

Getting Through The Screening Process With Your Lawyer Resume

By Leslie White

When employers are reviewing lawyer resumes, they tend to focus first on items that will immediately eliminate them from the “yes’ or “maybe” pile, and turn them into the rejection pile. Why? When you consider that employers can receive hundreds of resumes per position per week, a quick form of triage is often the most time-efficient way to get through a lot of resumes. In other words, looking for screen-out factors in lawyer resumes provides an easy way for employers to narrow down the list of candidates to contact for an interview. How can you get your lawyer resume through this screening process? This article will identify some of the most common screen-out factors, and describe how to address them so that your lawyer resume can make the first cut.

Numerous Short Transitions

Employers universally favor hiring lawyers that have had few transitions in the course of their practice. Therefore, to the extent that you can avoid changing jobs every couple of years or so, you should. That being said, with current economic times, and depending on one’s circumstance, that’s not always achievable. Why are numerous short transitions a potential problem? When your lawyer resume shows numerous short-term stints with various employers, that can send a signal to an employer that you are not likely to stay long enough to justify the expense of hiring, training, or relocating. Worse, it may place doubt into the employer’s mind as to the quality of your job performance, as well as your level of commitment.

Some lawyers who are aware of this potential screen-out factor, opt to omit their dates of employment altogether. You should *never* remove the dates of employment on your lawyer resume. Rather than help your case, your omission will now raise a red flag. It will only bring more attention to the fact that you have made a lot of transitions in a short time period. This is something you do not want to highlight any more than necessary. Therefore, rather than omitting the dates, use years, rather than months and years, to help soften the transitions. You may also want to use a “functional” rather than a “chronological” resume to highlight your skills rather than your work history.

Gaps On Your Resume

If you have a gap in your work history, you are not alone. However, gaps can be viewed as red flags by employers who are evaluating your performance, commitment, and marketability. While some hiring managers will give some weight to economic circumstances, gaps can quickly become screen-out factors if they are long, numerous, or unexplained.

If the gap is created in one's last position, providing the end date of employment and sending out the resume without any explanation is a mistake. Whether the gap is created when a lawyer is no longer employed, or because of unaccounted time between jobs, these gaps need to be addressed. Whenever possible, you should aim to fill a gap with professional experience or other practice-related activities. If your gap is going to last more than six months, consider pursuing an LL.M., doing contract work, joining a non-profit organization, or setting up your own solo practice. If it is not possible for you to fill the gap with professional or educational activities, be sure to explain it.

Whenever possible, you should address the gap directly onto your lawyer resume. For example, if you were part of a practice group recruited from one firm to another, and there is a six-week gap between firms, explain the reason for the gap in one line of text under the firm you eventually joined. If the gap is longer than a few weeks and you were unemployed for any length of time, you may want to include this in a special section of your lawyer resume, assuming you were engaged in some form of professional activity. If you have a long resume gap that is due to family, personal, or other circumstances, you should describe this gap in your cover letter. You should provide a couple of lines to describe the reason behind the gap. Again, there is no need to provide an expansive explanation; a short and to the point explanation is best.

Non-Legal and Irrelevant Experience

Many lawyers like to include all of their experience on the resume, including non-legal positions and activities, in a misguided attempt to highlight a diverse background. Unfortunately, not being selective as far as the experience that is included on a lawyer resume will make it appear unfocused. While you should include all of your legal positions, non-legal positions should be excluded from your lawyer resume, unless you are a junior-level lawyer with little professional experience, or the non-legal position is related to your practice or current job search. For example, if you are an intellectual property lawyer and you've worked as an engineer, that type of experience should definitely be included in your resume. If you are an energy lawyer, and you worked as a plant manager for an energy company, that type of non-legal position should also be included as it is relevant to your job search.

Typically the best way to identify what non-legal experience to include is to ask yourself whether it is relevant to your current practice or job search. The same rule applies to activities and hobbies. Your lawyer resume is not a biography. It is a marketing tool designed to land you an interview. Therefore, it's best to keep personal interests, hobbies, and other non-essential materials for the interview. If you are keen on listing organizations, affiliations, volunteer work, or extracurricular activities on your lawyer resume, only list those that are relevant to your practice as a legal professional, or that are directly related to your targeted job. Again, if it's not related to your practice or the position you are applying to, do not include it.

Typos, Misspellings, and Grammatical Errors

As a lawyer, your resume is considered a writing sample and work product. Therefore, you cannot afford to have any typographical errors, misspellings, or grammatical mistakes, as these errors will immediately raise concerns about the quality of your work and attention to detail. In other words, your lawyer resume must be flawless. This is definitely a time where you should be sweating the small stuff.

Lawyer resumes containing typos and spelling errors almost never make it passed the initial screening stage. While resumes do not have to adhere to the strict rules of grammar, cover letters do. To address problems related to typos and misspelling, make sure to use a spell-check using your word processing software. You can also run a grammar-check, but beware that some of these are not always accurate. Whatever you do, don't stop there. Some errors cannot be detected by spell-check or grammar-check software alone, which is where most of the errors on your lawyer resume will arise. Therefore, be sure to follow up with a thorough proofreading, and review the resume several times before you submit it. The last thing you want is a typo getting between you and the job of your dreams.

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