

Some tips for building a resume

Autism and ND Advocacy

It's not your experience that lands you an interview, it's how your resume represents that experience.

The 15 Second Rule

A resume isn't read, it's skimmed. A resume screener will glance at your resume for about 15 seconds (or maybe less) to make a decision about whether or not to interview you - and this is the guiding principle of resumes. A resume should be optimized for this 15 second rule.

The Rules

Rule #1: Shorter is Better

Imagine I wanted to tell you as much about myself as I can, but your attention span is only 15 seconds. Should I give you my 300 page autobiography? Or my condensed one-paragraph version?

The 300 page version will have a lot more info, but that doesn't matter. In 15 seconds, you'll only have time to read the first paragraph. I'd be lucky if you learned where I was born in that 15 seconds time. Although I offered more info, you actually learned a lot less about me.

A long resume is like that. It takes all your best content and theme mixes in less important information, leaving the resume reader with a worse overall impression of you.

It's best to stick to just the highlights.

Implementing this rule

A good rule of thumb is:

- Limit your resume to 1 page if you have <10 yrs of experience;
- At >10 yrs, you might justify 1.5-2 pages.

When you think you need more space for a particular role, ask yourself what about that role is most important? Is the fact that you were a coder at one point? Is it the impact you have in reducing the company's costs? Is it just the name of the company?

Focus on what is important, and leave out the rest.

Also if just a few lines force you resume onto another page, find a way to trim down your resume. A resume that just barely goes onto a second page suggests a poor ability to prioritize.

Rule #2: Bullets, Not Blobs

Many people live by a rule of “talk more about what’s more important”. There is some wisdom to this guidance, but it can backfire on a resume. The longer the chunk of text is, the less likely a resume screener is to read the resume. So keep things short.

Implementing this rule

Read through your resume. Anything that’s three lines of text or more should be condensed. The rule of thumb is that you should aim to have no more than 50% of your bullets expand to two lines. That is, at least half of your bullets should be just one line, with the remainder being two lines. The impact of your work often matters more than the details, so it’s okay to skimp here.

Rule #3: Accomplishments, Not Responsibilities.

People don’t care what you were told to do, they care what you did. Responsibilities are about what you were told to do. They don’t make it clear if you actually had an impact. Instead, you want to focus on your accomplishments.

Implementing this rule

Using present tense is a good tip-off that you’ve listed a responsibility. It’s difficult for something you accomplished to be written in the present tense. List the concrete ways you had an impact. Focus on the impact itself, the “what” more so than the “how” although both are important.

As much as possible, quantify your accomplishments. How much money did you make for your company? How much time did you save for your team? By how much did you improve customer retention? An estimation is okay here.

If you have an existing resume, it might help to start from scratch with one of these questions in mind:

- What are the 5 things you are most proud of?
- What would your team say are the 5 most impactful things you did?

The answers to these questions should form your bullets.

Your responsibilities should generally be clear from your specific accomplishments and from your job title. However, if you feel you must explain your general responsibilities, a good place is immediately under the job title and in italics, so as to separate it from your true accomplishments.

Rule #4: Use a Good Template

Every few months, some website or blog publishes a list of “amazing” resume designs, which, undoubtedly, a bunch of job seekers attempt to copy.

These resumes are cute, they might show some degree of creativity, and they might even grab someone’s attention. But unless you’re one of the lucky few to garner some media attention for your flashy design (or you’re applying for a designer position), a resume template like this might generally hurt you.

Many hiring managers don’t like these graphical resumes because it’s hard to learn much about you. Information isn’t presented in a clear way, and the information that is presented takes up way more space than necessary.

A good resume template won’t make your friends “ooh” and “ahh”. It probably won’t be flashy or particularly creative. But it will get the job done - which means landing you an interview.

Implementing this rule

A good resume is reasonably compact and quickly showcases your highlights. Look for a resume template with the following:

- **Two or three columns, one for names and the other for jobs titles.** You want to make this information very easy to pick up, especially if you have a top company on your resume. Location and dates are considerably less important. They need to be there but they don’t need to leap out at the resume screener.
- **No left column dedicated to headings.** Many resume templates use the left side of the page for headings such as “Employment” and “Education”. This looks attractive, but can waste 20% of the available space.
- **Limited text stylings.** Too many fonts, sizes, casings, and colours can be distracting.
- **Reasonable use of whitespace.** Too much whitespace wastes space. Too little can make your resume difficult to read and can suggest that you’re not good at prioritizing.
- **Reasonable font size and margins.** You want something that’s easy to read while not being wasteful with space.
- **Bullets.** Blocks of text look pretty (particularly on a graphical resume), but will be skipped over.

Rule #5: Don’t Skip the Best Stuff

Many candidates ignore this rule. They leave something out because they didn’t feel it was “appropriate” for a resume for <insert strange reason>.

For example, Jessica, a product manager at Amazing, was applying for other PM jobs at Amazing and other companies. After multiple rounds of resume editing and feedback, her resume was almost perfect - except for one detail. She;d neglected to mention that she had, on the side, launched a gaming company, hired multiple developers and designers, and overseen the development of a game. The combination of this entrepreneurial effort and the Amazon job are basically her golden ticket into any PM interview.

Why didn't she include it? Because, due to some medical problems, she hadn't yet launched the game. She figured that you couldn't list it until you were "done".

In similar situations, other people have given a variety of reasons: "It was for a class", "It wasn't an official class project", "We haven't finished yet", etc.

None of these reasons are sufficient to exclude something from your resume. If it helps you, list it.

Implementing this rule

Ask yourself, what did you *not* include? Are there projects you've done (on your own, for school, for friends, for a hackathon, etc.) that you haven't listed? Any relevant hobbies? Or interests which have some interesting accomplishments (e.g. completing a triathlon)?

There are no hard and fast rules about what belongs on your resume and what doesn't. If it makes you a more interesting or more attractive candidate, include it.

Credit: Gaini Bishekova from Meta (Facebook)