

Spotlight Education

Writing a Résumé

By Linda S. Jevahirian

Your resume is what differentiates you as a unique and qualified professional. It should reflect what you are looking for, what qualifies you, and what you are capable of doing. Along with the traditional rules, you can add some eye-catching and distinguishing features that will add to the effectiveness of your presentation. This article looks specifically at how to handle the education section of your résumé.

Many paralegal positions require specific degrees. When this is the case, it is wise to put your educational achievements at the beginning of your résumé. Recent graduates who have little work experience may also wish to put education information at the beginning in order to highlight this aspect of their qualifications. In instances where your work experience is of greater significance, your education information can be listed near the end.

For each institution, include your degree, the school name, year of graduation, and honors received. If you are in school, indicate your expected date of graduation.

It is not necessary to name and describe specific classes unless you are trying to demonstrate a specific specialty or skill. Legal and business classes that compliment specialty law subjects can enhance your résumé. If you are a personal injury paralegal, an anatomy course might make you more marketable. Engineering or life sciences might be applicable if you want to work in an intellectual property practice, and a real estate license can be valuable if you are applying for a position with a title company.

Bill Parsons, Director of Human Resources at the international law firm of Miller Canfield Paddock and Stone, PLC, states that he looks for areas of concentration, including majors and/or minors.

“These details give a more complete picture of the individual, even if the specifics are unrelated to the area of law they work in,” he says. “They also show the ability to learn and to grasp diverse areas. An employer wants to know if you can learn new skills, especially as technology changes. Equally as important are updates that occur in the tax, real estate, bankruptcy and probate laws.”

In many cases the person reading your résumé will be more concerned with the school you graduated from than the specific courses you have taken. ABA-Approved programs can be expected to meet an accepted threshold, and experienced recruiters find the course offerings to be somewhat similar across the board.

Christine Scurto, Paralegal Manager at Butzel Long, a large Detroit law firm, has a long history in the paralegal field, and is familiar with what most programs have to offer.

“I glance over courses candidates have taken, but I don't make it a point to concentrate on that as I look to the school and have a good understanding as to the kind of curriculum paralegal programs offer,” she says.

If you attended college but did not receive a degree, you may simply list the years of attendance. It is not necessary to point out the lack of a degree, which can sometimes be damaging, so be selective about what is important. If asked at the interview, of course, you should always be honest about your qualifications. This is another area where it may be wise to list any relevant classes taken. A lack of degree is much less significant if a candidate has taken several law related courses.

Because many advertised positions require specific degrees, it can be intimidating to apply for them if you don't have the requisite education. Some firms will waive the degree requirement for individuals with significant work experience. Other firms are willing to create a non-paralegal title for candidates who meet the requirements for experience, but do not have the required degree. And you never know when a firm might think you are a candidate for a completely different position that might get your foot in the door.

There are firms, however, that have adopted very strict educational criteria and make no exceptions. Honigman Miller Schwartz and Cohn is one of the largest law firms in Michigan, and, as with many competing law firms and corporate legal departments, their educational requirement is specific and unyielding. Their paralegal recruiter specifies that paralegal experience in a specific industry must be supplemented by a bachelor's degree plus a paralegal certificate from a certified institution, or a bachelor's degree in legal studies from a certified school. Résumés that do not show the required educational background are not considered.”

In addition to the traditional college education information, there are other educational accomplishments that should not be overlooked on the résumé. Be sure to include earned certificates that indicate a lot about a person, especially if they are earned while working.

Continuing education demonstrates that skills are up-to-date. Include the course title, sponsor, and the dates of participation in any classes or seminars outside your degree area. Many people find it hard to remember the specifics about seminars, so add them to your résumé as you complete them. It makes sense to offset this part of your background in a section that you can call “Continuing Education” or “Seminars.”

If you have had a unique academic experience, such as an archaeology dig or special study overseas, be sure to include it. Such experiences imply an interesting and well-rounded person. You can include your internship in this section or in the experience section. Be sure to indicate for whom you worked and any specific duties that demonstrate substantive experience.

Some recruiters place a high value on grade point averages and will look for a paralegal that has scored in the top percentage of their class. Others place little emphasis on the GPA.

According to Julie Weitzman, Paralegal Supervisor, at Plunkett & Cooney, “C” students make excellent paralegals. They work hard, they are diligent, and they are invested in a long-term legal assistant career. While most experts agree that a GPA of 3.0 can be impressive, whether to include your GPA is essentially a matter of personal preference.

Another thing that can differentiate you is your extra-curricular activities. This includes educational opportunities offered by associations. Scurto looks for school and bar related activities. This reinforces the candidate’s character and is important when building a staff of paralegals.

In the final analysis it is the blend of all of your experience coupled with your individual personality that will tip the scale. Employers are looking for skilled paralegals, but the bottom line is that they have to like you. Once your talent has been demonstrated, it all boils down to “chemistry,” and that is a difficult thing to communicate on paper.



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