

Keeping Your Legal Resume Fresh

By Claire Bellon

Legal resumes have a short shelf life. They are like dairy products; you need to check their expiration date often. When does a legal resume expire? When the date of your last position is a calendar year behind the times. In other words, if your last position ended in November 2009, and you are finding yourself in calendar year 2010 without a new entry, you can consider your legal resume to be stale and in need of immediate attention.

If you were recently laid off or have been out of work for less than six months, potential employers will ask why you are out of work, but you will still be considered for positions. If you have been out of work for more than six months, with nothing new on the legal resume to show for, you will soon discover that the job search has just gotten that much harder. Inevitably, employers will go from questioning what happened with your last position, to why you are still out of work, why no one else has snatched you yet, and what you've been doing with your time.

Time is a legal resume's worst enemy. The assumption is that there must be something wrong with you, as your stale legal resume will be unwillingly indicating. Employers have biases, and none as strong as "survival of the fittest." This is especially true in the legal industry. Whether right or wrong, the basic assumption held by potential employers is that even under the worst possible economic conditions, companies and law firms hold on to the best-of-the-best, and only layoff those the weakest. While some employers will give newly unemployed attorneys the benefit of the doubt – perhaps there was a mistake made, and a competitor will pick up this person right away – that benefit will be short lived as soon as you pass the six-month mark. By then, the bias will become reality to some employers who will conclude that there was something wrong with you; otherwise you would have found a new job relatively quickly, even in a bad economy.

While you may not be able to fight the good fight against these biases, there are certain things you can do to your legal resume to save it from going stale. First, let's look at what not to do to keep your legal resume current. One strategy that is often used by out-of-work attorneys is to include a reference to the part-time or contractual work they are currently doing under the umbrella of a staffing firm. While that might not be bad for an attorney that recently graduated from law school or has been out for a couple of years, this type of entry could have the opposite effect on a recently laid-off general counsel or senior level attorney. This type of work will be perceived as low-level, low-paying work, and rather than providing you with credit for being hardworking, it will make you appear desperate and lower your profile. Sometimes you have to do what you have to do to pay the bills, but your legal resume need not reflect that.

The other option that many out-of-work attorneys take is to set up their own shop, and go solo. Recruiters view solo resumes as the “kiss of death.” Companies and law firms pay recruiters a premium to recruit what is perceived to be “crème de la crème” candidates, and solo practitioners don’t fit that definition for the majority of employers. The bias against solos also stems from practice focus. Most solos specialize in practice areas like criminal law, real estate closings, consumer bankruptcy, or family law that large firms and companies don’t handle. While attitudes are changing and going solo is seen less as an act of desperation than as a willful act of entrepreneurialism, these biases remain rather strong and your solo experience will not help your candidacy for another type of legal job when exposed on the resume.

What is the solution to keep your legal resume from going stale? If you have some transferrable business, consider cutting a deal with a law firm and taking on an of counsel position. This may mean working on an hourly basis, rather than receiving a salary, and making other kinds of compromises. However, this will allow you to hitch your star to another firm, refresh your legal resume, get back on a firm’s website, and look attractive to potential employers. If you are on assignment with a company either in a part-time or temporary basis, obtain permission from the company to use their name rather than the staffing firm’s name on your legal resume. This will work best if you are working for one company, or on long-term assignments, doing high-level work. Finally, think about volunteering with a prominent and recognizable non-profit organization, or well-known political organization. This will be especially effective if you can demonstrate legal related work with these entities. Whatever path you chose, don’t let your job search completely take over your life. It is best to try and find a position that keeps you active, and most importantly keeps your legal resume fresh.