

# The Effective Resume and Cover Letter

by Sharon Davis and Myrlynn Sjogren

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You see the ad in the Sunday paper for the senior litigation paralegal and it has your name written, subliminally, all over it. You rush to your PC to brush the cobwebs off of your old resume or to create a new one. But you know that this is a tough legal market and wonder how you can write an effective resume which will rise to the top of the stack. Should you try being creative by experimenting with different layouts or try to look like a professional typesetter as you play with various fonts? The answer is, no...well, at least not yet. Before you go out and buy that special eye-catching paper you need to start with the basics.

## GETTING STARTED

Creating your resume is a soul-searching process and should never be rushed. Always take the time to do a realistic analysis of your skills and abilities before starting your first draft. Ask yourself what you have accomplished and where you want to go. Evaluate your previous job responsibilities. What did you like, what didn't you like? Make an honest assessment of your educational background and experience to determine if you are directly qualified for the position for which you are applying or if you have transferable skills that would make you a good candidate. Determine what additional training or education will be needed to achieve your goals. After you have completed this analysis, put pen to paper and jot the information down in outline form. You now have the focus of your resume and are ready to begin your draft.

## WRITING THE RESUME

Employers typically receive an avalanche of resumes for each published opening and usually review these documents very quickly to eliminate non-qualified applicants. What are employers looking for and how can you make sure that you are not screened out? Employers want to see resumes which are "...not exceptionally long, two pages maximum, which are extremely clear, detailing where the applicant worked, when, and their job responsibilities", says David Brezina, Legal Administrator at Brownstein Hyatt Farber & Strickland, P.C.

As you write your resume, keep in mind that paralegals are evaluated, in large part, for their abilities to organize, analyze, communicate effectively and for their close attention to detail. Write your resume carefully to make sure that it is reflective of strong skills in these areas.

It is important to organize your resume in a manner which conveys information clearly and concisely. If it's too verbose, it won't be read. Structure your work history in reverse chronological order beginning with your most recent or current employer. Dates of employment are critical and should be included for each employer along with your job title. A brief synopsis of your responsibilities at each place of employment should follow. Use action words such as "initiated", "communicated", "analyzed", etc., to paint a dynamic portrait of your performance. But don't get too bogged down in the details...leave something for the interview!

Your education should be organized in the same manner as your work history...in reverse chronological order, highlighting any special scholastic achievements.

If you have a tremendous amount of experience and limited education, focus the attention on your experience by starting with your work history and concluding with your education. Conversely, if you have a great deal of education and very little experience, start with your education and emphasize relevant courses and accomplishments during your internship.

Regardless of your background, remember that law firms as businesses are interested in knowing about accomplishments which saved time and money for other employers.

Most of the law firm administrators we canvassed agree that they have no interest in seeing information regarding hobbies, health, age or family on your resume. However, Mary Phillis, Administrator at Long & Jaudon, finds information regarding volunteer work to be relevant and indicative of an applicant's willingness to cooperate with others on the job. Many employers find information about memberships in professional organizations to be of importance because it demonstrates an applicant's level of commitment to their profession.

As a rule of thumb, remember that information about professional affiliations and volunteer work is optional and should not be included if it means that your resume will be longer than two pages.

Many resumes start with a statement of the applicant's goals and objectives. While some applicants believe that such a statement is a clear signal to employers that they are solid and know where they are going, it can also be a double-edged sword which limits the scope of possibilities for the applicant. Remember, the objective statement is optional and should always be compatible with the general focus of the resume on which it appears. It is perfectly acceptable to have several different versions of your resume which are tailored to specific jobs and which emphasize specific areas of expertise, while de-emphasizing others.

## TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL BOO-BOOS

Congratulations, you've finished the first draft! Now it's time to PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD. Or, better yet, ask someone who is objective and unbiased to read your resume to ensure that it is communicating what you want it to and that it is free from typos and grammatical errors. Sending a resume with typos is like going to a wedding in expensive formal attire sporting grass-stained Nikes. Everyone is looking at your feet and ignoring your three hundred dollar outfit!

Melody Allen of Gorsuch Kirgis L.L.C. says "...any application with a typographical error goes immediately into my 'gong' pile. If the applicant doesn't possess the acumen to make a great first impression, then what am I to use as a benchmark to determine whether or not they have the ability to treat every project as though it is the most important thing they ever worked on?" Amy Johnson at Sherman & Howard agrees, adding "...almost without fail, the typo will appear in the passage of the resume in which the applicant is discussing their meticulous attention to detail!"

## THE COVER LETTER

The cover letter is yet another opportunity to demonstrate your writing skills and should not be considered a burden. It should be concise, personalized and tailored to the specific position for which you are applying. Fax cover sheets, handwritten notes and yellow stickies should never be sent in lieu of a cover letter.

Most employers expect a brief statement within the body of your cover letter which indicates why you are qualified for their specific opening. If you don't have the exact experience requested, the cover letter can

be utilized to explain how your education or transferrable skills make you a viable candidate.

Always personalize your cover letter. Take the time to find out the name of the person who will be receiving the letter and their position at the firm. Whenever possible, research the company and demonstrate how your skills are compatible with its focus.

#### FANCY FONTS AND THE PAPER ITS WRITTEN ON

Resumes and cover letters should always be typed and printed on quality paper. Avoid flashy paper and opt for more conservative grays and cream colored tones. A white resume tends to get lost in the pile.

Fancy word processing fonts make a great visual impression. However, use of more than two different type styles in a single document can make it confusing and difficult to read.

#### RESPONDING TO THE AD

So, remember the ad we talked about at the beginning? How should you respond to it? For employers, the ability to follow directions is a key component of job performance. Sandy Brooks, Administrator at Parcel Mauro Hultin & Spaanstra P.C., thinks it is very important to read what the ad says and to follow the directions in the ad. If the ad asks you to fax your resume, don't hand deliver it or call the firm for an appointment to drop it by.

Hopefully, these suggestions will aid you in avoiding some of the common pitfalls of writing resumes and cover letters. Best of luck with your employment search!

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