Avoid These 10 Resume Mistakes

by Katharine Hansen

As a resume writer, I see hundreds of resumes, and the vast majority of them are much weaker than they could be. I see the same mistakes over and over. This article describes the 10 I see most often. All are easy to fix.

Don't make these resume mistakes:

1. Resume lacks focus.
A sharp focus is an extremely important resume element. Given that employers screen resumes for between 2.5 and 20 seconds, a resume should show the employer at a glance what you want to do and what you're good at. In a recent study by Career Masters Institute, employers wanted resumes to show a clear match between the applicant and a particular job's requirements. A "general" resume that is not focused on a specific job's requirements was seen as not competitive. In an even more recent study by CareerBuilder.com, 71 percent of hiring managers preferred a resume customized for the open position.

One way to sharpen your focus is through an objective statement. Your objective statement can be very simple and straightforward; it can be simply the title of the position you're applying for, which can be adjusted for every job you apply for. Or you can embellish your Objective statement a bit with language telling how you'll benefit the employer. Something like:

Objective: To contribute strong _____ skills and experience to your organization in a _____ capacity.
In this day of being able to manage our own computer files, you could have several versions of your resume that are essentially the same except for the objective. A specific objective is always better than a vague or general one. You can read more about resume objectives in our article, Should You Use a Career Objective on Your Resume?

To sharpen your focus, you can also add a section called something like "Summary of Qualifications," "Profile," or the like. Such a section can contribute to powerful resume opener that draws the reader in; it can be part of the top third of your resume that showcases your best selling points, catches the prospective employer's attention, and immediately demonstrates your value as a candidate. "Think of this section as an executive summary of your resume," writes my partner, Dr. Randall Hansen. "Identify key accomplishments that will grab the attention of an employer."

You can use your Profile/Summary section to position yourself for each job you target by tweaking the wording to fit each type of position.

2. Resume is duties-driven instead of accomplishments-driven.
Resumes should consist primarily of high-impact accomplishments statements that sell the job-seeker's qualifications as the best candidate.

Never use expressions such as "Duties included," "Responsibilities included," or "Responsible for." That's job-description language, not accomplishments-oriented resume language that sells. After all, if you were an employer and wanted to run a successful organization, would you be looking for candidates who can perform only their basic job functions, or would you want employees with a proven track record of accomplishments? In these days in which most resumes are placed into keyword-searchable databases, you won't find employers searching resumes for words like "responsibilities," "duties," or "responsible for."

Instead, focus on accomplishments that set you apart from other job candidates. In each job, what special things did you do to set yourself apart? How did you do the job better than anyone else? What did you do to make it your own? What special things did you do to impress your boss so that you might be promoted? What were the problems or challenges that you or the organization faced? What did you do to overcome the problems? What were the results of your efforts? How did the company benefit from your performance? How did you leave your employers better off than before you worked for them? How have you helped your employers to:

- make money
- save money
- save time
- make work easier
- solve a specific problem
- be more competitive
- build relationships
- expand the business
- attract new customers
- retain existing customers

Accomplishments are the points that increase reader's interest, stimulate a request for a job interview, and really help sell you to an employer -- much more so than everyday job duties. In the above-cited study by Career Masters Institute, content elements that propel employers to immediately discard resumes include a focus on duties instead of accomplishments, while documented achievements were highly ranked among content elements that employers look for.

For more about how to identify your accomplishments, see our article, For Job-Hunting Success: Track and Leverage Your Accomplishments. You may want to use our Accomplishments Worksheet to help you brainstorm your achievements.

Some job-seekers list accomplishments in a separate section or isolate accomplishments from duties/responsibilities when describing their job functions. I don't support this practice because *everything* on your resume should be accomplishments-driven. If you label only certain items as accomplishments, the reader's assumption is that the other things you did were *not* accomplishments.

Be sure also that the accomplishments you list support your career goals and that you tailor them to the job you're targeting with this resume.

3. Resume items are listed in an order that doesn't consider the reader's interest.
"The Resume Ingredients Rule," set forth by Donald Asher, author of numerous resume books (see our Q&A with him), says that information on a resume should be listed in order of importance to the reader. Therefore, in listing your jobs, what's generally most important is your title/position. So list in this preferred order: Title/position, name of employer, city/state of employer, dates of employment. I can't tell you how many resumes I've seen that list dates first. Dates can be important to some employers, but they're generally not as important as what your position was and whom you worked for.

Education follows the same principle; thus, the preferred order for listing your education is: Name of degree (spelled out: Bachelor of _____) in name of major, name of university, city/state of university, graduation year, followed by peripheral information, such as minor and GPA. If you haven't graduated yet, list your information the same way. Since the graduation date you've listed is in the future, the employer will know you don't have the degree yet.

By the way, the Resume Ingredients Rule is also the reason that experience and education are listed in *reverse* chronological order on your resume; it's assumed that your most recent education and experience are most important and relevant to the reader.

Also consider whether your education or your experience is your best selling point and which should therefore be listed first. Generally, brand-new graduates list education first, while job-seekers with a few years of experience list experience first. When job-seekers add value to their education by attaining an MBA or other graduate degree, they often switch education back to the more prominent position because it now becomes the hot selling point. In fields such as science and higher education, in which education remains a more important selling point than experience, education tends to be listed first consistently. In many countries outside the U.S., education is also considered more important than experience.

4. Resume exposes the job-seeker to age discrimination by going too far back into the job-seeker's job history.
The rule of thumb for someone at the senior level is to list about 15 years worth of jobs. Age discrimination, unfortunately, is a reality, and even more likely, employers may think you're too expensive if you list too much experience on your resume. Similarly, don't provide the date of your college graduation if it was more than about 10 years ago. Read more in our articles, Resume, Cover Letter, and Interview Strategies for Older Workers and Positive Attitude is Key When Fighting Prejudice Against Older Workers.

5. Resume buries important skills, especially computer skills, at the bottom.
There are few jobs today for which computer skills are not important. Yet many job-seekers, even those in technology fields, tend to tack a "Computer Skills" section to the end of their resumes. If computer skills are relevant to your field, list them in your Summary or Profile section. That way, they'll catch the reader's eye in the first third of your resume. If you are in

the technology field, list your technical skills in a separate section called something like "Systems Proficiencies," but be sure it's on the first page of your resume. You may want to set your skills up in a reader-friendly table, as in these samples: <u>IT Resume</u> and <u>New Grad IT Resume</u>.

Similarly if language and international-business skills are important in the type of job you seek, list them in your Summary or Profile section, not at the end of your resume.

6. Resume is not bulleted.

Use a bulleted style to make your resume more reader-friendly. In the above-cited study by Career Masters Institute, use of bullets was the 2nd-highest ranked preference by employers, and density of type (paragraphs rather than bullet points) was ranked highly as a factor that would inspire employers to discard a resume.

Use bullets consistently. Some job-seekers bullet most of their resume but don't bullet the Profile/Summary section, for example. Or they will list the overall scope and responsibilities for each job in an unbulleted section before beginning a bulleted section describing accomplishments. Given that the reader can't easily discern a rationale for why some material is bulleted and other material isn't, it's best to bullet consistently throughout the resume.

7. Resume uses a cookie-cutter design based on an overused resume template.

Most resumes created from a Microsoft Word template are instantly recognizable to employers as such. There's nothing wrong with that except that employers have seen a million of them, so they don't stand out. The employer immediately senses a certain lack of imagination in the job-seeker. These templates are also somewhat inflexible and contain problematic formatting. "Using a template or any kind of boilerplate to demonstrate your value to a company is the worst thing you can do to yourself when job hunting," says Nick Corcodilos of Ask The Headhunter. "You're supposed to be uniquely qualified so the company will choose you instead of some cookie-cutter drone -- right? Do you really want a template?"

8. Resume lacks keywords.

Job-hunting today increasingly revolves around the mysterious world of keywords. Employers' reliance on keywords to find the job candidates they want to interview has come about in recent years because of technology. Inundated by resumes from job-seekers, employers have increasingly relied on digitizing job-seeker resumes, placing those resumes in keyword-searchable databases, and using software to search those databases for specific keywords that relate to job vacancies. Most Fortune 1000 companies, in fact, and many smaller companies now use these technologies. In addition, many employers search the databases of third-party job-posting and resume-posting boards on the Internet. Pat Kendall, president of the National Resume Writers' Association, notes that more than 80 percent of resumes are searched for job-specific keywords.

The bottom line is that if you apply for a job with a company that searches databases for keywords, and your resume doesn't have the keywords the company seeks for the person

who fills that job, you are pretty much dead in the water. To read more about keywords and how to identify the best ones for your field, see our article, Tapping the Power of Keywords to Enhance Your Resume's Effectiveness.

9. References are listed directly on your resume.
Never listed specific references directly on your resume. List them on a separate sheet, and even then, submit them *only* when specifically requested by an employer.

Even the phrase, "References: Available upon request," is highly optional because it is a given that you will provide references upon request. If you couldn't, you would have no business looking for a job. The line can serve the purpose of signaling: "This is the end of my resume," but if you are trying to conserve space, leave it off.

10. Resume's appearance becomes skewed when sent as an e-mail attachment and/or resume is not available in other electronic formats.
Have you ever noticed that when you send a resume (or any document) as an attachment from your computer to someone else's computer, it sometimes doesn't look the same on the other person's computer as it did on yours? Maybe it has more pages on the other computer, or maybe Page 2 starts at the bottom of Page 1, or maybe the fonts are different.

If you are regularly sending your resume as an e-mail attachment, you may want to experiment with sending it to friends' computers to ensure that the formatting appears consistently from computer to computer.

Beyond a resume that can be sent as an e-mail attachment, it's crucial these days to have at least one type of electronic version of your resume for sending via e-mail and posting to Internet job boards. It's an absolute must these days because, as noted earlier, 80 percent of resumes today are placed directly into keyword-searchable databases. Read more in our article, The Top 10 Things You Need to Know about E-Resumes and Posting Your Resume Online. A text version of your resume is the most common and preferred format for electronic resumes. Read more about them and about other electronic formats you might need in our article, Your E-resume's File Format Aligns with its Delivery Method.

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5 Killer Resume Mistakes

Resume Mistake # 1

Failure to state your objective clearly and succinctly.

All too often resumes are submitted in many cases without the use of an objective and a clear statement of the role for which the candidate is applying. And on the occasions that objectives are used they can be nonspecific or worse, too wordy while failing to clearly state the candidates desired role.

Take for example a large organization, which may be recruiting for up to, and including 30 positions at a time. A recruiter will not sift through hundreds of resumes and spend valuable time attempting to discern which role a candidate is applying for when they have failed to state it clearly at the outset of their resume.

An example of an effective objective statement is as follows:

- A highly experienced sales and marketing professional with comprehensive skills in strategic planning and implementation seeking a position as a Sales Manager where these skills will add value.

A statement such as this gives a brief overview of the candidates experience and immediately generates interest on behalf of the recruiter/employer.

Failure to create a strong but concise objective will ensure that your application is relegated to the bottom of the pile.

Resume Mistake # 2

Focusing on duties and responsibilities rather than achievements and successes

Let's face it employers want to see what you can do for them quickly and effectively. They hate hiring and they like it to be as quick and painless as possible. No Manger/Recruiter wants to sit down and read a resume that is simply a comprehensive listing of every work task a candidate has performed throughout their career.

Imagine reading a resume that contains the following:

- Completed filing and archiving.
- Performed word processing duties.
- Answered the telephone to clients.
- Completed the accounts payable transactions.
- Managed the invoicing system.
- Looked after the office equipment.

This is a complete and frankly uninteresting way to detail daily responsibilities. An effective resume should focus on successes and achievements. An employer/recruiter will assume that an Administrative Assistant can type, use Word, archive etc. in the same way as they will expect that a Sales Manager can manage employees, prepare forecasts, market products etc.

Resume Mistake # 3

Resume length and use of big words!

Even now candidates fail to understand that a three and four page resume holds no attraction for a recruiter/hiring manager. With the volume of applications received for each job advertisement it is little wonder that mangers become frustrated by the length of resumes and the abundance of large words used within the resume itself.

Resumes should ideally be a one to two page document depending entirely on each candidate's level of experience, expertise and their profession.

A professional resume should be long on facts but short on words!

Resume Mistake # 4

Poor Resume formatting and visual layout

The two most widely used resume formats are:

- The Chronological Resume

- The Functional Resume

Visual Impact

Poor layout will have a detrimental effect on the success of your resume. All too often candidates create resumes that are a mishmash of fonts, bullet points, underlines and italics.

A resume should be where possible uniform with bullet points used to highlight specific accomplishments or achievements and not every sentence or they lose their effectiveness. Think of your resume as packaging for you as the candidate of choice. Create a professional resume by choosing the format that suits you, keeping the layout clear and easy to read and using white space effectively.

Resume Mistake # 5

Spelling and Punctuation

It really goes without saying that this is the faux pas of all faux pas! It will not matter that you have created the perfect layout, written the most effective text and the used the format

that suits your career perfectly if you submit a resume that contains poor punctuation or spelling mistakes.

The first thing an employer/recruiter will think when they see a spelling mistake included in a resume is that you are careless and lack attention to detail, neither of which are attributes that will endear you as a candidate.

Spell-checking your resume simply won't do. Computers are not infallible. Get your resume proofread by several people both friends and colleagues who are au fait with the terminology used within the resume.

Make sure that sentences are written in the correct context. Ensure that punctuation is accurate and that all spelling is correct. Sentence structure should be easy to read and professional in manner.

Don't create an otherwise well-written resume only to have it discarded because you failed to cross your T's and dot your I's.

Other Considerations

- Being Fired – Don't include any details on your resume that are not positive. Being fired is certainly not uncommon today, and looking for a new opportunity is expected. Your resume should present what you did well in previous situations. Analyze why you were fired and prepare in advance what you will say if asked in the interview.
- Over Qualified – Frequently people become more willing to settle for less as the time of unemployment lengthens. If you are willing to accept a position where you may be defined as overqualified or if you want to redirect your career, you may consider not including some of your credentials on your resume. Be prepared to explain why you want this particular opportunity and how your wealth of experience is a positive and not a deterrent.
- Gaps in Work History – If you have major gaps with a legitimate reason such as going to school, having a baby or attending to a dying parent, simply state those on your resume. You can also fill some situations by listing independent contracting work for a period of time. Some minor gaps need no explanation. Just exclude months on your resume. Thus a six month position from February 2006 to September 2006 can be eliminated completely.
- No Degree – this is frequently seen as a larger obstacle than it really is. Keep in mind that employers are more interested in seeing what you have done for the last 10 years than they are in knowing that you got a degree in Civil War history in 1967. If you do not want to draw attention to this area, put education toward the end of your resume. Most resumes are given 3-40 seconds review so you can reach the decision point before they get to the education part. Also you can list a time frame where you attended some classes but leave off that you did not get a degree.