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Part II
Reflecting on the Résumé
by Stanley H. Davis

Twenty seconds. It's said that in general, any résumé, submitted for almost any position, will get about 20 seconds spent on it at first glance. If the résumé is well written, employers can pull out what they need to determine whether the applicant is a potential fit in this timespan.

From experience as both a search executive and as an employer, I know that 20 seconds is an accurate number. So how do you make the most of that time?

Everyone, from a college graduate seeking an entry-level job, to a seasoned professional aiming for the executive office, needs to possess a strong résumé. Yet surprisingly, many do not. There are a few pointers that apply at all levels, and can help a potential employer better understand what you could bring to an organization.

Most basically, your résumé should be structured in a familiar format. Experience should be laid out in reverse chronology, followed by education, and then any additional information (e.g., relevant memberships or advanced technical knowledge). And with rare exception, keep it to two pages. If you're successful in being noticed, you'll have the additional information to solidify your candidacy during an interview.

Experience should be grouped first by each organization you have worked for, along with the dates of employment and location of the organization. Position title is listed next (if you've held more than one position with an organization, you should list the years you held each position). After this heading comes a short paragraph that includes a few words about the organization (size, services/products offered, market position), followed by a sentence or two about your typical responsibilities in this position. Lastly, you'll want to bullet-point your achievements in that position, showing how your accomplishments impacted the business results of your employer, and quantifying these comments whenever possible.

This level of position detail can be limited to your most recent 10 to 15 years of experience. After that, you can forego further detail and simply list the name and location of the organization you worked for, your position title, and years in the position. (An exception to this is if this less recent experience adds an important element to the position you are currently seeking; then, describe as outlined above, albeit more briefly.)

Many job-seekers tend to include an intro at the top of their résumé, usually in the form of an "objective." Objectives are fine, but one should remember that the résumé should be focused on the prospective employer. If your objective reads, basically, "I want to learn in new environments, etc., etc.," while nice, that does an employer no good. Instead, think of phrasing an objective this way:

“My objective is to contribute to the success of [the organization] by working with an employer on ___.”

An alternative to the objective is a “Summary of Qualifications.” This summary tends to be a short paragraph that highlights your skills in a way that shows what you can do for an employer, what difference you can make, and how you might stand out among applicants.

And, a quick word on cover letters – they’re rarely read by busy recruiters or hiring managers unless there is something in the résumé that makes them want to read them. Typically, the shorter and crisper the cover letter, the better.

A common mistake with résumés is to write them in such a way that you try to be all things to all people. This strategy does not work. Instead, build on things you know, while being both honest and broad-based.

You’ve got 20 seconds. Use them wisely.

Stanley H. Davis is founding principal of Standish Executive Search, LLC (www.standishsearch.com), the executive search firm advising mid-size and smaller companies positioning for growth, change or succession. He is a Providence, R.I., resident whose clientele come from the Southcoast Region, including the Fall River area. He also chairs the Boston Exit Planning Exchange (XPX). He can be reached at sdavis@standishsearch.com.
