

GET•THE Interview EVERY TIME

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

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HAVE YOU DONE YOUR RESEARCH?

“Determine how the company fills job openings and pursue the method it prefers.”

CAROL EUBANK
Human Resources Manager, Aquila, Inc.

Before you brush off your résumé and sprinkle it with innumerable keywords, create a strategy and target several companies on your dream-job list. Plan to spend about half of your time on the Internet looking at the Web site of each of these companies.

This is the planning stage and, according to the Fortune 500 participants, may be the most essential step in the job-seeking process. All major corporations today expect their applicants to be familiar with the company’s Web site. They want to see that you’ve done your research. And why shouldn’t they? Never before have job seekers had such easy access to a company’s business, culture, and employment opportunities.

Companies have spent millions and dedicated significant resources to ensure that their Web sites have valuable content and are user friendly, and for good reason: when it comes to hiring—company Web sites are incredibly cost effective. Merck, for instance, has saved “several million dollars over the past year by relying more on its corporate Web site to find candidates” (*Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2003). Web sites enable companies to hire from a broad range of candidates without using expensive search firms and advertisements.

Once you’ve decided to pursue a certain company, it’s also helpful to examine its literature from previous years as it will give you a good idea of how the company has evolved. Annual reports, press kits, brochures, price lists, and other publications are readily available online. If you already submitted your résumé and are waiting for the telephone to ring, put this in-between time to good use by reading every piece of literature you can find on the prospective employer.

That way you have all the information you need in the event that you are asked to interview.

This kind of preparation tells the company you are interested in becoming a part of the team. In addition, you don't want to go into an interview and ask questions that could have been easily answered just by reading the Web site.

Brian Little, a group director in human resources at Household, reaffirms this in the survey: "Research before you send a résumé. Nothing wastes more time than looking at résumés that should have never been sent in the first place."

GETTING STARTED

Even in cyberspace you may need paper and pen (especially if you don't have a handheld device to make notes). Dedicate a small notebook to your job search and start jotting down relevant information on each company to which you plan to submit a résumé. Carry this notebook around with you to jot down important information, such as the names of contacts, companies you want to research, and the like. Having this information in a notebook saves you the trouble of backtracking in case you are suddenly called in for an interview. It's a time-saver, and you can enter the information in the job data file on your computer at a later time.

I once attended a seminar on corporate communications. The teacher of the class must have found grammar and syntax a little too dry for her tastes because she exhibited an endless penchant for self-help tangents. On one of her many excursions, she advised us to boost our self-esteem by writing our résumé. I looked around the room and noticed I wasn't the only person in the class who looked dumbfounded. In fact, by the look on everyone's face, I think I can safely say that the idea of writing a new résumé sounded as inviting as joining the Jacksonport Polar Bear Club for its annual dip into the icy waters of Lake Michigan on New Year's Day. Not one of us welcomed the idea of writing a résumé to boost our confidence, which is one reason why the temptation to get off track when searching for a job is so strong. If you're like most people, it's a challenge to whittle your work history down to two pages of relevant, but dynamic, material.

The good news is that before you pull out the paring knife, you can still make headway in the job hunt by conducting research. Jump-start the process by clicking onto the Web sites mentioned in *Time* magazine's "50 Best Sites on the Web" (July 3, 2003). Devote a few hours to the following career sites to get the brain in gear: flipdog.com, careerjournal.com, monster.com, salaryexpert.com, and wetfeet.com. Not only will you pick up useful keywords, but the sites may actually inspire some enthusiasm for the task at hand. Besides recommending job boards where you can plug into a listing of nationwide opportunities, these sites provide

guidance to job seekers on such topics as interview techniques, salary scales, and résumé-writing tips.

At this point, it is not advisable to post your résumé on the big job boards. The most efficient use of your time lies in scouring company Web sites because that's where you'll find the majority of open positions. Moreover, doing your own research at a company's Web site keeps you in the driver's seat—you're targeting the company instead of jumping at a possible job lead that you may eventually turn down. It's early enough in the job search so that you can do the choosing rather than jumping at whatever comes along.

Keep the job boards in reserve for when you've exhausted most of your other options. But something to keep in mind when you do post your résumé on a job board: many recruiters look only at recent entries. If your résumé lingers too long on a job board, you cut your chances of being seen, so don't rush to put a résumé out there. Do some prep work instead.

Another caveat is that matching skills between employer and employee is more difficult on mainstream job boards. Many recruiters are switching to job boards operated by professional groups because the chances of a match improve significantly. According to one health care technology recruiter: "About 15 percent of people who respond to a job posting [on the professional group job board] have the right skills, compared with the 2 percent results . . . at mainstream job boards" (Adelson, *New York Times*, October 29, 2002).

Another excellent Web site (but not a job board) for company profiles and research is www.hoovers.com. (Everyone can access the profiles, but you have to be a paid subscriber for more in-depth information.) And you will get more information than you can handle by putting a company name through the Google search engine.

So keep in mind that exploring these career Web sites should be for informational purposes at this stage of the job hunt.

VIRTUES OF SIMPLICITY AND HUMILITY

When you go to the career page on a company's Web site, take a look at the company's mission statement or its profile of its "archetypal employee." Not only will you find useful keywords, but you'll also get a good idea of whether the company is a suitable fit for you.

It shouldn't come as any surprise that the mood of employers has shifted significantly in the new millennium. The ego-driven résumés of the 1990s no longer find a home at many of America's largest corporations. In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins contends that the values embraced by the companies he profiled and

the words they use to describe the corporate culture include “disciplined, rigorous, dogged, determined, diligent, precise, fastidious, systematic, methodical, workmanlike, demanding, consistent, focused, accountable, and responsible.” Use these words as a guideline for the tone of your résumé. And remember, as David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* (June 29, 2003) about *Good to Great*: “The culture at these companies encourages the Lincolnian virtues of simplicity and humility.”

Most of the recruiters at Fortune 500 companies have examined thousands of résumés, so you can be fairly certain they are adept at detecting sensational claims of glory. Rocco Mangiarano, a director of human resources at Engelhard who sees between 50 and 100 résumés per day, said in the survey that applicants should be honest about who [they] are and what [they’ve] done.” And David Murphy, an executive vice president at The McGraw-Hill Companies, said in the survey, “Hype does not pay.” He added that “exaggerated claims about skills and/or achievement” are his personal grounds for sending a résumé to the unwanted pile.

So resist bombast. Go instead to the company Web site and look up its mission statement; most Fortune 500 companies have one (even if they call it by another name). Many of them are simple statements about a company’s goals and values; others are more elaborate texts; but all of them have keywords that you can use in either your cover letter or résumé.

To cite one example, the H.J. Heinz corporate Web site has a section called “Vision and Values” that is loaded with clues about its culture and values. It says about its vision: “Being the best premier food company does not mean being the biggest, but it does mean being the best in terms of consumer value, customer service, employee talent, and consistent and predictable growth. . . . Our vision will be supported by our VALUES, which define to the world and ourselves who we are and what we stand for.” The company then lists its values, based on the adjective *premier*, that are important to it. Paraphrased, they are passion, risk tolerance, excellence, motivation, innovation, empowerment, and respect.

If you were to write a cover letter to this company, you might want to refer to its Web site material and show how these values are exhibited in your own work history. Remember, hundreds—and sometimes thousands—of résumés are sent to large corporations on a weekly basis. David Pulatie, a senior vice president in human resources at Phelps Dodge, said in the survey: “You must create personal uniqueness. When hundreds apply for the same job, you must stand out.”

One way to distinguish yourself so that your résumé is pulled from the pack is by knowing about a company’s culture and values. It also helps you to decide whether the company would be a good fit for your interests and background. Stephen Heckert, a senior manager in human resources at JDS Uniphase,

reaffirms this idea: "Search company Web sites for the companies that are a personal fit culturally and careerwise."

GETTING DOWN TO THE NITTY-GRITTY

After you have scoured the more general pages of a company Web site, proceed to the "career" or "job opportunities" page (but only if you are sure you have a current résumé that reflects what the company needs). Once there, you will see directions on how to apply for an open position. Generally, you will be asked to send your résumé directly to the company, or you will be asked to fill out the company's employee profile (which usually utilizes much of the information already on your résumé).

If you decide to fill out the company profile, *do not rush through this process*. Have a dictionary on hand and be prepared to double-check the accuracy of your information—from spelling and grammar to dates and company names. Human resources personnel are evaluating your communication skills, so do everything in your power to make sure that any information you provide the company is accurate and error free. One more gentle reminder: *Take your time*. If you are going to be interrupted a few times because you have to pick up your daughter from soccer or you expect the telephone to ring with a call from a recruitment agency, then it's better to fill out the company profile late at night or early morning. It's essential that all your communication with a prospective employer is 100 percent professional.

Most companies expect you to have an e-mail address, but if you don't, create one before you go to the company Web site. On the PepsiCo career profile page, you are given a link and the option of creating an e-mail address with Yahoo!. My advice, however, is that you get your own e-mail address from Yahoo! or Hotmail. Many times company Web sites require you to log on before proceeding to a specific job. Sometimes your e-mail address acts as your username during log-in, so there's no getting around the need for an e-mail address. Even if you already have one, you may want to set up a new account to use specifically for the job search. Furthermore, to avoid electronic glitches, get used to your new e-mail before using it.

It is essential you follow directions precisely; several Fortune 500 survey participants stressed this fact again and again. Dawn Thompson, a specialist in human resources at Idaho Power Company, said this in the survey: "Pay close attention to the application procedure of the company. One who doesn't follow procedures usually isn't considered." So when PepsiCo requests in its career profile that your résumé attachment not exceed 16,384 characters, do not send one that has 18,000 characters.

This may sound simple to most of you, but many applicants don't follow basic instructions. Don't be one of them. You are ready to go to the career page of a company Web site only when you have a current, accurate, and succinct résumé as well as an e-mail address and a dictionary. A few hours of quiet time is also recommended.

It is also helpful to be armed with a list of action words (see Chapter 4 for more information) to use in the event that you are asked to describe your career objective. A consistent reason Fortune 500 participants reject a résumé was that the applicant's objective was fuzzy or too general. Either applicants did not determine what positions were open and available or they lacked any real direction in seeking specific employment. If you have to fill out an employee profile rather than send your résumé, you may be asked to write a career objective in your profile. If you don't have one on your résumé, then you'll have to compose one on the spot before submitting your profile. That's when the list of action words comes in handy.

J. Michael Farr, author of *The Quick Résumé and Cover Letter* (see "Resources"), has this to say: "One of the worst things you can do with your résumé is to try to make it work for 'any' job. While it is acceptable for you to consider a broad range of jobs, applicants who don't seem to know what they want to do impress few employers. This means that all but the simplest résumés deserve to include a job objective."

On some company Web sites, you may only apply for open positions. Make sure you read the job description, which is usually more elaborate than the one you find in a classified advertisement, before applying for the job. Pick up some of the keywords from the job description and put them on your résumé (provided you have these skills, of course). If you are sending a "blind" résumé, one that will be held by the company for future positions or jobs not advertised, that's all the more reason to narrow your options. Employers want to see your focus.

An employer wants to match candidates whose credentials meet the criteria of the open positions in his or her company. Job seekers must anticipate those needs and then target their résumés accordingly. Revamping your résumé to reflect this employer-directed focus is essential. Employers want to know how you can solve their problems or meet their needs. The more you know about the company, the better you position yourself to customize your résumé to meet the company's needs.

Take, for instance, the Procter & Gamble career site. Besides allowing applicants to apply for open positions via the standard online job forms, the site gives you an opportunity to click on its career advice center and even participate in its "interactive online courses." Another click and an applicant can discover what it takes to succeed at P&G, something called the "what counts factors." This is valu-

able information when you are targeting your résumé—as well as when you land the interview.

COMPANIES AS OPEN BOOKS

It used to take three to six months for job seekers to find a new job, but in a competitive job market experts say it can take up to a year, because employers are deluged with résumés for just one or two openings. This can be discouraging unless you spend your time productively—researching your field as well as your career potential.

It's all about matching your qualifications to current job opportunities at a company. Many of the Fortune 500 participants said that if your qualifications don't match, your résumé remains active in the company database from six months to a year. That's not what always happens, though. When A. Tejero DeColli, a senior vice president at Jones Apparel Group, Inc., was asked what the company does with unsolicited résumés, she replied that they just don't accept them. You have to specifically apply for open positions. A few other participants also said their companies don't consider unsolicited résumés.

What this means is that you should do some sleuthing to find out what a company's policy is toward unsolicited résumés. If the information is not readily available on the career page, then either write the HR department an e-mail asking what its policy is regarding unsolicited résumés or call and ask.

Some of you may be puzzled by the suggestion that you call the company. If a company explicitly states that you should not call it, then by all means honor that policy. If, however, you are unsure what the company policy is, then investigate further. Stacey Webb, a human resources representative at Gannett, stated that job seekers need to be “persistent. Contact the HR department to express your interest in opportunities with the company.”

If a phone call is permissible, you have the opportunity to find the name of the person to whom you should send your résumé. It's a good idea to have a list of questions ready before calling the HR department, such questions as these:

- What is the standard procedure for applying to the company?
- Are there any openings now?
- Will there be any positions opening up in the near future?
- If a résumé is sent to the department via e-mail, should it be sent as an attachment or as plain text (ASCII, pronounced *askee*)?
- Do you require a career profile (e-form) to be filled out on the company Web site beforehand?

You don't want to sound like a novice in case you do get an opportunity to speak to an HR representative. As with online applications, your communication skills are on display—and being evaluated. You can improve your chances of being hired by being prepared and anticipating an employer's needs.

Of course, a good strategy for finding a job is *networking*. Nearly every one of the survey participants stressed the importance of referrals, contacts, and networking. But even if you do have a contact at the company, you are putting yourself at a disadvantage if you choose to bypass the research stage of the job-hunting process. Chances are that even with a contact at the company, you will have to follow the standard procedure for applying for the job. Don't shortchange yourself: Do your research, become familiar with the company Web site, and know as much as you can about the targeted company. It will not be a waste of time.

AND DON'T BE DISCOURAGED

The Fortune 500 companies surveyed for this book have thousands of employees, anywhere from 3,420 at Thrivent Financial for Lutherans to 360,000 at UPS, with most of the companies falling into the 25,000 to 50,000 range. Their hiring expertise goes a long way when acquiring talent.

Having the relevant skills to match a job opening is the number one qualification mentioned by the Fortune 500 participants. If your skills are not current or not in demand, don't be averse to taking a course to brush up. Finding a new job can take anywhere between three months and a year, and if you aren't presently employed, you probably won't spend more than 20 hours a week looking for a new job. If you have to brush up on your computer or accounting skills, that leaves half the week open and available.

Employers appreciate your dedication, because those who succeed in today's challenging environment are those who never stop learning and are willing to seek the information that will make their job search more productive and fruitful. According to Dan Bankey, a manager of strategic staffing at Mutual of Omaha, "We're looking for lifetime learners."

As already mentioned, it costs a company \$10,350 to replace an employee who has left for another job. Because a poor hiring decision can be costly to a company, try not to be impatient if the hiring process takes longer than you would like. You can be assured that the bigger the company, the longer it will take to procure a new position. Cydney Kilduff, a director of staffing and diversity at Kellogg Company, said applicants should "be patient—big wheels turn slowly."

And if you really want to work for a particular company, don't give up. David Murphy of McGraw-Hill said, "Do not rely on simply sending a résumé. Work the

headhunter. Network your way into contact with the right hiring authority at the target company.” Cecilia McKenney, at Pepsi Bottling, added: “Be persistent with the company you want to work for. Pursue jobs with multiple mediums and follow up.”

A one-size-fits-all résumé or dusting off the old résumé and updating it just doesn't work in today's highly competitive job market. Job seekers now must do the following:

- Write concise and skill-specific résumés.
- Target jobs that match their skills.
- Post résumés so they are seen by the appropriate hiring managers.
- Write engaging cover letters that make an applicant stand out.
- Anticipate what a company needs.

Remember that, according to the Labor Department, there are more than 1,200 official job occupations, so determining the best course to take depends on many factors. Your preliminary research helps to narrow your options. It also helps you determine whether the conventional snail mail, hard copy résumé is a requisite or only a posted ASCII résumé will meet a company's requirements. In today's digital environment, you cannot proceed with your job hunt until you determine exactly what is required.