

How to Construct a Dynamite Resume

By Bill Radin

In a perfect world, no one would need a resume.

The candidates most suited to a particular job would simply be summoned forth to interview, based on their reputation and word of mouth referral.

Employers would carefully make their hiring decisions based on the candidates' verbal account of their past performance, without regard to any kind of written documentation.

And companies would grow and prosper, having selected only the best and brightest from a large pool of qualified talent.

Right. And now the reality:

- Employers are so inundated with resumes, it often takes weeks, or even months to sort through them all to identify the candidates they deem qualified.
- Despite the administrative headaches and delays caused by processing resumes, companies rely heavily on the resumes they receive to screen for potential candidates.
- Given the choice of two candidates of equal ability, hiring managers will always prefer to interview the one with the most artfully constructed and attractive resume.
- For that reason, candidates with superb qualifications are often overlooked. And companies end up hiring from a more shallow pool of talent; a pool made up of those candidates whose experience is represented by powerfully written, visually appealing resumes.

Of course, many of the best candidates also have the best resumes; and sometimes, highly qualified candidates manage to surface through word-of-mouth referral. In fact, the referral method is the one I use to present talented people to my client companies.

But unless you can afford to rely on your "reputation," or on the recommendation of a barracuda recruiter, you'll need more than the right qualifications to get the job you want -- you'll need a dynamite resume.

In today's competitive employment market, your resume has to stand out in order to get the attention of the decision maker and create a strong impression. And later on, when you meet the prospective employer face to face, a strong resume will act as a valuable tool during the interviewing process.

Truth in Advertising

In addition to providing a factual representation of your background, your resume serves as an advertisement of your availability.

Although there's no federal regulatory agency like the FDA or FCC to act as a watchdog, I consider it to be ethical common sense to honestly and clearly document your credentials. In other words, don't make exaggerated claims about your past.

The best way to prepare a dynamite resume is not to change the facts -- just make them more presentable. This can be accomplished in two ways: [1] by strengthening the content of your resume; and [2] by enhancing its appearance.

Remember, your resume is written for the employer, not for you. Its main purpose, once in the hands of the reader, is to answer the following questions: How do you present yourself to others? What have you done in the past? And what are you likely to accomplish in the future?

Ten Keys to a Dynamite Resume

To help you construct a better, more powerful resume, here are ten overall considerations in regard to your résumé's content and presentation:

1. Position title and job description. Provide your title, plus a detailed explanation of your daily activities and measurable results. Since job titles are often misleading or their function may vary

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from one company to another, your resume should tell the reader exactly what you've done. (Titles such as account manager, business analyst, and internal consultant are especially vague.)

2. Clarity of dates and place. Document your work history accurately. Don't leave the reader guessing where you were employed, or for how long. If you've had overlapping jobs, find a way to pull them apart on paper, or eliminate mentioning one, to avoid confusion.
3. Detail. Specify some of the more technical, or involved aspects of your past work or education. Have you performed tasks of any complexity, or significance? If so, don't be shy; give a one or two sentence description.
4. Proportion. Give appropriate attention to jobs or educational credentials according to their length, or importance to the reader. For example, if you wish to be considered for a position at a bank, don't write one paragraph describing your current job as a loan officer, followed by three paragraphs about your high school summer job as a lifeguard.
5. Relevancy. Confine your curriculum vitae to that which is job-related or clearly demonstrates a pattern of success. For example, nobody really cares that your hobby is spear fishing, or that you weigh 137 pounds, or that you belong to an activist youth group. Concentrate on the subject matter that addresses the needs of the employer.
6. Explicitness. Leave nothing to the imagination. Don't assume the resume reader knows, for example, that the University of Indiana you attended is in western Pennsylvania, or that an "M.M." is a Master of Music degree, or that your current employer, U.S. Computer Systems, Inc., supplies the fast-food industry with order-taker headsets.
7. Length. Fill up only a page or two. If you write more than two pages, it sends a signal to the reader that you can't organize your thoughts, or you're trying too hard to make a good impression. If your content is strong, you won't need more than two pages.
8. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Create an error-free document that is representative of an educated person. If you're unsure about the correctness of your writing (or if English is your second language), consult a professional writer or copy editor. At the very least, use a spell-check program if you have access to a word processor, and always proofread what you've written.
9. Readability. Organize your thoughts in a clear, concise manner. Avoid writing in a style that's either fragmented or long-winded. No resume ever won a Nobel Prize for literature; however, an unreadable resume will virtually assure you of starting at the back of the line.
10. Overall appearance and presentation. Select the proper visual format, type style, and stationery. Resume readers have become used to a customary and predictable format. If you deviate too much, or your resume takes too much effort to read, it'll probably end up in the trash, even if you have a terrific background.

Resume writing can be tricky, especially if you haven't done it before. I suggest you write several drafts, and allow yourself the time to proofread for errors and ruminate over what you've written. Practice, after all, makes perfect. If you have a professional associate whose opinion you trust, by all means, listen to what he or she has to say. A simple critique can save you a great deal of time and money.

I worked with a candidate recently who had the most beautifully written resume I've ever seen. When I asked him about it, he said that he sharpened his skills by writing and rewriting his wife's resume. After he got the hang of it, he worked on his own -- and kept revising it on a monthly basis.

Building a Stronger Case

To get the most mileage out of your resume, you'll want to emphasize certain aspects of your background. By doing so, you'll present your qualifications in the most favorable light, and help give the employer a better understanding of your potential value to his or her organization.

You can build a stronger case for your candidacy, by highlighting the following areas of interest:

- Professional achievements of particular interest to your reader. For example, if you're in sales, the first thing a hiring manager will want to know is your sales volume, and how it ranks with your peers. If you've won awards, or reached goals, let the employer know. If you're in management, let the reader know the number of people you supervise, and what their titles are.

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- Educational accomplishments. List your degree(s) and/or relevant course work, thesis or dissertation, or specialized training. Be sure to mention any special honors, scholarships, or awards you may have received, such as Dean's List, Cum Laude, or Phi Beta Kappa.
- Additional areas of competency. These might include computer software fluency, dollar amount of monthly raw materials purchased, or specialized training.
- Professional designations that carry weight in your field. If you're licensed or certified in your chosen profession (CPA, CPM, or PE, for example), or belong to a trade organization (such as ASTD or ASQC), by all means let the reader know.
- Success indicators. You should definitely include anything in your past that might distinguish you as a leader or achiever. Milestones such as Eagle Scout, college class president, scholarship recipient, or valedictorian will help employers identify you as a potential winner. If you worked full time to put yourself through school, you should consider that experience a success indicator, and mention it on your resume.
- Related experience. Anything that would be relevant to your prospective employer's needs. For example, if your occupation requires overseas travel or communication, list your knowledge of foreign languages. If you worked as a co-op student in college, especially in the industry you're currently in, let the reader know.
- Military history. If you served in the armed forces, describe your length of service, branch of service, rank, special training, medals, and discharge and/or reserve status. Employers generally react favorably to military service experience.
- Security clearances. Some industries place a premium on clearances when it comes to getting hired or being promoted. If you're targeting an industry such as aerospace or defense, give your current and/or highest clearable status, and whether you've been specially checked by an investigative agency.
- Citizenship. This should be mentioned if your industry requires it. Dual citizenship should also be mentioned, especially if you think you may be working in a foreign country.

In a competitive market, employers are always on the lookout for traits that distinguish one candidate from another. Not long ago, I worked with an engineering manager who mentioned the fact that he was a three-time APBA national powerboat champion on his resume. It came as no surprise that several employers warmed up to his resume immediately, and wanted to interview him.

Resume Objectives

Most employers find that a carefully worded statement of purpose will help them quickly evaluate your suitability for a given position. An objective statement can be particularly useful as a quick-screen device when viewed by a manager responsible for staffing several types of positions. ("Let's see; accountants in this pile, programmers in that pile, plant managers in that pile...")

While a stated objective gives you the advantage of targeting your employment goals, it can also work against you. A hiring manager lacking in imagination or who's hard pressed for time will often overlook a resume with an objective that doesn't conform to the exact specifications of a position opening. That means that if your objective reads "Vice President position with a progressive, growth-oriented company," you may limit your options and not be considered for the job of regional manager for a struggling company in a mature market -- a job you may enjoy and be well suited to.

If you're pretty sure of the exact position you want in the field or industry you're interested in, then state it in your objective. Otherwise, broaden your objective or leave it off the resume.

Summary or Chronological?

Your resume can be arranged in one of two basic formats: summary or chronological.

1. The summary (or functional) resume distills your total work experience into major areas of expertise, and focuses the reader's attention on your accumulated skills.

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2. The chronological resume presents your skills and accomplishments within the framework of your past employers. (Actually, it should be called a reverse chronological resume, since your last job should always appear first.)

Although the information you furnish the reader may essentially be the same, there's a big difference in the way the two resumes are constructed, and the type of impact each will have.

My experience has shown that the chronological resume brings the best results, since it's the most explicit description of the quality and application of your skills within a specific time frame.

The summary resume, on the other hand, works well if you've changed jobs or careers often, and wish to downplay your work history and highlight your level of expertise.

If a prospective hiring manager is specifically interested in a steady, progressively advancing employment history (as most are), then the summary resume will very likely work against you, since the format will seem confusing, and might arouse suspicions as to your potential for longevity.

However, if the employer's main concern is your technical or problem-solving ability, the summary resume will serve your needs just fine.

Either way, you should always follow the guidelines mentioned earlier regarding content and appearance.

Beware of Artificial Fillers and Additives

So far, we've talked about ways to enhance or adjust the content of your resume. Now let's look at what should be left out, or at least minimized.

1. Salary history or salary requirements. I've never heard one good reason to mention your past, current, or expected salary. If you see a classified ad that says, "Only resumes with salary history will be considered," don't believe it. If your resume is strong enough, you'll be contacted. Once contacted, be forthright.
2. References. If you have high-impact or well-known professional references, fine. Otherwise, "References: Available Upon Request" will do just fine. Avoid personal references like your minister or your attorney, unless they happen to be Billy Graham or Sandra Day O'Connor.
3. Superfluous materials. When submitting a resume, avoid enclosing such items as your thesis, photos, diplomas, transcripts, product samples, newspaper articles, blueprints, designs, or letters of recommendation. These are props you can use during your interview, but not before. The only thing other than your resume that's acceptable is your business card.
4. Personal information. Leave out anything other than the absolute essentials such as, "Married, two children, willing to relocate, excellent health." By listing your Masonic affiliation, right-to-life activism or codependency support involvement, you could give the employer a reason to suspect that your outside activities may interfere with your work.

Not long ago, we received a resume from a candidate who felt the need to put his bowling average on his *vita*. I guess he thought that kind of information might improve his chances of being interviewed. Would I show his resume to an employer? No way.

Remember, the greater the relevancy between your resume and the needs of the employer, the more seriously your candidacy will be considered.

The keys to a dynamite resume are complete, accurate content and appropriate professional appearance.