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Manage Your Career

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Why I Tossed Your Résumé

By Brent Miller

"The applications are in," my colleague told me as she walked into my office. "Here you go." I didn't have time to look up from my computer before a hollow thump echoed in the room. She had dropped a stack of paperwork four inches high onto my desk.

"You're kidding?" I asked.

"Nope. Have fun," she replied with a smirk before heading out. The human-resources summary sheet on top of the stack told me I had 98 applications to read before our department's hiring-committee meeting on Monday.

Now stop and imagine that your application is in that stack on my desk. You have applied for a staff opening at my college. Your hopes depend on attracting my attention and convincing me that you're one of the five people I want to interview. Here's a confession for you: It's only going to take me a few hours to read through the files and make my recommendations.

So how do I—and most other hiring managers—move through so many applications so quickly? We weed the stack. We look for red flags that scream "don't interview me!" so we can safely put those applications aside and move on. I've cut my stacks in half with that method, sometimes glancing at a résumé for mere seconds before finding a suicidal mistake.

After serving on numerous hiring committees, I've developed a list of six mistakes that will guarantee your résumé a one-way ticket to my shredder.

You don't meet the minimum criteria. It took me only two

minutes to find that first red flag in my four-inch stack. I saw an application on which someone from human resources had written "experience may not qualify." The candidate had spent two years working at a work-force-development agency, but the HR staff member didn't know if that would count toward our requirement that the applicant have experience in vocational education. After reading the job summary on the résumé, I knew the experience wouldn't count. Case closed.

The first step in the application process is understanding whether or not you even qualify for the job. Your application typically will not go straight to the hiring committee. Instead, it will first go through the filter of the human-resources staff members who won't forward unqualified applicants or will flag someone whose qualifications are uncertain. If you don't have the job's minimum requirements, the process is over. Note those minimums and clearly demonstrate how you meet them.

We fail candidates for bad grammar. It's sad that I have to write that. But every stack has at least one résumé with misspelled words, incomplete sentences, and other cardinal sins of writing. While the average employer would certainly drop you for such transgressions, we are a college so we get twice as irritated about it. Misspellings signal laziness, inattention to detail, and just the overall sense that you aren't taking this seriously.

Here are three pieces of advice: proofread, proofread, proofread. Every word processor on the planet has spellcheck. Is it that hard to click the little button? You've already (I hope) spent an hour or more writing the thing. Would taking another five minutes for a once-over be too much to ask? One final question: Would you take this article seriously if I butchered the wording? Of course not. The same perspective applies.

Did you even try to tailor your résumé? The next red flag in my stack of applications came from an excellent, well-crafted résumé. Clearly demonstrating the candidate's expertise in accounting, it included specific accomplishments in previous accounting jobs. It

was without flaw. I may have even said aloud, "This is the best I've seen in a while." There was one small problem, though. We weren't hiring for an accounting position. On to the next candidate.

I'm sure many of us have either used or heard of the "spray and pray" method of applying for jobs. It means rapid-firing your résumé to every opening you can find. I have rarely seen that strategy work. In fact, one of the best things that applicants can do is demonstrate that they know what they are applying for. Mentioning specific programs or people at my college in your cover letter impresses me. I want to see a résumé that deals with our needs as a department line by line. You can't do that if you haven't bothered to notice what my department is asking for.

I know you're lying to me. Here's a great rule of thumb: If you already work at my college—or have worked with people who do—don't lie on your application. In fact, don't ever lie, because the truth eventually surfaces. But definitely don't lie if I can chat with someone down the hall who will know you didn't do half of the things listed on your application. Into the shredder you go.

Even if your lies help you make the first cut, you should know that I will do research on you before I call for the interview. If I even sniff deception, you're gone.

You didn't speak our language. Here's a trick I have used to land jobs myself: I copy specific phrases and buzzwords from the job posting into my résumé. Then I build them into the bullet points. "Instructional design a plus" from the posting becomes "experience in instructional design" on my application. (Obviously, I only do that when the statements are true.) I don't refer to instructional design as something else, such as "building course materials."

I have found that committee members who quickly scan résumés often look for the specific phrases they put in the job posting. Using other phrases to describe the same activity might cause a

committee member to unknowingly pass over critical parts of your experience while they speed read. I have also heard of some corporate employers using an automated filter that electronically weeds out applications if they lack the right "keywords," which essentially are the words from the job posting. I don't know of any colleges that do that—yet. But in the emerging age of digital applications, that point doesn't seem too far off.

You used too much personality fluff. I encounter this last mistake a lot. It happens when candidates use descriptive phrases about themselves like, "dedicated worker," "innovative thinker," "cares about students." Those read like fillers you stuck in because you didn't have enough concrete work experience to fill a page. I yearn for the day when people stop writing them.

I don't care if you think you're "motivated to succeed" or "enjoy new challenges." Anyone can say those things and most people do, to the point of being cliché. Furthermore, just because you can say them doesn't mean they're true. I will be able to read your personality from the interview. That's what the interview is for.

Your résumé should show me why you have the best background and skills for the job. If you enjoy new challenges, I should be able to glean that from the long list of challenges you have solved in prior positions.

As you assemble your application, remember: When employers sift through a giant stack of applications, we look for excuses to end the relationship quickly. Don't give us one.

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