

In our view, “The essence of a good résumé...”

By Richard A. Murray

If you ask fifty professionals to outline their recommendations for a good résumé, you will get just as many strong pronouncements. There are good reasons for this and those reasons are often not outlined to the listener. It is like asking “What is a good car?” The answer to that question is, “It depends” and the same is true for a résumé.

This paper is written with the professional level person in mind—and specifically it is for a person working in fundraising where positions are paid relatively well (\$75,000 to \$400,000 for about 90% of the positions in America). Most résumé writing services are encumbered with the college graduate, an entry level person, or someone from the workforce who was laid off and who is just trying to get a job—any job! The reason for this is the fact that there are literally millions of people in this category, so the writers are forced to follow the need. Their instructions are wildly different from what this paper recommends.

You also need to know the primary reason for a résumé. Ask yourself this question: What is my résumé supposed to do? The answer is simple—to get invited for an interview! While a résumé is used for other things, like providing background for someone who is to introduce you at a speaking engagement, in reality, a résumé has the primary purpose of getting your foot in the door for a position you are interested in pursuing. Now let’s talk about the product...!

Let’s start with an overview. Here are some guiding principles:

1. White space
2. An attractive appearance that parallels your personality
3. Clean, Clear, Concise, Consistent, Content (the five C’s)
4. Demonstrate, subtly, that you are a good, reliable, loyal worker with a small ego, a warm heart, and a can-do attitude.
5. Is there any gas left in the tank?

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Professionals often wonder what to include in a résumé. Consider what you normally see in the “Required or Preferred Qualifications” sections of a typical job description:

- Five to ten years of leadership experience as a professional development officer
- Baccalaureate degree from a four-year college or university
- Demonstrated excellence as a communicator, both in the written word and in verbal presentations
- Experience in utilizing team management techniques in organizing and managing professional staff and volunteers
- A record of meeting fiscal goals on time and within budget
- Proven track record in successfully developing and implementing a multi-million dollar fundraising campaign
- Notable history in closing major gifts
- History of recruiting and retaining an effective, professional and diverse staff
- Advanced academic degree, et cetera...

Assuming this list is somewhat typical for a leadership fundraising position, you should then include in your résumé information that demonstrates these qualities—if you have them.

Please try to understand this one very important point:

A résumé is not a marketing piece specific to you landing a job. If you write your résumé just to glorifying how wonderful you are, you will be less likely selected. Your résumé is a record of your professional work history and by your position titles, responsibilities, accomplishments, and the organizations that have hired you a compelling story is thus told. Hiring managers want to find people who are gainfully employed, very busy and very productive. Your interest in being selected or offered a new position should be based upon advancement opportunities or personal situations (but not necessarily upon

your career objectives). If you are not currently employed, the process becomes more difficult, so you need to prepare for your approach to maintain your attractiveness, but do that in a separate letter of application that accompanies your résumé where you can explain your particular situation.

Begin with your name and include your current and verifiable certification relative to your current profession, but limit yourself to the most important or prestigious and leave out the rest. Use your formal name, saving the nickname for the signature line on your application letter. For example:

John C. Mendoza, CFRE

not...

Johnny Mendoza, CFRE

Under your name, list your home mailing address, your home telephone and your home e-mail address. Formalize the entry by avoiding common post office abbreviations such as pound signs for apartments and two-letter state codes—spell words out. There should be a clear reason why you would include your work address/phones, your cell phones and your family Web site—these items are not normally necessary. If requested from the prospective employer during an interview, you can provide these items along with your fax number.

Organize your résumé into obvious major groupings:

Career Summary (this is optional and not necessarily recommended—see below)

Professional History

Education

Significant Certification Training

Significant Professional Publications/Presentations

Significant Professional Awards

Career Summary. Optionally, write a brief paragraph of your professional history, but it is not recommended that you state your future career goals as this portrays you as a job seeker who could be pictured as a short-term prospect who is trying to climb the ladder. If you choose to include a career summary, make it just that and explain who you are professionally. Normally, I would leave this out and use a cover letter personalized to the particular position to introduce an overview.

Professional History. List your professional positions (most recent first) with the company/organization name and city of your service. Write a brief paragraph describing the organization and the major focus of that organization. Under that brief description list your title with the inclusive dates for that title and then provide a description of your major assignments. This is highly important. You want to inform the reader the major projects that the employer wanted you to accomplish—the reason you were hired in that job. Now follow that with a bulleted list of your major accomplishments in that position, but only those that can be verified. This is where you demonstrate what you did and provides the future employer a vision of what you might be able to do for them. I hope you see the point here:

- List the name and location of the employer
- Describe what the organization does
- Indicate your title and inclusive dates of that service
- Describe your major assignments in that position
- Indicate what you accomplished relative to the assignments for which you were hired by describing your experiences—not just a brief bullet list of accomplishments. Your description might provide the reader with a vision of what you could do for them.

The following is an example of a work history entry:

2005–2011

| University of Wisconsin

Madison, Wisconsin

A major research university founded in 1848 with a current enrollment of 41,000 graduate and undergraduate students. University of Wisconsin, a member of the Big Ten, and the premier campus of the State University System having thirteen campuses, is one of two doctoral degree granting institutions.

Director of Development, School of Engineering

Major Responsibilities:

Work with a new dean to create professionally sound development effort within the college; write a plan for the funding of four endowed chairs; expand the staff by recruiting two associates and one additional support staff.

Accomplishments:

- Planned and launched a “Dean’s List” which was an annual support group providing unrestricted gifts of \$1,000 to fund the deans efforts at recruiting key new faculty positions
- Wrote a strategic plan for the personal calling of all engineering graduates with anniversaries of five years and greater
- Created a volunteer committee of graduates and undertook an in-house feasibility study to determine the ability to raise \$10 million for five endowed chairs
- Recruited and brought on board two associate directors of development and an administrative assistant—developed a good working relationship with all members of the development team
- Completed endowed chair campaign going beyond goal by \$1 million; built “Dean’s List” to 240 annual members

It is amazing how people will list their service at Centre College (for example) and not indicate it is located in Danville, Kentucky. People reading the résumé in Seattle may have never have heard of this highly acclaimed college. Also, avoid using a university abbreviation unless it is UCLA or MIT—even then, it is better to spell them out.

Make it easy on the reader by setting off the dates of your service at each employer. It is preferred that you set off to the left, a column for date ranges. The columns and a generous set of side margins create “white space” that

changes the page from a mass of text to an attractive presentation with space for the reader to place their thumbs and not cover the text.

Only list the previous four or five positions unless there is significance to listing more. Do not list minor positions that have little significance to your current professional life unless that would create a gap in your most recent professional history. Explain any significant gaps in your listing.

If your professional history reveals numerous short-term tenures, be prepared to answer the interview question that will invariably come to the surface.

Education. List your highest academic earned degree first and include the name of the institution, city and state, the degree (spell it out), the major area of study, the year of graduation, and any verifiable honors bestowed. Do not be concerned with disclosing your age. If age is an issue with the employer, they will figure it out. Do you really want to work for an organization where they age discriminate?

Do not try to be sly about the truth regarding your educational milestones. Taking coursework without confirmation of the degree is not a license to insert anything in your résumé that would lead an unqualified reader to assume you have graduated. My recommendation is to have (if needed) two sections on Education as follows:

Educational Degrees Received (then list them as advised above)

Educational Programs In-Progress (then list them and include the anticipated date of graduation)

Being less than absolutely honest with regard to any aspect of the claims you make are certainly going to damage your career. If not now, then sometime in the future. Honesty is a valuable asset.

Significant Certification Training. Follow the style for Education and list the significant professional training you have received especially those that have

led to professional certification. If the certification is not current, say so, and do not place the certification tag with your name if it is out of date.

You can include advanced degree programs that are in progress but not finished—but only if you are actively pursuing the degree (always include a planned completion date and make it clear that you have not yet earned the degree).

Significant Professional Publications/Presentations. Use the style described above and list only the most significant items. You would want to include any items that would demonstrate that you are an expert in the field.

Significant Professional Awards. List only those items that relate to your career and have clear significance. An Association of Fundraising Professional, Fundraiser of the Year award for a chapter is certainly noteworthy and should always be included while a captaincy of your college Intramural volleyball team needs to be left for the alumni reunion news.

Do and Don't. Avoid writing a special résumé specific for a particular position you are seeking. Instead, write your paper as a work history document and then include a cover letter to highlight those specific details that you want to outline as good preparation for the items in the particular job that you seek. If you are obviously short in certain qualifications that the employer requires, outline how you can make up for those shortcomings through professional training or other activities that would quickly fill in those employer-stated needs. Show the employer how you could get “up to speed” in minor areas you need to address in order to effectively do the job. This is what a cover letter can do for you. It would be rare for a serious applicant to send a résumé without a carefully drafted cover letter.

Refrain from including reference information within your résumé and you can save outlining your personal interests, hobbies, and the fact that you can format a PowerPoint presentation for a better time—possibly during your personal interview, if asked. Having an e-mail address says all you need to say with regard to your ability to use a computer as a communication tool.

Everyone expects that you can use common business office programs. Listing the computer programs in which you claim to be “proficient” is equivalent to saying, “I can drive a car.” Now if you are a clerical worker applying for a support position, list your technical skills. If you are highly proficient with donor records systems software, it would be a good idea to mention this. Major gift officers who do not feel it is important to religiously record their call reports are not looked upon favorably these days.

The length of your résumé is not significant. Those people who claim that you must keep your résumé to two pages are missing the point. How can anyone think that they would limit the chances of hiring a talented major gift officer—who could bring in over \$10,000 per day to the organization—because the résumé was four pages in length? We would call this foolishness, laziness, and professional malfeasance.

Do use a point size that is easy to read and a font that is distinctively you. Remember, for professional management positions, most hiring managers and selection committee members are over fifty years of age and the eyes start to go. Don’t make them wonder why they don’t like to read your résumé. Your body text should be 12 point and 10 point would be the minimum for special usages.

The style you use is very important to displaying how much you care about presentation of the written word. Once you choose a style, be consistent throughout the paper. Mixing styles indicates a lack of your attention to detail and a limitation on your care for the person who has to try and read your information.

Provide a header or footer (in the right hand margin, please) so that loose pages can be identified and placed back in order. Never, ever, place the file name and path anywhere on your materials. This only demonstrates that you have no organizational talent with creating a logical directory structure on your computer.

Try to avoid usage of all-caps—even for banners or headings. Opt instead for small-caps as this is readable and much more elegant. Also avoid the flashy bullets and weird cell shading. Try to make your piece look like *The New Yorker* magazine and not like your homeowners association newsletter published by Molly down the street.

Try to avoid over use of thick lines, underlining, and bolding. You will show your condescending nature when you capitalize and bold and underline an item. This is the kiss of death. Don't get me wrong. There is a place to use bolding, underlining, italicizing, and all-caps. Just do it sparingly and consistently based upon your organizational style.

Minimum margins should be 1.25 (top), .75 (bottom), and 1 inch (left and right) and it certainly is appropriate to have larger margins to create more white space. Set off your logical divisions with a good left column placement, thus indenting the body text. This will provide sufficient white space to make the piece inviting to read. Nothing is more daunting than seeing a page filled edge to edge with ten-point type all crammed together (on two pages!).

Be absolutely honest with your claims of successes in your career. Don't say, "Increased giving by \$5 million in first year." unless you actually did that all by yourself. The truth might be, "Led a team of spirited professionals and support staff that increased revenue by \$5 million in the first year." Now that says something about you!

Under Education, don't say, "Masters Program in Molecular Studies, Columbia University" when you only took a few classes but never got the degree. This is misleading and some readers might assume you completed the requirements. While you might think that it is significant that you were accepted at University of Chicago (and that is an accomplishment) and completed a few classes toward your Master's degree five years ago, it also says something about your ability to accomplish what you set out to do—could be a double-edged sword.

Visit your résumé often and add new items to the start and peel away old items from the end. If you format your document properly, the piece will flow nicely with various edits and additions.

While the younger crowd are racing to social media to post who they are, and others are following this trend to stay “relevant,” be careful. Posting your résumé on social media implies you are constantly looking for a better job. Your employer might hold this against you when consideration for a promotion is discussed among the leadership of your organization. If you have to do this, I would recommend posting a brief biography—maybe one paragraph. Always have your full résumé on your computer, update it often with new accomplishments, and have it ready to send out as necessary. You would never tell an employer to follow your link to your posting. Well, maybe you would if you are looking to land that assistant manager’s position at Johnnie’s Burgers. This would show that you are too lazy to do the work that you should be doing to get noticed.

Do not be offended when a recruiter or a prospective employer needs your maiden name when you earned your degree, your social security number and your year of graduation. These items are needed to verify the conferring of degrees. People who have earned the credentials should be pleased that they would be competing against like qualifications. Also, be honest about your salary history. When you get caught in a little fib—or convenient exaggeration—it could mark the end of your candidacy.

Finally, take a look at your finished document and have several friends read it for errors (including a close professional friend who would be honest if they feel you are over-stating your accomplishments). You will want hiring managers to have a clear concept of who you are, what you have accomplished, and most importantly, what the chances are of an upside potential for your future with their organization.

Remember, your résumé is written for the benefit of the reader. Unfortunately, most readers skim documents trying to find ways to toss yours out. This negative approach is quite common and the reason many

“pro’s” would tell you to keep your document limited to two pages. As mentioned earlier, don’t fall for this as you are an executive-level and you hope that your paper reaches a person who is serious about the need for a quality leader. You want the reader left with the impression that you have the experiences and skills that mirror what they need. You have to impress the reader that you are not going to be a jerk and upset their team (their family) and that there is plenty of gas left in the tank?

The Interview. Now, that, is a whole new set of issues.