

The Pandemic Changed Everything About Work, Except the Humble Résumé

Résumés may be more for robots than human eyes at first, but most job seekers are still advised to distill their work history in one typewritten page.

By Gray Beltran

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Two years into a pandemic, many aspects of work have changed drastically. In that time, some people have started new jobs, Zoomed their days away and then left companies where they never even met their co-workers in person.

But one aspect of work remains remarkably unchanged: the importance of the traditional, single-page résumé created in a word processor.

“Hiring managers and recruiters still rely on the résumé,” said Vicki Salemi, an expert on the job-search process at Monster, the online job-posting site. The résumé, Ms. Salemi continued, is still “the standard to apply for a job and get noticed.”

In Monster’s recent “Future of Work” report, recruiters in the United States ranked résumé search — the ability to look through uploaded résumés on sites such as Monster or Indeed — as the most effective tool for finding candidates. The report also found that for employers, a résumé was second only to an in-person interview in determining whether a candidate was a good fit.

Résumé design and formats are relatively static, too. A job seeker might find herself using the same format to apply for a type of job that didn’t even exist when she first created a document with her name and address at the top and work history in bullet points below.

That’s because while the basics of the résumé itself haven’t changed, the audience has. In the era of databases and applicant-tracking technology, software systems sort through job candidates before they make their way to recruiters. So it’s important to make sure that a résumé can easily be understood by both humans and technology, said Kathryn Minschew, founder and chief executive officer of The Muse, a website that offers job listings and career coaching.

And machine and human readers alike struggle with overly stylized fonts, such as Comic Sans. Tried-and-true classics like Times New Roman, Arial, Helvetica, Calibri and Georgia are still among the best font options for your résumé, Ms. Minschew said.

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“In many more traditional fields like banking and finance, STEM, academia, a traditional résumé is still very important, but the look and feel carries less weight,” Ms. Minshew said.

Ms. Salemi said that it was crucial for job seekers to highlight and quantify their skills and experience and to make sure they were using the right keywords. These strategies help ensure that their résumé shows up when recruiters search a job site or internal database for specific terms.

Unlike those seeking jobs in the days of faxed and mailed résumés, today’s job candidates might apply for one position through a company’s job portal, have their résumés uploaded and stored in a database, and then be matched with a different role at the same company months or years later.

“If companies are experiencing labor shortages in different areas, they may very well go back to their database,” Ms. Salemi said.

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That is why keywords matter. Ms. Minshew counsels people to look closely at the job description and highlight keywords and skills the company is looking for in that role. “Make sure that, if it’s relevant and applicable, you’re highlighting similar skills or even some of the same keywords on your résumé,” Ms. Minshew said.

Ms. Minshew noted that a 2019 report from Jobscan found that nearly 99 percent of Fortune 500 companies used an applicant tracking system, which could put job seekers who don’t include the right terms in their résumé at a disadvantage.

Part of why the résumé has stayed constant while work itself has transformed is that no one method has come along to take over.

“The traditional résumé is in the process of being disrupted, but I don’t think it’s necessarily clear yet what the outcome will be,” Ms. Minshew said — adding that it might be replaced by several products instead of a single one. Part of the reason straying from traditional formatting is risky is a résumé could be discarded by the software screening if it can’t process a candidate’s experience correctly. “This is a classic situation of, most people want something different,” she said — but no one has yet had the power to really change things. Though she did say that a number of recruiters — humans not robots — primarily consider a candidate’s LinkedIn profile, rather than a résumé, which is why she encourages people to keep both up-to-date.

But just because the format of the résumé hasn’t changed much, it doesn’t mean job seekers shouldn’t try to make theirs look great, especially in creative fields.

Marcos Chin, an illustrator and professor at the School of Visual Arts, said design professionals are often held to a different standard.

“My résumé would have to look nice in the sense that it would need to be visually appealing,” he said. “So typography would be considered.”

Mr. Chin also helps his students — many of whom are just starting out in their careers — polish their résumés, giving them feedback about font sizes and spacing.

“A really important thing is the way in which information is organized, so that it can be presented in a way that looks beautiful and makes the person who receives it want to sort of dive deeper into what it is that you do,” he said.

Design professionals often have the additional burden of creating a portfolio or personal website that showcases their work. But as the job market places a greater emphasis on personal branding as an element of career success, more professionals have begun to create personal websites and curate a social media presence. These platforms can convey some of what résumés once did.

“I think people are rightly questioning whether the résumé deserves to be the center of every hiring process, whether it deserves the sort of primacy that it has,” Ms. Minshew said.

One thing that is clear about the postpandemic résumé: Employers are less likely to be concerned with gaps in work history than they might have been a few years ago, according to Ms. Salemi at Monster.

“They’re also more open to job-hopping,” she said.