



8 modern resume tips tech pros need to adopt now

By: Alan Ackmann

INTRODUCTION

Resumes have existed since the turn of the century. Not since the year 2000, mind you; since around 1900, when embedding a letter with bullet points describing qualifications first became common. In the 12 decades since, the resume has transformed from a simple list of positions and/ or duties to a persuasive document convincing employers of job aptitude, to an infinitely varied manuscript — thanks to the 1980s emergence of word processing

(Amare and Manning 41-42). But recent shifts are equally monumental.

Electronic distribution is altering how resumes are gathered, sifted and retrieved, even changing the process of writing a resume and the finished product. Massive resume storehouses. Integrated social media platforms. Opaque, proprietary search algorithms. These features sometimes make

applicants feel powerless while creating gloomy cynicism about a resume's power.

Well, here's the good news: folks who study resumes also study technology, and they isolate new features and update best practices.

The better news? We're passing these tips on to you. Let's get to it.



1

Use keywords ethically and strategically

In the 1990s, keywords helped large-scale companies manage scannable resumes in internal databases. Now, 20 years later, “a single internet database might offer as many as 25 million resumes” searchable by keywords (Burns et al. 573).

To the distrustful or desperate, this risks turning job hunting into a simple quest to be noticed. Some applicants, therefore, populate resumes with invisible or irrelevant keywords, even plagiarizing want ads. Rather than providing an advantage, though, resumes harvested this way are immediately dismissed.

It’s still true that “to a degree reasonable [resumes] should reflect the language preferences of the advertisement or posting,” but this just means you should recast a want ad’s source language to reflect your own aptitudes (Plung 6).

In other words, work probable keywords in organically, not with repetition or deceit.



2

Anticipate reading behaviors

Chronological is the most common resume structure, but slight structural adjustments to highlight persuasive information are also acceptable. Many writers make this shift intuitively, since in a resume, “the positioning of elements on the page effectively provides [...] various degrees of significance, where what is presented at the top is viewed as more important than the bottom.” (Lipovsky 439).

Be aware, though, that “while applicants propose a sequential structure,” that proposal is often rejected. This leaves recruiters “free to choose the order in which they deal with the various sections, starting and continuing with one section” and then bouncing to another, especially on initial readings (Lipovsky 442).

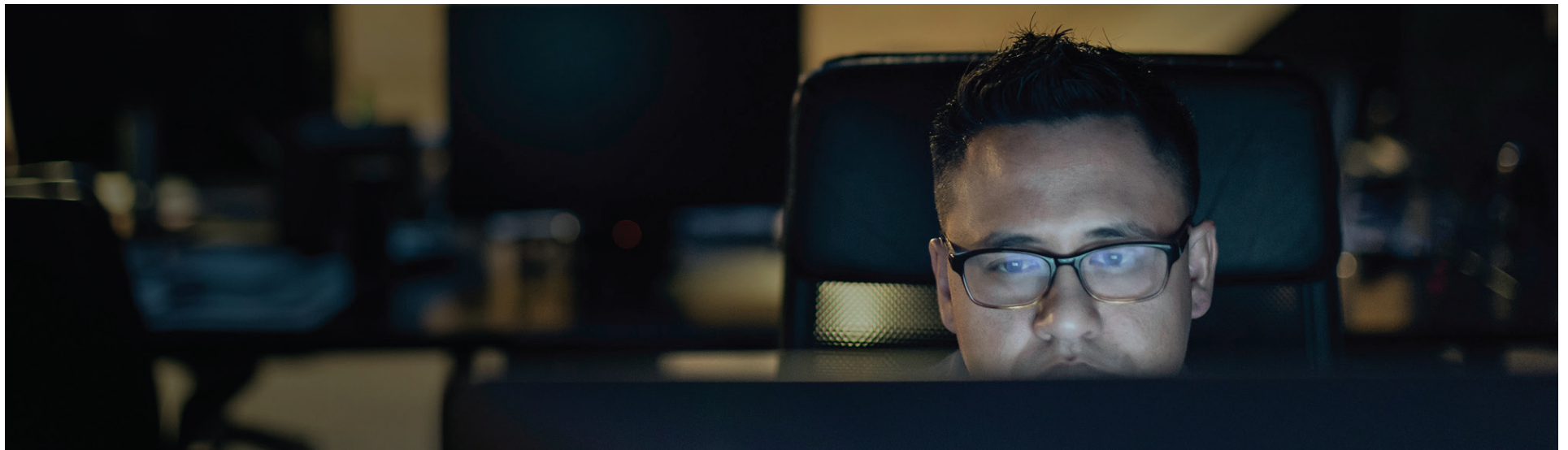
In other words, most resumes aren’t read in order. Being strategic with visual cues such as partitioning, italics and calculated white space, focuses your reader’s attention on critical elements.

You can also anticipate on-screen reading patterns. In eye-tracking experiments, Nielsen identified that on-screen readers employ an “F” pattern. This

pattern begins with a horizontal movement across the top, before moving “down the page a bit and then across in a second horizontal movement that typically covers a shorter area.” After these horizontal lines, readers “scan the content’s left side in a vertical movement.” (Diaz 434).

Diaz, therefore, proposes featuring your resume’s most compelling aspects, like keywords and strong evidence, along these “F” axes.

In terms of design, you shouldn’t seek unwanted attention with gimmicky or unconventional resumes. Across multiple studies, resumes “presented in creative graphic ways were ranked lowest by recruiters”. (Lipovsky 432).





3

Develop audience-centered themes

A common mistake is to jam a resume full of abundant, indistinguishable information, hoping readers create their own meaning. Such resumes overburden readers rather than impress them. Successful resumes, though, “appeal to the value structure of a potential employer” through deliberate evidence from the candidate’s background (Randazzo 383). Daniel Plung refers to these lines of proof as the “themes” or main ideas of the resume.

Here’s a strategy you can use to develop audience-centered themes:

When reading a job post, identify “at least eight terms the company uses repeatedly,” followed by eight technical or interpersonal skills and eight personality traits. Then, summarize your own experiences about these needs. Don’t worry about phrasing yet (Randazzo 385). From this, you’ll identify areas of personal overlap, and possible themes or the main points you want to emphasize.

This strategy also creates license, occasionally, to modify a resume’s structure or emphasis, since, “the weight allocated to an experience does not depend on the amount of time spent at [a] particular post; it depends subjectively on the significance that an applicant attributes [to it].” (Lipovsky 432).

In other words, you decide what dimensions matter most and how to feature them.

4

Integrate your resume into a larger social identity

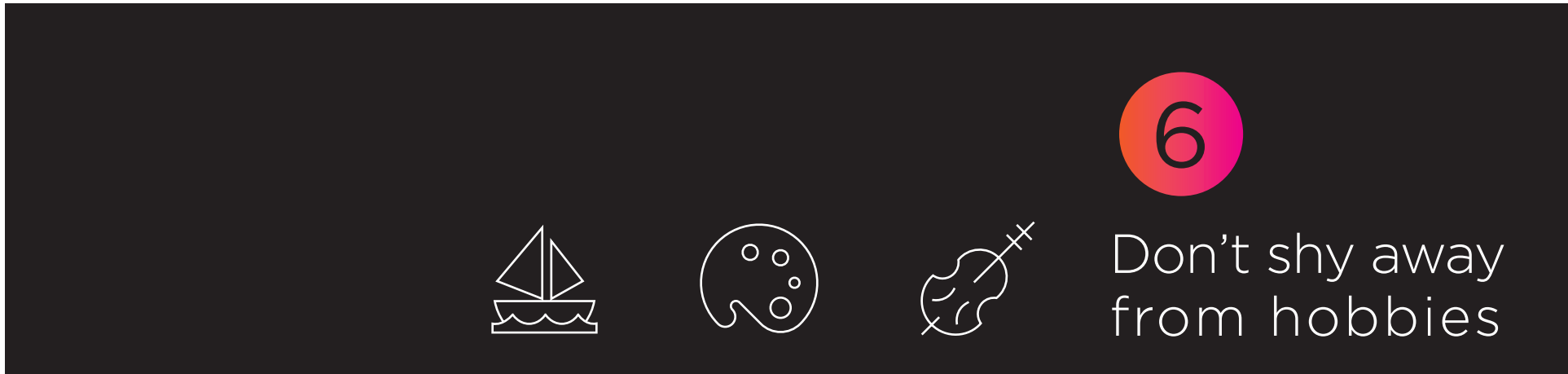
Since most employers run internet searches on applicants before offering interviews, some recruiters argue that the resume is a comparatively minor part of an application or an irrelevant one. This position strikes me as severe.

According to a 2009 survey of Fortune 100 companies, “resumes remain the number one factor in determining candidate selection” (Plung 1). This doesn’t mean, however, that your resume is the totality of your application identity.

While “initial opinion of the quality of your application [will be] based on the general impression created by the documents you have sent” (qtd. in Lipovsky 430), this impression will soon be scaled against your professional and online social profiles, as well as personal websites. So, again, be truthful and consistent in your resume.

There’s a possible advantage as well. When aggregated, online information is often unwieldy, so a resume offers the chance to distill your broader online identity into something coherent rather than chaotic.





5 Think about your personality

It's becoming clear that "resume readers are not only assessing the applicant's experience, but also looking to discern whether the candidate" matches the culture of the organization (Plung 6). Moreover, recent studies "suggest that resume reviewers can link specific content and style cues from resumes with personality traits, influencing hireability judgements". (Burns et al. 586).

In other words, readers aren't just looking at what a candidate has done; they're making assumptions about who a candidate is.

Some inferences are predictable. Grammar mistakes imply a sloppy worker. Leadership implies high self-

confidence. A flashy typeface indicates an attention-getting personality. Other inferential cues, however, are contextual and a bit more subjective.

One of the most striking insights is that cues a resume projects don't always match the self-reported personality applicants believe they project. Many writers just aren't sensitive to how they're coming across. So when writing a resume, always be mindful of how your implicit personality overlaps with your audience's values.

6

Don't shy away from hobbies

Conventional resume wisdom is to tether everything in a resume to professional goals, omitting filler like hobbies. Recent work, however, "does not support" the idea that extracurricular activities are a detriment (Burns et al. 584).

The reason (again) deals with inferences about personality and indication of hobbies as culture fit. Playing a sport, for example, might not seem meaningful, but "when the candidate participates in a team game, he or she is believed to have automatically acquired the habit to put the team first and the ability to work with people he or she may or may not like". (Roychowdhury 2).

The familiar argument that hobbies help an applicant stand out is incomplete, but there is growing consensus that the value of a hobbies section might be more complicated than originally thought.

7

Different resumes work for different goals

One of the biggest resume writing challenges is reconciling contradictory advice. If resume expert A claims hobbies show well-roundedness while expert B says hobbies are a waste of time, an applicant (who doesn't doubt the skills or motivation of A or B) remains uncertain who to trust. Consequently, some applicants take no chances and make no choices, which "position[s] the resume within an acceptable band of submittals, but will not necessarily promote differentiation or enhance competitive advantage". (Plung 2).

That bewilderment, though, ignores the idea that resumes are situational documents, not universal ones. Different people or industries value different things because of different needs, and "almost all components of a resume and cover letter are socially constructed." (Randazzo 387). Design jobs value design; programmer jobs value measurable technical skills.

In other words, resume choices aren't simply words on a page; they reflect what you assume about the world and what it assumes about you.



8

Remember that resumes are always changing

Here's one more insight: collective understanding of resumes remains incomplete, and most sources here explicitly point out how they're addressing one dimension of a still-evolving field. As today's resumes differ substantially from the resume of, say, 1920, so will resumes of tomorrow.

By reading this guide and keeping pace with the times, you're taking sound steps toward helping your resume stay meaningful and relevant.

For more information, check out Resumes, Research, and Writing on the Job Hunt, part of the Pluralsight learning platform.

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BIO

Alan Ackmann teaches technical and professional writing at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. His work has appeared in a variety of journals, and he is the author of numerous Pluralsight courses, including Resumes, Research, and Writing on the Job Hunt.