produce a resume when you're meeting a prospective client. It's also a good idea to keep a record of this information. When you've been in the business as long as I have, you may start to forget some of your accomplishments if you don't write them down.

Whatever you do, make sure your resume is well written. It sounds obvious, but you would be surprised what passes for a professional resume. Here are five tips that will help you effectively present your accomplishments.

Note: These tips are based on [an entry in our IT Consultant blog](#).

1: Keep your audience in mind

Before anything else can happen, you must connect with your reader. Visualize the people who will read your resume and think about what they're looking for in an IT consultant. You should have different versions of your resume. A lengthy, complete narrative will help you keep track of all your accomplishments. Then, you can choose from that version to create a resume that is targeted for each prospect. Yes, I think you should rewrite your resume for each prospect and emphasize the points that are meaningful to the specific audience. For instance, if I'm seeking a client who needs help with [Synergy/DE](#), I'll put my lengthy experience with that technology front and center. When I'm going after a Ruby project, Synergy/DE becomes a bullet point somewhere down the list.

2: Focus on your results

You're trying to communicate, "Hire me!" so how do you make that case? You need to demonstrate that you're the best choice among the client's list of candidates. You not only need to decrease the perceived [risk:benefit ratio](#), but you must also increase the perceived bang:buck ratio. When considering cost, your prospect should take into account both your fee and the opportunity cost of not hiring someone else. The client will probably have a checklist of specific required skills; if you know the requirements, feature your relevant experience.

Remember to focus on how you helped previous clients succeed rather than on how much you know. Besides being more tuned in to what the prospect really wants, it allows you to broaden the range of what's acceptable. "Eight years' experience in the .NET Framework" can easily be trumped by "Converted application X to the .NET Framework and released three months ahead of schedule," even if the latter applicant has only one year of experience with the .NET Framework. Don't offer clients potential — give them results.

3: Be brief

Before I went into consulting, I worked in an upper management position in which I was constantly looking for new people. I always had a hundred resumes on my desk for every position I needed to fill. If one of those resumes was six pages long, I'd scan the front page for what I was looking for and then toss it if those words didn't reach out from the page and grab my eyeballs. A two-page resume would get both pages scanned. A one-page resume would actually get read.

[It's much more effective to be brief](#) — but be sure to [pack a lot of meat into those few words](#). Don't repeat yourself. Some resumes include separate sections for skills, experience, languages, frameworks, and platforms; these sections include the same information reheated and served on different kinds of toast.

4: Include concrete details

One secret to making every word count is to be specific. Avoid generalities like “insured the success of Project Ingolstadt throughout its lifecycle.” What did you do while you were “insuring success” — underwriting? If you were the PM, say “managed a project of five developers, two testers, and a documentation specialist.” If you were a developer, say what parts you were responsible for designing and coding. And for goodness sake, tell them what Project Ingolstadt actually accomplished — and whether it was on schedule, under budget, and met with a reaction from users that was at least friendlier than [torches and pitchforks](#). The more you can quantify the benefit, the better: “saved the company \$40,000 a year” ... “was instrumental in attracting at least 12 new customers,” etc. Be sure you can back up the numbers you quote.

5: Be honest

[Erik Eckel references a study](#) of background checks by ADP Payroll in which it found that 44 percent of job applications contained fabricated work experience, 41 percent padded their education, and 23 percent lied about licenses or other credentials. While many candidates may get away with it, the cost of exposure is high: You could lose the engagement and be sued.

Furthermore, even if you aren't found out, you never want to oversell yourself. You'll end up in a project you can't handle, paranoid about being discovered, and making decisions that are designed to make you look smart instead of contributing to the project's success. Sure, you should embrace challenges, but only if your client knows how much you're being challenged and embraces that as well.

Writing a resume that lands you an interview

Many resume authors seem to forget that any form of writing has one overarching goal: communication. By giving ample consideration to who might be asking the questions, what you're trying to tell them, and how to get the message across, you can build a resume that grabs your prospect's attention and gets you to the next step: [the interview](#).

Additional resources

Much has been written over the years on crafting resumes. You can find some excellent resources right here on TechRepublic:

- [10 tips for creating a job-winning IT consultant resume](#)
- [Resume improved to focus on results](#)
- [Consulting resume example](#)
- [Resume do's and don'ts for IT consultants](#)
- [Nineteen words that don't belong in your resume](#)
- [High impact resume for the experienced IT pro](#)
- [10 tips for writing a job-winning developer resume](#)

Job search expenses that are tax deductible

By Toni Bowers

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a side benefit to the soul-sucking drudgery of looking for a job? There just might be in the form of tax deductions (only if the job search exceeds 2 percent of your adjusted gross income). According to [IRS Publication 529](#), deductible job search expenses generally fall into three categories:

Employee agency and outplacement fees: This expense is generally deductible. However, if you're reimbursed by an employer, you cannot deduct these fees.

Resume preparation: If you engaged a professional resume service (or bought a professional resume app), the costs can be claimed.

Peripheral expenses: Paper, envelopes, portfolios, postage, phone calls, etc. You'll have to keep receipts and be meticulous about keeping track of these.

Travel and Transportation Expenses: If you have to fly across the country for an interview and the prospective employer is too cheap to pay for it, you can deduct that expense. You may even be able to deduct fuel and mileage figures but you have to be scrupulous in separating those from personal errands, etc.

Most important caveats

Here are some points to keep in mind when you're looking at job-search related deductions.

- ➔ You have to be looking for a job in the same field you've worked in. For some reason, career changers don't get a break from the IRS.
- ➔ The job you're looking for can't be your first job. The deductions only apply to transitional job searches.
- ➔ There can't be a substantial break between jobs. If you're out of the workforce for several years, then decide to look for a job, you won't find many breaks from the IRS.

In short, consult a tax expert if you have any questions about how these deductions work.

Quick resume tip: List accomplishments not duties

By Toni Bowers

A very common resume mistake that many people make is to list their professional experience by company and then list their perspective responsibilities under each one. If you think about it, all that's telling a potential employer is what you were expected to do at your previous jobs—it doesn't necessarily mean that you actually did any of them or that you were good at any of them.

For example, keeping your company's Web site up might be one of your duties, but unless you can express that as an accomplishment in terms of downtime percentages, then it really doesn't have much punch. Try to stay away from the words, Duties or Responsible for...

You can list what you were in charge of in past jobs but do it in terms of what was accomplished. Before you list a responsibility, think of how you can rephrase it to reflect how your action saved the company money or time, or how it expanded the business or attracted new customers.

Think of your efforts in terms of how they helped your organization overcome a problem. Did you leave your employers better off than before you came along? How did you do that?

So, if one of your "duties" is optimizing the network for customers, state it as, "Maintain strict adherence to customer turnaround times, consistently achieving on-time completion of system repairs." Don't just state the responsibility. Be specific about how well you did it.

Try to qualify statements whenever you can with figures or measurements.

(To help you keep track of your accomplishments at each job, here is a [free Accomplishments Tracking template](#) you can download from TechRepublic.)

Quick resume tip: Hone your Job Objective statement

By Toni Bowers

Previously in this blog, TechRepublic members [debated the advantages](#) of even including an Objective statement in their resumes.

Many people swore by their use and many people ridiculed the Objective statement as a quaint, outmoded resume element. The fact is, everyone is correct, because what is included in a resume is entirely dependent on your personal needs and what information you want to convey.

It is unlikely that a hiring manager will stop dead in his tracks if you haven't included an Objective statement. But a poorly worded one can send a message that may not be the best one to put out there. However, Susan Ireland, in her book, [The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Perfect Resume](#), cautions that Objective statements make it easier for a potential employer to understand the message that you're trying to convey in the rest of your resume.

Ireland says, "A resume without an Objective statement effectively says, 'This is what I've done. Could you figure out what I should do next?' A job objective gives your resume focus and strength, and makes a powerful first move toward the title and salary negotiations."

If you're going to use a job objective, take time to make it a good one. Here are some tips:

Don't make it about what you want

It's very tempting to write something like:

*A **challenging** IT position in a company that **supports creativity and growth opportunity** in the workplace.*

Sounds okay, right? Well, not exactly. The parts in bold are all about you and your needs—a sure way to alienate employers who have a stack of more humble candidates to choose from. Here and elsewhere, adopt this mindset: "How can I help you, Mr./Ms. Employer?" (And don't get all puffed up and post angry comments about the job search being a two-way street. I know that, but the resume is not the time and place to make your "demands." You can do that after you've charmed everyone in an interview.)

Tailor your objective to the position you're applying for

If you're applying for a project management position in a hospital, put that as your objective:

A Project Management position within a health-care setting

Just be sure to change it for the next job you are applying for if the job title is different. This will also help an HR person know exactly where to direct your resume.

Resist the trite

Don't use phrases like "opportunity to grow" or "room for advancement." Those are not only a given but by using them you're essentially burying your real objective in a bunch of fluff.

Quick resume tip: Use punctuation to your advantage

By Toni Bowers

When you've been doing writing and editing for as long as I have, you start to feel a little sorry for the semi-colon. Bless its little heart, the semicolon is perhaps the most misunderstood and misused punctuation mark out there.

It doesn't have the authority of a period. It doesn't offer the sense of anticipation that the regular colon does, and most people mistakenly use a comma in place of it anyway. Let's face it, if your job is to connect independent clauses (which are, in and of themselves, some of the least understood grammatical elements), you're going to be misused.

So it is with a heavy heart that I add to the semi-colon's unfortunate rep by saying it has no place in a resume. Many people list their job responsibilities, or skills, in paragraph form, separated by semicolons, as you can see in **Figure A**. Believe me, a busy hiring manager doesn't want to feel like he or she is reading a term paper when leafing through resumes.

The best thing to do is to use bullets and use them consistently. **Figure B** shows our resume with skills and responsibilities separated by bullets.

Now, when I say to use bullets consistently, I don't mean that you should carry them over to everything. If you're listing something that has more than three elements, then use them. However, you don't need to use bullets to separate your contact information, like:

- ➔ John Doe
- ➔ Email address:
- ➔ Home phone:

Those blocks of text are short and simple and the white space alone guides the

eye. Remember, it's all about readability and giving the person looking at your resume the easiest path to gleaning information about you. There is a lot written about the fact that you have to have a resume that stands out from the

Figure A

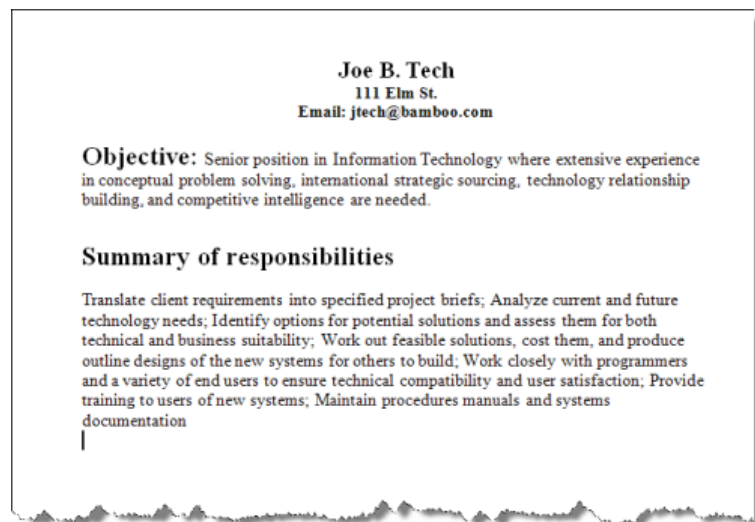
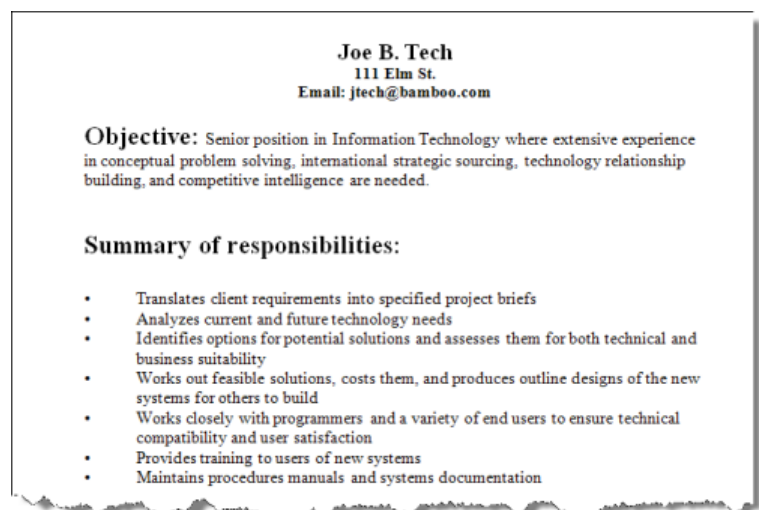


Figure B



Quick resume tip: Don't go overboard with formatting

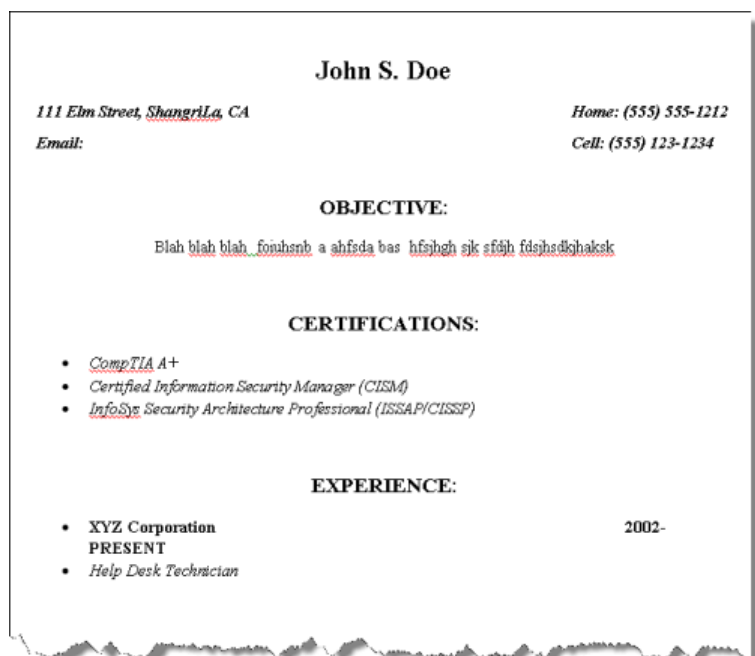
By Toni Bowers

There is a lot written about the fact that you have to have a resume that stands out from the crowd. One way to do this is with formatting (lines, boldface, italic, etc.).

The problem I've encountered most often with resumes is that people take this advice too much to heart and overdo it. When you overdo formatting, you do the opposite that you planned for and actually obscure your message.

If you want to clearly delineate between your work experience and your certifications, you can do this with bold or italic headings, or type the headings in all uppercase. But when you do all three of these things, then the eye doesn't know where to focus. The result is visual overload and it tires the eyes out. No one, especially someone who is poring over a bunch of resumes, wants to be visually assaulted.

As you can see in **Figure A**, using all elements at once can make your resume look as cluttered as the Vegas strip. Many of the design elements are not needed. All-capped subheadings already do the job of separating the elements of your resume; you don't need to add lines — dividing or underlines — to it also. **Figure B** shows the page without all the extra formatting. As you can see, the divisions are clear enough.



Quick resume tip: Negotiating resume scanning software

By Toni Bowers

One of the biggest mistakes that job candidates make is assuming that just because they send a resume to a prospective employer, it will be read. Many people don't consider that, in many cases, that resume will be sent through some kind of resume scanning software. If the software doesn't "find" what it's looking for, your resume may not get passed to the hiring manager. In the coming weeks, we'll offer tips on how to get your resume through the resume scanner.

Tim Heard, the owner of [eSearch Associates](#), a full-service search and consulting firm specializing in technology staffing, pointed out a detail that many people don't concern themselves with when creating an online resume: Your name.

Here are some of the common pitfalls that can keep a resume scanner from even getting your name off your resume.

Text boxes

Tim says, "Many resume databases don't have a mechanism for incorporating the contents of text boxes into the data that they grab." So even if your name is front and center on your resume like it should be, if it's in a text box it might be missed. He remembered one situation in which he received a resume from a very qualified job candidate but the resume scanner pulled her name as "Profile."

Headers

Tim says, "Placing your name in a header seems like a good way of saving space. However, some systems don't read headers when looking for contact information either." Also, since resumes often get reviewed without being printed out, and the reviewers have their word processor set so that the headers and footers don't show up, then you're out of luck.

Alphabet soup

You need to list your credentials (e.g., PhD, PMP, CCNA, etc.) somewhere in your resume, but placing those letters right by your name in the resume can screw up its identification.

Spacing

Some people add a space between letters of their name to space it out for graphical purposes, like this:

J o h n D o e

Tim warns, however, that this practice makes it impossible for most software applications to accurately parse out your name.

Overcoming potential resume pitfalls

2

Tackling the tricky dilemma of having no work references

By Toni Bowers

With the rate these days at which people switch jobs and companies go out of business, finding and keeping good work references can be a battle. Here's an e-mail I received from a TechRepublic member who's having a real problem satisfying a prospective employer's request for work references.

"I interviewed for a position last month which required, among other things, the application letter of introduction, a resume, a list of three professional references, and a copy of unofficial transcripts. So, as is obvious, there was a little bit of work to do to apply. Since the references are supposed to be professional I had a bit of a problem. Unfortunately in my case I gave three references but they were only personal references and two of them had tossed their cell phones so when a check was made the number wasn't valid. I was able to get another number to one of these references but I was eventually asked for another individual for a reference which I provided. This organization wanted to contact my present coworkers but I work in a small outfit (don't even have an HR dept) and if somebody contacted my coworkers then they'd know I was looking elsewhere and I'd find myself in a bit of a delicate situation.

My question is this: How does one go about applying to positions when one doesn't have any references to use? I left the Foreign Service three years ago and anyone I worked with is now overseas and nearly impossible to get in touch with. This employer whose job I'd applied to wanted to talk to not just someone who I've worked with or knows what I'm capable of but someone who I've worked along side for the past couple of years. This would be my two coworkers but one used to be in marketing and then decided to go build custom homes and the other was a librarian and housewife/mother. I've got almost 30 years in the IT field, whereas my two coworkers combined have less than a dozen. As such, I was hard-pressed to want to use them and the fact that I don't need anyone knowing I'm looking elsewhere.

So what does one do if he can't produce a professional reference for a job application? I think the department manager of the position I applied to wants to hire me but the HR head is wanting some professional references and I just don't have any. Do I just keep to opportunities that don't ask for any?"

First, I wouldn't let the fact of your coworkers not having as much IT experience as you deter you from using them as references. They can't address the intricacies of projects you worked on, but they can somewhat attest to your work ethic and character. The trick is they aren't, in the minds of the hiring manager, as subjective as personal friends would be. I can understand your reluctance, however, to let them know you're looking elsewhere for a job. Are there any vendors you've worked with in the course of your job? What about contractors with whom you interacted?

It's sad that HR's fears of making a bad hire — whether they be legal or financial — could be the cause of your losing out on this job. But it may be a fact of life.

When being overpaid and overqualified becomes a liability

By Toni Bowers

You would think if you were very qualified in your line of work and pulled down a great salary, that looking for another job would be easy. After all, those facts show that you're recognized and appreciated at your current company, so why wouldn't another company jump at the chance to hire you?

I recently received emails from two TechRepublic members that demonstrate this is not necessarily true. The first email said:

I am getting a salary which is higher than the industry standards.

However, the job is not giving me professional and personal satisfaction.

When I apply, the HR executive is the first person to call me. When he or she asks my current salary, that person states that the salary is higher than their standards. However, they promise to get back to me after asking their technical manager. Then they never get back to me. This is really putting me off.

How should I handle this? What should I tell the HR executive?

The second email:

For the second time in a matter of months, I've been told that I'm overqualified for a job that I applied to. I don't understand why being overqualified would be a problem. Don't companies want to get the most bang for their buck, i.e., the most qualified person for the salary they're offering?

It sucks, but the fact is candidates with high salaries and too many qualifications are often daunting to hiring managers. Hiring managers worry that if they hire an overqualified candidate, he or she will grow bored with the job or unhappy with the salary and will leave the company in a few months, leaving them to repeat the time and cost of the hiring process. In their minds, you're thinking of their job as simply a way station until you find something better.

Also, some hiring managers can feel threatened if your qualifications are on a par with or are better than theirs. They may think your first line of business would be to get their job.

So how do the well-compensated and over-qualified get their feet in the doors?

Be honest.

Particularly in your cover letter, where you'll be introducing yourself for the first time, you should be able to explain why you're seeking a job for which you seem to be overqualified. Mention how the position you're applying for aligns with your longer-term career goals, offers you more work-life balance, or offers you a chance to do work that is more meaningful than what you are currently doing.

If it's a money issue, explain that even though you are currently pulling down a salary higher than the one offered, you are not fulfilled by your job duties. Say that you will willingly give up some compensation to do something that makes you want to come to work everyday.

Make it clear you're not a threat to the boss's position.

A lot of managers shy away from hiring folks who may be more qualified than they are. In their minds, you could be gunning for their job. Make it clear in your cover letter and in an interview that you understand the parameters of the position being offered, and that you wouldn't step out of it unless you were called upon to do so by the manager.

How should one handle maternity leave on a resume?

By Toni Bowers

When I was expecting my son years ago, I worked for a smallish company that was in a growth period. I was very psychologically invested in the success of this company. During my maternity leave, a management position opened up (and was filled) without anyone letting me know. When I asked the guy who was over personnel at the time why I hadn't been told because I would have come back early to interview for the position, he replied, "If you suggested that, I would have told you your place was with your baby."

It was the first, brutal indication I had that some people drew a distinct line between gender roles at work when a maternity issue enters the picture. I was reminded of that conversation when I got an email this morning from a TechRepublic member who wonders whether she should include a reason for work history gap in her resume if that reason is having a baby. She wrote:

I understand it is illegal for potential employers to ask questions on my personal life, but at the same time, as a potential employee you should not leave career gaps in the CV.

If one took only few months off (of the 12 officially entitled to) and kept in touch, should that be brought up in the interview with potential employers? Or is that one's own choice and hence business?

Anyhow, I was wondering if you have any feedback from employers if they want to know of things like this and how that would influence their decisions.

I am a software architect working in a global company and will be taking 3 months maternity leave starting January 2010. As I always update my CV at the end of the year the question came to mind and I was just wondering how would one approach this.

The question comes down to which would be more detrimental: an unexplained gap in your work history or information that would let a prospective employer know that you have an infant at home. It's a shame that we even have to contemplate this, but it is what it is.

Sometimes it's the timing. I'll be honest, some people looking at your resume and seeing a recent maternity leave will make the assumption that, while coping through colic and midnight feedings, you may not be able to give your best at work. (Funny that they don't think the same thing about a man whose wife just had a baby.) But the bright side is, you probably won't be going on another maternity leave soon after the company hires you.

If the leave happened months before you apply for another job, then a prospective employer may not give it much thought at all.

You mention that you will be taking a maternity leave in January. If you plan to be employed by the same company when you do that, there really shouldn't be an "unexplained" gap. Even on maternity leave, you're still an employee. Just list your end date of employment as "...until present."

If your situation is otherwise, I would probably leave the gap unexplained on the resume. Chances are it won't be noticed. If it is, you can explain in the interview and hope for (and look for) the best.

Developer seeks resume advice about her portfolio and work gaps

By Justin James

Since [last month's reader Q&A post](#) received such positive feedback, I'm going to try to keep up this feature with monthly installments. And while I hope that no one needs resume advice right now, in case you do, this month's question will be of particular interest to you.

Reader's resume questions

Today's question comes from a reader who was in the middle of leaving one job to take another and had been struck with an illness. As a result, she ended up doing part-time contracting work for her original employer. Needless to say, going from "moving to a new job" to "part-time contracting to the previous employer" has left her in a bad spot that she is anxious to escape. What she is finding is that many of the companies she speaks to would like to see a portfolio of her work, yet they rarely check the URLs in her resume. She wants to know how to feature her previous work in a way that will be seen, as well as show her skill. She would also like to know how to handle the disruption in her work experience on her resume in a way that is honest but will not hurt her job prospects. Here's the resume advice I sent this reader.

Getting prospective employers to look at your portfolio

Regarding your portfolio, I suggest having a section at the end of your resume for it. Some people will click the links (or copy/paste them into a browser) and some won't, but the folks who want to see the portfolio will.

When I was looking for work in Web design, I made a Flash version of my portfolio; it had screenshots of sites I worked on (as well as "before" pictures when I could), quotes from my references, and hard numbers (when available) showing that my work made serious improvements.

For example, it would have a "before" and "after" screenshot of the site, a quote from the CEO along the lines of, "Justin made the difference on this project," and numbers such as, "unique visitors from organic search placement went up 54%, sales went from 2% of unique visitors to 5%, and total revenues from site increased 75%, with no changes in the marketing budget."

What really sealed the deal is that I made a complete package; a very nice CD case and nice CD labels. Then I brought the CD with me to the interviews. To make it easy, I set up the autorun on the CD to automatically play the Flash piece, so it really felt professional. This project took about 20 hours of my time, but the time investment paid for itself; not only did the content show off my work, it proved that hiring me would be a good decision, and it also showed that I could do decent graphics design as well. The CDs completely blew interviewers away and allowed me to quickly close a deal on a new job, jumping from a company that was sinking in the middle of the dot-com bust to a "safe haven."

I definitely suggest a similar approach. The great part about putting your portfolio on a CD is that you don't need to worry about the person getting annoyed with clicking links or typing in URLs. Also, the fact that you clearly put effort into it will make them feel obligated to at least give it a shot and impress them with your dedication and professionalism.

Caution: If you make this a half-effort (like writing on the CD with a Sharpie marker instead of a good CD label), you will hurt your chances more than you will help.

Handling employment gaps in your resume

About the employment gap, I follow a simple rule: be truthful. But 100% disclosure is not necessary. Here's my suggestion for how you should list your employment gap on the resume:

September 2003 - Present: Hart and Hart, Inc. - Web Developer

- ➔ Built applications with C#, SQL, JavaScript, and HTML
- ➔ Blah blah blah
- ➔ Blah blah blah
- ➔ Blah blah blah
- ➔ Originally employed in a permanent, full-time capacity, working as an independent contractor since September 2008.

I do the opposite on my resume. I have a few positions where I started as a contractor and then converted to a full-time company employee. It looks a lot better to show two years for the same employer than one year for the contracting firm and one year for the actual company. Remember, they don't care who signed your paycheck, they care what desk you sat in. So for me, I do something like:

September 2003 - October 2006: Hart and Hart, Inc. - Web Developer

- ➔ Originally a contractor through Foreman Associates, converted to permanent employee in March 2004.
- ➔ Built Web applications...
- ➔ Blah blah blah

See how that works? For the example I give for you, it minimizes the gap and shows that you are still working. Once you are at the interview, you can explain the situation more fully in a way that will be understood. The goal here is to get past what could be a problem on the resume to the interview where these things can be properly explained. Likewise, for my own resume, it is actually a very good sign to employers that you had been a contractor who converted to a full-time employee. It shows loyalty on your part and that you were of high quality.

I hope this information is helpful for you, and best of luck!

Download these resume resources from TechRepublic

- ➔ [10 tips for writing a job-winning developer resume](#)
- ➔ [Nineteen words that don't belong in your resume](#)
- ➔ [High impact resume for the experienced IT pro](#)
- ➔ [Edited resume with a clear message](#)

How to keep age out of your resume and cover letters

By Toni Bowers

A lot of older workers are finding themselves in the job market again having gone through layoffs. There is a way to make potential employers aware of the advantages borne of your experience without dwelling on the number of years you've been at it.

Embrace professional social networking sites

I've cautioned a lot of people about the pitfalls of being too involved in social networking sites, but these days it's almost essential that, as a job candidate, you have some kind of web presence. If you make it clear that you don't go for all that "trendy" stuff, then a prospective employer is going to wonder how open you will be to any new technologies that come down the pike in your day-to-day work. I didn't particularly like the social networking thing myself at first but I've grown fond of it. I just try not to post any sepia-toned photographs of myself slamming back beers with Abe Lincoln.

Choose your adjectives carefully

It's unfortunate, but to some people looking at your cover letter, the word "seasoned" could imply "world-weary." (I was going to say "overcooked" but that seemed a little gross.) "Seasoned" might indirectly imply that technology doesn't excite you and most employers want enthusiasm (at least initially, until they beat it out of you). Instead use words like "versatile" and "adaptable."

Limit your list of experience

I see a lot of resumes from people who feel the need to list every job they've ever had. (Not a good idea, and is precisely why I don't list that summer internship with Henry Ford.) You might think that a long, varied list of experience shows you're well-rounded, but really, it might imply an unconscious desire on your part to cling to the past. List only jobs going back about 15 years. Think about it: Technology changes so quickly that your intimate knowledge of the [Sinclair ZX80](#) isn't going to matter in today's tech job market. State your most up-to-date skills and remove any mention of obsolete technology.

Get a gmail account

If you want to be thought of as cutting edge, you might want to lose that earthlink url.

Good luck!

Should you be concerned with name discrimination on your resume?

By Toni Bowers

Discrimination because of surname is not a new practice. It's so common that members of some minorities have taken to changing theirs in order to improve their economic prospects. But discrimination doesn't stop with the last name. Here is a piece from CBSNews that talks about distinctive names and their effects on resumes: ['Black' Names A Resume Burden?](#).

A 2003 study from the National Bureau of Economic Research called ["Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination,"](#) demonstrated that a "white sounding" name on a résumé yielded as many callbacks as an additional eight years of experience, and that it yielded 50 percent more callbacks.

Studies have shown that recruiters and hiring managers — consciously or not — assess candidates on the basis of a name and that common names were best liked and most likely to be hired. Even more discouraging is that a hiring manager could have his or her own bad association with a name. If the first name on a resume is the same as that person's evil stepmother, there might be some psychology going on that would get that resume sent to the trash.

So what can be done? Not much about the psychology, unfortunately. But some talent management software-like Hazlet — offers users options for keeping candidate names hidden.

I suppose some candidates could use initials, but who knows if that would tick off some hiring manager because it comes across as pretentious?

Clearly, there are no easy answers. I'd like to hear from those of you who believe you have been discriminated against because of your name. Or maybe some hiring managers would like to chime in?

Inside the Hiring Manager's Mind

3

Hiring managers are not going to connect the dots for you

By Toni Bowers

If there is one thing I've learned from being married for many, many, many years, it's that you can never expect another person to know what you're thinking unless you tell them. Thoughts do not float out of your brain and then magically absorb into the gray matter of another person.

And if those closest to you can't read your mind, then you can be certain someone looking at your resume won't be able to. In fact, unlike your loved ones, he or she won't even try. That's why you have to take pains to make the purpose of your resume obvious and match it to the position you're applying for instead of using a generic resume for all job openings.

For example, if you're applying for a project management position but you don't list your PM experience until somewhere in the middle of your resume, then you can't expect a busy hiring manager to slog through a list of your help desk experience until he finds something that is relevant to the job he's offering.

You may have a deep history in IT and are responsible for almost everything IT-related in your company. However, stating first in your resume that you were in charge of reducing security risk for company data does not speak directly to project management (unless you specifically managed a roll-out of a security tool).

It's also great if, for example, you have experience training people in Microsoft Windows 7 or a Cisco curriculum, but that does not directly speak to an ability to manage project teams and stakeholders. If you think it does speak to it that in some way, then spell out why. Don't expect a harried hiring manager to connect the dots for you.

You may need to use a non-chronological format to do this, but you should begin with any migrations, site upgrades, accounting systems, or anything else that you planned and managed the process for. Then you can follow up with all the incidental education and experience you have that makes you an even better job candidate.

Resume pet peeves you may not know about

By Toni Bowers

We all know about the more common pet peeves recruiters have with resumes — poor grammar, misspellings — but here are a couple more that you may not have thought of. These came from a survey of technical recruiters and hiring managers on about.com.

- ➔ Writing the resume or cover letter in the third person. I have actually never even thought anyone would do this, but apparently it's common enough to become a pet peeve. And it's also kind of creepy.
- ➔ Using tiny fonts. A lot of people just can't stand the thought of a one- or two-page resume, which is the recommended length, so they employ a microscopic font so they can still mention every technology they've ever laid a hand on. If a recruiter has to employ a magnifying glass to read your resume, you're already losing points.
- ➔ Listing references but not professional ones. We know your brother-in-law thinks the world of you, but unless he's Bill Gates, it really doesn't carry a lot of weight for a recruiter.
- ➔ Attaching a resume with an obscure, significant-only-to-you name. Naming *your* resume named with the current date is not smart. Give it your name.
- ➔ Writing the resume using table formats (columns). Think in terms of what will be most accessible to the recruiter.
- ➔ Making the resume too long. Okay, this one isn't new to readers of this blog, but I thought I'd mention that it came up in the survey just to reinforce my advice. I can't say it any clearer—a recruiter only needs to see the skills you have that fit the job. He or she is not interested in the evolution of your technical development. You can mention that in the interview.

Why keyword-scanning tools are used on resumes: A recruiter's perspective

By Tim Heard

*Toni Bowers: Recruiter **Tim Heard** wanted to respond to my blog about the misuse of keyword scanning technology. Here is his response.*

One of the things I really like about being about to write for TechRepublic is that it gives me the opportunity to peel back the curtain from time to time and give job seekers a peek at what happens on the inside of companies with respect to the screening and hiring process. So, I was very appreciative when Toni agreed to let me offer a differing perspective on her article, "[Why you may be cheating your company when you use keyword scanning apps.](#)"

Without rehashing much of what I said in "[Perception and Reality in Today's Job Market](#)," I'll start by saying that all the recruiters I have ever known have cared about doing their jobs well. First, they get to know the hiring managers, who often are overworked and understaffed. They know that it's important to get people on board who can contribute to the team and who can be relied on to do a good job. Second, they often get to know the candidates too throughout the hiring process.

I got an email just yesterday from the first person I ever placed as a consultant. That was over ten years ago. I think his assignment maybe lasted six months, but we have stayed in touch since then. He's now a manager and was asking advice regarding how he could prepare himself to grow into positions of greater responsibility in the coming years. Interestingly, his boss back then, my first client, became someone I recruited for a BI leadership role just a couple of years ago when I was working as a contract recruiter for a large corporation. (He owned his own consulting company at the time when we first met.)

I can remember lots of stories (and have forgotten far more) of recruiters telling me how glad they were that so-and-so got hired, because of how badly that person needed a job. Or taking pride in how well someone was working out.

Is it true that all recruiters, or that even the good ones become best friends with all the candidates that they meet? Of course not. There aren't enough hours in the day, and most people have only so much emotional energy to invest. I'm starting with this assumption though, because you don't have to look far to find reader comments who believe that all recruiters are uncaring idiots, or that companies don't care about hiring good people. (Yes, I agree that some don't agree that some companies have [commoditized people](#) - especially contractors - and we can discuss that at length in another blog article.)

Why keyword search tools are helpful

Let's look at an example of an average recruiter, working for a fairly large corporation. Let's assume it's large enough that they are able to post positions on their website, and have a reasonably good applicant tracking system on the back end. Let's assume that the recruiter has 25 open positions to fill and each open position received several hundred online applications. (I have seen some positions receive over 500 applicants in a matter of just a few days.) If that recruiter spent just one minute skimming through every resume submitted, with no breaks for anything else...lets assume an average of 200 applicants per job...it would take 5000 minutes, or over 83 hours, just to skim through the resumes.

#1 Eliminating the 90%

I just got off the phone with DK Burnaby, a senior recruiter with [Concur](#). He agreed with my basic premise. (I almost said, “He concurred,” but thought that would be lame, so I didn’t.)

The issue, from his perspective is one of prioritization. That is, you want to focus most of your time on the candidates that are most likely to be a fit.

The average recruiter, he said, probably is working on anywhere from 15 to 50 open requisitions (positions) at the same time. When you take out meetings, phone calls, interviews, extending offers, and all the other things that take up a recruiter’s time, he or she may only have as little as 30 minutes per opening to spend screening candidates. Sticking with the one minute per resume assumption (though it often takes much longer) the recruiter could screen 30 resumes. If she found two she liked and contacted them out of the 30, they might be good candidates, but they might not be the “best” candidates, because there would be 170 that didn’t get looked at.

DK primarily does technical recruiting. In his opinion, about 99 percent of the positions he supports benefit from using key word searches to help narrow the field. “Even for sales positions,” he added, “there are generally some key words or phrases” that can be used to help narrow the field to “most likely” prospects for the position. In addition to key word searches, he often uses pre-screening questionnaires to further narrow the field. All of this is so that he can then spend more time reviewing the most likely prospects.

My personal experience is that, at best, the most likely candidates make up maybe ten percent of the applicants for any given position. Many are not even remotely qualified. When a corporate recruiter who’s using a reasonably good system pulls up an applicant, she can see the applicant’s entire history. Often, I’d see candidates who applied for every single position that a company had posted, with no regard to what the position requirements were. Also, it isn’t unusual at all to post things like “local candidates only” or “must be able to work in the U.S. without sponsorship” and get a huge influx of resumes from Hyderabad, Moscow, and East Timor. I can remember posting a temporary, entry level customer service position a number of years ago that happened to require someone who could speak Spanish. In the ad, surrounded by stars, I said something like, “This is ONLY a temp position and the client will ONLY consider local candidates.” It didn’t matter, candidates from all over the world zeroed in on the word “Spanish” and sent me their resumes. My point is, that I don’t want to spend my time on the 90% who aren’t remotely qualified. Key word searches are one of several tools a recruiter can use to narrow the field.

#2 Tools help less experienced recruiters

I don’t remember exactly what the situation was, but when I was still fairly new to technical recruiting, I had an opening for a Java developer that also required some sort of specific technical experience. I came across a guy who I thought looked promising, but was concerned because he didn’t seem to have the specific word listed on his resume that I was looking for. When I spoke with him, I expressed concern that he might not be a good fit, because he didn’t have that specific type of experience.

Apparently, he had dealt with a lot of similar recruiters in the past, who maybe were good at key word searches, but lacked a broader understanding of the positions they were filling. It happens. Even experienced recruiters find themselves venturing into water that’s over their heads from time to time. Anyway, he unleashed on me, and let me know

his opinion of recruiters in general (which wasn't good) and essentially said that if I had any brains, I'd understand that he DID have the experience I was looking for, but not listed in the way I was looking for it.

I apologized, and ended up forwarding his resume to the manager, even offering the manager a discount on the placement fee for that individual if he hired him, because I had underestimated his qualifications to begin with. The manager ended up interviewing him, but not extending an offer. It was a good learning experience for me though, and I was able to redeem myself in the eyes of the developer, as well as scoring some points with the hiring manager.

The thing is, there are tools that would have actually helped me identify that the candidate was a likely fit. I can remember working with a company quite some time ago that didn't yet have an [applicant tracking system](#). That is, they were receiving all resumes by mail or fax, or else people could walk in and fill out applications. All logging and filing of resumes was done manually, which was a nightmare. I started doing some research, and hit on a product at the time that was the gold standard of applicant tracking systems. They had compiled a database of every skill known to man, and all the various ways that the skill might be listed. So, if I searched for ERP experience, it was bright enough to also flag anyone with any of the various ERP solutions listed on their resumes, taking into consideration the variety of ways many of them might be listed.

That was over 10 years ago. There have been a lot of advances in the industry since then. A good candidate management system can take a job description and create a profile of what the recruiter is looking for, then find candidates who generally match the profile. That is, a system can differentiate between someone who leans more toward user interface development work, as opposed to someone who really is better at working on the back end and has really solid database skills. They do more than look for a key word. They can look at the total picture. (Admittedly some do this well. Others don't.) The point though is that if the recruiter only knows to look for the acronym "ERP" because the job description says, "ERP experience required" the system can probably help, and also can probably differentiate between users, implementation team leads, developers, and so on.

Word searches don't make hiring decisions

Some time back in my history, I had a boss who was feeling some pressure to get a particular position filled that I was working on. He got online and found a bunch of resumes that listed a particular skill and emailed them to me with the instructions, "Call these people."

Let's pretend the skill was Dataflex programming. (It wasn't. I just don't want to put a date on the search and then reflect back to *which* of my many previous bosses did this.) As I looked at the resumes, most listed Dataflex under education, or in statements like, "Some day I'd like to learn Dataflex." None were even remotely qualified for the opening I was working on, and it seemed unlikely that they even knew someone who was qualified. My chances of networking with them to connect with someone who was qualified were about the same as opening the phone book and calling random numbers.

My point is that someone has got to read and discern what the applicant has written. That's generally left to the recruiter as the first person who slogs his or her way through hundreds of resumes or more in order to find some worth screening. Ultimately though, there's always a hiring manager, who is an expert on what he or she needs, who is going to pass judgment on the job the recruiter has done of turning up good candidates. Let's face it, if the recruiter isn't turning up qualified people, the recruiter will be out of a job soon enough.

So, why not game the system then?

I see a lot of variants of this posted by disgruntled job seekers: “OK, so what I’ll do is just list every key word under the sun on my resume, and then I’ll get lots of calls.”

That’s possibly true. Of course, the people who are calling will most likely be idiots. Because if you have [every skill under the sun](#) listed, you’re misrepresenting yourself and they should be able to see that. Furthermore, most of the calls you get will be a waste of your time, because they will be likely keyed in on some skill you listed that probably isn’t even one of your strengths, or something you enjoy. “Yes sir. Thanks for calling, but it was 15 years ago when I programmed in COBOL, and I’m not interested in moving to India.”

I used to regularly get emails from a candidate who was a master of gaming the system. Not only was his resume packed full of key words, he had his own website, also packed with key words, and had developed a resume blasting tool that he used to regularly spam countless recruiters and hiring managers. While I gave him an A for being creative and persistent, ultimately I ended up blocking his emails because I had interacted with him enough that I knew what his skills really were, and knew where to find him if I needed those skills. (I hate being spammed. I have come very close to blocking emails from a close relative who can’t seem to resist forwarding every email to me that says “send this to 10 people you love,” that Apple is giving away iPads, or that there’s a bill going through Congress that would make owning an Afghan Hound illegal because it’s unpatriotic.)

If you’re qualified, these tools are your friend

This isn’t rocket science. Good recruiters know that not everyone lists every single thing they know on their resume. They also understand that there are a lot of variations with respect to how a skill might be listed. For the ones that don’t yet know this, various search tools can be a big help.

You can definitely make it easier for recruiters to find you by providing a few details about yourself. If you are applying for a technical position, having a technical skills summary near the top of your resume is a good idea. Here’s a [pretty good article](#) on the subject, and here’s a [pretty good example](#) for developers. I gravitate more toward the bulleted approach like those in the article with skills listed out to the right, rather than long columns of skills:

- ➔ Languages:
- ➔ Databases:
- ➔ Operating Systems:
- ➔ Software:

This approach takes up less space, and is easier for hiring managers to read. I think the examples provided in the article may be a bit over the top but wouldn’t fault anyone for listing so much.

If you want to include a keyword section, that’s fine. Rather than list everything under the sun, focus on variations of what you consider to be your strengths, as well as skills that may set you apart from the rest of the pack. Put it at the end of your resume, and call it something creative like, “Keyword List.” Here’s another tip. If you are concerned about appearance, change the font color in the key word section to white. It’s still text, and search engines will still find the keywords. If you list a skill though, be prepared to justify to someone at some point in the interview process why you listed it, especially if it happens to be the key skill that’s required for the job.

Again, as a recruiter, I want to spend as much time as possible reading your resume rather than the resume of the person who majored in art history, sold farm equipment for the last ten years, and now wants to apply for mobile device testing position I'm trying to fill. I would rather actually even have time to call you on the phone and get to know something about you beyond what's on paper, than individually reading the resumes of all the people who indiscriminately blast resumes out for every position they see posted on the Internet.

After all, to paraphrase a really great editor I know, finding the right person for a job is about much more than just matching key words.

Most unusual resume mistakes

By Toni Bowers

With 13.9 million Americans seeking work, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, grabbing an employer's attention quickly and leaving a positive impression is critical. According to a recent CareerBuilder study, nearly half of human resource managers said they spend, on average, less than one minute reviewing an application. The survey, which was conducted by Harris Interactive© from May 19 to June 8, 2011, included more than 2,600 employers nationwide.

When asked to recall the most memorable or unusual resumes, human resource managers and hiring managers shared the following:

- 1) Candidate said the more you paid him, the harder he worked.
- 2) Candidate was fired from different jobs, but included each one as a reference.
- 3) Candidate said he just wanted an opportunity to show off his new tie.
- 4) Candidate listed her dog as a reference.
- 5) Candidate listed the ability to do the moonwalk as a special skill.
- 6) Candidates - a husband and wife looking to job share - submitted a co-written poem.
- 7) Candidate included "versatile toes" as a selling point.
- 8) Candidate said that he would be a "good asset to the company," but failed to include the "et" in the word "asset."
- 9) Candidate's email address on the resume had "shakinmybootie" in it.
- 10) Candidate included that she survived a bite from a deadly aquatic animal.
- 11) Candidate used first name only.
- 12) Candidate asked, "Would you pass up an opportunity to hire someone like this? I think not."
- 13) Candidate insisted that the company pay him to interview with them because his time was valuable.
- 14) Candidate shipped a lemon with résumé, stating, "I am not a lemon."
- 15) Candidate included that he was arrested for assaulting his previous boss.

What are some of the weirdest things you've seen on resumes?

CareerBuilder survey reveals more goofy resume blunders

By Toni Bowers

[CareerBuilder](#) surveyed 2,500 employers between May 18 and June 3, 2010 and here are some of the results:

- ➔ Forty-eight percent of human resource managers surveyed reported they typically review 25 applications or less for open positions.
- ➔ Thirty-eight percent said, on average, they spend less than a minute reviewing a resume; 18 percent spend less than 30 seconds.

Because of stats like these, managers have almost developed a shorthand reading process that lets them cull exactly the information that is relevant and applicable from resumes they receive. And it's an unfortunate phenomenon that resume mistakes and weirdness just jump out at them.

Most of the managers in the survey said they pay more attention to resumes that are tailored for the position they're offering. That means they can spot fairly quickly the generic, one-size-fits-all resume and they don't respond favorably to it. This means if a job description asks for experience in network administration, you should lead with that experience, even if it's not a huge part of your job or actually occurred at a previous job and not the one you're in now.

The survey also revealed some more goofy blunders that the hiring managers have seen in resumes. Some of them are hard to believe but you never know—someone might benefit from seeing them. They are:

- ➔ Candidate put God down as a reference (no phone number).
- ➔ Candidate listed her hobby as alligator watching.
- ➔ Candidate claimed to be a direct descendant of the Vikings.
- ➔ Candidate's email address had "lovesbeer" in it.
- ➔ Candidate listed "Master of Time and Universe" under his experience.
- ➔ Candidate started off the application with "Do you want a tiger?"
- ➔ Candidate specifically pointed out that he was not a gypsy.
- ➔ Candidate's condition for accepting the position was being allowed to bring his pet monkey to the workplace.
- ➔ Candidate pointed out, "I'll have your job in five years."
- ➔ Candidate sent a 24-page resume for a 5-year career.
- ➔ Candidate put a picture of her cat on top of her resume.
- ➔ Candidate declared himself the LeBron James of table games.
- ➔ Candidate sent a video trying to hypnotize the HR manager into hiring him.

CareerBuilder offers professional resume writing services for every job level at www.cbResume.com.

10 ways in which recruiters annoy candidates

By Roger Emmens

The relationship between job seekers and the agencies who undertake to find candidates for roles for their clients is frequently a fraught one. The agency is paid by the client, and that's where their focus remains, and so they have the dominant position in the relationship with the job seeker. The candidate is their means of earning commission, but all too often is not treated as a supplier or partner, but as a necessary evil. There are many recruiters who act responsibly and ethically towards their candidates, but regrettably there are more - and it seems to be a growing percentage - who treat candidates poorly. These are some of the ways.

1. Keeping the candidate in the dark

The candidate is only informed if there is positive news - requests for more details of the candidate, requests for interview, and of course any job offers. If the candidate has been turned down, or not short-listed, then he or she will only find out by contacting the agency for information - if of course they can get hold of a responsible adult. If there is no news, then how many agencies will contact you to explain the situation, to advise what actions they are taking and what they consider the implications of no progress to be? The rule seems to be: if you are on the client's radar, the agency is all over you; as soon as the client's interest wanes, you are dropped faster than a toddler's ice cream.

2. Not returning calls

When you try to contact the agent for information, they are often unavailable - not unreasonable, as they spend a lot of time on the phone or with the client. However, if you leave a message requesting an update, why do so few agents return your call?

3. Not notifying unsuccessful candidacy

Mostly, unless you are shortlisted by the agency, an application goes into a black hole. There is often an automated response that "we have received your application", then that's the last you hear. It isn't rocket science or huge effort overheads to enable standard "sorry, not this time" emails to be sent to unsuccessful candidates. That way we don't have to waste time and effort trying to contact the agent to find out if anything is happening.

4. Not providing feedback on unsuccessful interviews

When you attend a client interview, and it hasn't had a successful outcome, then you want to know why - so you can learn from the experience and do better next time. Most agents have no real idea - they don't ask the client (it's not of interest), and some may even try to make up a reason, but you can usually tell if it's their assumption rather than hard feedback. Wouldn't it be nice to know?

5. Posting job specs that are unclear

I just spent a couple of hours on two applications where the job posting sounded like a perfect fit for my background, which is services, products, and software. When I got to speak to the agent it became clear in both cases that hardware development experience was essential. Nowhere did the job description mention this. These applications were thus a complete waste of my time, and made me wonder if there was a way to waste theirs in return.

6. Misrepresenting opportunities

It seems that virtually all candidates - myself included - have experienced agencies who engage in dubious practices, such as advertising jobs that don't exist, and initiating candidate searches for positions which the client has not yet confirmed and does not have signed off. I am now hesitant about applying for jobs advertised online unless I can speak to the agent, as not only do they frequently go nowhere, but all too often it is not even possible to follow up with the agent.

7. Basing contract fee rates on pro-rata permanent salaries

There seems to be an increasing trend for contract opportunities to be offered at "pro rata permanent salaries", which is a nice way for the employer to obtain temporary staff without any overhead costs (National Insurance, tax, holidays, pension and so on), which the contractor must then fund out of their fees, as well as funding the gap between contracts, meeting limited company costs and the necessary accountant's fees, and so on. I was approached recently by an agency for a short term project management role, demanding significant experience, at a day rate well below what I'd expect net of tax as a salary. Clearly the agent was failing to challenge their client as to the wisdom of the fee rate being offered.

8. Acting as curators of CV museums

The large Interim Management agencies claim thousands of interims are "on their books." In fact, they only actually provide opportunities to a core few hundred favored candidates, and the remainder will never hear anything: the vast majority of potential candidates are just there to inflate the size of their CV pool so that clients will be impressed. I keep in touch with a couple of the leading IM agencies, not because I expect any opportunities, but because I'm interested to see if they ever contact me.

9. Sending you details of jobs you aren't qualified for

I register with some agencies for email alerts of new job postings, and I get some calls from agents who find my CV on job boards. It is clear that some agencies are better than others at keyword searches, and even when I get called by recruiters, they sometimes seem not even to have read my CV before contacting me. My best example to date was a request for applications from airline captains with experience of 747-400s and fluent Russian. My background is systems implementation project management, and my only Russian is "da" and "nyet".

10. Being unsympathetic

I regret that some recruiters I've spoken to over the years have been somewhat abrupt in their manner. I've known some who were distinctly lacking in social skills - a bit strange for a people career - and those who can't wait to get you off the phone and aren't prepared to hide it. Worst of all in some ways are the ones who at the start of the conversation say, "How are you?" and clearly couldn't care less what you answer. I regret to say men are generally worse than women in this regard, but not always. Come on guys, be nice, it costs nothing, takes no time, and people do respond more positively as a result.

These kinds of treatment by agencies are very short sighted on their behalf - whether I undertake a contract as an interim manager or as a permanent member of staff, I frequently need to recruit other staff to resource the program I am working on. Naturally I will favor those agencies I consider have treated me responsibly and fairly. Those who

have been cavalier, I avoid giving further business to. Like many interim or permanent managers, I now maintain a list of both individuals and agencies whom I trust or abhor, and act accordingly. Indeed, there are now 'consumer rating' websites to share experiences and score agencies. Recruiters, beware...

Cover Letters

4

The purpose of a cover letter

By Toni Bowers

Every time I mention what to include in a cover letter in this blog, some people scoff. Cover letter, they say, “I spit on your cover letter!”

But the truth is you have to have some way of introducing yourself that doesn’t include bullet points. Even online programs that let you upload your resume offer a comment section for this. Whether it’s a formal Word doc attachment or a couple of paragraphs in an online field, this is where you deliver your core message.

Think of it as being at a meet-and-greet where you are introducing yourself to a stranger. You wouldn’t say, “Hi my name is Tom. From 1998-2005, I worked at XYZ industry. My responsibilities included the following...” (You might do that, but expect your listener to fall into a deep coma while you do so.)

Your cover letter or Comment section is the written form of an “elevator speech.” I found a piece by Chris King called, “[How to craft an effective elevator speech](#)” that says to start crafting it by determining your niche market. Identify problem(s) that you can help solve and come up with a solution that is the outcome. What makes you unique? What short story illustrates a successful outcome that you have produced?

Keep the pitch/comment/cover letter relatively short but to the point.

Here are some more tips:

- ➔ **Don’t repeat your resume word for word.** Use the cover the letter to tell a compelling story about your accomplishments.
- ➔ **Reference the job title.** The person reading your letter might be looking at hundreds of letters for dozens of different jobs. Mention the specific job you’re applying for and make sure all the content in your letter supports how you will meet the employer’s specific needs.
- ➔ **Customize.** You should try to customize your resume with each job you’re applying for. But if jobs are close enough in description where you can use the same resume, then you should definitely customize the cover letter.
- ➔ **End your cover letter with an active statement.** Instead of asking readers to call you, say you will follow up with them in a few days to answer any preliminary questions they may have.

Tried and true tips for writing an effective cover letter

By Toni Bowers

Some recruiters are so pushed for time that they won't even get to your resume. Some will scan your cover letter (or the text of the introductory email in which you include your resume) to see if you're worthy of an interview. That's why it's important to make sure your cover letter is presenting you in the best possible way. Here are some tips:

Determine what the employer is looking for and meet that need. Read the job description carefully and address all the requirements of the job in your application. This is why it's important to customize a cover letter for each job you're applying for. If a job description says the ideal candidate will have experience in programming web pages, then it's really not necessary, nor applicable, to mention your two years as a support pro.

Keep your cover letter short and to the point. It really is good that you have a world of experience over a number of years. But you know what it comes down to? The recruiter's time and attention span. He or she is looking only to fill a need and the easier the information can be discerned, the better.

Don't repeat the contents of your resume. Think of the cover letter/introductory email as a synopsis of your work history and a brief introduction to you as a person. Leave out the specifics of work dates and software versions.

Try to remain positive. It's okay to briefly mention that you were downsized at your last company. But don't get maudlin or negative about it: "After 24 years with this company I was unceremoniously let go." It may be true, but the recruiter is not interested in being a therapist. A positive tone also indicates professionalism.

Write in clear and accessible terms. Again, time is of the essence for a recruiter. The easier it is for the recruiter to understand what you're trying to say, the better your chances.

Write your cover letter, let it sit for a few hours, and then reread it. You'll be surprised at what a fresh look will show you. If you have someone else who can read it as well, that is a good idea.

Proofread. I've heard from a lot of recruiters who say they will toss a cover letter and resume in the trash if there is a typo.

Clarifying one difference between the cover letter and the resume

By Toni Bowers

A TechRepublic member emailed me last week after I posted [a piece on cover letters](#), asking if I would elaborate on one of my points: how a cover letter should not just repeat what's in your resume.

Put yourself in the place of a recruiter. You wouldn't want to read the same information in two different documents in trying to gauge the viability of a job candidate. You don't want the recruiters to have to make the connection between your skill and what the job calls for. Not that they're too dumb to do that on their own but because they're time is limited.

The best way to avoid repeating the information verbatim is to think of the cover letter as an introduction to the resume. Your cover letter should read like a book jacket cover. It should give the reader a taste of what's to come and encourage that person to open your resume and read it as well. It should highlight the aspects of your resume that are relevant to the position.

As I said, a cover letter is the place to tie in your skills with the job at hand. You can list your skills in the resume but the cover letter should take the extra step of showing the recruiter precisely how those skills will apply to the open position.

So let's say you're applying for an IT management position. Your resume includes the following as part of your technical experience (and happens to be what most closely matches what is asked for in the job description):

- ➔ Built a network operations team
- ➔ Designed a high level, all encompassing disaster recovery/business resumption plan

Your cover letter will expound on these accomplishments:

"In my last job, I was tasked with building a network operations team that was responsible for the internal infrastructure along with implementing new technologies within the organization. This process required that I hire and train people in all aspects of IT and build a cohesive team, which is something you stressed in your job description.

I am also familiar with designing and rolling out disaster recovery plans. My team designed our company's plan and assured that maximum data loss not exceed one day."

Hope this helps in understanding why you shouldn't repeat information verbatim from your resume in your cover letter!

Avoid these three common cover letter mistakes

By Toni Bowers

Generally, all resume and cover letter mistakes arise from the fact that [job seekers](#) don't put themselves in the shoes of the person hiring for a job. The best way to [create a good cover letter](#) is to imagine what kind of information you'd like to see if you were the one sifting through a bunch of job applications.

I won't talk about the obvious things to avoid, like [typos](#) or [grammatical errors](#). Everyone should know by now that a sloppy resume or cover letter will not reflect well on you. These are more things people automatically do without thinking when composing their cover letters:

Not mentioning the specific job you're applying for

"I would like to apply for the position for which you advertised..." Yes, that actually happens. If someone is filling several positions, he or she is probably not going to take the time to browse through your resume to figure out which position you're referring to in the cover letter.

Using a form letter

If you think you can use the same spiel to introduce yourself to every company you apply to, you're missing out. Your cover letter should mention specific aspects or attributes of the company and why you think you would be a good fit for it.

Repeating the information in your resume

The cover letter is actually the place where you want to let some of your personality show through. The hiring manager has your credentials in your resume. The cover letter is the place to show where your accomplishments will translate to the job being offered.