The Best Resume Gets the Interview

By Bob Langieri

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The rules and tools of job searching have changed, and your career can vary greatly depending on how you use them. You may not need this information now, but reality says that within two or three years you will.

It is no longer enough to just send a resume; it has become critical that you write your resume to be properly handled electronically by the likes of "HAL" of "2001 a Space Odyssey" and still have a format that is appealing to the "human" who actually understands what the company is looking for. You might be the best programmer/analyst, IT manager, or systems administrator, but unless you are also a professional interviewer and professional job seeker, you need to open your mind to learning something new about resume writing.

Resumes are a formal way of introducing people and their qualifications, particularly for white-collar, office, and executive jobs. And resumes have evolved tremendously in the last 15 years, thanks to word processors and email. Let's start with a couple of definitions of the word "resume":

- *A summing up; a condensed statement; an abridgment or brief recapitulation.* (<u>Source</u>: *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc.).
- *A brief account of one's professional or work experience and qualifications, often submitted with an employment application* (<u>Source</u>: T*he American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.)

You Are Competing Against the World

The Internet and email have really changed how you look for a job as well as how you present your skills. When a company advertises a position, it is no longer just in the local paper; it is tied to job boards, and those job boards have a global reach. When I advertise a position for a Programmer in Southern California on <u>my Web site,</u> I receive resumes from all over the United States and even other countries. Over the past years, for some states, the opportunities had not been as prolific as in Southern California with over 4000 IBM System i5, iSeries, and AS400 systems. While the numbers of installed systems are about the same in February 2011, unemployment has risen dramatically all across the US with states like California being hit exceptionally hard. When I post a job opening for an RPG Programmer Analyst, I get 50+ resumes a day from a combination of local people, out-of-state and a number of H1-B non-residents looking for contract work. Sorting through the usual barrage of resumes and phone calls is a challenge and very time consuming. Employers are going through same dilemma and usually get a large number of unqualified resumes which slows them down further. If I do a search for RPG resumes in the Los Angeles metro area, I will get about 200 resume hits. Only a few may be a good match for my current needs. Because of the larger than normal pool of good people, employers are being more specific about what skills they will accept, insist on software or ERP packages they use, even specify maximum commuting distances. In other words they want someone that has everything. Because we recruiters need to make the call as to which 5 or 6 resumes we submit out of 20 or 30 good resumes, it is critical that your resume is clear about your skills, well written and stay within a 2 – 3 page maximum.

The Purpose of the Resume

So what is the resume supposed to be in today's job market? What should it do? Do you really need one, or should you just fill out an application? A good resume can open doors to not only a job, but also a challenging and rewarding career opportunity that could help you advance quickly by getting you that *special* job.

Think of your resume as your ad in the yellow pages that jumps out and says, "Call me first; I have what you need." It is your opportunity to advertise your skills and abilities and show why you would be an asset to the potential employer. It's your opportunity to give the employer reasons to interview you. It is the "door opener." A poorly written resume could kill any chance of an interview.

While a good resume can't do all the work for you, it can lay the groundwork. It is the first impression you make on an employer. How it is written--the grammar, highlights, and facts, selling information, and formatting--is crucial. Think of your resume as an ad in a magazine or an interesting photograph. It must attract someone's interest visually. If not, the screener will turn the page and move on. People who are looking at hundreds of resumes tend to take more time with the ones that are easy to read or that allow certain skills to stand out.

HR's Dilemma

In the '80s and early '90s, companies mostly received local resumes that were mailed or faxed. Now, they receive 10 to 20 times the number of resumes they used to, partly because people see postings on the Web. They also receive more unqualified resumes because submitting resumes by email is easy and free. Companies are now forced to deal with a higher volume of resumes from people who are unqualified or geographically undesirable. Each resume must be opened and qualified or disqualified *as quickly as possible*, but that's often challenging.

Let me give you an example. One of my clients gave me a search assignment for an MIS manager of a small shop. He warned me that Human Resources (HR) had put the position on one of the job boards, had received about 300 resumes the first week, and was in the process of reviewing them. I arranged five interviews directly with the VP of Operations within 48 hours of getting the assignment. One of my candidates had also responded to the job board posting, but he hadn't heard anything from the company. That person got a second interview with the company, and the company still had no clue that they had his resume. Within days, I filled the position, and the company did nothing with the 300 resumes. They were overwhelmed. For your resume to have a chance of being seen, you need to draft a resume that gets the company's attention and get your resume in early.

The Age of Automation

A growing number of companies are using resume-tracking software to deal with the volume of resumes they have to deal with. Keep in mind that companies are not only looking for developers and systems support people, they are also looking for people in customer service, sales, accounting, etc. There are no less than 100 different software packages out there for tracking potential candidates. Most search firms use the same type of software. It can be fabulous when used effectively, but it is not perfect. Remember: Garbage in, garbage out. Never send your resume as a .PDF because it cannot be imported.

All of the tracking systems I have seen work pretty much the same way. A type of search engine imports resumes. It is assumed that the first line on your document is your name, the second line is your street address, and the third is your city, state, and ZIP. The fourth line is your home phone number, the fifth is your business or cell phone number, and the sixth line is your email address. The import process populates

those fields in the order I described. The software is also fine-tuned based on the company's own "data dictionary" to populate fields such as hardware, software skills, job titles, programming languages, duties, industry type, and education. It is quite simple yet quite amazing...and imperfect. Once the resume is imported, HR still needs to verify and correct any errors. This software works great when you have a plain-text resume without any special formatting like columns, logos, or text boxes. But things go wrong. For example, if you use the words "Resume of" above or before your name, the database picks up "Resume" as first name and "of" as last name. The person importing your resume could be a temporary clerk who may or may not correct your name and contact information. More importantly, that person may not verify that your primary skill sets and job title are correctly entered.

When a typical IT resume is imported, the software may correctly categorize you as a programmer or developer, but it might also incorrectly populate other fields, listing you as marketing, accounting, data entry, and customer service. It may have failed to pick up that you are a business analyst, project leader, or systems administrator. These categories need to be corrected one by one. When resumes are imported in batch mode, it is too much trouble for HR to go back and correct all of the resumes that did not import correctly. To help increase your odds of your resume being categorized correctly for screening and appealing to the human factor, I will enlighten you on key tips to enhance your resume.

Resume Form and Function

Your resume should have these key ingredients:
- Name your resume document the same as your name – **FirstName_LastName.doc**
- Complete contact information
- An objective
- A work history/experience summary (List technical skills, hardware, software, etc.)
- An education summary

While this sounds straightforward, people do not always get their information across to the person reading the resume. If you were to look through a random stack of 100 resumes, you would know what I mean. **How can I find Your resume when I get 100 resumes called resume.doc?** There are resumes you'd want to read and resumes you'd barely glance at. When HR reviews your resume, they're generally looking for a reason to rule you out and narrow down the resumes that they really want to consider. How can you increase your odds?

To begin with, your contact information must be complete and in the correct order, as shown:

John Smith
123 S. Cedar St.
Riverside, CA. 91277
909+222-1111 home
909+700-5555 cell   (*Note:* This could optionally be a business phone.)
jsmith@gmail.com

Since resume-tracking software assumes this is the order of your contact information, don't disappoint the software. I cannot understand why a person would send an electronic resume and not include an email address <u>on the resume</u>. When your email is deleted, your email address is also deleted and lost. Make it easy for the employer to find you: put your email address on the resume so it stays with your resume. Leaving out your address implies two things: that you are probably not a local candidate and that you might be on a fishing expedition and not seriously looking. Incomplete contact information also requires HR to find and manually key in your contact information, which they may not bother to do.

I cannot understand why a person would send an electronic resume and not include an email address on it. When your email is deleted, your email address is also deleted and lost. Put your email address on the resume so it stays with your resume. Most initial contact with a candidate is by email. Make it *easy* for the employer or recruiter to contact you. Also, put your home or personal email address on the resume rather than your business email. It's just not a good idea to use your employer's email server to do your job searching. Your company may have set up filters to search for any email that uses the words "resume" or "work history" or similar terms. Furthermore, using your employer's email address indicates that you're using your company's time for personal business, which is a very bad impression to give to a company you'd like to work for.

While word processing programs offer slick tools to generate creative resumes, keep it simple. Remember that this resume is being imported by a program that expects a simple text document without columns, fancy fonts, images, text boxes, or tables. Use these and you might lose your chance to have a human look at your resume. When I get a resume that has any of these elements, the first thing I must do is eliminate them before I import the resume. You can do a nice job on a resume using just the "Normal" style selection in Microsoft Word.

Functional or Chronological Resume

The preferred resume style is the chronological resume, in which your job history is listed with the most recent job first. A functional resume talks more about accomplishments, without saying when or where. I personally like a blend--a chronological format but with a list of accomplishments in bullet points to highlight special skills. I feel this format is most effective.

Format

For the text of your resume, I recommend that you use the most common fonts, either Times New Roman 12 or Arial 10 or 11. You can maybe use a larger point size for your name. Be consistent and use the same font throughout your resume. Use bold for your name and for headings like Objective, Summary, Work History, and Education.

A resume that is text from margin to margin tends to be difficult to read. It also doesn't allow special skills to stand out. There must be enough "white space" between paragraphs and headings so that your resume is easy to read. The formatting must have good margins. Typically, you should use one-inch margins. That being said, if you have two or three lines that spill over to page three, you can shrink your margin down to three-quarters of an inch.

Objective

Present your resume in a positive manor. Start with a positive statement in your Objective section. Don't box yourself into a corner by stating that you are an excellent programmer. Word your objective so that an employer gets the message that you are versatile and have more than one value to offer. Make use of accomplishments, awards, and projects that you played a key role in. A sample objective that you can build on would go like this:

Objective: Seeking a challenging and rewarding opportunity in which my experience with programming and business systems analysis can be fully utilized and I can contribute to the effectiveness of the Information Technology department and the user community.

Summary of Experience

Make it easy for the reader to understand your skills with a brief "Summary of Experience." I have found that resumes get better results when they include a summary that shows the employer five or six skills they're looking for. Make it easy for the resume screener to say, "Yes, I want to schedule an interview." Based on my 30 years of experience with getting candidates interviews, I strongly believe that the top third to top half of your resume determines how closely your resume is looked at. Remember what I said about your resume being like an ad. You must get reviewers' attention and create interest or they will move on to the next resume. Sell your experience, but avoid sounding boastful and self-centered.

A good way to present your summary would be to use bullet points to telegraph your message. Don't make each statement a paragraph. Use a short sentence for each point. Use these points to paint a picture to summarize years of experience, industry knowledge, special skills or tools, scope of responsibilities (large shop), major accomplishments, etc. Here's an example:

Summary of Experience:

- Over 15 years experience in programming, analysis, and systems design
- Excellent skills with RPG IV, RPG LE, RPG400
- Software experience includes BPCS (5 years) JD Edwards (3 years), PRMS (2 years), EDI (9 years)
- Project Leader for evaluating and implementing RFID system resulting in $1 million ROI
- Managed a team of 3 developers and 1 systems administrator
- Industry experience includes logistics/supply chain, manufacturing, and retail

Hardware, Software, and Languages

For technical resumes, it is a good idea to include a heading for Hardware, Software, and Languages because companies may be using this as a basis for screening. Put the most recent hardware, software, or programming languages first to emphasize your current skills. Include the obscure software, like utilities (EDI, change management, backup and recovery), as well as the ERP software. Include any desktop PC tools like Office, Access, Excel, MS Project, Visio, and Crystal Reports if you have worked with them. (These tools are used more and more to provide executives with special reports.) If you've had classes in Java, but no experience, include Java but say "Java (classes only)." For skills that you only have minimal experience in, say that you have "some exposure with ABC software." If you have been programming in RPG since the 1970s, you may not want to include that. Talk about your RPG IV, RPG LE, and RPG400 skills.

Work History

How far back should you go without telling someone how old you are? My rule of thumb is 15 to 20 years. You can add or subtract from that: Maybe you want to show that you had a long tenure with a certain employer many years ago. And if 10 or more years ago, you had a job you were at for only six months or less, it might be best to leave that off. If the last few jobs show very short durations, be sure to go back far enough to show some longevity.

It is best to use month and year when listing your work history. Not doing so tells me that you probably have some big gaps that you don't want me to know about. On an employment application, it is standard procedure to ask for month and year. Make sure your dates are accurate. Use the same dates on your resume as on the application to avoid raising a red flag. If your dates are found to be erroneous before you're hired, you likely won't be; if your dates are found to be erroneous after you're hired, it is grounds for termination. This is also true about degrees or certifications. More and more companies are doing background checks, even after you start the job.

Education

If you have a four-year degree, list it. If you will complete your degree in the next 6 to 12 months, then list the college and say "degree in progress--expected BS degree January 2006." List any certifications, along with a date and certification number when applicable. List any related classes that you have taken at a college or technical school. If you list the date of your college undergraduate degree, you are implying your age, and you need not put that on your resume.

Additional Pointers: Do's and Don'ts

- Don't include personal information such as marital status, religion, or political affiliation. That's nobody's business but yours!
- Be honest about jobs, titles, dates, what you can do well, and what you have minimal knowledge of. Today, many facts can be verified in a background check.
- List the type of position you are looking for using generic terms like "Programmer/Analyst" or "Systems Administrator."
- Keep your resume to two pages (preferred) and three maximum. Nobody wants to read a book.
- Check spelling, check grammar, check spelling again, and then have a technical colleague check spelling for you. There is no excuse for spelling errors. It shows that you are not careful in your work.
- Tailor your resume to what the company is looking for. When an ad lists several skill sets that they require, use that list as your bullet points to summarize your skills.
- Keep your sentences short to avoid grammatical errors. Know when to start a new paragraph. This adds white space to your document and makes it easier to read.
- Send your resume to a friend, have them print it, and see how your resume looks when it is received. Never just paste your resume into your email. Send it as an attachment and use a current copy of MS Word. If you are still using Works for Windows or Corel WordPerfect, which I loved, go out and get a current copy of MS Office, as it is the standard word processing tool used by over 80% of the world.
- Never send your resume as a .PDF document because it cannot be imported to tracking software.
- Never put salary history on a resume unless the company asks for it, and then submit it on a separate attachment. Should you have a peer interview, the employer would not want your potential co-workers knowing your salary history. However, if you are sending your resume to a recruiter like me, we need to know your current salary and the salary range you'd consider.
- Give more detail about your duties on your recent jobs and less on the jobs that were 10 or 15 years ago.
- Create different versions of your resume, depending on the different job titles you are pursuing.
- List activities or interest that may relate to your career (user groups, COMMON, etc.), but avoid things like movies, jogging, and off-road racing.
- Don't use "third-person" resumes. They sound stuffy and conceited. Example: "Mr. Johnson is an excellent analyst."
- State "References available upon request" on the last line of your resume. Keep a current reference list on a separate document that you can submit when asked. Get permission to use references and include their daytime contact information.
- Update your resume once a year even if you are not looking. Add any new skills.
- I repeat – name your resume the same as you name! example: **Bob Daniels - resume.doc**

First Impressions Are Critical

Your resume is the first chance you have to make an impression. How it looks and reads is almost as important as the experience you have. It's a sample of how well you communicate. Be sure to write your resume with the automated resume importing tools in mind. There is not one perfect resume format, and you will find variations everywhere you look. The Web is full of resume tips and samples. You can also visit my Web site for a small sampling of resumes for iSeries and network personnel.

As long as you remember the points I discussed, you will be able to develop your resume into a successful tool to increase your chances to get the interview.

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