

Job-Search Guidance From an Executive Recruiter

By **ROBERT D. WALSH**

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I've read thousands of resumes and personally interviewed hundreds of candidates in recent years. Unfortunately, the quality of their resumes and interviewing ability seems to be declining, rarely matching their track records and potential.

This holds true for seasoned professionals and neophytes alike, no matter what their discipline or industry. The most common deficiency is an inability to specify what they've actually achieved through the years. Candidates don't seem to understand that companies are more impressed by the quality of targets hit than by the quantity of bullets or arrows fired.

Since I can't conduct a "Resume 101" session for every candidate who's worthy but "resume-challenged," I've distilled my approach to resume preparation and revision to its bare essence. It begins with this caveat: There's no magical resume format, style or length--period. What works for some won't work for others, so don't slavishly follow someone else's example (least of all mine).

Start With Self-Analysis

I used to dismiss "know thyself" as so much pop-psychology pap. That is, until about 20 years into my career in public relations, when a recruiter told me at the start of an interview: "I've read your resume very carefully, but I still don't know who you are." She paused a few seconds, then gave me a rather arch look. "And I don't think you do, either."

The woman's appraisal jolted me, but she was right. My resume was merely a chronological recital of my eclectic mix of editorial and managerial experience in corporate, public service, association and PR management consulting settings. I hadn't effectively positioned myself--on my own terms--for the role in which I could optimally leverage my skills, experience and interests while achieving personal gratification. Instead, I was letting readers of my resume pigeonhole me based on their inference of what I aspired to do for money, recognition or whatever.

Not long after that reality-checking interview, my employer, a Connecticut-based PR management consulting firm, wanted its staff to relocate en masse far from our Northeastern roots, families and friends. Like many others there, I politely declined.

Forced to get to know myself better--and fast--I created a grid of my experience, interests and possible career options on a yellow legal pad. It became clear that I'd always gotten a charge from devising organizational charts and job descriptions, as well as from assessing personnel performance and potential, no matter what my title was at the time. I concluded that executive search or outplacement would be prime areas to pursue, and fortuitously, I was able to join a PR search firm that had once placed me in a corporate "dream job."

I later learned that my intuitive yellow-pad exercise is a major premise of the career-guidance book, "Do What You Love and the Money Will Follow" (1987, Paulist Press). Beyond a message that boils down to "know thyself," it offers numerous self-help quizzes and techniques to determine what your career aims probably ought to be and, in due course, how to make those goals clear to recruiters and prospective employers in your resume.

Says one person who recently completed the book's exercises, "If I followed through on some of my ideas, I'd probably open an antique store in the Adirondacks." In the meantime, she says, "I'd like to explore the possibility of becoming a consultant to small organizations in human services or in the arts, helping them gain greater visibility and do long-term public-relations planning." She now seems to have a firmer grip on what she really wants to do with her life.

An Even Better Method

In lieu of a yellow pad, another good approach is to get a batch of 3x5 index cards or slips of paper. On each, list projects you successfully completed that garnered praise from bosses and provided you with great satisfaction. Each entry must be a labor of love during which time flew by. Stay away from pet projects that went nowhere.

A typical card should list a few key words or phrases about a problem (or opportunity) that you solved or exploited to create a successful and satisfying outcome. Leave out projects you did well but found draining or unsatisfying.

Look for situations where you can quantify favorable results in terms of financial gains, of increased sales/revenue percentages or time/money reductions for employers or clients. Remember, jot down just a few words about each entry at this point. You'll get into greater detail later.

Look for Patterns

"Play solitaire" with your annotated cards on a desk or table top. Look for similarities, common denominators and patterns. You may notice, for example, several instances where you were "The Little Red Hen" who was totally responsible and involved in every detail from start to finish.

In other situations, you may have been part of a team, perhaps the captain or a crucial member who built consensus on the diagnosis, recommended action and assignments. Perhaps you excelled at developing a realistic budget and shepherding it to a successful conclusion. These are but a few of many roles in which you may have stood above the crowd. In any event, zero in on how your specific participation made a positive difference.

Be especially mindful of situations where you conceived strategies (big, sea-change concepts as opposed to incremental, marginal ones) or played a key role in implementing them. Obviously, strategists get better titles and pay than tactical planners. In turn, they prosper more than managers, then implementers, and so on down the line. Your mounting card piles should give you strong clues as to where you're likely to achieve future successes.

Next, flesh out "vignettes" of a sentence or two on each card to use as "bullet items" in your reverse-chronological resume. For example: "As manager of Company X's speaker's bureau, I found that few original trainees were equipped to accept invitations. After retraining them in methods related to their duties, virtually every new or retrained member took on an engagement within a month."

Select the best vignettes for your resume, listing them in descending order of importance. Use remaining vignettes when writing tailored cover letters to accompany your resume. Also use them when following up after interviews to reinforce points you made or to introduce important post-interview afterthoughts.

You also can use vignettes as talking points when an interviewer, whether on impulse or by design, sets your resume aside and asks you to describe yourself or explain why you're the best candidate for a position. Review your vignettes often, replacing marginal stories with better ones. Internalize the gems among them so you can retrieve them from memory for the right oral and written opportunities.

Resume Considerations

For some, the debate between chronological and functional formats rages on. A totally functional resume, which plays up accomplishments and lists employers, dates and education rather cryptically at the end, can camouflage age, employment gaps and job-jumping enough to stimulate a follow-up call or interview. But functionalizing often calls

attention to the very problems you want to hide. Sooner or later, you can bet your college graduation date will be ferreted out.

It's also confusing as a recruiter to have to jump back and forth to tie accomplishments on page one of a typical functional resume to fragmentary job listings on page two. I prefer a "highlights" resume that lists every significant job you've held (and its time frame) while establishing clearly how, where and when your bulleted accomplishments took place. Eventually, of course, you'll need another version listing all employers, dates, etc., for nitpicking HR departments.

One-page resumes are suitable for recent college graduates or novices who have worked only a year or two. But use a two-page format if you've held more than two jobs. If you find that difficult, you either haven't accomplished much or you're too modest to mention how you've made a difference where you've worked.

Remember Dizzy Dean's observation: "If you done done it, it ain't braggin'." Indulge in a little "gilt by association" by name-dropping freely when writing about past employers and clients. Don't hold back achievements because you plan to cover them during interviews. Without a certain degree of detail, you may not reach the interview stage.

Including a third page might be justified, but only if you're uniquely experienced. And once you graduate from college, drop the education segment to the bottom of your resume, unless you're applying for a job as an academician. Amazingly, many 50-year-olds still lead off their resumes with their education because that's what a college career counselor told them to do 30 years ago.

Profiles and Goals

Many resume writers wrestle with whether to lead off with a PERSONAL PROFILE and/or an OBJECTIVE statement. You may not need either if your vignettes highlight your strengths, or if you can succinctly articulate your aspirations in a cover letter that targets a specific job title or opportunity.

In any event, defer writing such statements until you've completed the assessment exercise described previously. You may well create some solid phraseology that fits your career to date, as well as your aspirations. Otherwise, you may profile yourself as a paragon who's good at everything and aspires to work "in a harmonious setting where one's experience and skills dealing with people can be fully utilized." Very weak indeed.

There's no guarantee that following this advice will lead you to greater fame and fortune. But it should help you gain a more realistic grasp of your strengths (weaknesses are off-limits here) and "heart-of-heart" aspirations. You may find that you don't have a world-class resume and that redefining your present job is your best option. If it becomes obvious you're an X in an O field, get thee to a professional career counselor.

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