

Applying to B-School? Résumé perils to avoid

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The résumé may seem simple, but it's an application minefield. Handled carelessly it can dash any hope of landing a top B-school spot.

The required résumé on the typical business school application is the first impression most MBA applicants make on the admissions committee, yet it is often their last priority.

Most people who work on admissions committees at top business schools say they read the applicant's résumé before anything else, said Scott Shrum, director of MBA admissions research at Veritas Prep, a test prep and admissions consultancy in Malibu, Calif., in an interview. In addition, students and alumni, who conduct interviews with applicants on behalf of the admissions committee, often see the résumé and nothing else, said Shrum.

"The résumé is sometimes the last thing candidates think about," said Shrum. "It's the only place where you have the entire candidacy on one page, and admissions committees often look at this first and start to form an opinion on your candidacy."

Completing the résumé as an afterthought is a mistake, said Mary Miller, assistant dean of admissions at Columbia Business School (Columbia Full-Time MBA Profile) in New York, in an interview. "The résumé gives me a picture of the applicant," said Miller. "I use it as an introduction before reading the rest of the application."

Career Progression

Admissions committees at top business schools are looking for one thing when scanning a résumé: career progression, said Rodrigo Malta, director of MBA admissions at the University of Texas-Austin McCombs School of Business (McCombs Full-Time MBA Profile), in an interview. Including accurate dates of employment and simple, yet thorough, explanations of your accomplishments and promotions helps your case, he said.

"We're looking for progression more so than canned job descriptions," said Malta. "You must show the impact you've had."

Admissions committee members are inundated with thousands of applications, which is why formatting becomes pivotal, said Michael Cohan, president of the MBA admissions consultancy MBAPrepAdvantage in Miami Beach, Fla., in an interview. For each job description, applicants should begin with an action verb, such as "managed." Then, said Cohen, they should describe their accomplishments in that role and quantify them. For example, one could write: "Managed project that led to \$800,000 in sales."

"What you're trying to do is make the information as easily accessible to your audience as possible," said Cohan.

Using the same résumé that one would use to secure a job or even for all the schools to which an applicant is applying, will not fly, said Cohan. For example, an engineer might use technical vocabulary in a résumé for a potential employer, but leave out those details on a business school résumé, said Cohan.

School-Specific Format

Look at the résumé books that each business school has in its career services department and follow its format, wrote Julie Liu, a 2004 graduate and former student admissions committee member at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business (Booth Full-Time MBA Profile),

in an e-mail. Refrain from writing paragraphs of text or being inconsistent with the use of punctuation, tenses, and formatting, such as bold titles, wrote Liu.

"All we care about is who you are," she wrote. "A person who does artistic or crazy fonts just shows us that maybe [he] should have applied to art school."

There is no room for error on the application résumé, said Brian T. Lohr, director of MBA admissions at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business (Mendoza Full-Time MBA Profile) in South Bend, Ind., in an interview. Spell-check and another pair of eyes can help applicants avoid errors, he added.

"It must be letter-perfect, no mistakes, no puffery, no lying or anything like that," said Lohr.

Sometimes applicants overlook the obvious, said Miller. Many applicants, she said, do not update their résumés. As a result, other parts of the application do not match, which raises red flags, Miller said. Some forget to include contact information, Lohr added.

Some applicants provide too much information. A candidate's high school education, SAT and GMAT scores, GPA, and references are superfluous, said Lohr. If the school needs that information, he said, it will ask for it in other parts of the application. International students sometimes include personal information, such as height, weight, or date of birth, all of which is unnecessary, he said.

One-Page Max

One of the biggest pet peeves at top business schools are résumés that go over the one-page maximum, said Shrum. Some schools, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management (Sloan Full-Time MBA Profile), ask applicants to stick to a strict word count.

"It's important to follow the guidelines, and pay attention to the school's needs when doing several applications," said Julie Strong, senior associate director of admissions at Sloan, in an interview.

Going over the one-page maximum sends the wrong message and can eliminate you from the start, said Shrum. "One and a half pages scream that you think you're either too important or can't be bothered getting it down to one page," said Shrum.

With many applicants having been laid off from their jobs, business schools are not surprised to see gaps in work history, but they sometimes require explanation. If a candidate used a period of unemployment to look for a job or take on freelance projects, he should mention that on the résumé, said Cohan. On the other hand, if the school asks candidates only to explain gaps of six months or more, and the candidate was out of work four months, then he should just leave out that information, said Cohan. If there is not enough space in the résumé, applicants can use the optional essay on most applications to explain gaps, too.

"The key is to be truthful," said Cohan. "You can be smart and judicious about what you include."

Getting Personal

Deciding how personal one should get in the résumé is a balancing act. Business schools, in which alumni or students interview applicants, seem to want to know if a candidate runs marathons or takes cooking lessons because these tidbits serve as icebreakers, said Lohr. It's also a chance to add personality, said Miller.

At the same time, applicants don't want to seem immature, inappropriate, or make anyone reading feel uncomfortable, said Shrum. Listing your status as an amateur magician could be interesting, whereas mentioning you're a devoted comic book fan could come off as silly, he said.

"It's a fine line," said Shrum. "You don't want to paint a picture of yourself as a misfit in business school."

In the future, the résumé could become obsolete, as video and other technologies overtake the standard one-page work history, said Shrum. But for the time being at least, it's serving its purpose, said Lohr, whose school has no plans for now to abolish it.

"The key is to show results and progression in your career," said Lohr. "That's the blocking and tackling of business. That's not going to change, even if the format does."

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