

10 THINGS I LOOK FOR WHEN I SCREEN RESUMES AND COVER LETTERS

by Ronnie Ann ~ November 17th, 2008



Confessions of a serial resume screener: One of the things I enjoy most as a consultant is when I get to help companies find good candidates to interview. It's fun meeting each one in an initial interview and trying to figure out if they might be a good match for the company and job. But before I bring anyone in, first I have to screen dozens of resumes and cover letters (sometimes over a hundred) to find those few candidates who seem most promising.

So what do I look for when I screen resumes and cover letters?

Glad you asked. Here are the ten things that make a candidate's application stand out for me as a screener:

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WELL-ORGANIZED, PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE – You may think that's obvious, but I've seen lots of resumes that look sloppy. Or hard to read. Or thrown together. Or scrunched up as if I wouldn't notice they're trying to squeeze it all into one page. By the way, you don't have to do that...especially if you have lots of solid experience you want to highlight and truly need more than one page.

But you also don't want to pad it with the same old same old again and again; if that's all you have, one page is more than enough. For example...if you're an analyst, no need to simply tell me you did analysis at each job. I get that. Tell me what type of analysis and the result. Show me something interesting for every job you list that helps you stand out from the masses! Now THAT's worth an extra page.

Also know that sometimes when resumes are scanned, the first page gets viewed the most, so let that page be loaded with your best stuff even if you have to create a Highlights section at the top to do that.

And don't forget to check out sample resumes and cover letters to see what great ones look like. The thoughtful use of bold, spacing, formatting, and different fonts can make a resume come to life for the reader.

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INITIATIVE – I want your resume and cover letter to show me you are not just an average worker, but someone who will look for ways to do your best and make my company better. Use bulleted sections that start with action verbs like “led” and “created” and “improved” and talk about what you’ve accomplished that makes you special, rather than a sentence like “Handled assignments on a timely basis.” You’re expected to do that. What else do you have to offer a new employer?

A SENSE OF WHO YOU ARE – Many resumes and cover letters look good, but they come off lifeless. No sense of the person and why i might want to meet them. This is hard to describe in a post, but you need to put some of your real self into it. Cover letters are great for this since you can lead with something interesting (within the bounds of decorum of course), rather than the deadly dull “I saw your ad on Monster” or whatever.

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This is your chance to market yourself to me and make me want to meet you! You do this by sounding real and by letting me see a glimpse of who you are in the way you write and how you organize your resume. Even what you choose to include and how you present it gives me a sense of the person.

I also want to get a sense of you as someone who takes responsibility, solves problems, commits to what they do, and is dependable. You can convey all that using your resume and cover letter.

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SOMETHING THAT HELPS ME

REMEMBER YOU – I know I said to keep it short and not go on and on, but there is still a way to do that and be memorable. It could be with a great opening line on your cover letter – although the trick here is to create some interest without making it hokey or gushy; you want to stay professional while still revealing a bit of you. You might mention someone you have in common or some interesting experience or skill that relates to the job. Or you might make sure you include one small unique accomplishment on your resume that stands out like “Hosted the 2008 Olympic Women’s Volleyball Team when they visited XYZ company.” (Uh...it has to be real or it counts against you.)

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GOOD WRITING SKILLS

- Even if the job does not involve writing, most jobs nowadays require good communication skills. Both your resume and cover letter should be written carefully, paying attention to grammar and typos. People can reject you for just typos because they show you are careless. (Remember that spell check doesn’t always catch typos that are real words, so please ask someone else to proof both your resume and cover letter for you.)

Oh...and you get a big plus if your writing is clear, to the point, and makes your case well. You don’t have to be Shakespeare...just take the time to do your best.

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DATES THAT ARE EASY TO READ AND UNDERSTAND - Sometimes I get resumes without dates or with the dates scattered around, making it hard to piece together the picture of what, where, when, and how long! You're not going to fool anyone by trying to hide your dates. I need to know where you worked, when you were there, and how long you stayed. If it looks at all suspicious, I move on to the next one.

If there are gaps (and many of us have them, including me), you can fill in the time with volunteer work or school or a project you took on or a book you wrote or something solid. If that's not possible, depending on what it is, you might want to mention it in your cover letter*. But in most cases it's probably best to try to wow them with what you do have to offer – enough to tempt them to at least want to talk to you on the phone – and then make sure you have a clear explanation you feel comfortable with when you get asked about it in an interview question!

This goes for apparent job-hopping too. Some screeners won't even bother, but more and more screeners recognize there are good employees who for one reason or another had a few short stints in a row. As someone who almost never stayed in one place more than one or two years until about 7 years ago (when I began free-lancing for the same organization – although in various areas), I can tell you there are still ways to market yourself effectively. But often it takes a really good resume and cover letter!