

## Destination Talent

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Musings, riffs, rants and insights on everything 'talent'

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Feb 19 2009

[Talent Talk: Conversation with résumé expert Gayle Howard](#)

Posted by [Phillip Tusing](#) in [Interview \(Q&A\)](#), [Recruitment](#)



*Résumés have a special place in the recruitment industry. Databases are created to house them. Sophisticated technologies are designed to track them. Business models are built to harness and profit from them. Fortunes of Job boards are dictated by how many they can collect. Recruitment firms buy resumes, repackage them and sell at a higher price. Employers invest significant resources to get to the right résumés. On any given day thousands of résumés are exchanged, in the process lives are transformed and fortunes of companies altered.*

*Yet, no one with the task of creating or updating a résumé enjoys it. Riddled with flaws, its role in the hiring process is often misunderstood. Misinterpretation by employers and misrepresentation by job seekers is rampant. Yet no viable alternative is available, and the humble résumé continues to play a central role in our industry. We further explore the world of 'résumés' with career expert [Gayle Howard](#).*

**DT:** It's often said, 'no one enjoys writing their résumé except, perhaps, professional résumé writers', like yourself. Why is an integral part of everyone's professional life – writing and updating a résumé - such a chore and a difficult endeavor?

**GH:** Writing your own résumé is hard because it's really hard for people to look at themselves with any degree of subjectivity. What most people seem to suffer with is an inability to understand that while the résumé is *about* you, it's not written *for* you. There's a huge difference there. Separating yourself from what you want to tell the employer and what the employer or recruiting firm needs to know is a differentiation that most people can't really get their heads around. People think - this is important to me. I did my best work 20 years ago on that project. The question though is, does the employer care what you did twenty years ago (despite it being monumentally important to you and usually the answer is "no".) So people really struggle with that.

People also struggle with boasting about themselves. Of course that shouldn't be a consideration because there should never be anything written in your résumé that you can't quantify by telling of a specific example. So people think others will think they are boastful and egotistical if they say "I am persuasive and influential and I have a can-do attitude"- and they are absolutely right in that regard. Who wants to read that sort of non-quantifiable run down of attributes? Instead, what people need to do is show by example how they have used those attributes to make a difference. If a person can show by deed and results, then they don't need to appear boastful. They appear credible.

People often leave things until the last minute. It doesn't occur to them to even have a résumé until they see a job in the paper. Then suddenly there is a massive knee jerk reaction to meet a self-imposed deadline which drives everyone mad! Things are left out, agonising is done and its so needless. If the document is kept up to date and tweaked as your career progresses you'll always be prepared.

**DT:** What factors drives your profession? Does demand spikes when times are hard? How big is the industry in Australia?

**GW:** Funnily enough, the life of a professional résumé writer tends to go against the grain of the current economic conditions. When times are good and there are lots of jobs around and something for everyone, people tend to know that by reputation alone there is a good chance that a job will come along without much of an effort. In boom times many people just write their own résumé as they calculate that if they miss out on that job or project, there will be another around the corner. People are a lot more relaxed in good times for obvious reasons. However in economic downturns such as now, this is when things get competitive! C-Level and up are getting that feeling that if something hasn't happened already, the axe may be just around the corner. They look at the type of people they could be up against and quite rightly recognise that it's not as easy as it was before. It doesn't take much — a couple of interviews that go nowhere, or more important no interviews for jobs they thought they'd be a "shoe in" for to make them think that perhaps they need to start putting their best case forward — starting with the résumé.

The résumé writing industry is very patchy in Australia and it's important to look at the credentials of the writer and see samples, ask about process for the people who write for you. Some people start up a business from home having typed up a résumé for the next door neighbour and call themselves a professional résumé writer. Clearly unless the résumé has the knowledge of careers and the business chops to be able to know instinctively what the key value propositions are for a client of a certain level and type, then the résumé isn't going to be brilliant and the client is not going to be happy. Most high level résumé writers in Australia tend to have aligned themselves with their US Counterparts in such associations as Career Directors International ([www.careerdirectors.com](http://www.careerdirectors.com)) where there are established training courses, certification levels, and ongoing interaction between professionals so that expertise can be shared. Despite résumé writing being an unregulated sector, certifications are strictly and stringently evaluated through testing of knowledge, sample resumes, and the like and held against a very strict criteria. Like any professionals, it pays to do your research.

**DT:** What insights do you have on people who come to do up their résumés ? Does your service make a person looks better than he/she really is? If so, is that unfair advantage for people who get professional assistance?

**GH:** As mentioned earlier, a résumé should never be anything other than credible and authentic. I had a client many years ago

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— back in the early nineties when I first started, who, as I questioned him seemed to be able to do it all! You name it, he counted it as a skill. Clearly I was suspicious and questioned him on specifics (a key part of my questioning to this day) and that is where he floundered and realised that if someone really questions you deeply about something you know little about, you'll look foolish and will have wasted everyone's time. I don't think it particularly had much affect on him though, because as he was leaving, he smiled and winked at me and said "I suppose I better get a wife and three kids in a hurry too". (Evidently he thought being a family man would give him a leg up!)

Regardless, the résumés written by a good, competent professional résumé writer will be highly authentic but based on the information provided by the client. I never take "wishy washy" answers, so if someone says to me "I was involved in this fabulous change management program and it was so wonderful that the whole company was revolutionised", then I'll question them on that. What was your involvement specifically? (People often say they were "involved in" and did no more than eat the biscuits at the weekly meeting!). What part of the project did you assume ownership of? Did you lead a team? How many? The part you were overseeing, what was the hardest aspect of that? What obstacles did you meet along the way? What action did you take to overcome those problems? What were the results? Did you deliver as you expected? In the vast majority of cases, people back away from their grandiose claims as they can't carry the story to interview, and of course, once they realise that the story they have while not "superhuman" status, is a good, solid and real representation of who they are and what they did, then we're cooking—and its true!

**DT: Research by Society for Human Resource Managers found 63% of job applicants lie on their résumés. It's hard to imagine that so many people would be willingly dishonest. Do you think a business culture and recruitment processes which expects people to be flawless is partly to blame? Why do we feel compelled to lie in our résumés?**

**GH:** People are desperate to fulfil all the requirements of a job. They see something they want and they want to wrap their skills around it. I've seen people's unrealistic assessments of their skills and abilities many times. From graduates who want to apply for senior management roles to people who tick off specific criteria and dismiss the major ones. I've often heard people say "I can do this job. I have excellent communication and interpersonal skills tick! I have good time management skills tick! I have a team spirit tick! Oh this one - 15 years as a senior manager in the logistics division of a multinational company..... No, I don't have that, but that's the only thing I don't have! Obviously that's unrealistic, so when they realise they are missing out on something major the thought occurs to them that perhaps, if they fudge the truth, just a little...."

The main area that people see of great concern and I think it's something that has come from the recruiting sector is the need for education. Of course, it's important and for some people: doctors, surgeons, lawyers and so on, it's obviously a key qualification! But when you get a man or woman in their mid fifties who left school in the mid seventies and they're worried to death that they don't have an MBA or a degree when they came from a place and time when it didn't happen so much, then people get very tempted to give themselves qualifications that don't exist. In many cases employers and recruiters have specified an MBA is required, when it is clear that if a person has 30 years successful experience as an executive, they have every bit and more of that in their personal skill portfolio. So fear of not being accepted and missing out is what drives it.

**DT: CV are essentially marketing documents. Most people indulge in selective truth telling, while omitting the blemishes. One is unlikely to come across a résumé which list "weaknesses". Is this a good thing? Is it your task to check the accuracy of your clients details?**

**GH:** A résumé is not a document where you let it all hang out. I read a quotation the other day that said "An interview is a meeting of two people actively lying to each other". While the prospective employee is putting his best foot forward, the recruiter or the employer is also not telling you about the despot that rules the department, how as a family owned company only the imbecilic sons are ever going to be the CEO, or how misery is rampant due to inept management. So it's all fair in love and war. As a marketing document, it is not up to the prospective employee to divulge weaknesses, it is up to the smart assessment and recruiting practices of the HR department or the recruiting agency to uncover them through research, profiling tools and clever interviewing!

When I buy a can of Coke, I don't see on the can — *this is a very tasty drink, but some people don't like the taste, it may rot your teeth if you're not careful, and it makes you belch. That's up to the purchaser to find out when they buy* — or if they want to do a bit of research beforehand, they can find that out by asking people who may have tried it!

As mentioned before, I question my client until he or she pulls out clumps of hair — but I can be pretty sure at the end that I am representing my client with the truth as they see it. I am not investing in this person to join my company, so I don't have the resources to do reference checks— this is all for the employer to check out. I can only assume that what the client tells me is true and if it isn't, then people with the appropriate resources to invest in this person's services will do their job properly so there are no surprises down the track. In most cases, the information is out there — often on the internet! (called digital dirt!)

**DT: What are your thoughts on VIDEO résumés. Where do you fit them in the scheme of things?**

**GH:** Video resumes as part of an overall portfolio are brilliant, but they're not for everyone. For a lot of executive clients, I would say they are a must. Frequently senior executives are in the media or they have created CDs internally. If you can get your hands on videos, excerpt part of it, and present it along with the résumé, articles, photos of speeches and the like it is just such a powerful combination. I have a client at the moment who when any executive headhunter asks for his résumé, he says "Oh I'll give you the link to my website, the résumé is there in downloadable form and you can see me and other articles and such". In every case, the headhunter has raved about the presentation citing that it is so much easier to get a feel for the person when you see them talk and put a whole picture together. Video portfolios are not for everyone and the person needs to have confidence to carry it off. A YouTube clip shot with a mobile phone wearing PJs and a cat on your lap with a TV blaring on the background is definitely not the way to go! Nor is cutesy and funny "Please feed me" type things. Not funny, not cute.

**DT: How important is a résumés in a world of LinkedIn profiles, Visual CV, blogs and various other forms of displaying/announcing your expertise, proliferating on the Internet? Do employers still preferred résumés and how relevant is CV in its current form (i.e. word doc)?**

**GH:** The résumé still is the one thing that we just can't yet do without and haven't been able to do without for sixty years. Regardless of whether a person looks good on linked in, twitters every day, writes a blog, or is a personal recommendation from a respected person in the company, sooner or later someone is going to say "Could you send us your résumé"? I think that the résumé is a handy thing for an employer to have on file. Just in case the person is not all that is expected, it can be used in the company's favour that they hold no liability as "That's what he told us!"

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