

Keeping Your Resume Out of the Wastebasket

By Benjamin L. Landis

Above all else, the purpose of a resume is to get you an interview. Although it should not exaggerate your qualifications, it should present them in such a way as to arouse interest and retain the attention of those who are selecting candidates for interview. The following suggestions should help you clear that initial hurdle.

Key Management Experience

Law firms are interested in the qualifications of their administrator candidates in five managerial areas:

- Personnel Management,
- Financial Management,
- Operations Management, including Facilities Management (others may call this Office Management or General Services Management),
- Technology Management (or Office Automation), and
- Planning (Strategic, Short Range, Space, etc.).

Your resume should bring out your background and experience in each of these management areas. Some law firms are more interested in one or two particular areas than in others. Some law firms may believe they don't need an administrator with planning or technology management skills. You probably won't know, before being interviewed, exactly where lie the management priorities of any particular firm.

You may be thinking, "What about marketing?" Very, very few law firms are looking today for marketing expertise or experience in their administrators. Whereas the lack of expressed qualification in one of the other management areas is likely to be enough to send your resume to the reject pile, the lack of marketing will not...unless the firm has indicated in the advertisement or in the instructions to the "headhunter" that marketing experience is a condition for consideration. If you have marketing experience, include it in the resume, but remember that *it does not replace the need to have experience in all the other managerial areas*. If you don't have marketing experience, the attractiveness of your resume is not diminished...at least not today. Five years from now this may not be true.

If you are forwarding your resume in response to a newspaper ad, the wording of the ad may give you some hints as to the management practices of the firm. I do not suggest tailoring your resume to each ad that you answer. If it is properly prepared—i.e., if it describes the level of your experience and background in each of the management areas cited above—what more can you say with respect to one particular area? If you believe you can add some relevant information without being redundant, then your resume wasn't properly prepared to begin with.

Organizing the Data

In what order should your information be presented? Experienced law firm administrators should organize theirs chronologically, describing under each administrator position the level and extent of activity in each of the management areas. Going back ten years is usually sufficient, unless earlier experience is pertinent to the position, has not been superseded by your more recent experience and has not been rendered obsolete by changing techniques and technology. For example, if you are interested in multi-office firms, you should include in your resume a description of your experience in managing a multi-office firm, even though it may be ten years old.

For people desiring to enter the field of legal administration for the first time, a functional organization is probably best, unless their previous managerial experience has been virtually identical to that of a legal administrator. (Although this is rare, certain administrative and financial management positions in some accounting firms, associations or consulting firms may fall into this category.)

In using the functional format, add a summary “Career History” as a separate section to the resume. It should have single line entries giving the job title, the name of the office or company, the location (city/state) and the number of years the position was held. Again, ten years of employment history is normally enough, unless some of the experience you describe in the functional section is older. Be careful about including experience that occurred 12 or more years ago.

A resume is not an advertisement. It should not use advertising or public-relations language. Introductory paragraphs titled “Career Summary,” “Qualifications Recap” or the equivalent are virtually useless; the “hype” may impress you, but it won’t impress those whom you need to impress. Instead, use a very brief (preferably one sentence) “Objective” paragraph to open the resume. Make sure your expressed objective corresponds to the position for which you are applying.

Focus on Results

Don’t write “I can do this” or “I will do that.” Use positive language: “I did this,” “I accomplished this,” “I had responsibility for these areas.” Be accurate, concise and truthful. Whenever possible, relate your activity to improved results. “Through these new procedures, the personnel turnover rate was reduced by 60 percent in one year.” “I developed and implemented an expense budget that held costs at the previous year’s level even though the firm grew by about 12 percent.” “Increased the firm’s revenues by \$800,000 through my efforts to collect overdue accounts.”

Make sure that the experience you describe is relevant to law firm management. This is particularly difficult for individuals who have come from large corporations and government offices. Remember that most law firms are essentially small businesses. A 50-lawyer firm grosses only about \$10,000,000 and may have about 115 employees including the 50 lawyers. Of the 65 non-lawyer employees, almost 50 percent are secretaries; another 15 percent are probably legal assistants. The person who has been a corporate or government executive must avoid talking about controlling 3,000 employees and managing hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars in procurement programs or operating expenses. This non-law firm experience must be reduced to a magnitude relatable to law firm management.

Highlighting Education

The placement of your education summary is of less consequence than what you include. You should certainly list undergraduate and graduate degrees, the schools from which you obtained them, the major(s) or area(s) of concentration, and the years in which you obtained them. If you are in the midst of obtaining a degree, indicate the projected completion date.

If you are thinking of omitting the years in which you obtained your degree(s) because you think the prospective employer will use them to estimate your age, keep in mind that if they consider age to be a factor, they will find it or estimate it one way or the other (even though they cannot do so legally if you are over 40). By omitting the dates of your degrees, you will call attention to them and imply that there is a reason for concealing them that is germane to your qualifications as a candidate. Unless you are over 59 or under 28, age is generally not an issue with respect to an individual’s suitability.

Be very wary about including educational background other than your collegiate undergraduate and graduate experience. Miscellaneous courses taken outside of a degree program, or various seminars and conferences attended do not generally interest the reviewers unless they directly relate to the position and were long enough to have treated the subject thoroughly. For example, if the sum of your experience is several years in one firm, and you were the word processing supervisor before you became administrator, then your attendance at the ALA Law Firm Management Course should be included as part of your educational background.

Law firms and headhunters frequently ask you to submit either your salary requirements or salary history, but I recommend that you do not do so (see box). I have never known a firm or headhunter to reject a resume they would otherwise have retained for consideration simply because the candidate did not include the requested salary requirements or history.

I also recommend that you neither include references in your resume nor transmit them separately at the time you submit the resume. The appropriate time for turning over your references is when you have advanced at least to the “quarter finals,”—to the select group of four or five candidates under serious consideration.

If you are a published author, you can certainly have a publications section. However, include only published articles, books, etc., relevant to legal administration. The fact that you write Gothic romances or children’s books on the side will not help you get an interview (although you may wish to include such information in the personal data section discussed below).

The penultimate section of the resume can list relevant professional associations of which you are a member. For a legal administrator, this boils down to the Association of Legal Administrators, any other legal administration related association, such as AALL, NALP, ARMA, etc., and possibly the American Management Association.

The last section of your resume can be devoted to personal data, although such a section is completely optional. It should not be long, but it can include such items as your birth date, your marital status, the number, sex, and age of your children, your security clearance, your extra-curricular interests, your foreign language skills, etc. Remember, what you do or do not furnish is strictly up to you.

How long should your resume be? Don’t feel obligated to crowd 10, 15, or more years of experience onto one page. Give yourself up to two pages, attractively formatted. Avoid a cluttered, crammed look, and leave wide margins.

A final word concerning the letter of transmittal. It should be brief, not more than three or four short paragraphs on one page. It should not duplicate information contained in the resume, and it should not be used to add relevant substantive information that should already have been included in the resume. The rare exception occurs when the position announcement includes an unusual requirement or specification that must be addressed. In this case, simply include the information succinctly in the letter of transmittal rather than rewriting the resume just to handle the one-time requirement. (If your resume is on diskette and if you are producing copies on a word processor rather than by offset printing, you may want to modify a version for this one application; be sure to save the original version for future use.)

This letter of transmittal should include a reminder to respect the confidentiality of your interest, if necessary, and a request that none of your employers, present and past, be contacted without your explicit consent.

Don’t send letters of recommendation and commendation, job descriptions, etc. with the resume. The job description undoubtedly repeats what is in the resume without stating how the job was performed, and letters of commendation and recommendation are usually so general and obviously “hype” that they contribute nothing to the resume.

A final word of advice: Remember that the sole purpose of the resume is to get and keep the reader’s interest in order to be given an interview. If you use the tips given here, I am confident that you will improve your resumes’ chances of remaining out of the waste basket.

Sidebar: Omit Salary Information

I firmly believe that candidates should not submit their salary requirements to potential employers, for several reasons.

First, the information can be used as a crutch for law firms and headhunters who are screening resumes. Because the prospective firm or office has undoubtedly established a target salary or a narrow salary range for the position, applicants who fail to match the target with their “required” salary are easily disqualified from consideration. In most cases where 150 – 200 responses are sent in to a single ad, this is

the quick, easy way to reduce those responses to an interviewable number, the “logic” being that, “We don’t want a \$30,000 person in our \$50,000 position,” or “Why should we pay \$60,000 for a \$50,000 job?”

Those who are fortunate enough to submit their salary requirements and still remain in the running for the position may face another disadvantage — if the candidate is offered the job, the salary that goes with it will match the stated requirements, even when the latter is lower than the firm’s undivulged figure; the candidate has shot him or herself in the foot.

Second, the “bigger-the-salary,-the-more-qualified-the-individual” theory leaves no opening for the “exceptions.” What about the 32-year old “hot shot” Harvard MBA who is already shooting up the executive ladder in a Fortune 500 Company, but who only has 7 years of compensation history? What about the woman who, regardless of the positions held and the responsibilities shouldered, will invariably have received less compensation than men in equivalent positions, or worse, received only as much as men in less responsible positions? These potentially qualified candidates will probably be rejected without an opportunity to interview for the position.

Saying “No”

From every point of view, I believe that submitting salary requirements or a salary history is a mistake. However, if you have serious trepidations about not complying with the request, try a statement in your transmittal letter along the following lines:

“Per your request for my salary history (requirements), if I were offered the position, I would expect to receive compensation commensurate with the responsibilities and authority accorded the position and with the market for such position in (name of city). I therefore consider my salary history not be relevant to the appropriateness of my qualifications for the position. My salary requirements would become relevant only if you determine that I am qualified for the position. If you were to offer me the position, I would then be prepared to discuss my salary requirements in relation to the level of compensation you have established for the position.”

Benjamin L. Landis is one of the founders and principals of Law Office Consulting Group, headquartered in Washington, D.C. Prior to becoming a consultant, he was the director of administration in three law firms over a 13-year period. He is the past president of the Capital Chapter of ALA.

THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER, 1988 EDITION OF *LEGAL ADMINISTRATOR*.

Association of Legal Administrators

75 Tri-State International
Suite 222
Lincolnshire, IL 60069-4435
Phone: (847) 267-1252
Fax: (847) 267-1329
Web: <http://www.alanet.org>

Copyright 1988 by the Association of Legal Administrators. All rights reserved.