

Résumé Mistakes That Can Cost You an Interview

By Haley Maple and Joel Ewusiak

Your ability to land an interview depends upon your ability to sell yourself through your résumé. Most likely, you have received some form of résumé writing training through your undergraduate or law school career services office. You know to use action words to demonstrate your skills and to provide standard education and experience information.

If your résumé contains minor typographical errors or other mistakes and reflects errors in your personal judgment, however, it is likely to end up in the “circular file.” This is especially true in today’s economy where the competition is stiff.

Even if your résumé appears to be “perfect,” you could damage your chances of landing an interview if you fail to account for special considerations when posting your résumé online and e-mailing it to potential employers.

Below is list of “don’ts” that will help you avoid costly résumé mistakes.

General résumé “don’ts”

- **Don’t have any typos.** This may seem obvious, but typographical errors in résumés are often cited as potential employers’ top pet peeve. Some interviewers will not interview a candidate who submits a résumé containing typographical errors. You may be a good writer and proofreader, but you can easily miss simple mistakes even after you draft, edit, and review your résumé multiple times. After you have finalized your résumé, step away from it for a day or two and look at it with fresh eyes. Always have at least one other person review it for typographical errors. Common mistakes include the misuse of “memoranda” versus “memorandum” and mismatched verb tense.
- **Don’t make the font too small.** Do not use a tiny font size to cram in as much information as possible that would cause your reader to use a magnifying glass to read your résumé. Instead, edit sharply. Include only relevant work and educational experience. Be as brief as possible, and do not use any font size smaller than 10 point. Consider moving your name and contact information to the header area of your résumé to free up space in the body.
- **Don’t list your high school education.** Prospective employers do not care where you went to high school. Including this information typically means that you have nothing better to add on your résumé and are simply filling white space. Replace high school history with more interesting information that is relevant to the person reviewing your résumé, including volunteer experience, language skills, bar affiliations, or more elaborate prior employment history descriptions. If listing your high school information is to demonstrate your connection to the city where a firm is located, make that point in your cover letter or through your address.
- **Don’t exclude information that will cause an employer to question your résumé.** If potential employers pause over noticeably excluded information in your résumé, they may jump to negative conclusions. For example, if you include your law school GPA, then include your undergraduate GPA. If your undergraduate GPA is something that you do not want to share, then you should not include your law school GPA. If you include one and not the other, potential employers may likely assume the worst about the excluded GPA.
- **Don’t ruin your chances by listing an outdated address.** New associates are a large investment, especially in today’s economy, and firms want to hire associates who will stay. Firms would prefer to avoid paying relocation expenses. If you are in transition, your résumé should reflect your current address and your expected future address (if you have one) near the firm. For example, if you are living in Washington, D.C., studying for the bar exam, and planning to move to Orlando, Florida, after taking the exam, then your résumé should list your current Washington, D.C., address and your Orlando address “as of September 1, 2010.” This is an honest way to let employers know that you plan on planting roots near the firm; do not lie about having a local address. You also can demonstrate your commitment to the town where a firm is located by publishing an article in a local bar association publication or becoming involved in the local community.

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- **Don't undervalue your experience.** Many new attorneys feel self-conscious about what they perceive as their lack of experience when applying for jobs. Don't make this mistake. Instead, look more closely at your prior experiences. Even if you only have work experience in a few internships, these experiences likely are more relevant to a legal position than you realize. If your current legal experience is somewhat thin, try to work in some of the experience and skills that you've gained from volunteering for organizations, leading committees, or working in nonlegal related fields toward the top of your résumé. Emphasize writing and analytical skills that you've developed, demonstrate your ability to timely achieve goals while managing multiple tasks, and describe managerial and marketing experience. All of these skills translate to your first legal position.
- **Don't overstate your experience.** Absolutely do not lie or stretch the truth on your résumé! It is simply wrong, and such actions could lead to a bar complaint. Additionally, the legal community is a small one, and potential employers might discover your mistruths through colleagues or a simple Internet search. Do not risk becoming stigmatized as a liar in the legal community where honesty is the most important commodity lawyers possess. Falsely increasing your GPA or lying on your résumé is simply not worth sacrificing your integrity and can haunt your entire career.

Online résumé "don'ts"

- **Don't allow your résumé to become stale.** This "don't" applies to any type of résumé, both in print and online. Often, professionals post their résumés on social networking sites or online job boards and never look at them again. If you do not regularly update your résumé, especially when it is posted online, you run the risk of potential employers coming across old or inconsistent information. Remember to update your online résumés when you acquire a new job skill or responsibility and when you are formally recognized for an accomplishment. You should update your résumés with new articles that you have authored, new professional or service memberships, new leadership positions, and awards.
- **Don't forget where you've posted your résumé.** As there are many options available to online job seekers and online social networkers, it is hard to keep track of all the places in cyberspace that your résumé may be lurking. Keep track of your online résumés by creating list of which Web sites that you have posted them on and when.
- **Don't leave unwanted metadata available for discovery in your electronic résumé.** Be sure that when you submit your résumé online or via e-mail that it is stripped of all metadata. Résumés are living documents, and potential employers should see the most current version and not one from years ago or one that shows an earlier draft errors.
- **Don't forget to tailor your online résumé to your target audience.** Résumé banks or databases allow you to submit your résumé to a database that is typically used by large employers and career Web sites, such as Monster.com. As employers often search résumé banks using key terms, you should include job-specific keywords in your résumé.
- **Consider posting your résumé on a personal Web page.** Then you can provide potential employers with a direct link to your résumé online. You can display your résumé on your home page or include a link to a downloadable résumé. Be sure to keep the appearance and content of your Web page professional and attractive, and avoid unnecessary flash on your Web page. Do not include links to other Web sites on your résumé or your Web page as you cannot control whether links to external Web sites will always function properly or to what content they will lead.
- **Don't fail to follow instructions.** Following this simple rule will save you from excluding yourself from the job pool because you did not submit your résumé in the proper format or with the proper information. Just as each position is different, each Web site is different and has different requirements for a submitting a résumé or applying for a job. Read all instructions, and alter your résumé accordingly before submitting it.

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- **Don't assume that your résumé's formatting will be preserved online.** Résumés submitted online frequently contain formatting problems. To maintain the professional appearance of your résumé when submitting them online, consider composing a plain text version of your résumé without special characters and fonts. Prospective employers viewing your résumé might not know what causes formatting problems and could conclude that you are sloppy or careless.
- **Don't ignore the risks that come with posting your résumé online.** Your address and phone number are probably on your résumé. Some job seekers also include their date of birth, driver's license number, social security number, and taxpayer identification number. Consider eliminating this type of information from your online résumé because other persons might use this personal, identifying information to establish bank accounts and credit cards. You also might be placed on marketing or mailing lists. Also, you should not post your résumé online if you are not actively looking for a position. Your current employer could view your résumé and wonder whether you are unhappy with your current position and whether you are looking for another job while at work. This could jeopardize your current employment.

E-mailing résumé "don'ts"

- **Don't abandon formality in e-mails.** All too often job seekers draft their e-mails as though they are sending an e-mail to their best friend instead of potential employers. Ensure that e-mails are properly drafted and have correct grammar and spelling. Make sure you use the appropriate salutation. Treat e-mails attaching your résumé just as you would traditional cover letters enclosing your résumé.
- **Don't say or do anything that you would not during an interview.** Do not use e-mail as an opportunity to "show off" by pointing out typographical errors on firm Web sites or in job postings. It could offend and turn off potential employers. Be careful of the impression your e-mail could give. For example, do not send your e-mail at 3:00 a.m. or after a few glasses of wine. Potential employers will notice and may think that you are not taking the application process seriously and, in turn, will not take the position seriously.
- **Don't forget to use common courtesy when e-mailing your résumé.** Whoever is receiving your e-mail is probably very busy. Make opening and reading e-mail as easy as possible to increase the odds that e-mail is read. Give your résumé an appropriate file name, and notify e-mail recipients of the attachment's file format. Employers may not open the attachment if it appears in an unfamiliar file format or has an unusual name; they may assume such e-mail is spam or contains a virus. Subject lines of e-mail should state the position applied for, your name, and a description of the attachment, if any, unless employers have instructed otherwise.

Make no mistake: your résumé will be judged with scrutiny and researched thoroughly. Therefore, you are well served by taking your time in drafting your résumé, editing it sharply, keeping it current, and taking special care in distributing it via the Internet and e-mail.

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