

Executive-Level Resumes Require Special Attention

By John C. Heed

There's a surfeit of resume books offering a host of conflicting advice about how best to construct a resume. The vast majority focus on simple mechanical points -- the use of action verbs, short sentences and bulleted items, keeping it to one page -- that are of little use to senior-level candidates.

At best, they can tell you how to produce an acceptable document. At worst, the guidance is downright damaging. The books ignore higher mental processes that the writer and target audience need to focus on.

Following is a checklist of points aimed at these strategic concerns. While targeted at managerial- and executive-level readers, the principles apply to job seekers at any career stage.

1. Have a specific target. Would you buy a product from a salesman who didn't know what he was selling but had a specific price? The notion of "keeping your options open" is a misguided approach to job hunting, managing a career and, especially, resume writing.

A prospective employer should know in the first two to three lines what type of position you're looking for and in the first 10 to 15 lines the greatest benefits you can bring to the role. Having two or three resumes with different targets still allows for an effective, manageable search.

If you're unable to narrow your target, focus on assessing your skills and career research, not writing your resume.

2. Be empathetic to your audience. Being able to identify with your audience is a crucial skill, not just in resume writing and job hunting but in business in general. This allows you to anticipate and avoid obstacles, present your skills and experience in the most advantageous light and remain focused while preparing your resume.

Some executives have a difficulty with this step because being rewarded for what they do now keeps them from shifting their focus to a new firm, says Donald P. Orlando, owner of the McLean Group, a career coach and business consulting firm in Montgomery, Ala. "It takes a little pressing of the envelope to know what their prospective employer needs," he says.

When interviewing, being empathetic can turn almost any situation to your advantage. Using your goals and history as a starting point will inevitably make you less successful. Instead, learn what your target audience wants and cite skills of greatest interest to them.

3. Inspire confidence in yourself and others. This is among the most important items in the checklist. When you scan your resume, are you brimming with confidence? Can you defend every word in an interview? Is every claim truthful, credible or substantiated in some way? Does the document present the clearest, most convincing and unified picture possible? Does every entry achieve the maximum impact?

If you answered yes to these questions, you have a valuable tool at your disposal. If not, keep working until you can say yes to each one.

4. Show intelligence. I've yet to meet a candidate who thought he was stupid, but declaring "I'm smart" only gets you ridiculed on your way to the circular file. Your resume should show your intelligence in how the information is organized, phrased and formatted. Your intelligence will also come through in the way your resume resolves personal or career problems -- that is, whether an employer will be able to detect them on the resume and how they're presented.

Using appropriate jargon can help if readers will understand the terms. Employers appreciate evidence of intelligence, enough in some cases to overcome significant objections.

5. Succeed on multiple levels. Is your resume effective when scanned quickly, at moderate speed or word-for-word in a detailed manner? To achieve maximum impact, it needs to succeed at each level.

Some writers, especially those who spend days preparing their documents, need outside observers to evaluate their resumes. Some professional resume writers offer free consultations, says Donna Peerce, vice president of writing services at the Heart & Soul Career Center in Nashville, Tenn. "All that a lot of executives need is some help to get that objective viewpoint," she says.

6. Present everything to your greatest advantage. This advice is common sense but many writers frequently fail on this point. Their presentations are poorly formatted, organized or written. Documents are scanned top to bottom, left to right. Information appearing first is presumed to be more important and influences what follows.

Bold type, italics, capital letters, numbers and bullets stand out more than ordinary print. But without highlighting, nothing will seem important. Format your resume for human readers, not a computer scanner. Scanners are widely used with little known results for job seekers. Resumes, including their formatting and organization, are logic puzzles. Solve these puzzles to your greatest advantage.

7. Use a profile or summary section. This section is the first and most important section of your resume's main text. In your first 10 to 15 lines, you should let a prospective employer know what you can do and why you're good at it. Coming immediately after your heading and contact information, a well-written profile puts a positive spin on every entry that follows and eliminates the need for a separate objective.

Typical headings for this section are "synopsis," "profile," "strengths," "profession," "specialty," "key skills/qualifications," "highlights," "summary," "expertise" or "focus." An effective profile will include your skills and/or experience. To be credible, a profile requires a focus on specific, verifiable claims. Almost every item should be substantiated or self-evident.

8. Include skills, scope of responsibility and accomplishments. This is the "holy trinity" of resume writing. Don't shortchange yourself out of concern for length. Your resume should be as

brief as possible without doing a disservice to your candidacy. If you use this checklist, length should be of minimal concern.

9. Quantify where possible. To present the scope of your responsibility and accomplishments effectively, cite specific figures in their proper context. They'll add credibility, highlight specific items, show where you fit into the big picture and address a prospective employer's concerns. Although this may seem counterintuitive, figures make a resume more readable.

10. Decide if you'd hire yourself, if you were the interviewer. If the answer is yes, start circulating your resume with confidence and expect success.

Reprinted by permission from CareerJournal.com © Dow Jones & Co. Inc. All rights reserved.