Does Your Résumé Pass the Six-Second Test?

How to make your résumé stand out in today's job market, and the job-search killers to avoid

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No pressure, but your résumé has six seconds to make an impression before it is sent to the don't-even-bother pile.

That is how long a recruiter typically skims a résumé to decide whether to pass it on to a hiring manager, said J.T. O'Donnell, chief executive of career-coaching site Work It Daily. Recruiters often have hundreds of online applications to wade through, even with algorithms helping filter many of them out. They will likely give yours little more than a glance to judge whether you make it onto the shortlist of candidates.

In other words, your résumé has to be highly "skimmable," Ms. O'Donnell said at The Wall Street Journal's recent Jobs Summit. "The human eye works in a Z-pattern, and I'm going down, looking for four to five things that I was told you need to have or you cannot be considered."

The CV won't clinch a job offer, but it gets you to the next step, she and other career coaches say. A résumé that's hard to skim or fails to mention key skills needed for the job could keep you from ever getting the chance to make your case in an interview.

Some ways to make your résumé stand out, and some job-search killers to avoid, according to the experts at the summit:

1) Forget the professional statement.

Job seekers have long been advised to include a short paragraph atop of their résumé summing up their skills, experience, achievements and goals. No more.

"Recruiters don't have time for that," Ms. O'Donnell said. Instead, open with a one-line "headline" stating your occupational specialty—ideally with words matching the role you're applying for, like "digital marketing specialist" or "technical writer," she said.

Follow the headline with two short columns of bullets with concrete skills. If you coordinated a team to pull off a big assignment and the job posting mentions project-management experience, use that same language, since that's what recruiters and their applicant-tracking-systems will screen for, said Jane Oates, president of WorkingNation, a nonprofit focused on workforce development.

"Every job you apply for, you should customize your résumé just a little bit by putting in some of the words that are in that job description," Ms. Oates said.

2) Don't be a jack of all trades.

It is tempting to [pack your résumé](#) with the entirety of your work experience, especially for those who have a lot of it. Resist the urge, and focus on your relevant professional work history. "You don't need to have any more that you scooped ice cream at the Margate Dairy Bar," Ms. Oates said.

Recruiters are looking for a match to that particular job opening, Ms. O'Donnell said. They aren't interested in the twists and turns of your career, which could suggest you're overqualified for the role.

"A lot of companies don't want to overpay, and that's exactly the message you're sending when you put everything on your résumé," she said.

It is OK for a résumé to be two pages, if necessary, she adds. But make sure it is formatted with enough white space to be easily skimmed. Start each line about your experience with the bolded job title, so that they are easy to scan down the left side.

3) Use numbers.

Avoid subjective, ambiguous language, such as "passionate self-starter" or a "dedicated hard worker." The hiring manager or recruiter will assess your soft skills when they interview you, Ms. O'Donnell said. A résumé is about your hard skills, which are best told through numbers.

Her tip: Circle all of the nouns on your CV, because they can usually be quantified.

If you are describing your experience as a receptionist, for instance, don't just say "Answer phones." More effective is something like: "Work for a 300-person company, answering more than 100 calls a day, on a 12-line phone system," she said.

4) Make your LinkedIn profile the priority.

"Your LinkedIn is really your [best résumé](#)," said [Brian Liou](#), founder and CEO of Rora, which advises tech-industry professionals in negotiating with employers. Recruiters trawl LinkedIn to find candidates for a given job opening. A few hacks can improve your chances of coming up in their searches.

First, set a reminder to switch up some of the keywords in your profile every two weeks. Changing the content helps prompt the site's algorithm to re-scan your profile, keeping it toward the top of recruiter searches.

And take advantage of Creator Mode, which Ms. O'Donnell calls one of LinkedIn's [best-kept secrets](#). The setting alters the presentation of profiles to emphasize topics that users discuss most on the platform and lets them choose hashtags aligned with their skills, showing LinkedIn you are an active user. "This is going to help get your content showcased," she said.

One LinkedIn feature she does discourage using is the ["Open to Work" banner](#). Though more hiring managers say they don't frown upon career breaks, discrimination against people between jobs persists, she said. Instead, tweak your privacy settings to signal more indirectly to recruiters that you're open to invitations, she suggested.

5) Resist using ChatGPT.

[The artificial-intelligence chatbot from OpenAI](#) has quickly become a [popular tool](#) for creating and tweaking résumés. The trouble is, recruiters can spot a ChatGPT-built résumé "a mile away," Ms. O'Donnell said, "and you get points off for that sort of thing."

The chat assistant can be helpful if you're building a résumé from scratch, but use it only as a starting point, she cautions.

One tool she does suggest is a free word-cloud app. ([Wordart.com](#) and [wordclouds.com](#) are two popular ones.) Paste the text of the job posting to see which words show up as the biggest—the ones repeated most often in the ad.

 "That's how you're going to find your top five or six things" to describe your skills and experience, she said.

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