

The Resume

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There is a lot of pressure to write an award-winning resume but keep in mind that it is a learned skill. It is no easy task to condense your life accomplishments in a one-page document that begs for white space. If you can approach this with the same art and science you do a good brief you will be at least 50% ahead of the pack.

Presentation

Even if you send an electronic resume you should follow it up with a hard copy. That said I suggest you pick the crispest piece of paper you can find. I know there is a tendency to get a little artful so that your page will stand out. But, take it from me, you are dealing with people in the law and they are not going to pick you because of your orange paper. They are going to think you are looking for a job in a pumpkin patch.

If you are responding to ads online I suggest you read about how to format an electronic resume. Most law firms are comfortable with an attached Microsoft Word or WordPerfect document but it may be different for corporations, most particularly if you are applying to the human resources department and they have specialized e-resume software that sorts and stores. I have read that the resume should not be attached, but should instead be part of your email, followed by a hard copy. I'm not sure I like this idea because it loses the format and sex appeal.

Objective

What about that alleged objective? I know that every book on the shelf says you should include an objective. And they all come in different sizes and forms. If you are looking for a paralegal position, why not just state that? Objective: Paralegal Position. Why does it have to say 'Paralegal position with law firm or corporate legal department that will utilize my people skills?' Or, 'I am seeking a position as a legal assistant in a firm that will appreciate my ability to get along well with others.' By the way the word I does not belong on a resume.

The objective is important because your resume can get separated from your cover letter, but it is not an opportunity to make up for your lousy sixth grade report card. Make it simple and make it fast so the reviewer will have more time to read the important parts of the resume.

Education

In most cases education is listed at the top of the resume. I happen to like it as the first entry because more and more positions have specific requirements. A more experienced paralegal might put education last thinking that experience is more important. The reader might find it aggravating to have to search for the education. Keep it simple and put your education at the top.

List your degrees in reverse chronological order. I prefer abbreviations for degrees because they are easier to read. This is the only place on the resume that I find abbreviations acceptable, however. A.A., Florida State University seems a little easier to scan than Associate of the Arts, Florida State University. This however is personal taste and if you like the formal spelling of your degree, use it.

Be sure to include your degree, school, year of graduation, and your major or concentration. If you received honors include them. If you have a 3.5 or above you can include your grade point average, otherwise don't bother. If you served an internship include that also. If you have attended a college without receiving a degree only include it if you have not received a degree elsewhere.

Include any continuing education classes (CLE) and be sure to identify the course name, the course sponsor, and the date you took the course. Make sure it is clear that the course was continuing education. It is hard to remember from year to year where you attended seminars so be sure to update this part of your resume regularly.

If you attend monthly association meetings do not list each and every meeting. Simply state that you attend them, especially if you receive credit. If you have attended classes such as Carnegie, include them. They demonstrate character building. If your firm has in-house CLE include it. However, if you take a class in day hiking at the local high school do not include it.

Do not include your high school diploma. If you are looking for a paralegal position it is implied that you have finished high school, especially if you have completed higher education. There may be some temptation to include your high school if you attended a college preparatory school or a well-known academy. If you want to include it and you have room, do so.

Computer Skills and Languages

List all the computer programs you can use, but do not get specific about versions. It adds way too many complicated numbers to your resume and as a legal assistant the focus of your qualifications will not be dependent on whether or not you upgraded your Word program.

Do not include the fact that you know how to use a fax machine or can make Xerox copies. Furthermore, do not include how many words you type per minute or list any programs or machines that are old and outdated. If you were trained on Wang that's great but they are all sitting in your local garbage dump now.

If you can speak, write or understand a language well enough to use it in business, include it. If you learned a little Italian before your last summer vacation and you can say 'good morning', 'please bring the check', and 'where is my pizza?' don't include it.

Employment

What is important about the employment section is what you did where and how long you did it. The address, telephone number, and supervisor name do not belong on a resume. If the firm or company is out of town you can include the city or state. If the firm has multiple offices you can include the city. Especially if you are in the legal field the people reading your resume have enough resources to look things up if they can't figure them out. If you worked at Burger King Corporate Headquarters it is going to be less important to include the location.

List your employers in reverse chronological format. Include under each one a list of bullets indicating your job assignments. If you have had several jobs and they have all been pretty similar in responsibilities you can list the responsibilities once and reference them in the others. Be complete but if you filled in as a receptionist one hour a week do not include it.

Each bullet should be terse and right to the point. Words like 'job responsibilities included' do not belong on a resume. If you are listing these things under the job it is assumed they are or were your responsibilities. Why in the world would you have to tell them they are if it is so obvious? It is too much clutter to include words that are implied.

Write the current job description in active voice. Draft documents, *not* drafting documents. Write the last jobs in past voice. Drafted documents. Trial preparation is an event. Prepare for trial is an action. File organization should be organized files.

Do not use the words etc., or various. Neither of them describe a darn thing. Every word you use should have a specific connotation associated with it. If you say etc. or various you are telling the reader there are other things that are important but you are too lazy to list them.

Litigation, real estate and family law is not a description of what you did at a job. Not every paralegal in every law firm or corporation does the same work in litigation, real estate and family law. You must include a list of the skills you have performed otherwise you are telling the reader that you cannot clearly describe what you did.

Memberships, volunteer work, hobbies and achievements

If you are a member of any professional groups list them in this section. If you have been an officer or committee member indicate so. Dates are not as important in this section. The fact they you list the group means you are or were a member.

Being a volunteer shows good character. If you have played a special role as a volunteer you should include it. You can include dates if the work is not current. If you volunteered for Habitat for Humanity it is significant. If you volunteer yearly at the church rummage sale it is it not. If you volunteer at a religious institution realize that you will give away personal information about your preferences so use your discretion.

Personally I like seeing hobbies on a resume, but in most cases it is no longer considered standard practice. Since a resume is an objective snap shot of your capabilities, hobbies and interests are better left to the interview.

If, on the other hand, you have won an award for a special event that demonstrates an activity or involvement, include it. Just simply saying you are a jogger is not as demonstrative as saying you ran the Boston Marathon. If your orchestra was invited to perform in Austria that is more effective than simply saying you play the horn.

If you have published articles, scholarly papers or books include them. If you have a list of articles two pages long, however, you may want to include an attachment or reference that you have a list if they want it.

Subjective data

Believe it or not I still get resumes with marital status, number of children, sex and age on them. Including this kind of information is old fashioned and outdated. In the modern world it is no longer appropriate for an employer to make choices based on personal statistics, therefore, do not tempt them to do so.

If there are practical considerations you want the employer to know about save them for the interview. Daycare is a big issue when it comes to overtime. If you have to pick your child up at a specific time it is ok to discuss it with an employer, but including your four children with their ages on a resume is not the way to get the point across.

Summary

Your resume is the most powerful piece of your portfolio. It should function as a torpedo not a hurricane. It should be smart and focused not in a state of chaos. Smart people know how to package themselves, they are articulate and they are concise. Your resume should be likewise.