My Personal Formula for a Winning Resume

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Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer that many of you will recognize. It goes roughly: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

What does this have to do with looking for a job?

Everything.

There's a ton of unfairness in the job search process. As a candidate, you can’t control whether a company requires a work visa, whether some executive’s kid has an inside track on your dream job, or whether your interviewer has some private or unconscious bias that will hurt your chances. I’ll write about some of these -- especially unconscious bias -- in the future.

For now, I want to focus on the most controllable element of a job search: your resume. The sole purpose of a resume is to get you past that first screen and into an interview. In my last post, "The Biggest Mistakes I See on Resumes, and How to Correct Them," I covered the all-too-common mistakes that knock applicants out of consideration at many companies. Let's assume you've read that post and scrubbed your resume so it's concise, error-free, legible, and honest. You're already better off than at least half the applicants out there.

But how do you make your accomplishments stand out? There's a simple formula. Every one of your accomplishments should be presented as:

Accomplished [X] as measured by [Y] by doing [Z]

In other words, start with an active verb, numerically measure what you accomplished, provide a baseline for comparison, and detail what you did to achieve your goal. Consider the following two descriptions of the same work, and ask yourself which would look better on a resume:

1. Studied financial performance of companies and made investment recommendations

2. Improved portfolio performance by 12% ($1.2M) over one year by refining cost of capital calculations for information-poor markets and re-weighting portfolio based on resulting valuations

The addition of the "12% improvement" makes the statement more powerful. Adding "($1.2M)" anticipates the reviewer's question about whether 12% is a big deal or not. If you improved investment results by 12%, but that meant going from $100 to $112, that's not too impressive. But adding $1.2M to the starting portfolio value of $10 million is huge. Explaining how you did it adds credibility and gives insight into your strengths.

Several examples inspired by actual resumes will show you what I mean. The first bullet is typical: not bad, but certain not to stand out. The second is a much better version of a similar accomplishment from a different resume. My own suggestions are in *italics*.

College student who is a leader in her sorority

- Managed sorority budget

- Managed $31,000 Spring 2014 budget and invested idle funds in appropriate high-yielding capital notes

- Managed $31,000 Spring 2014 budget and invested *$10,000 in* idle funds in appropriate high-yielding capital notes *returning 5% over the year*

College student participating in a leadership program

- Member of Management Leadership for Tomorrow (MLT)

- Selected as one of 230 for this 18-month professional development program for high-achieving diverse talent

- Selected as one of 230 *participants nationwide* for this 18-month professional development program for high-achieving diverse talent *based on leadership potential, ability to contribute to this MLT cohort, and academic success*

Finance or consulting professional

- Responsible for negotiating service contracts with XYZ

- Negotiated 30% ($500k) reduction in costs with XYZ to perform post-delivery support

- Negotiated 30% ($500k) reduction in costs with XYZ to perform post-delivery support *by designing and using results from an online auction of multiple vendors*

Sales support associate

- Achieved annual business plan commitments for volumes, model mix, wholesale revenue, selling expenses and brand

- As a team member, contributed to 21% increase in advertiser spend by achieving 158% of target number of customer contacts *(80 contacts per week)*and 192% of target interaction depth *(20 minutes per customer)*

Candidate with skill-based resume

- Skills: Excellent customer service skills. Friendly and positive attitude

- Skills: Excellent customer service skills *and positive attitude as demonstrated by receiving employee of the month in four consecutive months in 2014*

Logistics expert

- Reduce cost of goods sold strategy: Five years of line and supply chain management experience at XYZ distribution centers and managing outsourced third-party logistics providers

- Achieved 30% logistics cost savings by reducing returns, use of overtime, excess and obsolete inventory and targeted outsourcing

- Achieved 30% logistics cost savings *($900k) over five years* by reducing returns *(-8%)*, use of overtime *(-7%)*, *and* excess and obsolete inventory*(-5%)*, and *through* targeted outsourcing *(-10%)*

Marketing manager

- Studied the branding and marketing strategies of XYZ. Analyzed the pricing strategies of XYZ in comparison to competitors

- Led cross-functional 10-member team to develop and implement global advertising strategy for $X million XYZ brand

- Led cross-functional 10-member team to develop and implement global advertising strategy for $X million XYZ brand *resulting in 25-point increase in brand recall, 12% improvement in net promoter score, and contributing to 18% year-over-year sales improvement ($XM)*

Veteran transitioning to the civilian sector

- Worked as a trainer with deploying units to ready their medical personnel for combat action and trauma medicine

- One of three officers selected to lead comprehensive redesign of the XYZ training program for X,000 Marines and sailors, increasing measured unit proficiency by 20% *[This one is great -- I wouldn't change a thing!]*

You might feel like it's hard to measure your work, but there is almost always something you can point to that differentiates you from others. Back when I was a waiting tables at the Olive Garden, I would have written, "Exhibited the spirit of Hospitaliano by achieving 120% of dessert sales targets (compared to an average of 98%) and averaging 26% in tips per night."

Well, maybe I wouldn't have mentioned the Hospitaliano....

And even if your accomplishments don’t seem that impressive to you, recruiters will nevertheless love the specificity. “Served 85 customers per day with 100% accuracy” sounds good, even if the customers are people you rang up at a grocery store. It’s even more impressive if you can add, “…compared to an average of 70 customers at 90% accuracy for my peers.” Providing data helps. Making it meaningful with a comparison helps even more.

Niebuhr said to change the things you can control. I agree. You can’t control the biases and attention span of whomever reviews your resume. You do control what’s on the page in front of him or her. Use the formula “accomplished [X] as measured by [Y] by doing [Z]” and recruiters will take notice.