

How to Get Your Resume Read

By Katie Darden

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While job applicants spend considerable time working up a great looking resume, the real key is making sure it gets in front of the right person, and that it gets read. So, the key questions have always been...

- How long should my resume be?
- Which resume is best - chronological (by job) or functional (by skill cluster)?
- How much information should I share?
- What about gaps in employment?
- Should I use a cover letter?
- How long does the company keep the resumes? Or do they?

Well, recently Career Master Institute surveyed more than 2,500 randomly selected Fortune 500 companies and members of the Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) to find out what the hiring professionals were looking for when they receive resumes. The information they got back fits with my own personal experience of over 20 years working in the HR field.

Here are some of the numerical results, along with some comments from me.

About the survey: Companies represented diverse industries and ranged from fewer than 100 employees (29%) to more than 5,000 employees (4%) in the following categories: business and professional services (23%), manufacturing (20%), finance, insurance and real estate (13%), non-profit (9%) and health services (6%).

Paraphrased questions and numerical results:

- How long should a resume be?
60% of the respondents said that the length depends on the level of the position. Comments: This means that if you are new to the workplace, your resume should be no more than a page. If you have extensive experience that is related to the position for which you are applying, a two-pager will be okay. However, even with lots of experience, most managers will more favorably view the resume that is limited to two pages. Remember, this is an introduction, so keep it brief, make it relevant, and they can always get more information from you if they feel it's necessary. Also, and this is VERY important - a resume is not a confessional. Don't put everything on there - just what is relevant.
- Which resume is best - chronological or functional?

While 40% preferred the traditional chronological resume, 50% preferred a combination of the two styles or types.

Comments: As you are writing your resume, ask yourself: 'What do I want this employer to buy?' When you are applying for a position that is a natural progression from what you have already done, a chronological resume may be all you need - you are selling the employer on your proven history.

If you are moving into a new career, taking a sideways step, have many gaps in your employment, or are new to the job market, a functional resume is more likely to show your capabilities - which is what you are selling in this case. Often a functional resume with a short listing of relevant employers and dates of employment will work well.

- How many years of related background would you like to see in a resume?

A full 70% of those polled want to see between five and ten years of experience (if you have that much). Of those, 30% wanted at least five years.

Comments: If your experience is quite old, not relevant, in a different field, or in some way not applicable, don't include it! If it's relevant but dated (for instance you've been working on computers since Univac was new), you can lump it into a more generic format, and eliminate the details. Also, if you are an older employee who is concerned about being considered 'overqualified', you may choose to leave out some of your earlier employment or details that might prevent you from being selected for an interview.

- What about gaps in employment?

Wondering if it will help or hurt your chances if you explain the gaps? 74% of those polled say they would welcome valid explanations of employment gaps or job hopping. On the other hand, 22% said they don't trust explanations of employment gaps.

Comments: Remember, your resume is NOT a confession. There is no need to include any information that you feel might limit your ability to get the interview so you can present your skills to the hiring manager. If you have a valid and 'reasonable' reason, go ahead and state it. Otherwise, leave it out.

This is where a listing of 'Relevant Employment' on a functional resume is useful. You've already identified your list as being only the relevant jobs, so there may be gaps. Be prepared in the interview, however to give a good explanation in case you are asked.

Again, this doesn't have to be a confession, so if your gap was for less than positive reasons, look for the most positive aspect that you can talk about and honestly claim. For instance, if you were asked to resign, you could reframe that to say that you left to pursue a different venture. If the reason could negatively bias the hiring manager, it might be best to leave it out entirely.

Also remember that today people shift their professions as frequently as they used to change jobs. Having many different jobs is not necessarily considered a detriment any longer. In fact, some of my clients have been questioned more closely on why they held the same job for more than 5-7 years.

- What single item is most valuable in a resume?

The single most valuable item on the resume for 88% of the hiring managers was verifiable accomplishments.

Comments: A hiring manager is looking for what you can do for the organization. When s/he sees specific results (including numbers, percentages, progression), that implies you can do the same for

them. Use words that denote accomplishment (produced, created, eliminated, improved) and numbers to identify how much (25% increase in revenue). This information must be honest and verifiable. Don't even think about fudging here.

- Should I use a cover letter?

Interestingly, 20% didn't care whether a cover letter was included or not and 20% said a form letter was acceptable. However, 60% wanted a personalized letter.

Comments: The higher the position, the more important a cover letter is for insuring a professional presence. If you are going to send a cover letter, take the time to make it relevant to the position and the company, just as you would a resume.

The applicants who take the time to show the hiring manager (a) they understand the organization/company and its challenges (b) how they can be an asset and (c) specifically how their qualifications apply to the position are the ones that will be considered first.

- Does proofing and format count?

76% of the hiring managers said they remove an application if they find typos or grammatical errors. And, 83% prefer white or off-white paper.

Comments: In this day of spell checking on our computers, there is little excuse for typos. Remember that this is their first impression, so it's essential that you present your best self. Take the few extra moments to verify names and numbers. Ask a friend to review for obvious mistakes, and every time you make a change, run it through the spell checker again.

The most obvious reason to use other than white-colored paper is to make your resume stand out. The most obvious reason to use white is so that other reviewers can read the photocopies!!

One applicant I interviewed sent a beautiful resume on beige parchment. It looked great, the qualifications were wonderful, but the photocopier printed a dark grey copy that was difficult for the other reviewers to read. They all complained, until I showed them the original, which was quite readable.

Even though this highly qualified applicant did get the job, the unreadable copies could easily have prevented the panel from viewing her favorably. This is even more important in those cases where HR retains the original resume and is not directly involved in the hiring process, or where you fax your resume. Make it easy for them to recognize your value!! If you want to stand out, use a linen paper or something with a slight texture.

- How do organizations prefer to receive resumes?

I'll let the results speak for themselves here. Obviously they add up to more than 100% because most places accept resumes in different formats:

-By mail ... 10%

-By attachment as a Microsoft Word document to an email ... 60%

-By text in the body of an email ... 20%

-By fax ... 10% -No preference ... 20%

Comments: Notice only 10% prefer resumes to come in by mail. Now more than ever it's important to have several different formats for sending resumes. Once you create the resume, make sure it looks the way you want in the several different formats by sending it to yourself.

- How long does your organization keep resumes on file?

-Zero to one month ... 0%

- One to three months ... 0%
- Three to six months ... 30%
- More than six months ... 70%

Comments: I found these responses very interesting since only two of my prior employers wanted to retain resumes. Both were governmental agencies, and one retained applications for 6 months while the other retained them for 3 years. In every other hiring situation, the resumes were destroyed as soon as the hiring was complete. Given that many of those positions received 70 or more applications, retaining them all could have been a storage nightmare.

Along these same lines, the survey found that approximately 50% of the organizations use a scanning or database system to manage resumes. Another reason to use white paper.

And what did these hiring managers most want from applicants? They wanted the applicant to research the company and know something about it, to be clear and definite about what they wanted from the organization - and to express that in their cover letter and interview, and they wanted accurate and current information on the resumes they received.

Makes sense to me. The easiest way to get the job you want is to be clear about the company you want to work for, clear about what you have to offer to them, and clear about where you want to fit in. When you can share this with a prospective employer who needs your services, why would they NOT want to interview you?

Note: These survey statistics taken from an article by Louise Garver in the 5/30/03 issue of CareerNewz, an iEntry publication.

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