

# The First Step

## How Do You Write A Résumé And Cover Letter That Will Maximize Your Success In Landing The Perfect Job?

By Holly Bigelow Martin

**S**ome career counselors recommend that you skip the résumé when looking for a job and rely instead on networking to develop relationships with prospective employers. At some point in the hiring process, however, most employers still want to see a written record of your achievements and experience. So, how do you write a résumé that will maximize your success in landing the perfect job?

The first tool you need is access to a personal computer (PC) or word processor. "With equipment like the Apple Macintosh computer or Windows software, you can make beautiful résumés on your own without professional help," says Susan O'Keefe, staff manager for university relations and college recruiting at AT&T. Check out your college's résumé-writing lab, where you can get not only the benefits of computing, but also help from a career counselor in creating your résumé.

In addition to great graphics, preparing your résumé on a computer means you may be able to enter yourself on one of the new electronic résumé

databases. You can also use the flexibility of word processing software to maximize your chances of landing a specific job by tailoring your résumé to fit each job for which you are applying.

You are a complex human being with the potential to work at many different jobs, but you will only confuse employers with information extraneous to the job they are trying to fill. Use classified ads, trade publications, annual reports, and personal contacts to find out what each company is really seeking. Then write a one-sentence career objective or summary of your qualifications to fit as closely as possible each company's job description. Use your PC to make several copies of your résumé file, each with a different objective to send to different companies.

"The problem with objectives is that they can be extremely broad or extremely narrow," says O'Keefe. "You have to be careful you're not too limiting, unless you only want one type of job. Job titles vary between companies, so try to make your objective as specific as possible without stating a title, such as,



'Working on spreadsheets in the finance department.'"

In some cases, an objective may not be necessary, or even wise. "Sometimes a company might screen you in if you don't list an objective, when it might have screened you out of an interview otherwise," says O'Keefe. "That happens at AT&T because we have so many different positions to fill that we don't post all the openings."

## Support Your Objective

The body of the résumé should contain information that highlights your qualifications and supports your objective. Some résumé writers follow their objective with a list of "transferable skills," such as analyzing, training, developing, cooperating, researching, or managing, which can be used in a wide range of job situations. This is helpful if you are changing careers and want to show

change the order of the information to emphasize or de-emphasize different aspects of your education and experience. You may arrange these in several ways: chronologically, by skill, or by project. A chronological résumé starts with your most recent job and works backwards, listing each one by date, such as: June 1982-August 1982: (Co-op assignment)—Modified a proposed process for sodium deactivation to be used in nuclear reactors.

If you have more than one area of expertise, you could arrange your résumé in paragraphs with headings such as: Software, Research, or Management. Many engineers organize their experiences by project, since they may work on more than one project concurrently.

"For both the résumé and the interview, we look at very specific information, and our criteria are well delineated," explains O'Keefe, who trains all the recruiters at AT&T. "First we look at the student's major, graduation date, and grade point average [GPA], though the further

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that you'll be able to work in a new field. For those individuals just out of college, however, O'Keefe says that just listing your experiences will demonstrate your skills.

Remember that, when tailoring your résumé, you can

you are from graduation, the less important GPA becomes. We also look at interpersonal skills, work management effectiveness, and work-related experience. We try to give equal weight to all of these criteria."

## JOB-SEARCH RESOURCES

The following resources can help you carry out a top-notch job search:

*111 Techniques and Strategies for Getting the Job Interview*. Burdette E. Bostwick, John Wiley & Sons, 1981. Bostwick believes that often it's harder to get an interview than to actually get the job. He provides helpful tips not only on how to get the interview, but how to survive it.

*From College to Career: Entry-Level Résumés for Any Major*, Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 1992. This easy-to-read paperback contains a chapter on writing technical résumés, as well as samples of résumés for engineering and related fields.

*Sweaty Palms: The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed*, H. Anthony Medley, Ten Speed Press, 1984. The emphasis here is on how to conduct yourself in an interview once you've landed it. Medley covers all possible questions you may have, including how to prepare; what to wear; how to handle salary discussions; how to remember the interviewer's name; how to quiet your butterflies; and, most of all, how to sell yourself.

*The 1993 What Color Is Your Parachute?*, Richard Nelson Bolles, Ten Speed Press, 1993. Subtitled, *A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Career Changers*, this perennial classic will help you analyze your interests, talents, and experiences, and present yourself to the job market without a formal résumé.

*Who's Hiring Who*, Richard Lathrop, Ten Speed Press, 1989. According to Richard Nelson Bolles, this is the best book around for writing résumés, or, as Lathrop calls them, qualifications briefs.



## ELECTRONIC RÉSUMÉ DATABASES

"Electronic résumé databases have become popular over the past five years," says Susan O'Keefe, staff manager for university relations and college recruiting at AT&T, in Morristown, NJ. AT&T has subscribed to Kinexus, a national résumé database, since 1989. "With Kinexus, students fill out the fields that the electronic database asks for," O'Keefe explains. "Later, I can sit at my PC and, for example, select the criteria of black female electrical engineers who graduated in 1992 and who want to work in the New York Metropolitan area. The system then prints out a list of all the candidates who would match that criteria, along with their profiles."

AT&T also uses several other database technologies, including The Golden Key National Honor Society database, as well as Dasis, a database standard developed at Purdue University. The employment office uses a scanner called Resumix that pulls data right off a résumé and loads it into a database that can be searched for certain criteria.

"These technologies are giving employers access to a much larger pool of students," reports O'Keefe. "Basically they save an incredible amount of time and cost for recruiters, who do not have to go on campus."

Though some say electronic résumé databases will become increasingly popular, O'Keefe doesn't believe they will ever completely outdate the good old-fashioned résumé. "I think you're always going to have a mix of different mediums," O'Keefe observes. "You'll never see just one approach."

**A résumé is a written document, and, as such, demands the same skills important to all good writing. Use active language and concrete details to really sell yourself.**

If you don't have work-related or school leadership experience, however, don't despair. Recruiters will consider other life experiences in their assessment. "We're seeing a lot more nontraditional students, such as those who may be older or single-parent heads of household, who may work full time while going to school," O'Keefe reports.

"They don't have the opportunity to be in a traditional college leadership role, such as president of the student government, but we'll take into account other leadership experiences, such as demonstrating that they manage their household or that they are a leader in their church or community, or ran a baby-sitting co-op."

Though recruiters prefer to see your most recent achievements, O'Keefe says that in certain cases, high school activities may count. "If you haven't done much in college, but you demonstrated leadership, management, or communications skills, or received an honor in high school, put it down on the résumé," she advises.

At the bottom of your résumé, you may want to include a small amount of personal information, such as hobbies and free-time activities you enjoy. Some experts warn, however, against putting down this type of information, as it might unwittingly slant an employer against you. "For AT&T, it is

not a big consideration, because we do everything possible to keep the interview from becoming personal and letting any bias enter in that way," says O'Keefe.

## The Finished Product

After you've completed your first draft, go back through your résumé and begin the editing process. A résumé is a written document, and, as such, demands the same skills important to all good writing. Use active language and concrete details to really sell yourself. For example, instead of saying, "I was a co-op student for three semesters," say, "I developed a computer model of heat flow in nuclear power plant cooling systems that helped to determine the effectiveness of using waste heat for aquaculture."

Make sure your résumé uses correct English. "The large majority of résumés and cover letters I receive have spelling and grammar errors in them," says O'Keefe, who stresses that you should show your résumé to several people as a doublecheck on these areas before sending it out. Don't forget to use your spellchecker on the word processing software.

Remember the definition of résumé—it's a short sum-



mary, not a life history. Edit your final draft to one page, preferably, or at the most, two. O'Keefe says she absolutely hates seeing two-page résumés, because often the second page gets lost. "There's no reason for using more than one page, unless you are an older MBA student who may have a significant amount of work experience," she says. "We receive hundreds of thousands of résumés in this company every year. If you don't make it as easy as possible for the person looking at your résumé to scan it and pull out the information they need, you're putting yourself one notch down. The important things should jump out at you."

Keep this in mind when formatting your résumé. Create a heading or letterhead design that includes your name, address, and phone number, followed by a space or a line across the page. Put titles in bold, and emphasize important information with underlines, italic, or different fonts. "There should be a significant amount of white space," notes O'Keefe. "Many times students will try to throw in as much as possible on that one page, so they'll shrink the print down real small. You shouldn't have to strain to read it."

Neatness still counts. "The appearance of a résumé is the first thing any recruiter is going to see, so obviously you want to see a résumé that doesn't have coffee stains or pen smudges," says O'Keefe. "This has nothing to do with content, but I think it's important in determining whether or not the person goes much further in looking at the other credentials."

If you don't have access to a letter-quality or laser printer, take your disk to a local print shop to make the final copies. Use good quality paper, but it's not necessary to buy personalized stationery.

## Cover Letters Come First

Cover letters aren't necessary when you're applying for a job through the college recruiting office, though they are more important if you are responding to an advertisement. "A cover letter is a good idea because it shows respect for the corporation as well as for the person you're sending it to," says O'Keefe.

The cover letter should be brief—one page or less. You can use the same letterhead you created for your résumé and print it on the same paper. "A cover letter might not get read in its entirety, but it helps me pull off the main points before going on to read the résumé," O'Keefe says. "Your cover letter should explain clearly, within the first sentence, what type of job you are seeking."

**Use classified ads, trade publications, annual reports, and personal contacts to find out what each company is really seeking.**

Statistics show there's a much lower chance of getting an interview by sending your résumé in blind or in answer to an ad. The old saying is especially true in the job-search process: "It's not what you know but who you know," especially when you know someone—either a friend or relative—who works for the company. Look for contacts at classes, trade shows, conferences, or workshops who may be willing to pass your name along to someone who is hiring.

"It always helps to know someone, and it doesn't have to be at an executive level," observes O'Keefe. "The theory is that if you're a good employee and you refer someone, that referral is going to be good like you. A lot of people do get hired from employee referrals." ♦

### Explore the Energy Field

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