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Why Your Resume Gets Tossed

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The average recruiter sees 5,000 resumes a year. Any legitimate reason she finds to make one disappear makes her life that much easier -- and yours that much harder. Here, top-level recruiters reveal how candidates blow their chances to get a foot in the door.

Numbers Don't Add Up

If accomplishments can be quantified, do it -- but use discretion. Brandishing borderline performance numbers signals a lack of experience and bad judgment. "Phrases like 'managed a budget of $500,000' or 'led a team of two' might catch my eye in a bad way," warns Olaf Weckesser, a former recruiter for McKinsey & Co. Better to spin it as "managed company's largest budget."

Adds Alexandra DeMarino, a Citigroup recruiter: "If a small number is impressive, you absolutely have to put it in context." Because you can't provide context for academic numbers, don't include GMAT scores below 650 if you're targeting a top firm. DeMarino suggests bragging about nothing less than a 3.7 GPA.

Formality Takes a Vacation

Don't succumb to the informality of email. "If you send a cover letter by email that starts with 'Hi,' it and your resume will probably end up in the trash," says Cynthia Shore, an assistant dean at the University at Buffalo School of Management and former director of its career-resource center. Treat an email as you would a proper letter: Instead of "Hi," write "Dear Mr. Case." Instead of "Thanks," conclude with "Sincerely."

Keywords Are Overused

It's true that recruiters sometimes use scanners to sort through resumes looking for certain keywords. But resumes appear contrived when candidates consciously try to include them. Describing a business-development position using such terms as "needs assessment" and "contract analysis" in order to squeeze in more keywords is a misguided strategy. Assume that a human being -- not a computer -- will be reading the resume. After all, these days fewer than 25 percent of all recruiters even use scanners.

Things Get Too Personal

"If you mention your age, we have to trash your resume," says Jeremy Eskenazi, vice president of talent acquisition at Idealab!, the California incubator firm. Since it's illegal for a company to solicit a candidate's age, race, or marital status during the hiring process, firms have adopted a "don't tell" policy to avoid potential bias suits. Many won't risk even having it handed to them.

It Looks Too Fancy

"A recruiter who receives resumes in pretty plastic folders will likely toss them," says Dave Opton, CEO and founder of ExecuNet, an online executive recruiting service. "I don't have time to take the damn things apart." Another faux pas: Folding a resume so that it fits into a standard business envelope. Heavy-stock paper that retains its crease can be a nuisance. Says Opton: "They're easier to store and photocopy if they're flat."

Also, don't try to differentiate your resume with boxes or ornate lettering. When recruiters see a resume that's designed differently, they think the person's trying to hide something. Instead, focus on content. Your resume will rise to the top of the pile.

Want more? Visit CareerTV.com for this video on keeping your resume out of the trash. For more articles on resumes and cover letters, visit WetFeet.com.

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