

MY TWO CENTS' WORTH: THE RESUME-LENGTH DEBATE

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"It should be no longer than a page." *"It should be two or more pages to reflect experience."* *"Technology allows a résumé to be long – even up to six pages."* *"You should have an eye-catching résumé that bucks the one-two pages format – like a brochure."* This discussion starts to sound like IBM versus Macintosh after awhile, doesn't it? It also sounds jarringly familiar to me regarding advice I received years ago after the birth of my first child. *"You must not bottle feed."* *"You must not spoil the baby."* Everyone's an expert. Where is the truth? Is there one truth, or is it opinion? It is our obligation as professional résumé writers to give sound advice and to follow a process that fosters success for our clients in their job search. So what "truth" do we follow? How do we know what is truth and what may be myth?

There are two popular myths regarding the length of a résumé:

- A résumé must be one page or it will not be read by busy hiring directors;
- A lengthy résumé is a must to begin to adequately put to paper a person with extensive experience or credentials on paper.

Amusingly, these two myths represent opposite points of view; however, like many myths, they contain partial truths. There are, in fact, two different stages to résumé screening for organizations that *do not* first use an automated applicant tracking system for screening and ranking.

- A brief 15-30 second scan in which it is determined if the candidate appears to meet the majority of the requirements.
- A more careful scrutiny – sometimes up to several minutes – of those résumés passing the brief scan. This is to ensure the candidate meets the requirements and warrants investing an even greater amount of time required in an interview.

Busy hiring executives do not have time to read a book, however their responsibility is to hire the best candidate, not eliminate top candidates based simply upon résumé length to make their job easier. It was not very long ago that a one-page résumé requirement was not only a truth – it was a golden rule that when broken, usually dictated a résumé be moved to the circular file. Although many still hold to this principle, changes have continuously occurred in technology, the economy, the workforce climate, and the criteria for résumé length.

My rule regarding résumé length is that there *is no* rule. Areas factoring into the decision include occupation, industry, years of experience, scope of accomplishments, education and the job seeker's situation. The most important guideline is that every word in the résumé should sell the candidate. As a professional résumé writer for over 20 years, I've written résumés for job seekers with incomes of zero or debt as a student – to over \$1 million. I follow one adage: the résumé is a career marketing tool; it is not a life story. My rule is that I strive to keep it concise and focused on the client's key selling points. Experiences that do not help market the client's goal are not included. However, careful attention is paid to length and formatting so that time is accounted for. Every word must count to sell the client's credentials and value to a potential employer. It should whet the employer's appetite to learn more in an interview situation. One does not want to squeeze a client's experience onto one page if the result is deletion or diminishment of achievements. The reverse is also true. No hiring professional wants to read a lengthy résumé that rambles on about a candidate's irrelevant or redundant experiences. When writing a résumé, I constantly ask myself, "Is every word in this résumé selling my client?" My tried-and-true question as I write is, "So what?"

When asked by clients how long their résumés should be, my answer may appear to be an evasive one: "Your résumé should be as long as it needs to be ... and no longer." After the client has given me that look of confusion, exasperation, or amusement, I then elaborate. "There's no law against a two-page résumé – or a four-plus-page résumé if it sells the client. I have written three-page résumés for college graduates with outstanding successes relevant to their career goal. I've been able to condense a senior

executive's 20-year career into an effective one-page format. The key is that the résumé must be compelling to read.”

The problem with the one-page-fits-all approach to résumé writing is that the page may not fit the client very well. One-page documents are often appropriate to job seekers, especially entry-level candidates or those with less than ten years of experience. However, trying to squeeze a client into that mold may not be the strategy that best serves the client. When creating a one-page résumé, I follow two rules of thumb as to whether I should lengthen the document. I lengthen the résumé if I feel I am diluting important information that will sell my client. I lengthen the résumé if I feel the document is too visually crowded and hard to read, and yet I do not want to eliminate any more data.

If a résumé is more than one page, the important selling points must be near the top of page one. If the front page doesn't hook employers, they may never turn to the second page of the résumé. This is true in a situation where the résumé is scanned for keywords. It is also true when a résumé is scanned the old-fashioned way – by a busy hiring professional's eyes. I strive to include my clients' most important jobs, job titles, skill groups, or successes on the first page. I basically tell the reader why he/she should read further. This may range from designing a brochure format for a client in a creative field, to writing a six-page curriculum vitae that details academic accomplishments in a conservative format.

An effective résumé will be visually attractive and unique. It will speak of the client's successes. It will differentiate the client from the competition. The résumé must define and speak to its target audience, industry or niche. It must mirror qualifications for a clearly defined goal. This may be done with an objective statement. It may be done with an industry title under the candidate's name. It may be done with the cover letter. The one question to be answered for the potential employer: “What's in it for me?” My clients' résumés are customized to the audience. Relevant achievements are highlighted to make the “buyer” want to meet the “seller”. The key is balancing brevity with relevant depth and detail – both are important, and it is my job to write the most effective marketing tool for each client. Length, format, scan quality, electronic transmission quality, aesthetic appeal – every factor is weighed carefully. My clients deserve results; the means justify the end.

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