Profile of a Resume Screener

The inside scoop from the other side of the desk

Understanding what goes on in the evaluation process can be extremely helpful in writing a resume. Increased resume volume, automated screening systems and a tighter selection process have complicated matters, but it always comes down to a human being with a desire to identify the best-fit candidates to interview. Here are some insights about resume screeners that may be useful when crafting your resume.

▶ They have acute attention deficit disorder

Well, maybe not in the clinical sense, but after reading a hundred or so resumes it's pretty easy to get distracted. That's why the most important information needs to be obvious and presented early on to grab attention. The old saying "What's most important is above the thumbs", still holds true even though it refers to a paper resume. Organizing content, highlighting qualifications vs. requirements, crafting every word carefully and using graphics to make key items pop will help. Also important: If you can say what you need with fewer words, do so – and use keywords and key phrases wherever possible.

▶ They're brutal (but fair)

The process of elimination can be brutal. Consider that there may be two or three passes at screening – a rough sort to parse out the unqualified, a middle sort to identify those that are well qualified and a final pass to select those few that shine the brightest. The idea that you need to catch the reader's attention in 6-10 seconds refers to the rough sort. The trick is to write the resume to satisfy all passes, highlighting the most important qualifications but enticing the reader with adequate detail on accomplishments and achievements. One page is nice and may be required for entry level, but if more space is needed to showcase all that is relevant, that's fine.

▶ They're suspicious

Fight skepticism with quantifiable facts. Facts like numbers, percentages, events, transactions or anything that details some result will support your claims.   Facts can be interesting and the resume screener likes them because they can be double checked. Be selective and honest. Occasionally people leave certain negative facts off of their resume like dates, titles, grades, location, etc. but this may actually create a red flag. Before leaving important facts off of a resume consult with a career professional who may have a better perspective as to the risk of non-disclosure.

▶ They say "Impress me!"

They're more inclined to press delete than save, so getting to the next level is like an obstacle course. Appearance counts. Order is important. Every word, every symbol, and every detail matters. They are looking at your personal brand and pattern of behavior and are estimating how well you could do the job. They are assessing and balancing your qualities based on what is in front of them and making a non-scientific judgment about your value. They will assume that if you cannot properly proofread your resume, a fairly simple task, then you probably cannot do a good job. If you customized your resume to that specific company and position, it is likely you will make a great impression. The time and effort taken on customizing the resume for a specific job is a direct reflection on you.

▶ They may have built in biases

The resume screener could be anyone from an administrative assistant in HR to the CEO – it all depends on the organization. Often the screener will have biases favoring people from a certain school or employer, with a certain major or almost anything imaginable. Biases can be positive or negative. The strongest positive bias usually happens if referred by someone through networking. This may completely short circuit the screening process getting an instant interview. Personal referrals are powerful.

One of the better ways to overcome negative biases is to give them the overall picture of who you are and what you can do. For example, offering up an eFolio or personal website may shed a more complete and favorable light. If you're adventurous perhaps recording a video elevator speech can be a good way to dispel potential bias.

▶ They may take shortcuts

Employers sometimes have a highly structured screening approach involving systems that do grading with keyword matching and data collection using online questionnaires. This is why keywords and key phrases are so important. But it still comes down to a human making a subjective decision on which keywords and phrases to use and who makes the cut. The automated resume screener is just a tool and it cannot recognize a personal brand either. They may actually be helpful to you because they help dispel the so-called resume abyss.

▶ They ask a lot of really basic questions

Your resume needs to answer the basic questions to survive the rough sort such as:
1. Do you have the education, certification or training needed? (degree, major, courses, training)
2. Possess the type of experience they ask for? (prior jobs held or work performed)
3. Over or under qualified for this job? (years of experience or level may reveal salary)
4. Have the skills needed? (technical and non-technical skills inventory vs. requirements)
5. Where are you living? (location and ability to relocate)
6. Are you on the upside or downside of your career? (future growth potential)
7. Are there any red flags?
    a. Laid off or fired if not currently employed
    b. Gaps in employment and tenure
    c. Changes in career path and focus
    d. Availability

▶ They want to see their referral hired

The resume screener is being judged on who they move forward in the process. Chances are, screening resumes is not their favorite task because of the overwhelming repetition. It is tedious and hard to keep all of the facts straight. The satisfaction they get is after several more steps in the process such as interviewing and reference checking.

You will definitely increase your chances if you make their job easier by having a memorable, well formatted and on-target resume.