

5 Tips to Bullet Proof Your Lawyer Resume

By Leslie White

Legal employers today are receiving hundreds of resumes for every lawyer job opening they advertise. Does your lawyer resume have what it takes to make the cut? Here are 5 tips to bullet proof your lawyer resume and make sure it gets the attention it deserves:

Tip 1: Start With The Most Important Information First

Your lawyer resume may only get a 30-second cursory glance as an initial review. That leaves little room for error. The key is to provide your resume reader with the most important information first, so that nothing will be missed during this quick overview. What's most important? Your technical skills as a lawyer; that's what employers are primarily looking for. Therefore, your technical strengths must stand out clearly at the beginning of your lawyer resume.

It is likely that your lawyer resume will not be given its first cursory review by a legal professional, but rather by a recruiting professional without a legal background. To effectively translate your legal skills to a non-legal professional you should use relevant buzzwords that reflect your knowledge and experience. Use the buzzwords of the job description itself. This can help eliminate the guessing work of a non-legal professional reviewing your resume. Give them something they know and recognize, and you will have a better chance of being selected, whether your lawyer resume is being reviewed by an attorney, administrator, or software program.

Tip 2: List Information In Order Of Its Relevance

Do I start with my education or work history? That's a question lawyers ask all the time about their legal resume. A better question to ask is: What is most relevant to the employer and the position I am applying to? If you do not have enough information to formulate an answer to this question, you should follow this basic rule of thumb: If you have been out of law school three years or less, you should consider placing your education at the top of your resume.

As a junior-level attorney, your academic credentials will still be very relevant to a potential employer. If you have been out of law school three years or more, then it becomes a judgment call. If your academic credentials are exceptional – i.e. you have graduated law school from Yale or Harvard, or Order of the Coif from a top 20 law school, your academics are still worth highlighting at the top of your resume.

If on the other hand you graduated from a good school, but you have exceptional work experience – i.e. you are working for an Am Law 100 firm, a Fortune 500 company, or as General Counsel of a prominent organization, clearly you should highlight your professional experience first. If you've already done what the position you are applying to requires; by all means, list it first, even if it wasn't your most recent job. If you are still not sure, follow our tip number 1 and place your strongest selling points at the top of the legal resume.

Tip 3: Select Action Verbs Using The Correct Tense

You should use action verbs in your lawyer resume because they make sentences and statements more concise and persuasive. Concise writing is easier for readers to understand, it is more reader-friendly, and reader-friendly writing is generally more persuasive. In other words, action verbs are simply more convincing.

Use action verbs in your lawyer resume to describe all skills, jobs, or accomplishments. In order to make a striking first impression, use action verbs as the first word of each bullet point to emphasize a skill. Using action verbs will allow you to highlight the tasks you can do. Choosing the right verb to describe your skills and accomplishment is critical in effectively describing what you have done, and in persuading potential employers to interview you (For a list of legal resume action verbs, see "Using Active Verbs in Your Legal Resume").

Finally, you need to use the correct tense with respect to your action verbs. For your current position, the verbs should be in the present tense (i.e. negotiate, litigate, draft, etc.). For all your past positions, the verbs should be in the past tense (i.e. researched, prepared, revised etc.). Remember to keep the verb tenses consistent throughout your lawyer resume.

Tip 4: Quantifying Your Experience Whenever Possible

Quantifying your experience on your lawyer resume is one of the most important steps you can take to improve its overall substance. Whenever possible, include numerical figures that demonstrate progress or accomplishments resulting directly from your work. How does quantifying your resume improve it? Here is an example.

Supposed you're reading a resume and you see the following statement:

"Handled the discovery of a large products liability case and obtained a favorable settlement."

Sounds nice, but that statement does not make much of an impact. After all, the other 99 resumes you've read for this products liability position make similar statements. So why choose this resume over another?

Consider this statement instead:

"Handled the discovery of a products liability case, including the review of over 5,000 documents, and obtained a favorable \$10M plaintiff settlement together with attorney's fees in the amount of \$500K."

Now that's a statement with impact! That statement could get you the interview you are looking for. Why? Because it provides enough details that an employer will want to know more about this story and about your accomplishments in general. It also stands out because it demonstrates your ability to generate value, which is something employers care about when hiring lawyers.

Tip 5: Don't Sell Yourself Short

You need to think of your lawyer resume as a marketing tool. Your goal is to create a legal resume that stands out from the crowd and earns you an interview. This is not the time to be bashful about your accomplishments and skills. You need to view your lawyer resume as a means to sell yourself to a potential employer. How do “sell” yourself effectively in a lawyer resume? You highlight all of your strengths, starting with those that most closely relate to the position you are applying to.

When listing your various skills, you need to clearly demonstrate the difference your skills have made to the organizations you have worked for in the past. You need to be confident in everything that you have achieved, and be thorough in listing your various skills and accomplishments. If you don't, you can be sure the other candidates applying to the same position will. How do you sell yourself effectively without appearing arrogant? Don't simply gush about your achievements; back them up with concrete facts and evidence of results. You not only want employers to know about what you have to offer, but to also determine how your skills can add concrete value to their organization.

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