

Creating Resumes and Cover Letters that Work for You

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Creating Resumes and Cover Letters that Work for You

You might see a hurdle to leap over. Or a hoop to jump through. Or a barrier to knock down. That is how many people think of resumes, application forms, cover letters, and interviews. But you do not have to think of them that way. They are not ways to keep you from a job; they are ways for you to show an employer what you know and what you can do. After all, you are going to get a job. It is just a question of which one.

Employers want to hire people who can do the job. To learn who these people are, they use resumes, application forms, written tests, performance tests, medical examinations, and interviews. You can use each of these different evaluation procedures to your advantage. You might not be able to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but at least you can show what a good ear you have.

Creating Effective Resumes and Application Forms

Resumes and application forms are two ways to achieve the same goal: To give the employer written evidence of your qualifications. When creating a resume or completing an application form, you need two different kinds of information: Facts about yourself and facts about the job you want. With this information in hand, you can present the facts about yourself in terms of the job. You have more freedom with a resume--you can put your best points first and avoid blanks. But, even on application forms, you can describe your qualifications in terms of the job's duties.

Know thyself. Begin by assembling information about yourself. Some items appear on virtually every resume or application form, including the following:

- * Current address and phone number--if you are rarely at home during business hours, try to give the phone number of a friend or relative who will take messages for you.
- * Job sought or career goal.
- * Experience (paid and volunteer)--date of employment, name and full address of the employer, job title,

starting and finishing salary, and reason for leaving (moving, returning to school, and seeking a better position are among the readily accepted reasons).

- * Education--the school's name, the city in which it is located, the years you attended it, the diploma or certificate you earned, and the course of studies you pursued.
- * Other qualifications--hobbies, organizations you belong to, honors you have received, and leadership positions you have held.
- * Office machines, tools, and equipment you have used and skills that you possess.

Other information, such as your Social Security number, is often asked for on application forms but is rarely presented on resumes. Application forms might also ask for a record of past addresses and for information that you would rather not reveal, such as a record of convictions. If asked for such information, you must be honest. Honesty does not, however, require that you reveal disabilities that do not affect your overall qualifications for a job.

Know thy job. Next, gather specific information about the jobs you are applying for. You need to know the pay range (so you can make their top your bottom), education and experience usually required, hours and shifts usually worked. Most importantly, you need to know the job duties (so that you can describe your experience in terms. of those duties). Study the job description. Some job announcements, especially those issued by a government, even have a checklist that assigns a numerical weight to different qualifications so that you can be certain as to which is the most important; looking at such announcements will give you an idea of what employers look for even if you do not wish to apply for a government job. If the announcement or ad is vague, call the employer to learn what is sought.

Once you have the information you need, you can prepare a resume. You may need to prepare more than one master resume if you are going to look for different kinds of jobs. Otherwise, your resume will not fit the job you seek.

Two kinds of resumes. The way you arrange your resume depends on how well your experience seems to prepare you for the position you want. Basically, you can either describe your most recent job first and work backwards (reverse chronology) or group similar skills together. No matter which format you use, the following advice applies generally.

- * Use specifics. A vague description of your duties will make only a vague impression.
- * Identify accomplishments. If you headed a project, improved productivity, reduced costs, increased membership, or achieved some other goal, say so.
- * Type your resume, using a standard typeface. (Printed resumes are becoming more common, but employers do not indicate a preference for them.)
- * Keep the length down to two pages at the most.
- * Remember your mother's advice not to say anything if you cannot say something nice. Leave all embarrassing or negative information off the resume--but be ready to deal with it in a positive fashion at the interview.
- * Proofread the master copy carefully.
- * Have someone else proofread the master copy carefully.
- * Have a third person proofread the master copy carefully.
- * Use the best quality photocopying machine and good white or off-white paper.

The following information appears on almost every resume.

- * Name.
- * Phone number at which you can be reached or receive messages.
- * Address.
- * Job or career sought.
- * References--often just a statement that references are

available suffices. If your references are likely to be known by the person who reads the resume, however, their names are worth listing.

- * Experience.

- * Education.

- * Special talents.

- * Personal information--height, weight, marital status, physical condition. Although this information appears on virtually every sample resume I have ever seen, it is not important according to recruiters. In fact, employers are prohibited by law from asking for some of it. If some of this information is directly job related--the height and weight of a bouncer is important to a disco owner, for example--list it. Otherwise, save space and put in more information about your skills.

Reverse chronology is the easiest method to use. It is also the least effective because it makes when you did something more important than what you can do. It is an especially poor format if you have gaps in your work history, if the job you seek is very different from the job you currently hold, or if you are just entering the job market. About the only time you would want to use such a resume is when you have progressed up a clearly defined career ladder and want to move up a rung.

Resumes that are not chronological may be called functional, analytical, skill oriented, creative, or some other name. The differences are less important than the similarity, which is that all stress what you can do. The advantage to a potential employer--and, therefore, to your job campaign--should be obvious. The employer can see immediately how you will fit the job. This format also has advantages for many job hunters because it camouflages gaps in paid employment and avoids giving prominence to irrelevant jobs.

You begin writing a functional resume by determining the skills the employer is looking for. Again, study the job description for this information. Next, review your experience and education to see when you demonstrated the ability sought. Then prepare the resume itself, putting first the information that relates most obviously to the job. The result will be a resume with headings such as "Engineering," "Computer Languages," "Communications Skills," or "Design Experience." These headings will have much more impact than the dates that

you would use on a chronological resume.

Fit yourself to a form. Some large employers, such as fast food restaurants and government agencies, make more use of application forms than of resumes. The forms suit the style of large organizations because people find information more quickly if it always appears in the same place. However, creating a resume before filling out an application form will still benefit you. You can use the resume when you send a letter inquiring about a position. You can submit a resume even if an application is required; it will spotlight your qualifications. And the information on the resume will serve as a handy reference if you must fill out an application form quickly. Application forms are really just resumes in disguise anyway. No matter how rigid the form appears to be, you can still use it to show why you are the person for the job being filled.

At first glance, application forms seem to give a job hunter no leeway. The forms certainly do not have the flexibility that a resume does, but you can still use them to your best advantage. Remember that the attitude of the person reading the form is not, "Let's find out why this person is unqualified," but, "Maybe this is the person we want." Use all the parts of the form--experience blocks, education blocks, and others--to show that that person is you.

Here's some general advice on completing application forms.

- * Request two copies of the form. If only one is provided, photocopy it before you make a mark on it. You'll need more than one copy to prepare rough drafts.
- * Read the whole form before you start completing it.
- * Prepare a master copy if the same form is used by several divisions within the same company or organization. Do not put the specific job applied for, date, and signature on the master copy. Fill in that information on the photocopies as you submit them.
- * Type the form if possible. If it has lots of little lines that are hard to type within, type the information on a piece of blank paper that will fit in the space, paste the paper over the form, and photocopy the finished product. Such a procedure results in a much neater, easier to read page.

- * Leave no blanks; enter n/a (for "not applicable") when the information requested does not apply to you; this tells people checking the form that you did not simply skip the question.
- * Carry a resume and a copy of other frequently asked information (such as previous addresses) with you when visiting potential employers in case you must fill out an application on the spot. Whenever possible, however, fill the form out at home and mail it in with a resume and a cover letter that point up your strengths.

Writing Intriguing Cover Letters

You will need a cover letter whenever you send a resume or application form to a potential employer. The letter should capture the employer's attention, show why you are writing, indicate why your employment will benefit the company, and ask for an interview. The kind of specific information that must be included in a letter means that each must be written individually. Each letter must also be typed perfectly, which may present a problem. Word processing equipment helps. Frequently only the address, first paragraph, and specifics concerning an interview will vary. These items are easily changed on word processing equipment and memory typewriters. If you do not have access to such equipment, you might be able to rent it. Or you might be able to have your letters typed by a resume or employment services company listed in the yellow pages. Be sure you know the full cost of such a service before agreeing to use one.

Let's go through a letter point by point.

Salutation. Each letter should be addressed by name to the person you want to talk with. That person is the one who can hire you. This is almost certainly not someone in the personnel department, and it is probably not a department head either. It is most likely to be the person who will actually supervise you once you start work. Call the company to make sure you have the right name. And spell it correctly.

Opening. The opening should appeal to the reader. Cover letters are sales letters. Sales are made after you capture a person's attention. You capture the reader's attention most easily by talking about the company rather than yourself. Mention projects under development, recent awards, or favorable

comments recently published about the company. You can find such information in the business press, including the business section of local newspapers and the many magazines that are devoted to particular industries. If you are answering an ad, you may mention it. If someone suggested that you write, use their name (with permission, of course).

Body. The body of the letter gives a brief description of your qualifications and refers to the resume, where your sales campaign can continue.

Closing. You cannot have what you do not ask for. At the end of the letter, request an interview. Suggest a time and state that you will confirm the appointment. Use a standard complimentary close, such as "Sincerely yours," leave three or four lines for your signature, and type your name. I would type my phone number under my name; this recommendation is not usually made, although phone numbers are found on most letterheads. The alternative is to place the phone number in the body of the letter, but it will be more difficult to find there should the reader wish to call you.

Triumphing on Tests and at Interviews

A man with a violin case stood on a subway platform in The Bronx. He asked a conductor, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The conductor replied, "Practice! Practice! Practice!"

Tests. That old joke holds good advice for people preparing for employment tests or interviews. The tests given to job applicants fall into four categories: General aptitude tests, practical tests, tests of physical agility, and medical examinations. You can practice for the first three. If the fourth is required, learn as soon as possible what the disqualifying conditions are, then have your physician examine you for them so that you do not spend years training for a job that you will not be allowed to hold.

To practice for a test, you must learn what the test is. Once again, you must know what job you want to apply for and for whom you want to work in order to find out what tests, if any, are required. Government agencies, which frequently rely on tests, will often provide a sample of the test they use. These samples can be helpful even if an employer uses a different test. Copies of standard government tests are usually available at the library.

If you practice beforehand, you'll be better prepared and less nervous on the day of the test. That will put you ahead of the competition. You will also improve your performance by following this advice:

- * Make a list of what you will need at the test center, including a pencil; check it before leaving the house.
- * Get a good night's sleep.
- * Be at the test center early--at least 15 minutes early.
- * Read the instructions carefully; make sure they do not differ from the samples you practiced with.
- * Generally, speed counts; do not linger over difficult questions.
- * Learn if guessing is penalized. Most tests are scored by counting up the right answers; guessing is all to the good. Some tests are scored by counting the right answers and deducting partial credit for wrong answers; blind guessing will lose you points--but if you can eliminate two wrong choices, a guess might still pay off.

Interviews. For many of us, interviews are the most fearsome part of finding a job. But they are also our best chance to show an employer our qualifications. Interviews are far more flexible than application forms or tests. Use that flexibility to your advantage. As with tests, you can reduce your anxiety and improve your performance by preparing for your interviews ahead of time.

Begin by considering what interviewers want to know. You represent a risk to the employer. A hiring mistake is expensive in terms of lost productivity, wasted training money, and the cost of finding a replacement. To lessen the risk, interviewers try to select people who are highly motivated, understand what the job entails, and show that their background has prepared them for it.

You show that you are highly motivated by learning about the company before the interview, by dressing appropriately, and by being well mannered--which means that you greet the interviewer by name, you do not chew gum or smoke, you listen attentively, and you thank the interviewer at the end of the session. You also show motivation by expressing interest in the job at the end of the interview.

You show that you understand what the job entails and that you can perform it when you explain how your qualifications prepare you for specific duties as described in the company's job listing and when you ask intelligent questions about the nature of the work and the training provided new workers.

One of the best ways to prepare for an interview is to have some practice sessions with a friend or two. Here is a list of some of the most commonly asked questions to get you started.

- * Why did you apply for this job?
- * What do you know about this job or company?
- * Why did you choose this career?
- * Why should I hire you?
- * What would you do if... (usually filled in with a work-related crisis)?
- * How would you describe yourself?
- * What would you like to tell me about yourself?
- * What are your major strengths?
- * What are your major weaknesses?
- * What type of work do you like to do best?
- * What are your interests outside work?
- * What type of work do you like to do least?
- * What accomplishment gave you the greatest satisfaction?
- * What was your worst mistake?
- * What would you change in your past life?
- * What courses did you like best or least in school?
- * What did you like best or least about your last job?
- * Why did you leave your last job?

- * Why were you fired?
- * How does your education or experience relate to this job?
- * What are your goals?
- * How do you plan to reach them?
- * What do you hope to be doing in 5 years? 10?
- * What salary do you expect?

Many jobhunting books available at libraries discuss ways to answer these questions. Essentially, your strategy should be to concentrate on the job and your ability to do it no matter what the question seems to be asking. If asked for a strength, mention something job related. If asked for a weakness, mention a job-related strength (you work too hard, you worry too much about details, you always have to see the big picture). If asked about a disability or a specific negative factor in your past--a criminal record, a failure in school, being fired--be prepared to stress what you learned from the experience, how you have overcome the shortcoming, and how you are now in a position to do a better job.

So far, only the interviewer's questions have been discussed. But an interview will be a two-way conversation. You really do need to learn more about the position to find out if you want the job. Given how frustrating it is to look for a job, you do not want to take just any position only to learn after 2 weeks that you cannot stand the place and have to look for another job right away. Here are some questions for you to ask the interviewer.

- * What would a day on this job be like?
- * Whom would I report to? May I meet this person?
- * Would I supervise anyone? May I meet them?
- * How important is this job to the company?
- * What training programs are offered?
- * What advancement opportunities are offered?
- * Why did the last person leave this job?
- * What is that person doing now?

- * What is the greatest challenge of this position?
- * What plans does the company have with regard to...?
(Mention some development of which you have read or heard)
- * Is the company growing?

After you ask such questions, listen to the interviewer's answers and then, if at all possible, point to something in your education or experience related to it. You might notice that questions about salary and fringe benefits are not included in the above list. Your focus at a first interview should be the company and what you will do for it, not what it will pay you. The salary range will often be given in the ad or position announcement, and information on the usual fringe benefits will be available from the personnel department. Once you have been offered a position, you can negotiate the salary. The jobhunting guides available in bookstores and at the library give many more hints on this subject.

At the end of the interview, you should know what the next step will be: Whether you should contact the interviewer again, whether you should provide more information, whether more interviews must be conducted, and when a final decision will be reached. Try to end on a positive note by reaffirming your interest in the position and pointing out why you will be a good choice to fill it.

Immediately after the interview, make notes of what went well and what you would like to improve. To show your interest in the position, send a follow-up letter to the interviewer, providing further information on some point raised in the interview and thanking the interviewer once again. Remember, someone is going to hire you; it might be the person you just talked to.

If you are

- involved in counseling others about job opportunities,
- thinking about a career,
- contemplating a career change,
- involved in education planning,

- involved in worker training, or displaced worker retraining,
- or simply interested in knowing about the world of work and how it is likely to change, you should examine these two job outlook publications:

Occupational Outlook Handbook

Probably the most widely used career resource; found in 9 out of 10 secondary schools. Updated every 2 years, it describes what workers do on the job, where they work, how much they earn, the training and education they need, and job outlook for about 200 occupations.

Occupational Outlook Quarterly

It helps to keep you informed about changing career opportunities, and provides practical, "how-to-do-it" information on choosing and getting today's and tomorrow's jobs.

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