

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

Recruiters and resume experts draw a firm line between putting your best foot forward and lying on your resume.

The woman was mousy and small, just 5 feet tall and 105 pounds. She wanted to be hired full time at the Ohio-based manufacturing facility where she was temping, and asked what she had to do to make that happen.

Well, you have to fill out an application and go through an interview, and then we'll do a background check, the vice president of human resources, Matthew Rosen, told her.

I'll have a tough time with the background check, said the woman.

That was an understatement. The background check revealed a criminal record and hard time in a penitentiary. When Rosen asked the woman about it, she said her husband had beaten her, repeatedly. So she shot him, a crime for which she spent seven years behind bars.

Rosen's jaw hit the floor. And yet, Rosen recommended hiring her.

It "turned out beautifully," Rosen said. The woman is still working at the plant today. She's one of the organization's best workers, grateful just to have been given a chance.

It's an extreme case. Many people have issues they'd rather sweep under the carpet than reveal on a resume, from work-history gaps to degrees not received to an age that's either too ripe or too raw to admit.

But all resume issues have one thing in common: Getting caught in a lie about them can obliterate your chances of getting hired.

"It's going to be discovered. If it gets discovered, or when, there will be no chance you'll get that job," said Rosen, who is now human resources director for Schiller International University in Largo, Fla.

"You have a better chance explaining it, much better. If they run a background check, then it will get discovered, and then you've lied to these people. Who'll hire someone who's lied to them? I'm going to hire someone who did something and went to a penitentiary. I'll never hire someone who's lied to me."

But while it's easy to preach truthfulness, resumes are marketing documents that present candidates in the best light. It begs the question: What can you successfully gloss over, and how do you do it without turning yourself into a liar? When is it OK to polish, and when does an embellishment become a forgery?

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

In this package, TheLadders draws the line.

Certified professional resume writers, job seekers, corporate recruiters and career coaches speak out to delineate the difference between an appropriate omission and a deliberate disguise.

They break down the resume into sections and define what shows what and how you can tweak your resume to make it shine and still stay within the bounds of honesty. The result is a clear topography of this slippery slope for all those job seekers who've found themselves questioning the distinction between exaggeration and fabrication.

Employment And Education Dates - Bottom Line

- It is acceptable to omit graduation dates, but it can lead recruiters to think you are trying to mask your age
- Every position must include the year, but not the month
- It's a bad idea to fudge dates, given how easy it is to check dates of employment and graduation.

But with age discrimination at both ends of the experience spectrum, there's sound justification for strategically dealing with dates, in particular, dates of college graduation.

"For some jobs, like those of top executives, employers won't hire (somebody) in his early 30s," said Steve Burdan, a certified professional resume writer who works with TheLadders. "They're looking for (an applicant) in his 40s or early 50s."

Similarly, applicants in their 50s can face prejudice concerning older workers and their presumed inflexibility regarding:

- Salary
- Learning new technology
- Being managed by a younger person

When To Date Yourself

Burdan himself was once a recruiter and admits that checking on college dates is the first thing he'd do when reviewing an application. "I'd take the hard resume copy and go immediately to the college (dates) to figure out how old they are," he said.

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

Now that he's a resume writer, Burdan handles resume dates differently depending on where a job seeker is in her career path. If a job seeker has had only three operations jobs in her career and received a degree in 1988, Burdan will include the college dates to signal how old the subject is. If the subject is in his early 60s or 70s, Burdan excludes college dates completely.

The point isn't to lie, Burdan said; the point is to "throw employers off the trail as long as possible."

An employer will eventually find out a candidate's age. But the longer it takes for that to happen, the less time there is for that employer to rule somebody out due to preconceptions about their age, and the more time there is for a candidate to get into an interview and to build a relationship with her interviewers.

But be forewarned: Recruiters know what you're up to when you're cagey with dates, and leaving them off can set off alarms.

"Dates are something very critical to have on your resume," said Jacqueline Hudson, a senior account executive for the Renascent Group LLC, an executive search firm. "I totally understand age discrimination, but if dates aren't included automatically a recruiter will think, 'What are they hiding? Are they too junior or are they too senior?'"

Dates of Employment

While leaving off education dates clearly has its pluses and minuses, leaving off work history dates is never a good idea. Recruiters like to see how long a candidate stayed with an employer and, specifically, how many years of experience they have in a given role.

"If they list five jobs with no dates, we don't know if they spent 25 years at one job and one with another," Hudson said. "Dates show consistency and what your work history pattern is. Nobody wants to hire somebody who will turn around and work for someone else in less than a year."

For those worried about a short tenure at a job, contemporary wisdom dictates eliminating months and including only years for job history dates.

Work History - Bottom Line

- It is acceptable to omit work experience, or limit details, after 10 to 12 years.
- Don't cover gaps by extending your tenure at previous positions.
- Fill in gaps with consulting and volunteer positions or list the reasons for the unemployment (e.g. a sabbatical, family leave or maternity leave).

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

If you began your professional career in 1974, are you required to fill several pages with technology jobs, promotions and duties dating back 35 years?

No! Convention in the resume industry which is driven largely by the expectations of recruiters and hiring manager dictates that candidates include the past 10 to 12 years of work history on their resumes.

Job seekers typically feel compelled to list "... every single thing they've done since they started their professional careers," said Stephen Van Vreede, a certified professional resume writer who works with TheLadders

But, Van Vreede added, most recruiters and hiring managers don't care to go back that far, and exhaustive detail is unnecessary.

Use discretion to cull work history beyond the 12-year mark. If a job held more than 12 years ago seems relevant to the position you're applying for, it's acceptable to include the employer, job title and dates of employment without a full job description. Just be prepared to explain why this experience is relevant.

Gaps In Your Resume

Lying by omission occurs in the work history section when candidates exclude or try to hide employment gaps. Hiring professionals are trained to spot such gaps or to weed them out in background checks, and they'll typically assume that a candidate is trying to hide something if they find an unexplained gap.

Gaps can result for myriad legitimate reasons. Examples include:

- A retirement that was cut short due to a nose-diving 401K plan
- Childbirth or family issues
- A sabbatical
- A return to school to pursue a degree

Candidates often write what's known as a "functional" resume to try to cover up such gaps. In a functional resume, company names and job accomplishments are provided without dates.

Don't do it!!!

When looking at a functional resume, hiring professionals can't tell when or where a given accomplishment happened, and it will signal to most hiring managers that a job seeker is trying to hide something.

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

"I think that's a big mistake," Van Vreede said. "Right off the bat, you're making people worry about you. And if worried enough, they'll leave you out of consideration."

Fill In The Gap

Be forthright by documenting all work-history gaps just as you would a job, said several certified professional resume writers.

For example, if you took a sabbatical from 2001 to 2003, include that information on your resume, with "Sabbatical" in all capital and/or bold letters, just as if it were a company name.

That way, the gap is right up front, addressed and filled in for the hiring manager who's just looking at the dates," Van Vreede said.

"It gets you through the human resources screen, but you won't be accused of trying to hide anything. And in today's environment, a lot of people have gaps on their resumes."

Case in point: Schiller International University's Rosen reviewed a resume in mid-July that included a gap in employment, but the applicant had been clear that the gap was due to time spent as a stay-at-home mother.

"Well, that's fine," Rosen said. "That was explained. But the other point is, especially these days, losing a job is not a black eye anymore. At one point, if you got laid off, people thought there was something wrong with you. Nowadays if you lose your job, it's no big deal."

Explain the Gap

Rosen is also understanding of work histories that are somewhat inconsistent, as long as the inconsistencies are explainable. He talked to another job seeker in mid-July who had been at one job for a long time, followed by short tenures at two companies, a potential red flag from a recruiter's perspective.

The candidate explained that he had moved on from the long term position to a new one, but left because of a disagreement with a supervisor. He had then moved into a position in the mortgage industry, but lost his job in the early days of the recession. "That's OK," Rosen said. "They were at one job for 18, 20 years, that's OK. That's a reasonable explanation. It really is."

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

Certified professional resume writers Van Vreede and Burdan recommend that job seekers fill in gaps on their resumes resulting from layoffs with any consulting, freelance or contract work completed. Include pro bono or volunteer work, as well.

For those who have done nothing since losing a job, putting nothing down can work if there have been only a few months of downtime. If you've done nothing for more than six months, you're getting to the point where people will start to worry.

However, unemployment remains common enough in this economy that it should not automatically disqualify a job seeker.

Job Titles - Bottom Line

- Insert the official title(s) used by your previous employer(s) on your resume.
- When it comes to job titles, there is no way around the truth
- Certified professional resume writers say you must always be honest because titles are easily verified by reference and background checks

By default, you should provide the title referred to by the employer,” said Burdan. “Companies like the Big Five, they’ll have titles like ‘Senior Auditor.’ You have to go along with that,” he said, even if that title has an unclear meaning out of context. “That’s what the industry knows and the company uses. It’s awkward, but you’ve got to use it.” It is also easily verified by reference and background checks.

Exceptions To The Rule

But there is some wiggle room, said several certified professional resume writers.

An example of an acceptable title change would be for an applicant whose past job was as both a sales representative and a manager. If that job seeker decides he wants to do only sales and would rather not manage anymore, it’s permissible to include only the sales experience on his resume, said Mary Schumacher, a certified professional resume writer who works with TheLadders.

Job seekers who were business owners present a particular problem for Burdan. Too often they include inflated titles, such as president and CEO, he said. He advises against those titles, even if that’s what the individual’s business card said. Instead, he advises using a title such as “Principal.”

The rationale boils down to perception: There’s a big difference between being the president of a one-person company and being the president of General Electric, and, in most cases, it’s wise to “Dial it Back” to avoid being seen as exaggerating your role, he said.

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

Burdan also suggests translating or converting titles of candidates who have military or government experience, given that titles such as “Colonel,” “Major” or “Agent in charge” don’t have clear meaning within the business community.

Education - Bottom Line

- Never claim a degree or certificate you do not possess
- Never falsify or round up a Grade Point Average (GPA)

Accu-Screen, a company that specializes in employment background checks, has found during the course of tracking 15 years worth of screens that some 16 percent of academic degrees and institutions listed on resumes are falsified. Job seekers also falsify 15 percent of technical skills and certifications, Accu-Screen has found.

Many job candidates who have gone to college but haven't graduated lie by saying that they've completed a degree. Resume writers also often find such candidates using qualifying language such as "only four credits left to get a Bachelor of Science degree."

Both tactics are "huge mistakes," said Van Vreede. "Any reasonable person will look at the candidate and say, 'Are you stupid? Why didn't you go back and finish your degree? Go back and take correspondence courses online; I did it and got a degree. What are you waiting for?'" he said.

More to the point, language tricks send up red flags, giving the impression that a job seeker is trying to be sneaky. A better approach than lying or manipulating language is to say that you attended a program or did coursework at a given institution.

Here's another technique that resume writer Burdan uses: For those who have college degrees, he labels the appropriate section “Education.” For those who lack degrees, he bundles their education up in a section he labels “Professional Training.”

In a Professional Training section, Burdan will state, for example, that a subject has completed three years of a Bachelor of Science in finance program at the University of Georgia.

By labeling it “Professional Training,” it appears less like an aborted degree and more like continuing education. After all, many people churn through a “boatload” of seminars and workshops above and beyond their formal education, Burdan noted.

“I won’t hide it, but I’ll downplay it,” he said. “For somebody not to have a college degree is rarer today,” and that makes it best to draw attention away from the hole, Burdan said.

To Tell the Truth: Resume Rules

Certifications

Technical certifications represent a special case.

One field wherein which it is common to find faked certifications is the technology industry. Many IT job candidates will load their resumes with certificate lists or even paste in graphics that only certificate holders have the right to use, such as is the case with the MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer) credential, thinking they won't be checked.

But faking certifications, professional accreditations, trade memberships or professional licenses is a "Cardinal Sin", said several certified professional resume writers.

It's very easy to check with the organizations that award the titles, and the hiring companies often face liability for hiring someone who faked an accreditation.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Another education-related lie to avoid is fudging your grade point average.

Christine Bolzan, former vice president in charge of Global Emerging Markets hiring for JP Morgan and current CEO of Graduate Career Coaching, said that job seekers often exaggerate GPAs but that even the slightest tweak will raise a red flag. "In today's job market, you can't create any type of question about your candidacy," she said.

"Employers want highly ethical individuals, and hiring companies have their pick. You might say you have a 3.8 GPA and it comes back as a 3.78 GPA. That will raise the red flag. The candidate will say, 'I was just rounding up,' but with the job market as competitive as it is now, there's no room for rounding up."

Bottom line: If you are caught lying it is too hard to keep lies covered, and, once caught, your chances of being hired are all but obliterated. The Internet and background checks make it hard to cover up a lie. Even exaggerations can hurt you in a tough employment market.

The bottom line is that there is no stepping over the line that separates advertising yourself and lying on your resume.

Your chances of being hired if you are perceived to be a liar are extremely low. And, with the Internet, rest assured: There isn't much that can remain hidden for long.

(End)