

EMPLOYER PREFERENCES FOR RÉSUMÉS AND COVER LETTERS

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This article reports the results of a survey of employers' preferences for résumé style, résumé delivery method, and cover letters. Employers still widely prefer the standard chronological résumé, with only 3% desiring a scannable résumé. The vast majority of employers prefer electronic delivery, either by email (46%) or at the company's Web site (38%), with only 7% preferring a paper copy. Cover letters are preferred by a majority (56%). Preferences regarding résumé style and cover letters were independent of national (USA) vs. multinational geographic range, company size, type of industry, or respondent's job function. Smaller companies prefer résumé delivery by email, and human resources workers prefer delivery using the company's Web site.

Keywords: *résumés; cover letters; scannable résumé; employer preferences*

PREPARATION FOR EMPLOYMENT searches is a standard component of most business communication courses and textbooks. In recent years, however, numerous anecdotal experiences relayed by student job applicants have caused us to question the wisdom of spending classroom time teaching multiple résumé formats and cover letters. Company representatives at our career fairs have increasingly declined even to accept a printed résumé while speaking with the student. Instead, students are directed to company Web sites for employment application and résumé submission. There, the applicants are prompted to enter their education, skills, and experience directly into a proprietary series of labeled boxes, which gather information into the employers' databases for sorting convenience. A similar option for prompted entry of résumé information into searchable databases is provided at job Web sites, such as Monster.

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com. Students return to the classroom confused about whether they really need a prepared résumé of any kind. The scannable résumé seems to be particularly problematic.

In the late 1990s, the scannable format was the most up-to-date style for a résumé (Baker, DeTienne, & Smart, 1998; Quible, 1995; Roever & McGaughey, 1997) and is still included in business communication textbooks (e.g., Locker & Kienzler, 2008; Thill & Bovée, 2007). The scannable résumé offered employers the ability to sort large numbers of applicants quickly and without bias by any criteria desired, but not without a price. The scanning equipment was expensive and required an extra step of manual paper handling to scan a printed copy into the scanner's memory, where optical character recognition software could then convert the printed text into digital code. Companies that could afford neither to develop their own proprietary systems nor to purchase a commercial package had to contract to have the work done. Although usage was widespread—even described as a revolution (Kennedy & Morrow, 1995)—it was not universal. A 1998 survey of Fortune 500 companies found that one third of the respondents had no plans to adopt an electronic résumé management system (Baker et al., 1998). The majority (61%) of those that did use such a system did not “scan” the data in at all, but input it manually by keyboard. Further, a 1996 study of 236 companies in a rural Missouri community found that most were unaware of the résumé management technology, none used it, and only three had plans to use it in the future (Roever & McGaughey, 1997). Even for companies possessing the technology, anything short of 100% compliance left it necessary to maintain redundant systems for handling applications.

The scanning technology also imposes a burden on the applicant. For the scanner to successfully read and faithfully translate the information, scannable résumés must follow a prescribed format that differs substantially from the traditional chronological résumé (e.g., Locker & Kienzler, 2008; Thill & Bovée, 2007) and that may differ among employers. That is, scannable résumés must be attractive to the computer's “eye,” not the human eye (Roever & McGaughey, 1997), which raises both content and format issues. Most crucial, the applicant must provide a Keywords section containing several carefully selected noun, noun phrase, or adjective descriptors that

the scanning software will use to match the person with its preprogrammed set of words for a specific job opening. This requires careful scrutiny of the position description, as well as familiarity with the industry and its jargon; advice on keyword selection abounds (e.g., Hansen, n.d.; MacMillan, 2007). Special formatting requirements include flush left margins with only one type of information on each line (e.g., home phone number, cell phone number, or email address), sans serif font styles, and no use of bolding, italics, underlining, or similar features that might add visual interest for human readers. At least with the early scanner technology, use of a laser-printed original was preferred. Given the extent of these differences, applicants have been advised to prepare two versions of their résumés, one customized for machine viewing and one for human viewing (Roever & McGaughey, 1997).

Options for transmitting résumés, whether traditional or scannable, have included hand delivering or mailing an original paper copy, faxing the document, and emailing it as either text or attachment. In addition, the applicant could direct a potential employer to his or her personal Web site to view a résumé and related materials. Each method has limitations and advantages: Mailing paper is slow but, assuming no damage is done in transit, perfectly preserves the quality of the original document and minimizes risk of scanning errors. Faxing is fast, but equipment availability might be a problem, and the document quality can be degraded. Emailing is fast and inexpensive but historically has been plagued with virus hazards and incompatibilities of printing and word processing software, and ultimate quality depends on the recipient's printer. A 1998 survey of Fortune 500 companies found that only 19.7% accepted résumés by email, whereas 98% accepted résumés by fax (Baker et al., 1998). Relying on the applicant's personal Web site permits frequent updating as well as ready linking to related materials (Krause, 1997) but also requires relying on the employer to take the initiative regarding one's application, which is a questionable strategy.

Important technology advances have occurred in the past 10 years. Improvements in antivirus software, standardization of word processing software, and use of PDF (Adobe® System's Portable Document Format) files have made routine the exchange of documents with minimal risk of loss of laboriously crafted formatting.

Dot matrix printers have been replaced by inkjet or laser printers, which permit offices and individuals routinely to make inexpensive, high-quality printouts. Perhaps of most importance, development of online Internet sites now allows an applicant to type in directly or copy-and-paste a traditional résumé, either in entirety or in sections, into the computer of an employer or a third-party jobs Web site. The need for manual scanning is gone, paradoxically just as scanning hardware and optical character recognition software have become inexpensive features of home computer printer systems. Computer capacity and software developments have made it possible for a document to be searched rapidly for any word or phrase, not just a few preselected keywords. A recent survey of Fortune 500 companies found that 77% *require* an online response to job positions posted on the company's careers Web site (Taleo Research, 2005). Note that the requirement of online application should not be confused with endorsement of scannable résumés; the same survey found that "the vast majority is avoiding steps such as fax, traditional mail and scanning résumés into their digital software, which slows down the application process." These developments clearly have made the admonition of Baker et al. (1998) for "astute educators and job seekers" to "continue to monitor industry trends and to adapt their employment documents accordingly" (p. 18) as urgent today as Quible's (1995) admonition for business communication teachers to keep up to date by teaching "electronic" (i.e., scannable) résumés was a few years earlier.

In the present study, we respond to this imperative and to compelling evidence that an important change may have already occurred regarding résumés and cover letters. We ask the following three-part research question:

Research Question: What are employers' preferences regarding résumé style, résumé delivery method, and having a cover letter accompany the résumé?

To address the question, we have surveyed a sample of employers from U.S. or multinational companies (MNC) that recruit at our university. Their preferences for style of résumé, method to receive the résumé, and inclusion of a cover letter are presented, along with

an investigation of effects of company geographic range, company size, type of industry represented, and the job position of the respondent. The findings will help business communication instructors make the most efficient use of precious instructional time as they seek to optimize the preparation and minimize the frustration of students about to enter the workplace.

METHOD

The Sample

We were interested in using a cross-section of all of the companies and their representatives that our students were likely to deal with, rather than, for example, only Fortune 500 companies. Thus, we used a convenience sample of contact persons for all of the organizations that recruit at our university. Surveys were sent by email to 1,446 persons, and 234 completed responses were received. In order to make the present report of general interest, we used publicly available information to eliminate companies that had only a local or regional geographic range, leaving a sample of 140 consisting of 48 U.S. companies and 92 MNCs. We defined a national company as one having facilities located in at least three different regions of the United States and an MNC as having facilities in at least two countries.

The sample contained a wide range of company sizes and types of industries. The distribution of company sizes, in terms of numbers of employees, is shown in Figure 1. The sample contained a majority (53%) of companies with over 5,000 employees and 11% with fewer than 100 employees. The distribution of industry types is shown in Figure 2. The largest single group (31%) was manufacturing, followed by retail/wholesale (21%).

The job functions of the persons who responded to the survey are shown in Figure 3. The majority (54%) were in human resources, with the remainder spread over five other categories.

The Survey

The survey asked three simple questions dealing with the three elements of our research question. Note that we purposely avoided use of ambiguous current terminology, such as “electronic,” “Web-based,” and “online”:

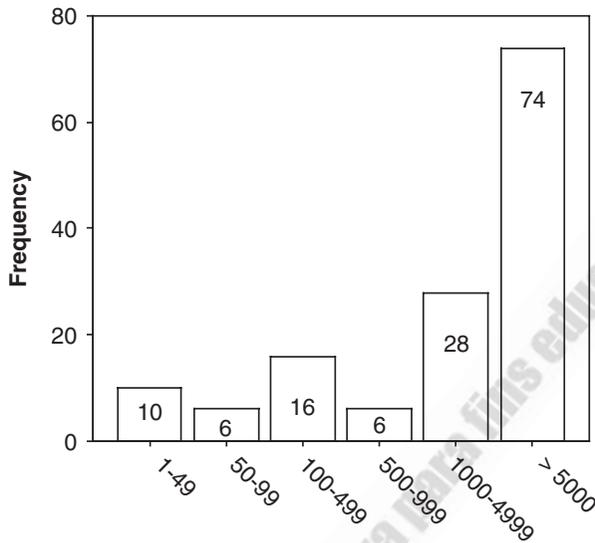


Figure 1. Distribution of Company Sizes in the Sample in Terms of Numbers of Employees

NOTE: Number of respondents whose companies are in each category is shown.

1. “What style of résumé does your company prefer?” Five options were provided: standard chronological, standard chronological in text format, scannable résumé with key nouns, none (company application used), and other.
2. “What is your company’s preferred way of receiving résumés?” Seven options were provided: paper copy, entered in entirety at company Web site, entered in sections at Web site prompts, pasted into an email, sent as email attachment, access from candidate’s Web site, and other.
3. “Do you prefer to receive an application (i.e., cover) letter with a résumé?” Yes or no options were provided.

In addition, demographic information was requested, including the company’s name, size, and type of industry, the respondent’s job function, and additional comments at the respondent’s option. The optional comments were used only to help clarify and categorize the respondent’s job function.

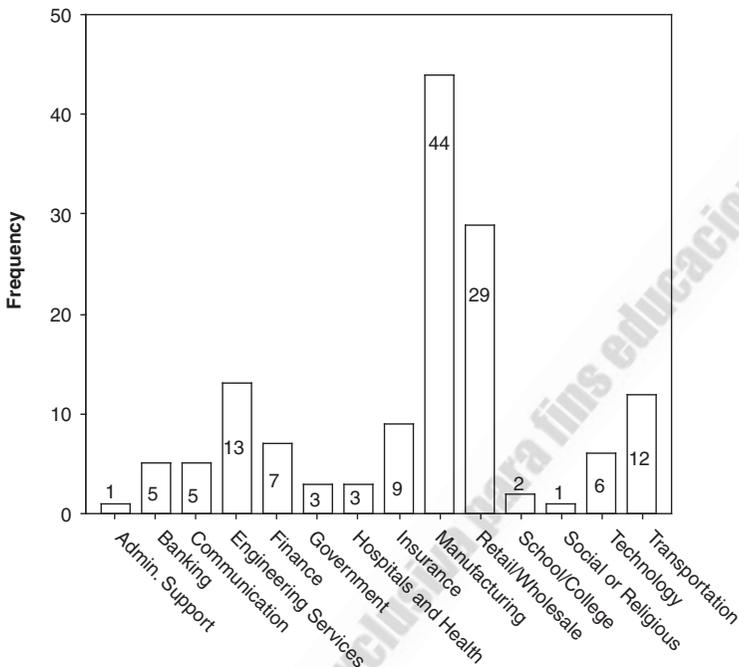


Figure 2. Types of Industries Represented in the Sample

NOTE: Number of respondents from each type is shown.

Statistical Methodology

Chi-square analysis was performed to determine whether résumé and cover letter preferences are related to the four demographic variables: geographic range of the company, company size, type of industry, and respondent function. Because this analysis was exploratory rather than hypothesis testing, and to minimize reporting of effects that might be sample dependent or of little practical consequence, we used a conservative alpha level of .01 and collapsed categories as necessary to assure a minimum statistical power of greater than 50% for a medium-size effect (Cohen, 1988). Also, a Monte Carlo implementation of Fisher's exact test was used to calculate the p values, allowing for unbalanced categories or low cell counts. When an overall statistically significant relationship at

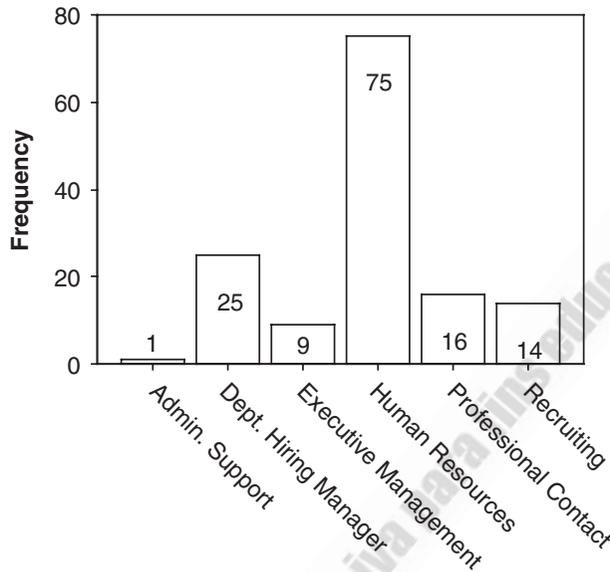


Figure 3. Job Functions of Respondents in the Sample

NOTE: Number of respondents in each job category is shown.

$p < .01$ was found, post hoc analysis to identify specific cells with statistically unlikely populations was done using adjusted standardized residuals (adj. resid.) greater than 3.0. That corresponds to a discrepancy between observed and expected cell counts more than three standard deviations above the average such difference in the sample (*SPSS Base 8.0 Applications Guide*, 1998).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preferred Style of Résumé

Responses to the question regarding preferences for résumé style are summarized in Figure 4. A large majority (71%) of employers prefer standard chronological résumés, with another 21% preferring them in text format. Five percent of the companies have no preference or want only their own applications. Only 3% ($n = 4$) prefer the scannable résumés.

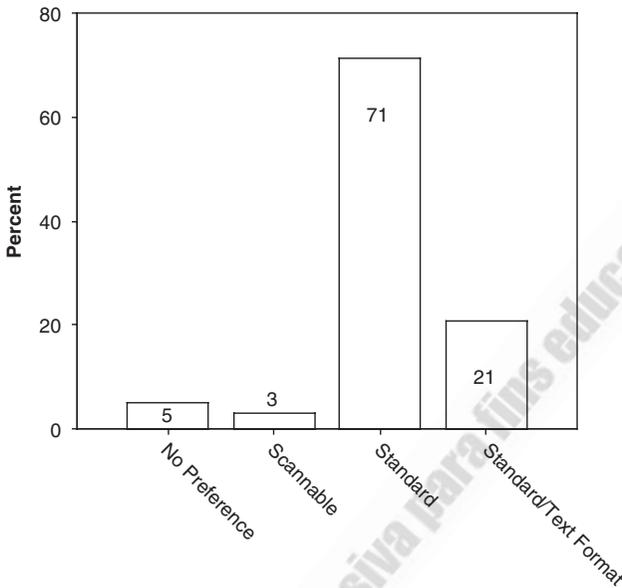


Figure 4. Percent of Respondents Who Preferred Each Style of Résumé

Chi-square analysis showed that these preferences were unrelated to the company's geographic range, size, or type of industry, or to the job function of the respondent. To eliminate sparsely populated cells and improve the statistical power of the chi-square analyses, several related variable categories were collapsed. A maximum of three categories for a demographic variable could be used and still achieve a statistical power greater than 50% in tests involving preference variables having as many as four categories. The original six categories of company size (Figure 1) were collapsed into three: 1-99; 100-4,999; and > 5,000 employees. The 14 types of company industries (Figure 2) were collapsed into three: manufacturing, sales, and services. The six categories of respondent job function, which were dominated by the human resources respondents (Figure 3), were collapsed into two: human resources and other.

Because the viability of the scannable résumé is of particular interest, we scrutinized the attributes of the four companies that preferred that style, looking for any helpful insights that the statistical

analysis might have missed. None were found beyond the fact that all four were MNCs. One was in the smallest size group. Types of industry represented were manufacturing (2), technology, and retail/wholesale trade. Two of the respondents were from human resources and the others were department hiring manager and executive management. Three wanted the résumé entered at the Web site, either in entirety (1) or in sections (2), and the other preferred email attachment. Three preferred cover letters; one did not. We note also that there were no respondents who preferred scannable résumés among the local and regional companies that were culled from the original set of survey respondents.

Preferred Way to Receive Résumés

The most preferred ways to receive résumés are summarized in Figure 5. Email is the most preferred modality (46%), with 41% preferring attachments and 5% preferring the résumé pasted into the body of the email. The second-most preferred modality is entry at the company's Web site (38%), with 34% preferring the résumé copied in its entirety and 4% preferring entry in sections. Paper résumés are preferred by only 7%, and none of these respondents preferred to obtain the résumé from the candidate's Web site.

These preferences are unrelated to company geographic range or type of industry but do depend on the company's size ($\chi^2 = 17.1$, $df = 6$, $N = 140$, $p = .006$) and the respondent's job function ($\chi^2 = 30.3$, $df = 6$, $N = 140$, $p = .000$). For the statistical analysis, because there were relatively few preferences for résumés pasted into emails or for Web site entry in sections, the original six ways to receive résumés (Figure 5) were collapsed into four categories: company Web site, email, paper, and other. Using those and previously described collapsed categories, we found that the small companies (1–99 employees) were overrepresented among those preferring to receive résumés by email (observed/expected = 14/7.3, adj. resid. = 3.6). The large companies (> 5,000 employees) were underrepresented (observed/expected = 25/33.8, adj. resid. = -3.0). These preferences for or against email delivery were compensated for primarily by opposing biases regarding Web site delivery, although the adjusted residuals for the latter cells did not reach the 3.0 threshold.

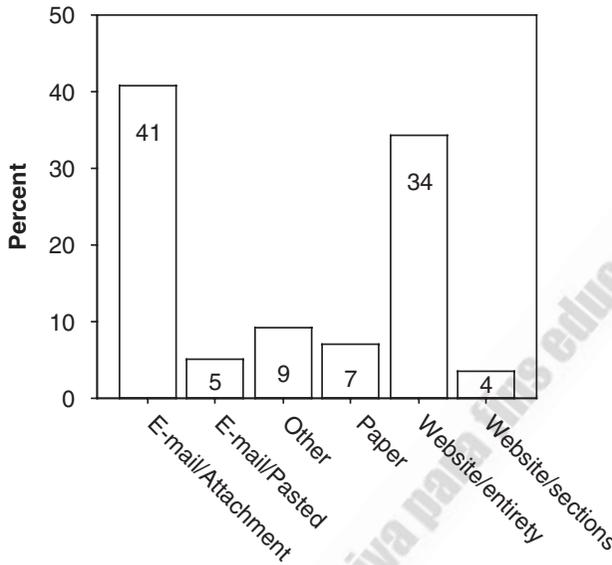


Figure 5. Percent of Respondents Who Preferred Each Method of Resume Delivery

Respondents who listed their job function as human resources were overrepresented among those who preferred applicants to use the company's Web site (observed/expected = 43/28.4, adj. resid. = 5.1). This overrepresentation was compensated for by underrepresentation in all three of the other résumé delivery categories, most strongly "other." One speculative rationalization for this dichotomy is that human resource workers might be more likely to work in a remote corporate office and have less direct contact with applicants. As such, they might be more wedded to, or content with, the impersonal Web site technology than are department hiring managers, recruiters, and professional contacts, who interview or interact more directly with the applicants.

Preference for Cover Letters

Fifty-six percent of the respondents preferred to receive cover letters along with the application or résumé. This preference was unrelated

to the company's range, size, or type of industry or the job function of the respondent, and is essentially unchanged from the 60% preference reported previously (Baker et al., 1998).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The standard chronological style of résumé is still "the standard," irrespective of company size, location, or industry, or the job function of the hiring contact person. In contrast, scannable résumés are preferred only by a very small fraction (3%) of companies.

Electronic delivery of résumés appears largely to have replaced paper. Eighty-four percent prefer delivery either by email or by company Web site, and only 7% want paper. Email delivery is particularly preferred by smaller companies, and Web site delivery is preferred by human resources individuals. The 8-fold preference for email attachments over pasting into the message narrative suggests a minimal concern over attachment-borne viruses. None of the respondents preferred to go to the applicant's Web site to obtain a résumé. Cover letters are preferred by a majority of employers (56%), although the study did not investigate their preferred delivery method.

We conclude that business communication courses should continue to provide instruction in preparation of standard chronological résumés and cover letters, but with the understanding that the résumés are much more likely to be delivered over the Internet than in paper form. Nonetheless, construction of a basic printable résumé probably remains a wise investment of time in that such a complete, organized, and well-phrased inventory of an applicant's skills and experiences would be convenient for multiple potential delivery venues, including submission by email as either attachment or text, copying selected sections into proprietary Web site forms, or printing a paper copy for carrying to an interview or in the event of a chance encounter with a potential employer. In contrast, constructing scannable résumés could be considered a low priority for inclusion in the syllabus, as their low demand by employers justifies neither the required instructional time nor the student anxieties associated with the unique formatting requirements. Similarly, although employers might view personal, or social networking, Web sites to learn more

about an applicant of interest (e.g., Banjo, 2008), they do not seem to be interested in going to such Web sites in search of résumés; spending class time to help students perfect their Web sites for the purpose of résumé display also should be a low priority.

The data provided in the present study should assist instructors in optimizing classroom time and help resolve differences between students' personal experiences and the advice found in textbooks or on employment Web sites. Of course, it is to be expected that exceptions to the patterns reported will exist at the individual employer level, and students should be encouraged to be alert for the need to customize their application materials accordingly. Further, although we know of no reason that our sample of employers should be biased with respect to the issues studied, replication of the investigation with other samples is encouraged.

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