Standing Out With Your Resume and Cover Letter

▶

When you're looking for a job, your resume is your ticket of entry at your target companies — provided it is well-crafted. The problem for many people is that it's not easy to put together a document that will capture a hiring manager's interest.

Fortunately, you don't need a magic formula to create a strong resume and cover letter. Here are some tips for showcasing what you can offer a potential employer.

Choosing a resume format

Each of the three most common resume formats is appropriate for certain situations and less so for others.

Chronological. A chronological resume is the most popular with hiring managers. With this type of resume, you list your work experience in a reverse-chronological sequence, the most recent first. The principal advantage of this format is that it gives employers an easy-to-follow snapshot of your work experience and professional accomplishments.

Functional. A functional resume is organized according to your skills and other attributes. Although this format can be beneficial in certain situations — if you are re-entering the workforce after a long absence, for instance — you run a risk that interviewers may find the layout confusing or hard to follow.

Combination. A combination resume showcases your skills and accomplishments and features an abbreviated version of your work history, including dates of employment and the names of companies you've worked for. Because of this, a combination resume can be an effective way to emphasize your skills without obscuring your work history.

Zeroing in on your targets

Rather than creating a standard document that you submit to every company that interests you, tailor your resume to each opportunity. Use the job ad as your guide, emphasizing your background and abilities that most closely match what the company is looking for. This may mean placing more focus on your certifications and "strong presentation skills" for one prospective employer, while playing up your

"self-directed" nature and "proven ability to be effective with minimal supervision" for another.

Senior executives were asked, *"Do you prefer to receive a resume written in a chronological format that is organized by dates of employment, or one in a functional format that is organized by skills?"* Their responses:
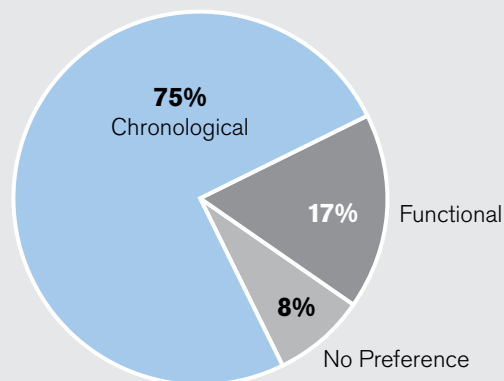
- 75% Chronological
- 17% Functional
- 8% No Preference

Source: Robert Half survey of 150 senior executives from 1,000 of the largest companies in the United States

Determining length and what experience to emphasize

Document length should ultimately be determined by the depth of your experience. If your career spans 20 years and includes positions with increasing responsibility, don't be so concerned about brevity that you gloss over your credentials. On the other hand, don't make your resume longer than necessary to appear more qualified.
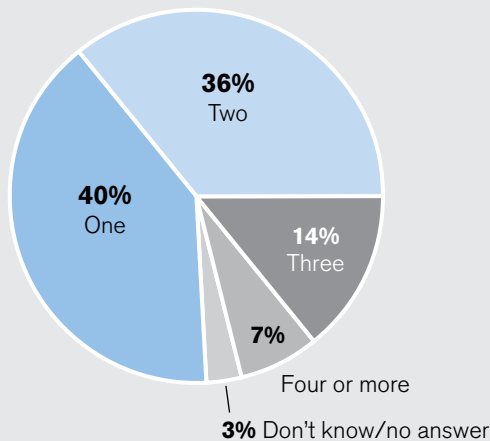
Robert Half®

Clearing the clutter

Instead of describing every task you performed in previous jobs, write a one- to two-sentence overview of your role, followed by a bulleted list of your most important duties and noteworthy achievements.

At the same time, don't clutter your resume with extraneous personal information. For instance, many job hunters meander off track by including hobbies or interests that have little or no relevance to their professional pursuits. Before sending your resume, review each point and ask yourself, "Does this add value?"

Executives were asked, *"How many typos in a resume does it take for you to decide not to consider a job candidate for a position with your company?"* Their responses:

36%
Two

40%
One

14%
Three

7%
Four or more

3% Don't know/no answer

Source: Robert Half survey of 150 senior executives from 1,000 of the largest companies in the United States

Using keywords

Many resumes are first evaluated by computer programs that scan the documents for keywords from the job ad. You can help your resume make the cut by incorporating these terms, assuming they accurately describe your skills and experiences. For example, if the job ad seeks someone who is experienced in billing, collections and payroll, consider changing your wording from "experienced in all aspects of accounting and financial management" to specific mentions of these areas.

Remaining error-free

With computer spell-check so readily available, there's no excuse for submitting a resume full of typos or misspellings. Even with this feature, though, there are certain types of errors that can go undetected. Be sure to proofread your document multiple times (and ask a friend to take a look, too) to make sure it's error-free.

E-mailing and posting online

Thanks to the Internet, you can distribute your resume more easily and widely than ever, but you need to be careful. When applying for a position through a company's website or online job board, make sure you've attached the right document. When e-mailing your resume, paste it into the body of the message and include it as either a Word file or PDF attachment, unless the job posting requests another method of submission.

Sample Resumes
Click on each resume to enlarge.
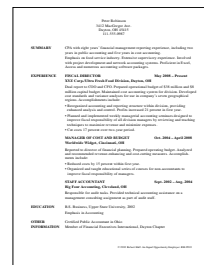
Chronological Resume
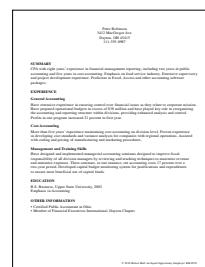
Functional Resume

Combination Resume

Robert Half®

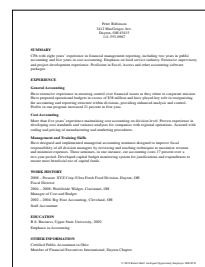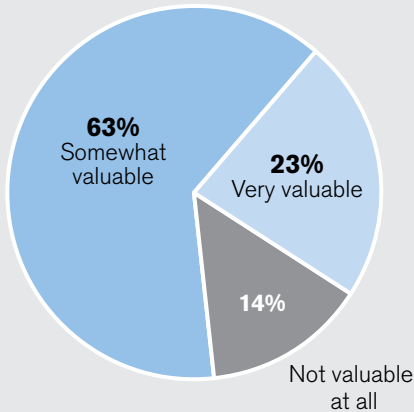Executives were asked, *"When evaluating prospective job candidates, how valuable is the cover letter that accompanies the resume?"* Their responses:

63%
Somewhat
valuable

23%
Very valuable

14%

Not valuable
at all

Source: Robert Half survey of 150 senior executives from 1,000 of the largest companies in the United States

Considering the case for a cover letter

Some people feel that including a cover letter with their resume isn't necessary. But this document can be invaluable for entry-level professionals or those who seek a career change.

These tips can help you create a cover letter that'll make a hiring manager want to learn more about you:

Keep it brief. Your cover letter should be concise. Keep it to two or three paragraphs.

Customize the content. Like with your resume, it's important to target your cover letter to each job opening. Determine which of your accomplishments are most relevant by looking at the job posting.

Avoid rehashing your resume. Look at your letter and resume as separate but related documents. They should complement one another without being repetitive. Expand upon one or two key points from your resume to better key into the potential employer's needs.

Address any concerns. The cover letter also is a place to explain anything that might prompt a question from a hiring manager, such as a gap in employment. Briefly explain why you were out of work and, more important, what you have been doing since then to keep your skills up-to-date.

Be web savvy. When applying online for a position, paste your cover letter into the body of the e-mail message or into the appropriate field on an online application form.

Putting your best foot forward

As you prepare your resume and cover letter, keep in mind that they are the basis of a first impression for a hiring manager. Even well-crafted ones may not assure you of a job interview, but documents poorly prepared will almost certainly work against you.

Sample Cover Letter
Click on cover letter to enlarge.

105 West St.
Baton Rouge, LA, 43090

September 16, 2010

Mr. Ben Clemens
Vice President, Marketing
Delicious Food & Beverage
123 Elm St.
Louisville, KY 00302

Dear Mr. Clemens:

A good friend of mine, Mary Johnson, mentioned to me yesterday that you were looking for a Director of Marketing. I am very interested in this position and feel I have the qualifications you are looking for.

As you can see from my resume, I have more than ten years' experience in marketing, virtually all of it in the food and beverage industry. In fact, much of this work parallels the chief responsibilities of the job you are seeking to fill.

In addition, I know quite a bit about Delicious Food & Beverage, having worked with several of your salespeople when I was with UltraFresh. I know that you have a fast-paced, entrepreneurial atmosphere and that you place high value on teamwork and loyalty. I know that I can bring those qualities – and more – to this job.

I will follow up with you next week to discuss the opportunity to meet in person. Thank you for your interest and your time.

Sincerely,

Jill Jobseeker

© 2010 Robert Half. An Equal Opportunity Employer. RH-0910

Robert Half®

1.800.803.8367
rhi.com