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Gimme One Reason to Scrap Your Resume...

Do's and Don'ts Of IT Resume Writing

After a month of going through resumes and interviews, I've decided to tackle the resume gap. The resume gap is the distance between your resume and the job you want to get. The further your application is from a particular job posting, the more likely it is going to get tossed into the abyss of deleted job applications. And it doesn't take much to fall through the cracks.

Does this sound familiar?

"I sent out over 300 resumes, and NO ONE got back to me!!"

It's an amazing attitude to have while job hunting, but nonetheless prevalent. This poor, unlucky soul desperately needs help and obviously knows nothing about the resume gap. So if that's you--even if you've never been tempted to say that sentence out loud--read on.

Before we start, let's get some hard truths out of the way.

Hard Truths

Every job posting gets hundreds of resumes, regardless of skill and experience level required. Of those hundreds, maybe 20 or 25 will get short-listed; and of those, maybe 5 or 10 will get interviewed. So, do the math, and you'll see that you are a needle in a haystack of needles all wanting to get hand-picked.

We are in an employers market now, which means that more people are hoping for any job they can get. Today, there are a innumerable out-of-work, recently down-sized, over-qualified IT veterans, and still more newly graduated, freshly certified, under-experienced, over-enthusiastic IT neophytes all dying to be hired by the end of the week.

This means that as an employer looking for IT personnel, I have to be cut-throat and objective. It means I can probably get the exact candidate I want, and maybe even for less money than a few years ago. This means that too much of my time is spent going through too many poor resumes. So, all I need is one, tiny, little reason to fling your resume into the chum bucket of death.

Just one.

How do you avoid the dreaded recycle bozo bin? What are you doing wrong, and right, from the employer's perspective? What do you need to do or to do better to get short-listed, interviewed, and hired?

Rule #1 – Stand out

Rule Number #1 of every resume is to stand out. Everyone knows that, but almost no one seems to do it well. Want to know the easiest way to stand out? A cover letter. A GREAT cover letter.

A wonderful cover letter will show me, the IT employer, who you are before I even glance at your

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qualifications. A letter is much more personal than a resume, and a good cover letter helps me get to know you. Here's a sample from my favourite cover letter...

"As detailed in the attached resume, I pride myself on bringing together both the precision and the flexibility that comes with my level of education in writing and research. My background in teaching has allowed me to develop organisational and teamwork skills in high-pressure, fast-paced settings, as well as to recognise the huge impact that the smallest detail can have in such environments.... It seems a rarity that I should come across a position that draws on all of these strengths while allowing me the opportunity for additional growth, and I do appreciate that..."

This person got an interview; this person subsequently got the job. This cover letter was tailor-made for this company, this position, and the skills listed in the job posting.

No cover letter for me, no interview for you. Simple as that.

Another way to stand out is to have all the requirements of the position clearly mentioned in both your cover letter and your resume. Another way to stand out is to inject a little of your personality:

"I work with Windows, UNIX, LINUX, and regrettably Mac operating systems."

"I actively pursue all my hobbies."

"Cheeky, talented web guru seeks part time fling with groovy design agencies. Superhuman knowledge of W3C standards, including HTML and CSS. Good spelur."

The hilarity of "Good spelur" leads me to the next rule for your resume...

Rule #2 – No errors

No errors. No grammatical problems. Not one spelling mistake, and especially NO hyperlinks that go nowhere. I have ditched a dozen resumes because their "online material" led me directly to a 404 page. That spells "unreliable" and "not worth my time." In other words, File under G for Garbage.

Don't give me a URL and then say, "Sorry but that link isn't working at the moment." It's better to leave the URL out.

Your cover letter and resume must be flawless. FLAW-LESS. While most IT jobs don't require much writing, almost all require some form of documentation. Thus, one little mistake here may be reason enough to recycle your application.

And it might not be a typo. It might be that you forgot to change the name in the "Dear So-and-so" greeting. For some employers, that's enough to get tossed like a Frisbee.

Rule #3 – Show me you're qualified

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? I was shocked by the number of people who submitted resumes who seemed to have none of the skills, experience or education needed. One cover letter said that our position was "perfect" for them and they were the "ideal candidate," but I couldn't for the life of me figure out why. I don't know you, and I don't know what you've done: you have to show me. Point me in the right direction and spell it out for me. If you don't..."You are the weakest link. Good-bye."

Your resume is the showcase of your skills to date. This is the place to show off what you've done and what you can do, where you're going and where you've been.

If you are a novice with no experience and you haven't done anything or been anywhere, you need to tell
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me what your future plans and ambitions are. If you are a veteran, you need to show me why you're both qualified and not over-qualified.

If you are applying for an IT position, you must highlight your IT skills especially. Otherwise, how would an employer know what IT skills you have? Mention the computer classes you've taken. Explain the job skills that you've learned. Mention how you taught yourself. Talk about your computer hobbies that you've spent hours honing and now want the chance to use professionally.

If your resume shows me nothing but retail sales, restaurants, and the like, you need to show me why I should hire you into an IT position. Classes, volunteer work, contract work, etc. Show me what you know and where you learned it from.

And by the way, I don't care what your high scores were. I don't care if you love video games and play them all the time. Unless you developed the game yourself, don't bother. Video games do not count as IT experience.

This next point is very important: Always mention all of the job requirements in your cover letter and in your resume. Put them front and center. If the job posting says you need to know A, B, C, D and E, then you should have all of those skills and you should clearly show me that you do. I'll be looking for those requirements in the hordes of resumes, so you had better have them all.

What if you don't have one of the skills?

"Though I currently have not played much with E, I know that I am able to learn it quickly on my own time."

"While I have no work experience with B or C, I have used similar software in several courses in school, and I know I can learn both very quickly in a production environment."

Still mention it. Why? If I don't have a qualified candidate (and that happens a lot), I'll be looking for the next best thing.

Rule #4 – One at a time

Simple: one job at a time. The cover letter and the resume must be individually addressed and the text must apply to THIS one position. I know you're looking for a job and applying for many jobs, but I am looking for ONE candidate for my ONE job. If you don't seem to fit as perfectly as that final jigsaw puzzle piece, I won't even notice you in the paper shuffle. Trash bin.

If your resume and cover letter email are not tailored, then I may not immediately see why I should hire you for my job. To get short-listed, you need to show me you have all the skills I need and more. In fact, if you don't list off all the skills that I've taken the time to list in my job posting, then I will likely skip you over for any candidate who does, sometimes even regardless of education or experience.

For example, if you have 5 years experience, but are missing two tech skills I need (or you have them, but don't mention them), I may go for a less experienced candidate who lists all the skills I need. From my point of view, the less experienced candidate is still the better fit.

Rule #5 – File format

Personally, I don't even print out the resumes until they are short-listed and on my "Must Interview" list. Why waste the paper? So, make sure your resume can be scanned on screen. Make sure it is in a format that the majority of people have: HTML, PDF, DOC, RTF...

The particular format isn't important so long as I can open it. And don't bother to mention that you've sent your resume in xxx format just to make sure I can open it:

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"I wasn't sure what format you'd like the resume in, so if you can't open it just E-mail me back and I'll send it in the format you prefer. Or I could just post it on the web and send you the link."

This person did not get an interview. Why? Too much useless information. What would have been better? Saying nothing at all would have been better, actually. If you feel you must draw attention to your resume format, give me something that I can use:

"If you would like to see my resume online, go to <http://www.here-is-my-resume.com>."

Now you've covered all the bases. I certainly will NOT be emailing you just so I can get your resume in a format that I can read. If I can't open it, you are tossed in the garbage faster than rotten lettuce.

Have your resume ready in several formats if you want to be really sure. Check the job posting for hints about what format is best. If they are looking for someone who knows Microsoft Operating Systems, you're pretty safe submitting a Word document. If you're applying for a developer or UNIX position, a text file is probably best.

Rule #6 – Apply ASAP

Don't bother applying for old job postings. Most positions get filled as quickly as possible. Most companies receive an onslaught of resumes in the first week, and then they continue to trickle in. The problem is that job postings online seem to last forever. If you haven't submitted your resume within a week of two of the posting, the position is probably filled. If not, the company has likely already reached their limit for resumes. That doesn't mean resumes stop coming in, just that we stop reading them.

There is one exception to this rule, however. If this is a senior position with a large number of requisite skills, it could be that not even a single qualified candidate has applied yet.

And answer ASAP. Make sure you check your email and phone messages daily. If I'm trying to set up an interview with you, I want to reach you today, and I want you to get back to me ASAP. It will convey initiative if you do, and a lack of interest if you don't.

A final note

If you are the cream of the crop – the in-demand specialist with experience, education, and all the skills needed and dreamed of – you will be interviewed. You may even get the job. If, however, you're not 1 of 3 people in the whole world with that particular combination and skill and talent, then you have to work a bit harder to make sure you are interviewed. Don't shoot yourself in the foot by sending out a ton of resumes, scattering your name around the email world willy-nilly. Don't get lost in the shuffle because you didn't take the time to think about and really apply yourself to each application. You do not get interviewed when you use the napalm approach. Getting the job requires precision.

Job hunting is like horseshoes – the closest one to the middle wins. Make sure your application is precise, targeted, and an obvious winner.

In a few weeks, we'll look at the differences between applying for an entry level, intermediate level, and senior level position and common mistakes that you will never, ever do again.

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