

The Yang of Legal Resume Writing

By Leslie White

Your legal resume is your personal marketing tool. A resume may be your only opportunity to convince an employer that your qualifications and experience make you an ideal candidate. Employers often use a poorly drafted resume as a basis for rejecting an application without an interview. While there are some accepted standards and formats for legal resumes, there are few hard and fast rules. The following is some general advice about the yang, or must-do elements, to create an effective legal resume.

Think of Your Legal Resume From An Employers' Perspective

You have to put yourself in the shoes of a prospective employer. The main objective of employers reviewing your legal resume is to be able to quickly and efficiently identify relevant skills and positive traits you will bring to the organization. Anything you include beyond this objective will only detract from the aim of your legal resume. Resumes are not designed to be complete biographical summaries. Therefore, you need to be strategic and selective with the information you select for your legal resume. This often means that less is more. Often, job seekers feel compelled to include *everything* on their legal resume for fear of leaving something that might possibly be of importance. By staying focused on relevant information, you will be able to create a concise, yet effective, legal resume that will make an impact on employers.

Select Information That Is Relevant To The Position You Are Seeking

If you have a great deal of experience, the challenge will be to select the information you want to include on your legal resume. While you always have to stay truthful, you can select experiences to highlight or downplay certain aspects of your candidacy as they relate to the position you are applying to. For instance, if you have both criminal and civil experience, consider including more details about your criminal experience and the skills derived from that experience for an application to the District Attorney's Office, rather than for a litigation position with a corporate law firm.

If you have less experience, then you have to think creatively and broadly in terms of identifying experiences from which you derived your professional skills. You have to look at legal or non-legal, paid or volunteer, academic or extracurricular activities, and extract skills that are applicable to the type of positions you are seeking. Your goal is to focus on relevant skills. For example, if you were involved in a local club or organization and you were responsible for the newsletter, you took notes or minutes, and organized events; you should highlight those skills, as they will be transferable in terms of writing, organization, and teamwork.

Always “Prove” Your Claims, Don’t Simply State Them

When you are listing your various accomplishments on your legal resume, be sure to quantify and use specific examples to highlight your skills and accomplishments. In other words, you bear the “burden of proof” to show employers the value of particular experiences. You cannot assume that an employer reading your legal resume will draw certain inferences from your various skills and accomplishments. It is up to you to provide concrete information in your legal resume so that the reader will draw the conclusions you are aiming for.

For instance, if you use this statement: “Handled the discovery of a large products liability case and obtained a favorable settlement.” It sounds nice, but that statement does not make much of an impact. After all, the other 99 resumes the employer has read for this products liability position make similar claims. 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.” 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.

Final Words of Advice Regarding Your Legal Resume

Regularly update your legal resume. A resume is a constantly evolving document that has to be updated and customized. Be sure to add new skills, accomplishments, or relevant training or publications you’ve been involved in since you last updated your resume. This is also an opportunity to delete information that is no longer as relevant or useful in advancing your candidacy. Finally, remember that you never get a second chance to make a great first impression. Most employers quickly scan through resumes to make the initial cut. If your legal resume is not error-free, reader-friendly, and relevant with carefully selected language and content, you are unlikely to make it pass the first read.