

Keeping Your Resume Out of the No Pile

By Tag and Catherine Goulet, FabJob.com

The last time you applied for a job and didn't get an interview, was your résumé tossed on the "no" pile after someone skimmed it for only a few seconds, or did the employer read it carefully and you just missed making the cut?

Seventy recruiters met recently at the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business to discuss what can make or break a résumé. The recruiters represented a variety of industries including oil and gas, tourism, technology and financial services, and some of what they revealed may surprise you.

An employer may review 100 or more resumes in an hour, spending only 20-30 seconds on each one. "Recognize that most employers are using the résumé to screen you out rather than to select you in," says Derek Chapman, Ph.D., professor of industrial organization and psychology at the Haskayne School of Business.

Getting Attention

"If you don't catch my eye, you're out," one recruiter said. That doesn't mean you should use bright pink paper or multi-colored lettering, but several recruiters said they don't mind applicants including a photo. Creative photos (such as the shot an applicant included of herself in a snow suit with snowmen on either side and a caption saying "I'm the one in the middle") might help land the interview.

However, Chapman cautions against including a photo. "A photo can be used to screen you out on the basis of your sex, age, national or ethnic origin, etc. If someone hires you for your good looks, are you sure you want to work for that supervisor?"

Name Dropping

A better way to catch an employer's eye is to include names of well-known companies you have worked for. As one recruiter explained, if you previously worked for a reputable company, it enhances your application "because they have some standards." Employers are likely to assume you will be a good employee because you successfully passed that company's hiring process and were well-trained. If you haven't been employed by any large companies, consider doing an internship or volunteer work for a well-known organization. Surprisingly, "name dropping" only works when mentioning companies. The recruiters said they are turned off when an applicant writes in a cover letter that they were referred by someone such as a company executive. The employers said if someone really thinks you are a good applicant that person should deliver the résumé to the recruiter or phone on your behalf.

Résumé Mistakes

While employers want résumés that are error-free, making a mistake such as addressing your cover letter to the wrong company won't necessarily disqualify you from the job. Of course, it depends on the employer. For some recruiters, that kind of mistake is inexcusable. However, many others will allow one or two mistakes -- even stapling the second page upside down -- as long as you have the right qualifications.

To minimize mistakes, proofread your résumé. Your spell-checker doesn't know you meant to say "manager" instead of "manger".

Another surprise is that about one-third of the recruiters at the session said they do not read cover letters. To make sure your important information doesn't get overlooked, it should be in your résumé.

Making the "Yes" Pile

Here are some additional tips to help you make the "yes" pile:

- Have a conventional e-mail address. Your name is fine; kookybear@hotmail.com or partyanimal@msn.com are not.
- Tailor your résumé to each job you apply for. Make sure it shows you have the skills the employer is seeking for that particular position.
- Use lots of white space and bullet points to help information stand out.
- Include interests that are relevant to the job. If you are applying for a job in agriculture, for example, show that you have rural roots.
- If you are submitting an electronic résumé use a standard format such as Word to ensure it can be opened.
- Don't disclose irrelevant personal information. ("I don't want to know you are 5'6," and weigh 195 pounds" one employer said.)

State your accomplishments rather than just your responsibilities. "For example, simply stating: 'Managed a budget of \$200,000 annually for training and development' is not nearly as powerful as 'Reduced training and development costs by 20 percent while maintaining the quality and quantity of training provided to employees'," Chapman says.

"Placing positive information at the very beginning and again at the very end of the résumé helps keep the employer's attention and capitalizes on the psychological principles of memory to work in your favor," Chapman says.

"Remember, most employers are only skimming your résumé at first to make a preliminary decision. Make sure they can find your information easily."

Tag and Catherine Goulet, "The Breaking In Experts," are co-CEOs of FabJob.com, a leading publisher of career guides offering step-by-step advice for breaking into a variety of dream careers. Visit www.FabJob.com.