

Five Fatal Resume Mistakes

Are your resume and your prospective employer two ships passing in the night? If so, you may be scuttling your own vessel before you set sail on a hoped-for career. Although you don't want to reenact the collision of the *Andrea Doria* and the *Stockholm* with any prospective bosses, you at least want them to be aware of your presence in the choppy seas of job hunting.

Victor R. Lindquist, author of Northwestern University's reputable *Endicott Report*, observed for *The Wall Street Journal*, "Resumes these days are treated like junk mail." If this is the case, we need to ask why it is so and how it can be remedied. If you expect your resume to catch and hold the attention of your employers and generate interest in you as a potential employee, you need to make sure it doesn't hit the circular file before it has delivered its message.

Let's troubleshoot some common faults in writing and formatting resumes so that those fatal mistakes can be avoided. The following are examples of mistakes taken from resumes written by graduating collegians.

Aiming too high, too soon. Lynn, 20, is majoring in communications and minoring in journalism. Her work experience includes instructing aerobic dance classes, waitressing, and working as a receptionist/bookkeeper. However, the job objective on her resume states that she is "seeking a position as a public relations director within a large business organization."

The two ill-chosen words in this example are "director" and "large." In 10 or 15 years, perhaps, with good luck and determined effort, she may land such a job. For the present, however, she needs to think in less grandiose terms. Her immediate occupational goal is to find an entry-level position in an organization (regardless of its

Most resumes wind up in the wastebaskets of prospective employers. Advice from an expert on how to avoid this

size) that will hire her, so she can gain some experience in public relations.

No one becomes an admiral overnight. Though Lynn may have potential, she is not yet ready to be trusted with directing the intricate public relations efforts of a large firm. While starting at the bottom and working up sounds less than glamorous, it is possible. Occupational goals need to be within the realm of the possible. Aiming too high, too soon on a resume means the writer will miss the mark altogether.

Giving all experience equal billing. Resumes should be written in the same way that music is played—with dynamics. Not all entries should be given the same emphasis. Important items need to be stressed; less important ones, muted. To know whether or not something is important, ask yourself if it shows that your abilities match the employer's needs.

James is aiming for a job in sports promotion. Yet, listed side-by-side and given equal space on his resume are two work experiences—one pertains to sports and the other is not related to sports. He listed sports editor for the college newspaper next to lawn maintenance, and equal space has been devoted to each.

Because he is aiming for a sports position, not one in landscape architecture, he should put a greater emphasis on his job as sports editor. The two entries are not equal in the eyes of the prospective employer. The lawn main-

tenance entry says, "This applicant has held jobs and appears to be ambitious." Although this is certainly not a negative message, it is not as pertinent as the one given by the sports editor's job. The newspaper entry says, "This applicant could plug right into our business. With his first-hand journalistic experience, training him will be no problem."

"Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative" was the advice in an old World War II song. And "emphasize the pertinent" should be added. How do candidates emphasize the best they have to offer? By choosing to de-emphasize or exclude irrelevant experiences that merely clutter the resume and by allocating the most space to the most applicable experiences. What is excluded is often as important as what is included. Resumes are more like portraits than photographs because you act as the artist/writer who decides what to include on your resume or your canvas.

Once content is chosen, form can be used to enhance it. By underlining or capitalizing significant points and by moving the most pertinent information to the lefthand margin, the resume writer says, "Hey, look at this."

Here is an example of how visual impact can easily be achieved. Most people know, for example, that underlining emphasizes. But few think about the double strength of putting a line above the information as well as underneath it. This is a simple visual modification easily made on either a typewriter or a word processor. But use it sparingly, as overuse will detract from its impact.

Resumes with plenty of white space are easier to read than those with narrow margins that are packed with print. The prospect of reading a resume of solid words, unrelieved by ample fields of white space, may lessen an

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employer's desire to read any part of it. "Less is more" in the art of resume presentation. Applicants can greatly enhance the impact of their resumes by making the visual presentation underscore the verbal.

Burying crucial information. In writing resumes we need to use all the persuasive strategies we have in our arsenals. Purposeful placement of information is one such strategy. For example, psychologists tell us that readers are more likely to remember information that is given first or last in a document. These are considered to be the power slots. Information placed in a middle slot is usually least likely to be remembered.

When Marie, aiming for a broadcasting career, buried a detailed analysis of her two job-related internships in the center of her resume, we suggested moving that information to a more prominent and memorable location: closer to the job objective near the top of the first page.

Marie's resume originally read, "From May through August, 1984, I worked as an intern at WEBC and KDAL radio stations. At KDAL I worked in the continuity department, where I wrote commercial spots and prepared them for production, working with little or no supervision. My responsibilities included taking information given to me and developing it into a creative and effective commercial, re-

coding network feeds each day, writing 'promos' and public service announcements, and filing. During this time I developed a strong interest in advertising."

Such job-specific information needs to be placed where it will be seen and remembered—first or last, but not buried in the middle.

As an alternative, Marie could have chosen a special format to emphasize her experience. For instance, she could have selected the "half-and-half" style. Visually, this format appears to break the page into halves: one paragraph entitled "objectives" and another, "qualifications." What the applicant is seeking is paired with what she has accomplished and is related to that objective. Again, the uncluttered simplicity of the format allies itself with the relevance of the experience to pack a persuasive punch.

However, be careful when using the last slot in the resume. It can have drawbacks. Let's look at another example from a resume.

Bette, who has an international and executive flavor to her life, de-emphasized her unique experiences with their shrouded placement, even though they are listed last. The postscript-like addition to her resume of a "Summary of Experiences" gives the impression she is saying, "Oh, yes. I almost forgot to tell you, I am the president of the board of directors, founder, owner, and

head teacher of a Montessori Learning Center; I was a freelance reporter; I worked in Puerto Rico; I volunteered for the Peace Corps in Afghanistan; and I directed a community action program in New Hampshire. Ho-hum."

She is hiding her light under the proverbial bushel. Such exciting, diverse experiences should be spotlighted by prominent placement in the resume, not given as an afterthought.

Highlighting the irrelevant. Well-meaning advisors tell career seekers to analyze previous jobs and put the analysis on the resume to demonstrate specific skills. However, because of the limited space in a brief document such as a resume, you must carefully choose which job to analyze or you will be end up with irrelevant remarks included in your document.

As a case in point, let's look at Stacy, who is seeking an elementary school teaching position with a writing specialty. As might be expected of a 20-year-old, none of her paid work experience illustrates how well she works with children or how well she writes. In fact, her analysis listed five summers as a desk clerk/assistant manager of a Best Western motel that seemed out of place in a resume targeted for a teaching position.

But when Stacy scrutinized her student teaching experience, she found exciting evidence of special skills in motivating second graders to write.



Executives are inundated with resumes. Make sure that yours is one that is read rather than tossed into the wastebasket.

During the height of hockey fever in a city with a college team fighting fiercely to be No. 1 in the Western Collegiate Hockey Assn., Stacy invited four university hockey players to her class for a talk show. The students each prepared a question to ask the players and Stacy served as the moderator for the videotaped show.

Following the talk show, each child wrote an account of the event. Stacy then asked a local newspaper editor to speak to her class. She also convinced him to edit the children's stories, which were subsequently published in the local paper. This endeavor clearly demonstrates attributes that a school system would want to know about. The talk show, even though it was an isolated event, should be a featured analysis on her resume.

Keeping the employer in the dark.

Graduates are often unsure of how to present themselves when their paid work experiences do not match the jobs for which they are applying. Even when applicants have college degrees that are closely or exactly related to their job objectives, they make employers guess (based primarily on a declared major and transcript) about their potential usefulness as an employee. There is, however, a way to make and demonstrate a match.

Take Jack, for example, an older-than-average student with a BA in biology and a yearning to be a sales representative for a major pharmaceutical company. As far as work experience is concerned, however, his only paid jobs have been as a subpoena server, a wood stove salesman, a waiter, a groundskeeper for a lawn service, and a roustabout for an oil rig.

At first glance, none of these short-term or summer jobs resemble what pharmaceutical sales representatives do. So how can he make something out of what appears to be no experience in pharmaceuticals and also make his unrelated experience match what an employer needs? Jack's task can be likened to pulling single socks out of a dresser drawer in the dark and trying to match them.

The answer lies in asking the right questions. What does a pharmaceutical sales representative do? We know they deal with doctors, but what are doctors like? Most are pressed for time, well educated, want the best for their patients, and don't suffer fools gladly. Thus, the company reps who deal with doctors must be able students who are poised and confident enough not to be intimidated by the doctors' medical training.

They must also be able to present a

good case for buying new products that is both informative and succinct. They must also like to learn in order to stay abreast of new developments in the pharmaceutical field. In addition, a good salesperson must convey a sense of excitement about how new developments will benefit patients.

Pharmaceutical sales representatives also deal with the chemical nature of the products they sell. Good salespeople should be able to answer many complex questions. For example: What are the synergistic potentials of the drug in combination with other drugs? What are the side effects and the dosage recommendations? Sales representatives clearly need a working comprehension of this kind of information. As far as personal characteristics are concerned, pharmaceutical salespeople need to be self-motivated, relish travel, and be able and willing to move often.

After extracting a job profile and pinpointing some functional skills—such as persuasiveness, initiative, and responsibility—from the analysis of what drug company representatives do, can Jack pull evidence from his previously unrelated work experience to demonstrate he has the ability to do the job?

He can if he uses his sales background in wood stoves to show persuasiveness; if he draws on his subpoena serving to demonstrate initiative and self direction; and if he outlines his plans to add some business courses to his education to complement his biology degree and to demonstrate his serious interest in the profession. Furthermore, to show that he keeps up with new developments, he can list the titles of professional magazines he reads regularly.

To be sure your resume is shipshape, take it on a shakedown cruise before sending it to potential employers. Placement, emphasis, realistic expectations, visual cues, and good judgement are all allies in your battle to be noticed by potential employers. You may need to be creative when translating your accomplishments into a resume that will speak to potential employers. Be sure that the most relevant points get the attention they deserve. By following these guidelines and avoiding the five fatal mistakes discussed in this article, you can make your resume work for you. ■

For Additional Information

Full Potential by Robert J. Radin. McGraw-Hill. 212 pages; \$7.95, paperback.
Does Your Resume Wear Blue Jeans? by Edward C. Good. Word Store (1047 Emmet St., Charlottesville, Va. 22905). 179 pages; \$8.95, paperback.