

The Short and Useless Life of a Bad Resume

by Sharon D. Nelson

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Over the last 20 years, I have reviewed hundreds of resumes. Most of them hit the wastebasket very rapidly. There are a lot of reasons why.

1. The author can't write proper English, punctuate properly or obey the rules of grammar. Even little things matter – attention to detail is important in the business world and a resume should be proofed carefully before it is sent out. Don't just proof it yourself – have someone you know to be a good editor review it as well.
2. The resume sounds like puffery (“I am wonderful” is not the right tone).
3. The objective has no hint of personality or originality. Some are like eating a spoonful of the Sahara. Add some color (without going bonkers) and make yourself stand out. I always like language that indicates that applicants are self-starters who enjoy both working individually and in a team. You'll certainly have to do both. The truth can be refreshing. I remember someone whose objective indicated his passion for digital forensics while noting that, thus, far, his experience was limited. His passion and candid recognition of his minimal experience struck me, both in his resume and in his cover note. He still works for me.
4. When I look at the resume's metadata (yes, I always do that if the resume is interesting), sometimes the candidate is not the author of the document. Humorously, the name may indicate that mom or dad did the resume (tsk, tsk). There are legitimate reasons for another name appearing as the author – and there's no harm in going to a professional to help with your resume. But be aware that employers sometimes do look at the resume's metadata, especially if they are applying for a position in a technology field.
5. The cover letter (or e-mail) doesn't jive with the resume. The resume may display wonderful writing (thanks to help from someone) but the accompanying note does not. These days, prospective employers want nothing to do with applicants who can't write the English language.
6. The cover letter (or e-mail) fails to spark my interest. This is the perfect place to say something original that will catch the attention of the reader and differentiate you from other applicants.
7. When I advertise for a position, I always ask that the applicant include his/her salary requirements. If you do not do so, you are history – you can't follow instructions. Saying that you are open to discussing your salary is not acceptable. It doesn't tell me anything. I want some idea of what you think you are worth.
8. If you are young, a one-page resume is sufficient. Trying to cram all the minutiae of your life into your resume is not helpful. People reviewing resumes do so quickly, ditching the obvious “losers” and reserving resumes to be looked at more carefully. That said, now and again, I get a very worthy two-page resume from someone who has actually accomplished quite a bit and

needs the two pages to document their credentials and experiences– if well done, I will review it carefully.

9. Tell the prospective employer why you want to work for them. This rarely happens – I suppose applicants don't want to take the time to look up a law firm or company and personalize their cover note or e-mail, but rest assured that those who do end up in the pile of resumes I want to look at more closely. The more it is clear to me that they did some homework about my company, the more apt I am to ask for an interview. Virtually every employee I've ultimately hired has made that effort.
10. Tell the prospective employer if you have a skill that might be relevant. For instance, if the law firm or company is involved with high tech work, it is helpful to list any technical certifications or technical skills you possess. More and more, law firms want to know that you are "tech competent."
11. Don't undo your resume with your social media. I vividly remember receiving a well-done resume from a young woman and then visiting her public Facebook page, where she described herself as "sexually adventurous" and boasted that she could run a mile in high heels. Her resume hit the trash can with more than the usual speed.
12. Don't write from your current employer's address. If you will research and apply for jobs on someone else's time, you'll likely do the same thing to any employer – including me. It also indicates that you aren't all that bright since employers have the right to monitor work done on company computers.

Your resume is critical. If it fails you, you won't get the job you want. One of the best resources I've seen is from Yale Law, which has a Toolkit for Student Job Seekers (<https://law.yale.edu/student-life/career-development/students/toolkit-student-job-seekers/resume-advice-samples>) including Resume Advice and Samples along with Cover Letter Advice and Samples. It is a good starting point.

One more thing – if you get the opportunity to interview, employers know you are likely to be nervous. In my experience, this is one of the things job applicants worry about the most. I have a story that I hope will calm you if you are prone to "interview anxiety." Ten years ago, I interviewed an incredibly nervous young man whose hands shook rather severely during our entire interview. He was well-mannered, well-spoken and incredibly bright. I overlooked his nervousness (as most employers do) and hired him. Ten years later, he is my CEO. Fashion a great resume and cover letter – and if you cannot entirely compose yourself in an interview, may you have the same happy ending as my CEO.

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