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RESUME

Tuning Your Resume to the Right Keywords

The terms you use can make or break your match with an open position. How can you find and deploy the right keywords to aim your resume at the job you want?

By Lisa Vaas

ILLUSTRATION:Chip Buchanan

How Keywords Open Doors

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

A PROFESSIONAL RESUME is a machine with many moving parts. It reminds me of a sophisticated robot designed to negotiate treacherous terrain — the surface of Mars, a hostage situation — to deliver information or acquire a target.

In the course of most senior-level job hunts, your resume will need to navigate past three obstacles to achieve its mission: It must get through a preliminary scan by appli-cant tracking system (ATS) software; it must match the specifications a human-resources staffer has been given; and it must demonstrate the professional depth and expertise to satisfy the hiring manager for whom you'll be working.

At each turn, your resume will continue its journey or stall based on its basic components: the key-words you've chosen to represent your qualifications.

HR pros (and search-engine tech-nologists) use the term "keyword" glibly. But how can you know which words are the right ones and how to use them in a resume?

In this package, Lisa Vaas speaks to the experts to get real, tactical advice on how to make those choices. (Be sure to check out the list of the most popular keywords recruiters have searched on TheLadders.) ∎

IN THIS PACKAGE:

What did you think of this package? Got a story of your own to tell? Have ideas for future coverage? Please write Editor-in-Chief Matthew Rothenberg at **matthewr@theladders.com**.

KEYWORDS: THEY'RE BUZZWORDS that identify an industry or a profession. They're also the currency of the job search.

Keywords are the terms and phrases hiring managers supply to human-resources managers and recruiters to create job posts and find matching resumes for open positions. And in a modern job-search transaction, keywords can separate your resume from the rest of the pile or transfer it to the circular file. At most companies, applicant tracking system (ATS) software uses keywords to filter resumes before they're ever reviewed by human staffers.

The importance of keywords in a resume can't be overstated. They not only help connect resumes with current openings, they also ensure that searches for future job openings will pull appropriate resumes out of the database and put them in front of hiring professionals.

TheLadders asked hiring professionals, ATS vendors and resume writers for tips on how to compile a list of winning keywords and employ them in a resume.

Keyword basics

Kathy Robinson, the founder of TurningPoint and a career and business consultant, recommends her clients figure out what kind of job their resumes will win. She then uses job boards to research keywords used for similar job postings. Here's the process broken down:

a. Make a master list of keywords that appear in similar jobs.

b. Search as if looking for that job. Even if the candidate wants to stay local, she doesn't limit this mock search geographically, since this exercise is intended to generate keywords, not locate specific jobs.

c. Go to Web sites that represent companies and associations related to the candidate's target industry in search of other buzzwords.

d. Cull keywords from specific job descriptions for which the candidate is applying.

e. Search LinkedIn profiles of users who have similar jobs to see what keywords they're using.

f. Go to association Web sites if there's a "find a member" directory; see what keywords other industry professionals have used.

Boolean and location-based keywords

Nathan Shackles is the owner of Racarie Software, which develops a Web-based recruiting/applicant tracking product called ApplicantStack. According to Shackles, the most common feature his clients inquire about is keyword search — especially Boolean logic, which enables users to combine keywords in their searches.

Employers often use Boolean searches to seek local professionals. For example, if a company wants to hire a project manager in the Dallas area, it may conduct a search that looks like this:

Overnight Resume Success

After two years and 400-plus attempts, a northern Virginia HR exec had low expectations for her new resume, but the result "paid for itself."

By Kevin Fogarty

After months of job searching, it can be easy to lose perspective about how much difference a small change can make.

After hundreds of unreturned e-mails, phone calls that get no response and the understanding that success doesn't happen overnight, job seekers like Natalie, a human-resources executive in northern Virginia, don't expect drastic results from a little change like improving their resume. Those expectations shrink even more when,

like Natalie, you've already tried it twice before.

"I had paid twice to have my resume done, and they just didn't do a good job," said Natalie, who asked that her last name not be used. "Over two years, I sent out more than 400 resumes and couldn't find a full-time job. I fell deeper and deeper into debt and was in foreclosure. I was six months behind in my payments; it was a really precarious situation."

It was demoralizing for the woman, who worked her way to an associate's, then a bachelor's degree and added technical and functional certifications during the 11 years she spent at IBM, where she rose from an executive assistant position to human-resources roles and held technical positions along the way.

"I know all the work I've done, but I was not able to show it on my resume, so that information was not being communicated to recruiters," she said.

" 'project manager' AND Dallas."

The search will only return resumes that contain both terms "project manager" and "Dallas" and would reject any project managers who left out the "Dallas." For this reason, Shackles recommends users include their town or region. "If you're leery of putting down an address, leave out the street number and name, but put down the city, state and ZIP code to avoid getting overlooked," he said. A phone number with an area code is also helpful.

Spell out the obvious

Many job seekers make a keyword mistake of omission: They assume the people who read their resumes will know what their job responsibilities comprise. It seems obvious, for example, that a litigation attorney has written briefs and legal memos, has done depositions and has handled discoveries, said Rahul D. Yodh, principal at Link Legal Search Group.

"Anybody who's practiced law would know that," Yodh said. But the hiring professionals on the front line who first see resumes tend to be generalists who may have little to no knowledge of a given job or duties, he said.

And like human-resource generalists, ATSes don't implicitly know by scanning a resume that a lawyer has had experience with briefs, depositions or discoveries. Every term needs to be spelled out.

Every industry and function carries its own set of duties; make sure you unfold your job responsibilities to pull out those words that seem too obvious to mention.

Contextualize keywords

Many resume writers use sections titled "Professional Summary" or "Skills" at the top of a resume as a kind of corral for keywords. While it's fine to use keywords in such a section, it's important to use them throughout the resume as well, in the context of job responsibilities.

To understand why, consider your own Google searches. Google returns Web pages that contain the correct search terms, but many of the results are irrelevant to what you're searching for; the search terms are scattered throughout a given page and in the wrong context. The best search results show the search terms grouped together in the proper context.

Similarly, Yodh said, if a hiring professional or ATS identifies a search term in a summary but not in a job description, the resume may well be eliminated. That's why it behooves job seekers to use a given search term both in the summary section and in the job-responsibility description.

Here's an example: If a graphic-design professional used Adobe Photoshop in her previous job, she would put that term in her summary. It would be a mistake for her to then say she used "publishing software" in the experience description; instead, she should once again use the term "Adobe Photoshop" in context.

Other keyword tips

- Include acronyms, but also spell them out. That's especially helpful since the person tasked with going through

"What was hindering me was not my lack of skills – it was how it was presented on the resume that failed."

The two biggest reasons Natalie's resume got no attention: It didn't include the kinds of keywords and phrases human-resources software applications look for when they scan resumes and didn't give human readers a clear, instantly recognizable set of skills and value for her. That's the expert opinion of Tina Brasher, a certified professional resume writer who works with TheLadders and wrote Natalie's most recent resume.

"You have to determine what the person wants to do next, and that has to be clear from the resume," Brasher said. "What occupation and what level and what would make you better at it than everyone else whose resumes come in.

"To even be considered you have to have the right skills. She had things like 'strong communicator, problem-solving skills, listening skills.' That's all a lot of hooey," Brasher said. "Hiring managers are interested in accomplishments. Natalie was looking for a position as an HR generalist, so if she didn't have words like 'recruiting, benefits and compensation, regulatory compliance' in the list, her resume would never see the light of day. And she didn't."

Natalie began her career at IBM as an executive assistant, but was soon promoted to asset manager where she managed the inventory of laptops, desktops and devices for more than 4,000 employees and ultimately became resource manager where she managed the complex personnel elements and regulatory issues of projects for defense contractors and federal agencies. "I knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my career," Natalie said of that job.

She has also worked part-time as a 911 emergency services operator and customer service representative in a call center while taking courses toward an MBA.

A career misstep; a new search

In 2006, Natalie made what she now calls "a mistake": She left

▸ **KEYWORDS**

resumes might not know all the relevant acronyms, said Christine Bolzan, CEO of <u>Graduate Career Coaching</u>.

• Include relevant professional groups or associations.

• Embed keywords in cover letters in case they're also being scanned.

• Use keywords in social-media profiles as well as resumes. For example, LinkedIn provides a summary section for keywords and specialties. Bolzan noted that anywhere from 50 percent to 80 percent of employers are searching for keywords on LinkedIn, Facebook and other social-networking sites.

• Search engines add more weight to keywords in bold, italics, and in Title and Header tags, so you can use that formatting to rank higher on the search-engine results pages for those searches, points out David B. Wright, author of *"Get A Job! Your Guide to Making Successful Career Moves."* ∎

IBM to start her own identity-theft-prevention consultancy. There, she used her training as a Certified Identity Theft Risk Management Specialist (CITRMS) to counsel small businesses in northern Virginia on IT security. She found few customers, and the business failed in 2008.

"Everything just fell into a black hole," she said. "My 401K, savings, pension, everything. I put everything into building my business and got no return on my investment."

Natalie was back looking for full-time employment for the first time in two years, and she found trouble explaining her experience in a resume. What she saw as working her way up in the business world, the business world saw as "a convoluted career path," Brasher said.

Natalie tried twice before to have her resume written by experts, the second time going to a company that specialized in resumes designed for companies that work closely with government agencies.

"Imagine paying more than a thousand dollars to two companies to do your resume and then you send it in for a free critique [at TheLadders] and it comes back with five pages of what's wrong with it?" she said. "Imagine investing $695 for a new one? No one looking for a job thinks they can afford to do that. But if it will get you a job in one to two days? That's priceless. It would pay for itself."

Brasher formatted and rewrote the resume to focus on Natalie's laundry list of skills and qualifications: project management, lifecycle recruitment strategy and support, HR regulations, federal employment standards, IT security, federal, state and local contract bidding, law-enforcement, asset management, administration, and project-resource management. She introduced the document with a summary of what Natalie brought to the table and included a list of keywords that described her skills in ways search engines and HR software applications could identify. Then she listed Natalie's roles at IBM and her part-time jobs in decreasing order of importance.

"She had all these jobs, so it looks at first glance like she's a job-hopper, Brasher said. "But she's not. She got promoted frequently at IBM. So we had to make that clear."

But would it pay for itself?

Natalie found out one day after Brasher handed her the final draft. Natalie attended a job fair in Northern Virginia sponsored by local defense contractors. After standing in line with all the other hopefuls, Natalie noticed one recruiter's table open. Applicants would sit for a minute and talk, then just walk away.

"I walked over and gave him my resume, and he just beamed; he said my qualifications and my clearances fit what they were looking for and he didn't think he was going to find anyone," Natalie said. "He talked to me and called right back to another manager, and it all happened just that quick."

The defense contractor, who Natalie asked not be named because she's still going through the required verification process, offered her a position as an executive administrative assistant. The job is for a division of the defense contractor that maintains high-security data centers for the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Customs and Border Protection to verify the identity and contents of planes, trains and ships entering the U.S.

The job fits with Natalie's administrative, IT, law enforcement and government experience and gives her the chance to do HR work while she completes her MBA and reopens negotiations on her foreclosure.

Such overnight success is rare and a first for Brasher. No other client has ever reported such a fast response. Not that they would call the resume writer, she laughed. "They're usually busy calling friends and family and being relieved that they got it. The resume writer's usually the last one they think of to call." ∎

Top 100 Resume Keywords

What are the words recruiters use most often to find the candidates they're searching for? The following are the top 100 terms used by recruiters to find candidates on TheLadders between April 1 and Oct. 1.

By John Hazard

1	Sales	34	Manager	67	Private Equity
2	CPA	35	Project Manager	68	RN
3	Tax	36	Oracle	69	Business Intelligence
4	Business Development	37	HVAC	70	Compensation
5	Marketing	38	Java	71	Cisco
6	Controller	39	Operations	72	C++
7	Healthcare	40	Director	73	Engineering
8	Human Resources	41	Inside Sales	74	Mechanical Engineer
9	Insurance	42	Hospital	75	Ikon
10	Software	43	Attorney	76	CPG
11	Manufacturing	44	Call Center	77	Chemical
12	Finance	45	SEC	78	ADP
13	Retail	46	Packaging	79	Bank
14	CFO	47	Pharmacy	80	Banking
15	Medical Device	48	Physician	81	Mortgage
16	Pharmaceutical	49	Outsourcing	82	Financial Services
17	Sales Manager	50	International Tax	83	IT
18	Software Sales	51	Logistics	84	Business Analyst
19	Financial Advisor	52	Deloitte	85	Advertising
20	Pharmacist	53	FAS 109	86	Accountant
21	Medical	54	Compliance	87	KPMG
22	Supply Chain	55	SAAS	88	Product Development
23	SAP	56	Real Estate	89	Wealth Management
24	Accounting	57	Electrical Engineer	90	Transportation
25	Medical Sales	58	Nurse	91	Sales Engineer
26	Account Executive	59	SEC Reporting	92	Internal Audit
27	Audit	60	Security	93	Benefits
28	Tax Manager	61	Technology	94	BPO
29	Food	62	Storage	95	Litigation
30	Engineer	63	Energy	96	Lean
31	Recruiter	64	ERP	97	Series 7
32	Product Manager	65	Aerospace	98	Telecommunications
33	Construction	66	Procurement	99	Government
				100	CRM

Source: RecruitLadder, October 2009

Career Advice from TheLadders

- Keywords for Resume Success

- The Perfect Resume: Easy to Read and Easy to Search

- Resume, Meet Technology: Making Your Resume Format Machine-Friendly

- The Must-Have Features of a Winning Resume