

Résumés Matter: What Nonprofit Employers Want to Know About Job Seekers

By Jennifer C. Berkshire

When the nonprofit research and education group Public Agenda, in New York, advertised for an entry-level communications manager in May, the response was staggering. More than 400 people applied for the position, including veteran reporters, television producers—even a former network bureau chief.

"Many of them were so overqualified that it was heartbreaking," says Ruth Wooden, the group's president.

While the sheer volume of job applicants reflects the state of the economy, there's a lesson here too: résumés matter.

The new communications manager at Public Agenda was hired not just because of her background—she had worked at a for-profit public-relations firm as well as for the Obama campaign—but because of the skill with which she presented herself on paper.

"Her résumé was impressive because it was very pointed and easy to read," says Ms. Wooden.

Prove You Can Do The Job

As the economy continues to deteriorate, nonprofit groups of all kinds are cutting back on their hiring. That means that not only are employers seeing more résumés for the openings they do have, but, chances are, they are also viewing them with an increasingly critical eye.

For Ms. Wooden, that meant looking for a concrete, compelling document that showed the candidate could do the job.

"I was really interested in descriptions of exact experience skill sets, not in lengthy descriptions of accomplishments," she says. "That isn't what I think résumés should do."

Hiring experts say that attitude is increasingly common among employers seeking to fill positions at every level of nonprofit organizations, from entry-level jobs to leadership roles. "There is so much competition right now that how you present yourself on paper becomes incredibly important," says Shelly Cryer, author of *The Nonprofit Career Guide*, which includes tips on résumé writing. "This economy is separating out the stellar candidates from the very good candidates."

Here's some advice from recruiters and nonprofit job-market experts on how to make a résumé stand out, at any stage of a job seeker's career.

Tie qualifications to a charity's needs. In the old days, stating a desire for a "job that makes a difference" might have been enough to fill in the dreaded "objective" line at the top of a résumé. In today's economic climate, however, the objective statement provides a key opportunity for a job seeker to make the case that he or she is the right person for a particular nonprofit job. And these days, most charities need help generating revenue, says Carol Weisman, founder of Board Builders, a nonprofit consulting and recruiting firm in St. Louis.

A former corporate accountant who enlisted Ms. Weisman's help in finding a charity job said that his objective was to use his accounting background to help his potential employer maintain books transparent enough to satisfy any donor. He got the job. "It blew people away," says Ms. Weisman.

If a well-written statement of objectives can whet an employer's appetite, a dud can send an application straight into the recycle bin. Ms. Weisman says that she sees too many résumés these days with objectives that are trite or even meaningless. She recalls one recent résumé in which an individual seeking nonprofit employment after many years in the corporate world stated that he could "help your nonprofit run more like a business."

"I had to laugh," says Ms. Weisman. "What business is he talking about? Enron? Countrywide?"

Proofread—and then proofread again. Ms. Cryer urges applicants to double-check their work exhaustively—and engage the services of others—to make absolutely sure that the documents they submit are error-free. "If there's an obvious typo on your résumé, you've just given an employer an easy reason to throw it out," she says. "That's why you always need six sets of eyes to review it."

Whenever possible, send the résumé by e-mail. Include the résumé as an attachment. But never, ever waste that initial contact with the words "please see attached," says Laura Gassner Otting, author of *Change Your Career: Transitioning to the Nonprofit Sector*. Ms. Otting suggests using the e-mail message as a de facto cover letter that can quickly introduce a potential employer to your strengths. "This is your opportunity to instantly present your skill and your passion," says Ms. Otting. "Before an employer even sees your résumé you're telling them how to look at it."

Convey passion. Both recent college graduates and older job seekers who are looking to switch to nonprofit careers often need help strengthening résumés that are typically short on actual nonprofit work experience, notes Ms. Cryer. She suggests that both groups call upon experiences that go well beyond the workplace: volunteering, internships, even personal interests.

"Whether you're a recent college graduate or a sector switcher, you have to use your résumé to tell a compelling story about who you are, your experiences, and your passion for the mission of the organization," says Ms. Cryer.

Streamline qualifications to focus on specific achievements. Rob Huxtable, president of Socius, an executive-search firm in Cleveland that works with both for-profit and charity clients, recently received a résumé from a program officer. "He basically took up that white space with a job

description," says Mr. Huxtable. "He talked about what a program officer does. That's a missed opportunity."

The program officer would have done far better focusing on what he had actually achieved at his job, says Mr. Huxtable. "A résumé is a place for you to highlight quantified, meaningful accomplishments. What did you do that made a difference? What was the problem and how did you solve it? How did you stretch a buck?"

Translate business jargon into English. For what recruiters call "sector switchers" — people from the business world who hope to switch to charity careers — this translation process is especially important. Corporate job descriptions, for example, are often mysterious to nonprofit hiring managers, notes Karen DeMay, who conducts searches for nonprofit executives at the Bridgespan Group's New York office. "Don't assume that people know what you're talking about," says Ms. DeMay.

She cautions would-be applicants to avoid insider phrases and abbreviations and to learn as much as they can about nonprofit management before they send off their résumés. "Nonprofit hiring managers are looking for signs that you have a passion and a commitment and that you can function in a consensus style of decision making," she says.

Emphasize volunteer fund-raising experience. Lou-Ellen Barkan, president of the Alzheimer's Association chapter in New York City, who worked in human resources at the financial-services companies Lehman Brothers and Paine Webber before making the switch to a charity job, often finds herself advising corporate executives who are eager to find work in the nonprofit world.

"The gap that I see most often in their résumés is fund raising. Most of these people have never raised money before," says Ms. Barkan. Yet they often have work experience that has what she calls "revenue potential": "If you're coming from a job where you had to build long-term relationships with clients and close the deal, those experiences can be translated into terms that a not-for-profit employer can understand."

Even first-time job seekers may be able to boost their employability by emphasizing their revenue-generating potential. "If you raised money for something on campus, definitely mention that," says Ms. Cryer.

And if you haven't? "Take a class in fund raising and development wherever you can find one. Any executive director would be thrilled," says Ms. Cryer. "You can list it in the spot that would ordinarily go to your Microsoft Word skills."

Delete "references available upon request." Ms. Otting is a firm believer that those words are a waste of space. "Of course you're going to give your references to me when I request them, you're trying to convince me to hire you."

Neither does she recommend including the names of your references on the résumé. It is probably not in the job seeker's interest to have a potential employer contact the individuals before an interview, she notes.

One exception to the rule: applicants who have recently left a position might want to consider listing their former employer as a reference. "That way I can tell that you left on good terms," says Ms. Otting.

Don't hide the seasoning. Older job seekers often grapple with the question of how much information to include. Should college graduation dates be included, even if the happy event took place decades ago? Ms. Otting cautions that while it may be tempting to leave one's date of graduation off the résumé, doing so carries risks.

"Whether or not you list your age, the hiring manager is still eventually going to meet you face-to-face," she says. "The best plastic surgeons in the world might not be able to make a young, gritty nonprofit staffer with 27-year-olds appreciate a 65-year-old corporate retiree. Some might recognize the importance of 'gray hair' for credibility and wisdom, but others won't. Instead of wasting their time and yours, be upfront about your age at the start."

But don't sell the advantages of youth short, either. Wendy Morosoff, director of the Career Development Center at Purchase College, part of the State University of New York system, is spending extra time counseling student job seekers this summer as a result of the struggling economy. She says she is well aware that in the battle of the résumés, recent graduates are often competing with more-skilled and experienced candidates.

Yet Ms. Morosoff believes that her students may have the edge. "Nonprofits are often looking for someone who is greener and more moldable," she says. "Besides, students are cheaper."

Jim Bretl, director of the career center at Creighton University, in Omaha, looks at thousands of student résumés each year. Too few of them, he says, devote enough space to the four years their writers have just completed.

Young job seekers, he says, "need to spend time on what they did while in college," says Mr. Bretl. He urges students to highlight anything from their academic experience that could be relevant to a potential employer: "It could be an internship, a course they took, even a paper that was relevant."

Regardless of the age of the author, Mr. Bretl says, the best résumés respect a simple rule: "I call it English 101: Writing to the Reader. If the reader isn't that interested, he or she will skim right over it."