

Creating Purposeful Resumes

Tips for creating effective resumes

An effective resume serves the purpose for which it exists: present you in an impactful way and compel the reader to invite you for an interview. This document provides strategies to apply when creating resume, so that desired results can be achieved.

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Introduction

Put simply, a resume is a chronicle of your past accomplishments and your strengths that might be of interest to a prospective employer. A resume is used in contexts other than employment (college applications, visa applications, soliciting funding for your company, etc.), but for brevity, we will focus on employment context.

An effective resume presents you in an impactful way and compels the reader to invite you to an interview. It also acts as a marketing brochure for the product YOU and presents the value you offer to a prospective 'buyer' (employer). Therefore, it is very important to construct this document carefully and provide right information that conveys your value in the best possible manner. Rest of this document will focus on how to create such a document. These resumes will work for all kinds of roles.

Readers of a Resume

It is very important to understand the readers and the context in which they read the resume.

Resume is read by following people:

1. **Automated system** - Filters the resume based on keywords and key phrases. Resume should have enough keywords related to the domain of the target company.
2. **Recruitment consultant** (outside the company) - Screens the resume for a fit. The resume should be interesting enough for this person so that it can be shortlisted.
3. **HR/Recruitment** (within the company) - Screens the resume provided by recruitment consultant and applies more filtering (or just passes it on to hiring manager). Should provide clear summary and well-known keywords relevant to the company and the job description.
4. **Hiring manager** (in some cases) - Make sure they are not wasting time interviewing a wrong guy. Resume should clearly summarize the accomplishments and value to the new org.
5. **Interviewer** – Prepare for an interview. Resume should convey an image of a strong candidate who has all the right skills, strengths and experience for the target company, so that interviewer is warmed up (and has positive bias) to have a favorable interview.

They will exhibit following characteristics:

1. Resume reader has no more than 2 minutes to spend on your resume, and that he uses first 30 seconds to decide whether to spend that 2 minutes or not.
2. Reader has no understanding of your domain. However, he understands details of his own domain and basics of IT industry
3. Person screening your resume will not be an employee of the company (most HR functions of recruitment are outsourced these days) and may not know much about their own company except for some keywords and phrases.
4. Interviewers will not read your full resume, they will glance through it

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Principles for a good resume

1. **Length:** Create 2 page resume, with first page containing the summary of accomplishments and the value you provide, and second page containing details to substantiate the claims made in page one. Most readers will only read page 1.
2. **Customization:** Visualize the hiring manager of the target company and figure out what problem is he/she trying to solve by hiring you, and then structure first page so that it provides the right information quickly to him. Reflect on the role definition and structure your first page appropriately. It is OK (and good) to create multiple versions of the resume, and in those cases, there can be different 1st page contents and same page 2 contents.
3. **Focus on Value, not Activity:** Resume should highlight who you are (strengths, skills, etc.) more than what you have done (what you did, how you did it, etc.).
 - a. You should translate your experience into statements of strengths and skills that are transferable across industries. For example, designing a command-line tool to provide interface to admin options in an embedded system is not much different from designing admin panel for a website, and the resume should reflect this by using right context and phrases ('designed and implemented interface for power users of the system'). If current domain is very different than target domain, this becomes critical because it may be hard to understand everything about the resume.
4. **Prioritization:** Prioritization is a key element. Every sentence in the resume should be written as if this is the last sentence the reader is going to read. So it should be crisp, it should expand on what is said before, and it should be a less important fact about you than all previous sentences (because this sentence may never be read).
5. **Create and Sustain Interest** - Resume should tell a story. A good story builds on multiple small stories which run in layers and in parallel. Keep the audience (resume reader) in mind, and make sure you don't lose his interest. Best way to do so is to keep a human touch, use following principles
 - a. Use active voice rather than passive voice
 - b. Use your work/life examples to illustrate a point rather than general statements
 - c. Be honest and understate your strengths rather than go overboard
 - d. Build a case for your suitability through right use of words and examples
6. **Grab and Hold Attention:** Highlight things that matter to the reader. Here are a few ways to highlight:
 - a. Visual formatting – Use bold, underline, italics, don't use colors
 - b. Sentence restructuring – Put keywords and phrases at the beginning of the sentence
 - c. Resume restructuring – Move the important strengths and experiences to the beginning of the resume

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Creating domain-independent resumes

If you are moving from one domain to another (say semiconductor to internet), it is important to make the resume domain independent so that people in the target domain can understand your experience, accomplishment and suitability.

Follow these steps to create a domain-independent resume:

1. **Identification:** Identify 3-4 key experiences/projects that you are most proud of because of what you accomplished there.
2. **Elaboration:** Write 8-10 sentences to describe each of these projects, with following conditions:
 - a. Avoid any jargon of your industry – if you must use them, define them in non-domain-specific terms.
 - b. Clearly state the following:
 - i. Organizational context (team sizes, location, roles, goals, etc.)
 - ii. Your personal contribution
 - iii. Benefits accruing to the company in business terms (revenue, profit, market share, customer satisfaction, etc.)
 - iv. Skills (technical and soft) you gained in the process
 - c. Create a 3 line project summary that can be used like an elevator pitch for this project
3. **Categorization:** Review each of these projects and categorize your contributions and learning for each project in following areas:
 - a. **Domain Knowledge** (things which are specific to your domain, and is not relevant in any other domain)
 - b. **Technical/Hard skills** (programming languages, algorithms, data structures, analytical/problem solving) – think in terms of your engineering education
 - c. **Business/Soft skills** (managing team, cross-boundary collaboration, negotiation, managerial economics) – think in terms of business education you have received
 - d. **Smarts** – Raw intelligence (which is transferrable across domain) like patents (actual patent is domain knowledge, but the fact that you have X patents shows you are smart), paper publishing, intrapreneurial work, quizzing, volunteering, etc.
4. **Creation:** Summarize the 3b and 3c into bullet points and use them to create the first page of your resume. 3d can be in the first page if it has some real cool stuff. 3a should be on second page, buried in the experience details
5. **Validation:** Give your resume to someone from outside your domain and ask them to comment on ease of understanding

Here is an example of how the outcome of categorization may look like, Don't use this table anywhere in the resume, this is just intermediate data for your reference and to do #4 above well):

Project	Project Summary	Domain Knowledge	Technical/Hard skills	Business/Soft skills	Smarts
Project1	A tool to debug	How chip design	Highly optimized search across	Managing ambiguous	Filed 3 patents and 2 papers

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	complex designs generated by another tool	software work and can be validated to work	large data sets, creating a new language to handle user instructions, delivering 0 defect code	requirements from customers	presented, best manager award for 2 consecutive years
Project2					

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Resume Structure

I don't want to recommend a resume template since there are so many equally good versions out there (see office.com templates), but I do want to provide some guidance on what should go in a few important sections. All the sections are optional, but if you have them, consider using the same sequence as given below.

Objective

State the desired role – be generic because different companies describe roles differently. This is an important section when you are clear about what you want to get (for ex: 'Engineering Management position in product companies'). If you are flexible about the role and/or you are not clear what you want, you should skip this section.

Strengths

Describe the strengths. Focus on things you are extremely good at and can perform well in any context. For example, if you are a good manager, you will be good in all types of companies, and you should mention it here. This section will be read by everyone (even those who skim through your resume) so write it using keywords that you want reader to remember about you.

Achievements

This section should provide the key phrases from your experiences that will be relevant for the reader. Most resumes are read online, so use formatting (bold, italics, hyperlinks) to draw attention to the right places. This section is also an expanded version of strengths section, in that it makes the strengths concrete. For example, you may say 'Good manager of distributed teams' in your strengths section; in Achievements section, you will say 'Managed teams of 10-20 people distributed in India, Finland and Germany to deliver a complex product in the area of e-commerce', with right areas highlighted. This may be the last section that many readers will spend time on, so make sure it highlights the companies you worked in, projects/domains you worked in, and contributions you made, and recognitions you received.

Experience Summary

This is useful to add in page 1 somewhere if you have more than 7-8 years' experience in multiple companies. This ensures that all company names are mentioned on this page without the reader diving into experience details. This also acts as an index to experience details if the reader wants to understand details of experience for a specific company. This can be a list of companies you have worked in and the roles you have performed. Readers can choose to selectively dive into details based on this list.

Experience details

This is entire page 2 if you have all of the above sections in your resume. If you have worked in multiple roles in the same company, create one section to capture entire duration, and then describe work under each role. It is important to show length of service in a company since that signals your durability as well as depth of your experience. Description of experience should be crisp in stating the following:

- Problem statement (what was required to be done?)

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- Outcome (What did company get out of this - on-time delivery, \$X revenue, customer sat, etc.)
- Your contribution (What did you do, your accomplishment)
- (optional) Your learnings if any. This may have been mentioned in some earlier section, in which case this can be skipped.

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Conclusion

A resume is one of the most important documents you create in and for your career. It is important to focus on right things and present in right manner when creating a resume. A good resume is 2 page long, presents clearly the value offered to the new org in first 5-10 sentences in the resume, has lots of numbers and bullet points to present details, and is easy to read and understand for individuals outside the domain of the resume writer. Also, it is important that you write your own resume rather than getting someone else to write it for you (there are many services available online that will do it for you). This is because when you spend time writing and rewriting your resume, you essentially sharpen your pitch you give to interviewers, thus improving your chances of doing better at interviews. Also, you know your own accomplishments and value best, and the more time you spend thinking about it yourself, the better chance you have at presenting your best image forward.