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June 2010

## Resume and Cover Letter Preparation — How to Better Market Yourself to Future Employers

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In today's marketplace, there is strong competition for every open Paralegal position. For every job opening, employers are receiving and getting buried in a sea of resumes. Regardless of whether you are an entry Paralegal or an Experienced Paralegal, you need to distinguish yourself from the pack. You need to prepare a Resume and Cover Letter that "Market" and "Sell" your skills, experience, abilities and assets, targeted to the particular job opportunity you are seeking. Below find some Tips that will help get your Resume noticed and compel the recipient to contact you for an interview.

### Start Building Your Resume Early

You need to have something to talk about and document on your resume. Start as early as possible to obtain some relevant experience, even while you are still attending school. Apply for those clerkships, internships and externships, focus on obtaining summer or part time work within the legal industry, and take on volunteer or pro bono opportunities that can add additional experience. And, while obtaining that experience, whether it is an internship, a paid legal position, or a non legal job, make sure to keep a notebook that documents what you did, learned and accomplished over the course of your Experience Opportunity (EO). Doing so will help you document your experience properly on your resume and will prevent you from forgetting specifics that provide substantive information about you as well as possible talking points during an interview. A notebook detailing what you did and learned is also a helpful review tool when preparing for an interview since employers can and will ask you about anything listed on your resume.

### Tailor the Resume to the Desired Opportunity

Each Resume Submittal should be written to demonstrate that you have the skills and abilities that the prospective employer desires, so tailor it for each and every opportunity. Start with a generic version and then customize it according to the desired position's needs. If you are interested in a few different types of roles or positions, you might have several different generic versions.

Always keep in mind what the Employer is trying to ascertain when reviewing resumes and be sure to demonstrate those skills and abilities on your resume, cover letter, and in the interview. The Resume and Cover Letter are your opportunity to let prospective employers know about you and why you are someone that they just have to meet!

### Employers Want to Know:

1. Can you do the job?
2. Will you do the job?
3. Are you a good fit for their organization?

Employers will be looking for evidence that demonstrates that you meet these requirements. They will be looking at and for your academic achievements; prior experience and job history; communication, project management and organization skills; computer/technical proficiencies, attention to details; and solid research skills. They will be looking for motivation, commitment, energy level, character, discretion, and enthusiasm. And, they will be looking for personality fit with the supervisor and the firm's culture. Personality fit can be harder to display on a resume but will be a key factor to reveal when preparing a cover letter and during the interview, and will be different for each organization. The more you can learn about a particular organization prior to resume submittal, the more you can address these concerns in your resume and cover letter.

### Resume Set Up

It is important to highlight your best sellable assets first, at eye level, so as to grab the recipient's attention. The order will be dependent on your background. If you are entry level with minimal on-target experience, but have obtained a paralegal education and other academic achievements, start with your Education first. If you have obtained substantive experience relevant to the targeted position, you should probably start with your Experience first.

Don't make the resume recipient hunt for your best assets because most will not make the effort and will just

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move on to the next resume. Remember the 3-second rule — if a resume doesn't grab the recipient's attention in the first 3 seconds, your resume will probably not be read.

**Resume Styles:** While some professional resume consultants prefer a "Skills Specific Resume," (SSR, also known as a "Functional Resume"),

I have found that the legal profession prefers a "Chronological-by-Position" (CBP) resume. SSRs don't provide a clear picture of a person's experience level — they can over- or under-sell abilities and have been utilized to hide depth of experience. Where and for how long you perform a particular responsibility can make a significant difference in determining your fit to the position. There is also a "Combination Resume" which combines the chronological and functional resume styles. For the most part, my preference is a CBP resume, but for some candidates, a functional resume may be the better version to utilize given their background.

**Under Education:** If you have impressive achievements, such as a good class rank or GPA, have been active on campus or outside of school in organizations, social and civic activities, pro bono and volunteer activities, and are a member of professional organizations, be sure to list these honors, memberships and activities, and highlight any positions of leadership. Attorneys are very credential conscious and they place strong importance on high academics, so be sure to indicate those achievements if applicable. If you lack specific experience but have taken CLE seminars or courses in the area that the position requires, list those courses or seminars.

**Under Experience:** If you use "Experience" as the heading vs. "Employment,"

you can include all relevant activities that might not necessarily be Employment, such as volunteer work, internships, etc. In most cases, start with your most recent experience first, listing each EO in reverse chronological order. Be sure to provide details such as employer's name and location, dates of employment, title and most important,



your responsibilities. Don't Bury Your Relevant Work Experience — do show depth and substance and demonstrate that you can add value. If you kept a notebook during your EOs, this is when you utilize what you have recorded to help you better expound and market yourself. Don't be shy — sell yourself by providing examples of your paralegal skills and toot your horn. Indicate if you saved your employer money, met or exceeded your billable target, or worked on, oversaw or managed a special project, being careful to maintain client con-

fidentiality. For example, if you worked on litigation, describe the type of litigation (i.e., intellectual property litigation) and some specifics on what you did (i.e., reviewed documents for relevancy, drafted discovery responses, prepared trial notebooks, etc.). If you utilized specific practice software, identify the software and how/why you utilized it. NFPA's

Paralegal Responsibilities, which can be found on the NFPA website at [www.paralegals.org/associations/2270/files/Paralegal\\_Responsibilities.pdf](http://www.paralegals.org/associations/2270/files/Paralegal_Responsibilities.pdf), is an excellent source of language that describes paralegal skills by practice area. Use Action Words — Reviewed, Drafted, Prepared, Performed, Created, Managed, Implemented, etc. to describe your accomplishments. Do not speak in the first person.

For those who haven't worked in the profession in awhile and therefore, recent experience is not on target, or if your most relevant experience would end up on page two, list the applicable experience first under a different title (i.e., Relevant Legal Experience) and then the balance of experience to follow under a different title (i.e., Other Experience).

If you are entry-level, do list any unrelated work experience that illustrates that you are responsible, industrious,

dependable, hardworking or otherwise special. If you put yourself through college while working full or part time, highlight that. For Example: Financed 75% of education through summer or part-time employment.

### Layout

- You want the layout to be organized, uncluttered and easy to read. The resume must be well written, with proper grammar and spelling, and professional looking. Bullet points are good but not required.

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- Be sure to list your Contact Information — name, address, telephone number, and email address. Make sure that your email address is an appropriate address to use when conducting a job search.
- You can BOLD and Underline certain items but don't overdo. NOTE: if you are sending your resume to a company that utilizes an applicant tracking system, do not bold, underline or use columns/tables because these formats may not download properly.
- Two pages are fine if you have enough material that requires it, but no more than two pages.
- Don't use odd fonts, colored paper (for those that still send resumes via mail), gimmicks (someone sent me beads once), or provide your picture on the resume — attorneys are still very conservative and it might hit them the wrong way.
- Use 11 or 12 pt. font if possible — you don't want the type to be so tiny that the recipient needs a magnifying glass to read your resume.
- Don't run on or be too crowded so that the recipient's eyes gloss over and tune out.
- Listing interests — often these are talking points, but they can also backfire so be careful (i.e., political activities).
- Use a Professional Objectives or Summary section only if it is well written, is not repetitive of what follows, adds to the resume, and doesn't exclude you from any unintended opportunities. Employers might discount a candidate when they don't like what is listed under Professional Objectives or when it doesn't match their current or upcoming opportunities.
- Don't Fudge Dates. More and more law firms and companies are conducting background checks and if the dates don't match up, it will be discovered!
- Don't embellish Experience. Be Truthful.

- Highlight the ability to speak, read or write any foreign languages and any computer/technical proficiency.
- Avoid or minimize the appearance of being a job hopper. If any short term EOs are temporary positions, internships or part time while attending school, be sure to identify them as such. Combine similar jobs together if that helps conceal the fact that you made multiple jumps.


#### Additionally...

- Have several people proof your resume and encourage them to ask you questions. Questions can point to items that are not clear and require clarification. As the writer of the resume, you are so close to it that you can easily miss typos and misspellings, and one typo can send your resume to the trash pile.
- It is okay to include a separate legal-oriented writing sample (redacted for confidentiality) and good reference letters with your resume submittal.

#### Cover Letter

The main reasons for a cover letter are to motivate the recipient to read your resume (although some recipients, like myself, often read the resume first and then the cover letter), demonstrate your ability to write and communicate effectively, and is an additional opportunity for you to stand out, differentiate and distinguish yourself further from the competition. A good cover letter adds to the resume, should be creative, and should not repeat what is already stated on the resume. To catch the reader's attention, demonstrate knowledge of what the employer does and focus on the reader's concerns and needs (the job description can provide you with some of this information), suggest ways that you can help the employer meet those needs, and include a few accomplishments to help demonstrate your ability to meet those needs or concerns. You can describe a particular project you worked on in detail, an honor that you achieved, or something about yourself that you want them to focus on and know more about. Provide the reader with an insight into your personality and illustrate why you are special, unique, appropriate for their opportunity, and must be interviewed.

#### Further...

- If the resume is being submitted with regard to a particular open position, be sure to identify what position you are applying to, and with firms with multiple locations and openings, specify which opening and location(s) you want to be considered for.
- Customize each letter based on the specific opportunity. If there is no specific opportunity, then customize it based on what you know about the firm and why you are interested in working for this firm.
- Address the cover letter to a specific person (not "To Whom It Concerns"). If you don't know who the specific person is, then make a call and find out. Even if you are told to just send it to "HR", push back in a nice way and tell them you want it to be addressed to someone specific. If you are pleasant and professional, you should be able to obtain a name.
- Use proper grammar and spelling, and No Typos! And be sure that the correct cover letter and resume go to the intended firm/company's mailing or email address. (I often receive cover letters addressed to other companies, which only demonstrates to me a total lack of detail).
- Tell the recipient that you will follow up in a few days with a phone call to answer any questions. Then, make the call. The extra effort made might be the difference between getting an interview or not. Of course, if the recipient won't take your call or sends you to voicemail, leave a professional message but don't harass the recipient with subsequent calls or emails. 

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