

### Resume Screening and Interviewing Tips

By Stacey Parker

Effective written and verbal communications are at the core of properly matching employers and potential employees through the recruitment process, whether it's a well-written resume, an effective resume screening process or an insightful interview.

During this discussion, we'll review these hiring processes from the individual perspectives of employer and potential employee -- with a view to identifying best practices. The advent of key word search technology has significantly changed recruiting, in general, and the resume screening process, in particular. We'll also offer some tips to help employers and employment candidates deal more effectively with this new reality.

The basis of the initial interaction between employer and candidate is the job description. It is crucial to the process of attracting the right candidate. A well-written job description is one that clearly defines the role, its specific purpose within the organization, its responsibilities and tasks, the minimum skill requirements, the required educational background and any desired workplace behaviours.

Those companies that truly wish to attract and hire the best candidates should "brand" the job description, articulating why their organizations are great companies to work for. They can achieve this by enunciating their vision, their beliefs about their people and how they value their customers and the communities they work and live in.

Potential candidates should only respond to job opportunities that match their experience, skills and education. Similarly, employers should only pursue those candidates who meet the minimum requirements of the job. Both employer and candidate should exercise high standards in their assessments of themselves and each other.

#### The Resume

##### From The Candidate's Perspective

A resume should always be accompanied by a cover letter that helps an employer to clearly link your career objectives with the job you are applying for. The career objectives statement at the top of your resume should also align with the role as enunciated by the employer.

You should identify your core competencies in your cover letter and resume and, if transitioning to a new industry, focus your communications around your transferable skills rather than routine responsibilities. Similarly, if you appear over-qualified for a particular job, highlight your hands-on involvements and downplay managerial responsibilities. Overall, your resume should provide broad brush strokes about your experience and accomplishments and avoid going into mind-numbing detail about your specific responsibilities. It should also be completely factual. Candidates who publish false information in their resumes face the prospect of disqualification during the hiring process or, if hired, termination once it has been discovered.

If you are seeking an IT-related opportunity, you should know that an increasing number of organizations are looking for IT professionals with business acumen. Your core IT competencies should be supported by examples of how your expertise translated into a financial savings or a productivity improvement or the introduction of a new product or service.

Given that you will likely be submitting your cover letter and resume electronically, it is imperative that you use the same terminology deployed by the employer in the job description. Why? Most employers today are using key word search technology to screen resumes. If you aren't using the language employers are looking for, your resume will simply not be considered. For that reason, the age of the two-page resume is probably over. A four- to six-page resume is now an appropriate length. After all, in this new reality, the resume has evolved into a screening-out tool for employers. Thus, the resume needs to be as complete as possible. That is not possible with a two-page resume.

Remember, a good resume is your calling card. Properly designed, grammatically correct and spelling error-free, it will help you navigate through the screening regimen, set your agenda during the interview process and continue to market your worth long after you've finished the discussion.

##### From The Employer's Perspective

A good resume is an easy-to-read roadmap of a candidate's education, skills and professional history. But, honest, factual and well-organized resumes only provide a partial picture of a candidate's skills and capabilities.

The resume is nothing more than a high-level introduction, written on the candidate's terms. It is not an objective, highly-detailed account of their experience or skill set. Treat it accordingly.

#### Resume Screening

##### From The Candidate's Perspective

Simply put, when it comes to the resume screening process, your fate was sealed by the overall quality, relevance and accuracy of the resume you submitted earlier to the employer. At this point, the process is out of your hands.

Should your cover letter and resume create an opportunity to participate in a telephone screening process, carefully review them both before



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the call and quickly get on message -- and stay on message. Listen carefully to what the interviewer is asking and respond thoughtfully, truthfully and economically to each question, ensuring your responses are aligned with your key messages, particularly when it comes to your experience, skill set and education. Close the call with a summary of your core competencies and how they relate to the job you have applied for.

### **From The Employer's Perspective**

Taking a structured and consistent approach to screening resumes will save time and money and will afford an objective, fair and accurate evaluation of the best candidates for the job. It is the most important part of the hiring process, so don't rush through it.

One way to separate the applicants from one another is to create three real or virtual piles:

1. Interview (yes);
2. Interview if needed (maybe); and
3. Do not interview (no).

However, before beginning to populate the various piles with resumes, a template should be developed that establishes the desired list of qualifications to compare each resume against.

Once the criteria has been established, carefully read the cover letter and career objective line in the resume, ensuring they match the role you are seeking to fill. Review the candidate's relevant work experience, skills and education. They too should align with the requirements established for the role. Numerous jobs held over a short period of time or unexplained gaps between jobs are not necessarily matters to be concerned about, but they need to be properly explained by the candidate. Watch for vagueness.

Once an adequate number of resumes have been settled on (a minimum of three is recommended), contact the candidates to conduct short 20 to 30 minute telephone screens. The objective of the phone screen is to validate whether or not the candidate has the skills to move forward for an interview. It is important to be familiar with the candidate's resume before making the call. It is also important to have three to five questions on hand that relate to the skills you are looking for. Grade the candidates on the quality of answers given during the call. Explain next steps in the process just prior to hanging up.

## **The Interview**

### **From The Candidate's Perspective**

It is important to get the employer focused on your suitability for the job almost as quickly as you exchange greetings and sit down across the table from one another.

That means your appearance must be secondary to your communications. This is best accomplished by wearing a dark-coloured business suit, for example, complemented by a white shirt or blouse and tie (men only). Your look should be professional, not provocative.

Once seated, hand over a crisp, clean copy of your resume, ensuring you have studied its contents fully during your preparations for the interview. During those preparations, you should have contemplated any possible questions your resume might elicit and developed a factual response. You should have learned about the employer's business, vision, values and goals. You should have also updated your portfolio with samples that are relevant to the job opportunity. And, when asked to provide specific work experience examples during the interview, you should highlight only those that are relevant to the employer – and the position he or she is seeking to fill.

When given the chance to ask the employer a question or questions, confirm that the job description for the position you are seeking accurately reflects the opportunity.

Be economic and factual in your responses and positive and constructive in your attitude. You are offering your potential employer a solid glimpse into the type of employee you will be day-in and day-out.

### **From The Employer's Perspective**

There are three crucial elements that a candidate must possess in order to succeed in the job – knowledge, skills and attitude. A resume will identify knowledge and skills, but an interview will identify attitude. The interview is all about efficiently, skillfully and legally uncovering the details necessary to determine if the candidate seated in front of you is the right talent for your organization.

But, before you conduct that interview, ensure you are intimately familiar with the candidate's resume, have developed a set of questions that relate specifically to the job opportunity and are comfortable with the level of information about your company that you are about to share.

The interview should be used to substantiate information found in the resume. Eighty percent of the time allotted should be spent by the candidate answering your questions. Those questions should be open-ended and begin with "who," "what," "when," "tell me about," or "describe." Some interview questions might include the following:

- What interests you about this job?
- Tell me about a time when you have gone above the call of duty to get a job done?
- Tell me about a goal you set for yourself and how you achieved it?
- Tell me about an occasion where you followed a policy, even though you disagreed with it?
- Tell me about how you improved a particular job or task?
- In what kind of environment do you do your best work?

Remember that you are not legally permitted to ask questions about age, race, gender, country of origin, religion, disability or marital status. Ignore any discriminatory information you may have stumbled across about the candidate during your interview preparations.

What follows is a list of Do's and Don'ts:

**Do's:**

- Take the time to put the person you are interviewing at ease;
- Prepare a set list of interview questions and ask every candidate these same questions;
- Prepare special questions for each candidate based on their resume or the telephone screen;
- Keep notes on their answers;
- Focus on learning about person's experience, ability and personal qualities that will directly affect how he or she will do the critical parts of the job;
- Be reasonable and impartial; and
- Ask questions that reveal the candidate's general attitude.

**Don'ts:**

- Don't talk too much;
- Don't jump to conclusions and make a decision too early. Listen carefully to what is being said from beginning to end;
- Don't be too concerned if the candidate appears nervous, unless their confidence is relevant to the job;
- Don't ask leading questions which tell the applicant what you want to hear;
- Don't use stress interviews, designed to see if you can upset the applicant; and
- Don't get off track. Stick to questions that are relevant to the job.

Pay close attention to all small details, listen for vague responses and know that, by the end of the interview, you will need to decide on this candidate's fate. Before you part company, make sure the next steps in the process are clearly understood. If you intend to move forward with this candidate, ask for references.

**Other Recruitment Processes**

**Testing**

Administering a test may help to understand if the candidate is qualified. Testing can range from skills testing to personality testing. This can include but is not limited to the following: creative abilities, teamwork, problem-solving, writing, selling, presentation skills, and product and/or industry knowledge.

**Reference Checks**

At least two business references should be provided by the candidate. Depending on the job's responsibilities, it may also be advisable to do education, health, vision, drug, criminal and/or credit checks, which are all permissible under current employment law. Checking references validates information on the resume as well as information given during telephone screening and interview processes. Reference checks ensure the candidate has the right knowledge, skills and attitude.