

Resume Myths: What to Avoid in Preparing Your Resume

By Pamela Cook, ACFRE and Paul Gietzel

(A version of this article appeared in the November/December 2009 issue of *Advancing Philanthropy* and in the November 2009 *AFP-Golden Gate Chapter e-Bulletin*)

We do not have a professional resume business, but we review hundreds in the course of our search work. Because we are frequently asked for advice, we describe below mistakes development professionals often make in preparing their resumes.

Myth #1: Make your resume functional by selecting your categories of strength and listing work and volunteer experience that relate to this category.

Reality: Some advisors encourage candidates to prepare functional resumes. We have always found them difficult to evaluate and too long. We surveyed our colleagues in the Network of Nonprofit Search Consultants. The response was a 100% vote for chronological resumes. Functional resumes make it difficult to develop a full picture of a person's career. Some employers are suspicious that a functional resume attempts to hide a spotty work history.

Colette Murray of Paschal Murray says, "Employers want to know where you are now and how long you have been there." Dennis Barden of Witt/Kieffer says, "If it is important, say it first."

Myth #2: Avoid listing positions older than 10 years on your resume.

Reality: In development, experience is usually a plus. Yes, age discrimination exists, but smart employers don't do it. What smart employers avoid are candidates who hide their career experiences – they assume the worst! List your experiences and describe what you learned from them. While you can summarize older positions, make sure that an employer will understand the sequencing of your career history.

Myth #3: Make your resume stand out by using unusual fonts, colors, and images.

Reality: You want your resume to be easily opened, read, and copied. Unusual formatting increases the odds that a recipient will not be able to open or view it properly. Stick to a white background and standard fonts. Vary the font size, use bolding, underlining or italics for emphasis, and consider a mix of bulleted items and text. Do not put periods or odd punctuation in the document name. Avoid document names like ChuckResumeFundraisingJobs that might indicate that you have multiple career goals.

While it is a common practice outside the US to include a photo, most US employers think it is inappropriate and potentially discriminatory.

Do not exceed 200 kilobytes, or you may be "spammed out" or clog your potential employer's system. If you can, use PDF format. If not, use a standard Word format.

Myth #4: Your resume should be no longer than one page.

Reality: While it is important to be concise and to prioritize the items on your resume, you should take the pages you need to list your experience and education fully. Describe your more recent experiences in greater detail. List additional training when it is relevant to the position. Selectively include volunteer experience. Keep it under four pages.

Myth #5: If your resume looks good on your printer, it will on everyone else's.

Reality: We see lots of resumes with page breaks in awkward places and/or scattered blank pages. We sometimes see resumes that don't print at all because they are configured for special sized paper or contain an image that overwhelms some printers. Try emailing your resume to friends with different printers and make sure that it opens and prints properly. Producing your resume in PDF can reduce the number of printing issues.

Myth #6: List only your home telephone number on your resume.

Reality: You need to list a number and email address where you can be easily reached. Every number should be one that you answer and check frequently and at which someone has a good chance of reaching you during business hours. Avoid giving numbers that another person might answer (even a partner – when an employer calls, they can't assume your partner knows you are looking for a job!). Your voice message should sound professional, should state your name, and should let people know whether personal and confidential messages can be left. On email, you should use a confidential account that is not managed by your employer and that will not "spam out" potential employer enquiries. Your e-mail address should sound professional, e.g. not ready2party@hotmail.com!

Myth #7: A few typos on the resume do not matter.

Reality: A few typos on the resume may sink your candidacy. Employers will assume that your resume is representative of your best writing and editing skills. Proofread, spellcheck, and have your friends read your resume. Every entry throughout your resume should have consistent structure. We suggest bullet items beginning with action verbs such as lead, organize, supervise, create, build, and produce.

Myth #8: No one wants to see numbers on your resume.

Reality: In development, everyone wants to see your accomplishments quantified. Use specific numbers in talking about the number of staff managed, prospects in your portfolio, gifts raised, calls, mailings, events, attendees. While some of your results can be shown in percentages, for most, the actual numbers will be most relevant.

Resume Myths

Myth #9: Everyone will recognize my employer.

Reality: Do not assume that everyone who sees your resume will know about your current or previous employer. List the organization and its location. Rick King of Kittleman & Associates suggests “a short descriptive sentence about the organizations/institutions to provide context.” A hyperlink may be helpful.

Myth #10: If I ask that my resume be treated confidentially, it will be.

Reality: Once you begin a job search and you distribute your resume, anything can happen. The wider your resume is circulated, the more likely it is that someone will either inadvertently or deliberately “spill the beans.” While you can ask a prospective employer to keep your search confidential, you also want them to discuss your application with other decision makers. It is difficult to control who can and who cannot see your resume, so you should be aware that it might become “public” more quickly than you had hoped.

Myth #11: Put your references on your resume.

Reality: Sometimes the person scanning your resume may see an individual they know or respect listed as your reference. However, the listing of names will lengthen your resume and may induce reference calls to be made too early in the process to be most helpful to you. Certainly, if you want any degree of confidentiality, a statement that references are available is sufficient. You should contact references in advance of your search and they should be alerted if you believe an employer will contact them.

Myth #12: You should prepare a resume only when you see a position of interest.

Reality: You should always keep your resume up-to-date. You never know when you might see an opportunity of special interest, and in today’s market, you need to be nimble. If you list your accomplishments as they occur, you will be sure to get them onto the resume so that they are not forgotten in the rush of preparing a new document. You can tailor a resume for a particular position, but it is more productive (and less error prone) to carefully prepare a cover letter that specifically highlights the match of your experience with the job you are seeking.

Pamela A. Cook, ACFRE, and Paul Gietzel work for Pamela Cook Development Search, an executive search firm in the San Francisco Bay Area. We appreciate the good counsel and ideas of our colleagues in the Network of Nonprofit Search Consultants (www.nnsc.org) but any mistakes or omissions are our own.