

GET•THE Interview EVERY TIME

Fortune 500 Hiring Professionals' Tips
for Writing Winning Résumés and Cover Letters

Brenda Greene



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FORTUNE 500 RESULTS

“Focus your energies on the specific jobs that match the talents and interests you have—and individually tailor your efforts toward convincing the candidate companies that you can provide measurable ROI when hired.”

DAN BANKEY

Manager of Strategic Staffing, Mutual of Omaha

Recruiting practices at large corporations have changed dramatically in the last five years. The basic, one-size-fits-all résumé and cover letter—standard entry into the 20th-century work world—have gone through innumerable transmutations. Today job seekers are expected to maneuver their way around the new hiring landscape electronically. They must target their individually tailored résumés and cover letters to specific *open* positions that are, more often than not, posted on company Web sites.

In the 21st century, pounding the pavement has given way to scouring the Internet.

According to the survey of 50 Fortune 500 hiring professionals conducted in 2002, hiring practices at major companies have undergone an overhaul. Even though it is still essential to network and prepare a professional-looking résumé and cover letter, it's also necessary to know that most companies recruit new employees via the Internet at company Web sites. In fact, a 2002 study conducted by iLogos Research, a division of Recruitsoft, claims that “81 percent of Fortune 500 companies are posting job openings on their corporate Web sites.” Moreover, 70 percent of the Fortune 500 hiring professionals surveyed for this book said résumés sent electronically are preferred. Knowing what the expectations of Fortune 500 hiring professionals are gives job seekers the competitive edge when seeking employment at both large and small companies.

Experts who participated in the survey were virtually unanimous in stating that résumés need to be not only individually tailored for targeted jobs but skill specific and results oriented as well. And it must be immediately obvious to a

prospective employer that the job seeker is a “good fit” for the company and its culture.

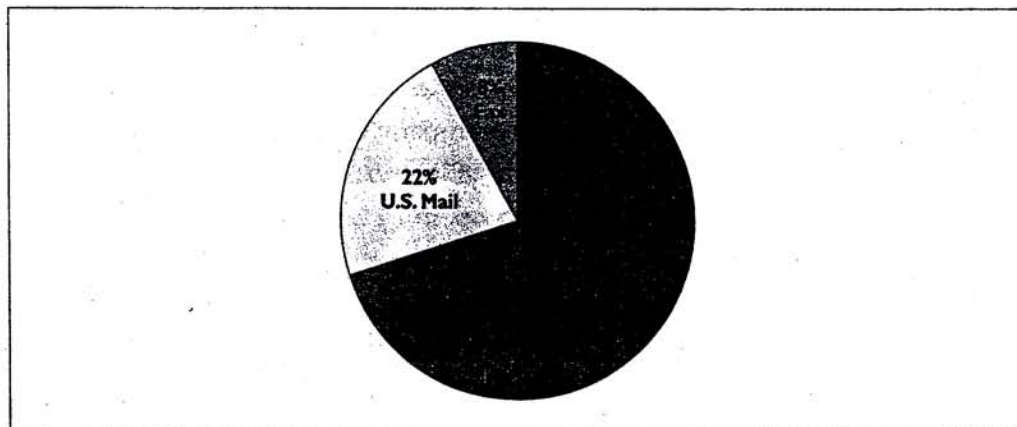
In a two-page, 24-question survey, Fortune 500 hiring professionals answered questions regarding their respective hiring practices. Their responses to the survey provide job seekers an inside view of what Fortune 500 employers look for when acquiring new talent. Here are just a few of the survey questions.

- How are most résumés delivered to the HR department?
- Is a cover letter attached to every résumé?
- Does a computer program screen résumés?
- What is the ideal length of the standard résumé?
- What’s the single most important piece of information on a résumé?
- How much time is spent reviewing a résumé for the first time?
- What are the grounds for sending a résumé to the unwanted pile?
- Where should applicants seeking employment begin their job search?
- What does the company do with blind (unsolicited) résumés?

Some of the responses confirm what you already know, but most answers will surprise you. Did you know, for instance, that most résumés at Fortune 500 companies are delivered via e-mail? As already mentioned and shown in Figure 1.1, 70 percent of the respondents prefer this method (11 respondents prefer snail mail and 4 prefer fax; all percentages were based on the number of respondents who answered the particular question).

One thing is for certain: a job search in the 21st century requires access to a computer as well as to the Internet.

FIGURE 1.1 *Résumé Delivery Preferences*



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY ABOUT COVER LETTERS

That electronic cover letter you agonized over for three hours may not be read unless your résumé jumps out of the pack and catches the attention of the recruitment officer. In fact, most e-mailed résumés are submitted without cover letters: 74 percent of the respondents claimed that no cover letters were attached at the time of submission, whereas only 13 respondents said that cover letters were included. In the case of an attached cover letter, only 40 percent of the respondents read the cover letter *before* they read the résumé. The remaining respondents read the cover letter only if they were interested in the candidate. Trang Gulian, a manager of staffing at Fannie Mae, said she “only reviews a cover letter if more information on the candidate is needed.”

But just because hiring professionals don't read all cover letters doesn't mean they don't expect to see one. On the contrary, the data suggest that although the first thing hiring professionals look at is the résumé, the next thing they look at (if they are interested) is the cover letter. Cutting corners and blasting a solo-flying résumé out into cyberspace may not produce good results.

Taking a casual approach toward writing the electronic cover letter may be counterproductive as well. In fact, 84 percent of the survey respondents expected the e-cover letter to conform to their high writing standards, which are the same as those of a standard cover letter; only two respondents indicated that it's not a strike against the candidate if the electronic cover letter is informal.

And what about the standard cover letters sent by snail mail? Are they considered dinosaurs? Not yet. If they are well written and insightful, these cover letters could help you to stand out above the rest. Tracy Grajewski, a senior director of corporate staffing at Merck, said she wants the cover letter to “tell [her] how focused the person is on his or her job search and give [her] an idea where to refer the résumé.”

So what (at the very least) do Fortune 500 professionals expect from both standard and electronic cover letters?

- That they accompany every résumé you send
- That they are brief but error free and accurate
- That all pertinent contact information is included (name, address, telephone number, e-mail address)
- That accomplishments are highlighted in a short paragraph
- That the position being applied for is specified

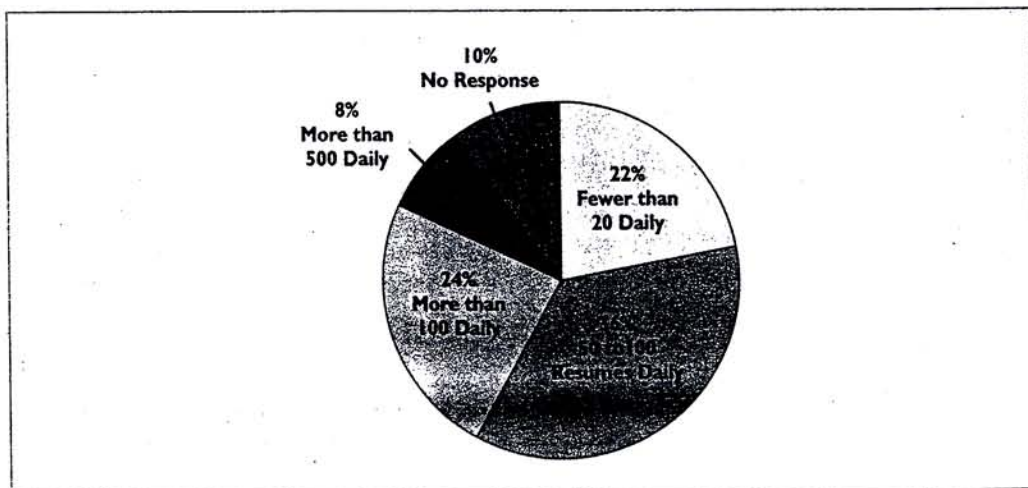
The Fortune 500 participants had a good deal more to say about what they expected to see in cover letters, but Chapter 5 goes into more detail.

If you're wondering whether your résumé and cover letter get the human touch, you can be assured that only 36 percent of the companies use computer programs to initially screen applicants. If, however, the company does screen, those résumés and cover letters should include keywords that company programs can pick up. Even though the majority of respondents don't yet have the capability to screen (64 percent don't), it's just a matter of time before they jump on board. Why? Because manually screening thousands of résumés is labor intensive, especially for Fortune 500 companies.

Eighteen of these companies receive between 50 and 100 résumés a day, twelve receive more than 100 résumés a day, and four of the 50 companies claimed they receive more than 500 résumés per day (ALLTEL, Chubb, Continental Airlines, Unisys), as depicted in Figure 1.2. Only 22 percent of the Fortune 500 companies receive fewer than 20 per day. The competition for jobs at Fortune 500 companies is stiff.

The survey results, which represent a new body of knowledge on hiring practices in the 21st century, clearly indicate that the momentum in recruiting is shifting swiftly toward the Internet. It's safe to assume that what Fortune 500 companies do today, smaller businesses will do tomorrow. Why? For the simple reason that it makes good fiscal sense. According to Cambria Consulting's Bernie Cullen, a partner at the Boston-based human resource consulting firm, companies can "cut their costs [finding] new employees by nearly 90 percent compared with traditional recruiting techniques" via the Internet.

FIGURE 1.2 *Résumés Received per Day*



THE CRUX OF THE RÉSUMÉ

When asked what they looked at first when reviewing a résumé, 80 percent of the respondents said it was “related experience.” Human resource professionals are *primarily* concerned with filling *open* positions. When an applicant can match the experience of the person leaving the company, the transition is smoother and less costly (according to a 2002 Beta Research Corporation Study featured in the *New York Times*, it costs on average “\$10,350 to replace an employee who leaves for another job”).

Surprisingly, neither educational background nor applicants’ previous place of employment was a top priority. In fact, only one respondent said educational background was the first thing he looked at, and only one respondent said where the applicant worked before was the first priority. Four of the respondents stated they look at the format and style of the résumé. If that meets their expectations, then they proceed to further examine the qualifications. One respondent said that he checks the grammar and spelling before proceeding, and two said they look at a combination of the four factors mentioned.

Another surprise is that the category of “accomplishments” was not checked off by a single survey participant. Although a candidate’s prior accomplishments may be a deciding factor in whether the candidate will be asked to interview, this category seems to come into play only once other criteria are met. As was made clear by many respondents, accomplishments must be backed up with verifiable numbers, results, or promotions. These hiring professionals are wary of overblown accomplishments and “hype.”

If you’re wondering how much time is spent reviewing your résumé for the first time, make note of the fact that you don’t have all day to capture a recruiter’s attention. Most—36 percent—said they spend 2 minutes; 34 percent said they spend 1 minute; 22 percent said they spend 30 seconds, and 6 percent said 5 minutes. One respondent said it depended on the résumé.

This information should actually encourage you because it differs slightly from conventional thinking on the subject. For example, according to the résumé design page in OWL, the online writing lab of Purdue University, “Employers will usually take, at most, only 35 seconds to look at this one-page representation of yourself before deciding whether to keep or discard it.” And in an April 29, 2003, *Wall Street Journal* article, Joann S. Lublin wrote: “Employers overlook significant experiences because they typically scan a résumé for just 15 seconds.”

Whether it’s 15 seconds or 2 minutes, you still must grab the recruiter’s attention quickly. That’s why it’s important that your “related” experience is immediately evident on the résumé. The best possible way to capitalize on this experience is

to make sure your résumé contains relevant keywords and a focus statement. (See later chapters for more detailed information.)

As for the length of your résumé, the survey indicates a general consensus. When applying for a management position, the standard is two pages, according to 74 percent of the respondents. Taking a minority view, 18 percent of the respondents thought one page was standard and only 8 percent thought three. Only two respondents said it “depends.”

The preference for brevity makes sense when you consider that recruiters at large corporations look at hundreds of résumés each week. They need to zero in on the pertinent information quickly. Creating a ten-page résumé is almost certain to diminish your chances of getting a thorough examination by a recruiter.

START SEARCHING THE COMPANY WEB SITE

It's best to begin your job search by first narrowing down the companies you're interested in and then going to their Web sites. But before you go to the career page and start filling out a profile or searching for a specific job in the accounting department, spend some time getting a feel for what the company is all about. Research is crucial to gaining an edge, according to the Fortune 500 respondents.

When asked where applicants should begin, 74 percent said to start at the company Web site. Surprisingly, only 18 percent said networking should be the first option, a finding that flies in the face of the commonly held belief that networking is the most important key to beginning a successful job search. One respondent advised reading the classifieds, another said to go to job fairs, and two advised, “all of the above.”

When asked where their companies advertise jobs, 60 percent said these jobs can be found on the company's Web site; 12 percent said they use newspaper classifieds; 6 percent said they use online job boards; and 20 percent said they used all of the areas previously mentioned. One respondent said that an agency was his company's primary source.

Although the survey results reinforce the fact that time spent on a company Web site is highly advantageous, you do need a strategy. Surfing haphazardly through innumerable company Web sites and job boards could be counterproductive if you neglect other strategies. Try to aim for balance, and add some job fairs, networking, and even cold calling to the mix.

Developing a strategy before sitting down at the computer is crucial. Pinpoint the companies that interest you and target specific jobs. Once you've narrowed your target, you'll be able to make the best use of your time on the Internet.

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS

As obvious as this may sound, it is essential that before posting your résumé on a company Web site or even an online job board you make sure that your information is accurate and error free. Run everything through the spell checker—twice. For extra insurance, you should even have another person read your material for grammar and spelling errors or inaccurate gaps in your employment history. The margin of error in putting together this information is greater than you think.

When asked what the percentage of errors was for submitted résumés (see Figure 1.3), 36 percent of the respondents said that 10 percent have errors; 44 percent said 25 percent have errors; 16 percent said 50 percent have errors; and two respondents said 75 percent of the résumés they see contain errors!

Errors are one reason your résumé flounders; in fact, 14 percent of the respondents said spelling and grammar errors disqualify even the most accomplished candidates, but there's another important reason you may not get a response.

When asked what the grounds were for sending a résumé immediately to the unwanted pile (see Figure 1.4), 54 percent of the respondents reported a lack of computer skills, 18 percent said applying for a position that isn't *open* doesn't work, and 12 percent said stipulating a specific salary is a negative. Only one respondent considered a gap in work history a serious issue.

Most recruiters in human resources departments at Fortune 500 companies are practiced at detecting incongruities in the information you provide. Even if the information seems straightforward and direct, many verify the facts, especially when a candidate gets past the first stage of the process. In fact, exactly 50 percent said they "always" verify information on résumés, 28 percent "usually" check, and only 22 percent "sometimes" check.

FIGURE 1.3 *Résumés Received with Errors*

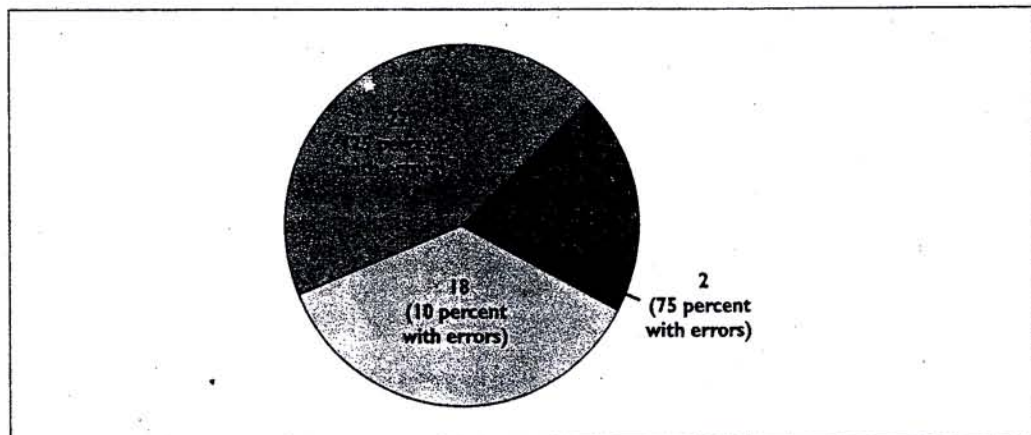
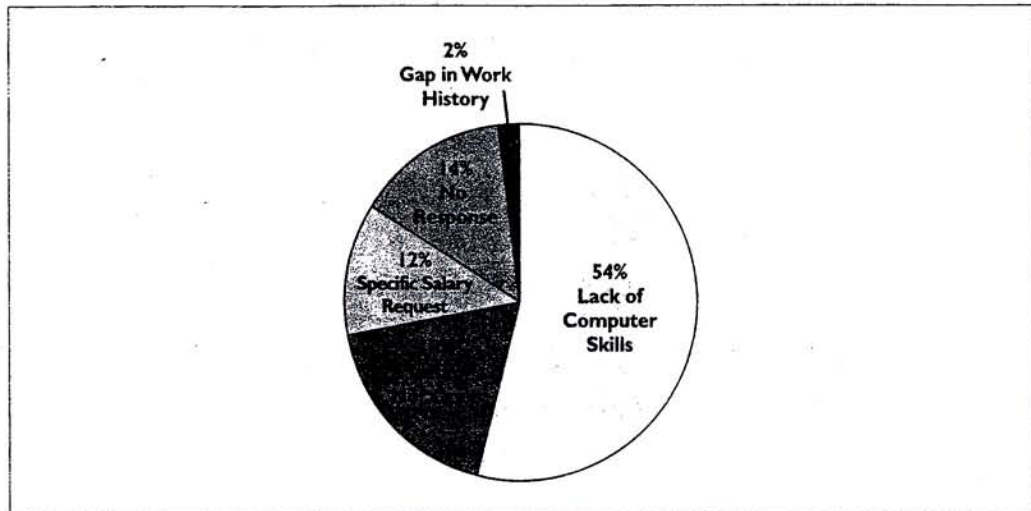


FIGURE 1.4 *Reasons for Refusing Résumés*

And what about the ubiquitous personal information and interests sections on many résumés? According to the Fortune 500 respondents, if the information isn't relevant, don't include it. Twenty-one respondents said they prefer not to read about applicants' outside interests, 14 said such information was "acceptable," and 7 advised including it only if those interests are applicable to the job. Mentioning your love of poker and mountain climbing activities could work against you, so remember to keep *all* the information on your résumé relevant.

Once you send the résumé, there's a good chance it will be acknowledged; at least the majority of respondents (27) always acknowledge receipt of your résumé. Of the rest, 15 acknowledge receipt only if they are interested in you as a candidate, and 5 said that acknowledgment depends on the method of submission (which generally means that if you e-mail a résumé, an automatic response is generated). Only 3 of the respondents said they never acknowledge receipt of résumés.

Whether you receive an acknowledgment or not, once the résumé is sent, you have no control over the outcome. That's why it's so important that your initial effort is thorough, accurate, and well researched. And remember: don't sit back just because you sent out one résumé to a prospective employer. Continue your efforts.

WHAT ABOUT MANAGERIAL POSITIONS?

The job hunting landscape is changing as much for managers as it is for newbies to the job market. When asked how they recruit for managerial positions,

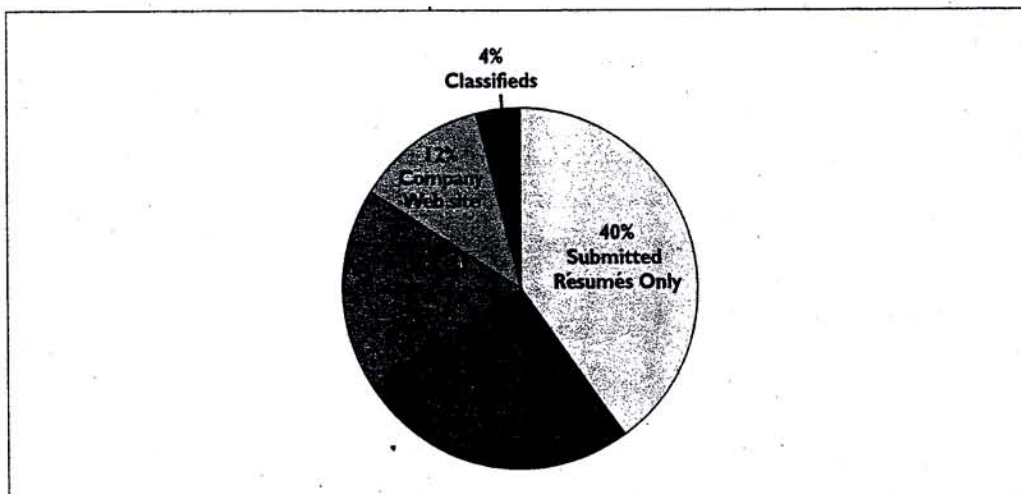
according to the survey, 40 percent said résumés are still used; 26 percent said they rely on a recruitment agency; 18 percent said management positions are filled by a referral from someone in the company; 12 percent said they use the company Web site; and 4 percent rely on the classifieds. Based on the cost savings and momentum, you can expect the percentage recruited via the company Web site to grow steadily during the next few years.

What was particularly interesting about the survey results was that your dream job may present itself up to a year after you submit a résumé. Most of the Fortune 500 respondents keep your résumé on file for a year or more; in fact, exactly half of the respondents confirmed this. And 24 percent said they keep them for up to six months, whereas 6 percent said three months, and one respondent said one month. For those applying for an open position at the company, the odds are better. Your résumé stays on file until the open position is filled, according to 10 percent of the respondents.

Sometimes you may have the urge to send a résumé blindly to a company that you would like to work for with the hope that eventually a suitable position will open up. The good news is that only 12 respondents said they would not consider such résumés at all. Half said they file them for an eventual need they may have, and six route them to the appropriate departments. Four hold on to them indefinitely, especially if the candidate is recommended by either a personal friend or someone within the company.

When asked if they ever filled a position by using a résumé from their files, 76 percent said they do (even though this does conflict with how they view less recent résumés on online job boards). Only 12 percent said they prefer new résumés.

FIGURE 1.5 *Recruiting for Managerial Positions*



The survey results cover the basics for launching your résumé and winning an interview in today's competitive market. The findings provide insight directly from the people—HR specialists, managers, directors, vice presidents—who make thousands of hiring decisions every year. Cutting through the conflicting information about the best tactics for finding a job is that much easier now that you have firsthand information from these Fortune 500 hiring professionals.