

Effect of Resume Format on Applicant Selection for Job Interviews

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Four hundred professionals were randomly contacted by mail and sent each of three resume formats (functional, chronological, psychological). The subjects were asked to rank the resumes of the three people in the order in which they would invite them to an interview for a manager trainee position. 196 surveys were returned, of those, 180 were usable. A Friedman analysis of variance by ranks yielded a significant difference between the ranks. Further analysis indicated that there was no significant difference between the Chronological and Psychological formats and that both the Chronological and Psychological formats were preferred to the Functional format.

Overview of Resumes

There is little doubt that resumes are a critical factor in the job search process (Knouse, Giacalone, & Pollard, 1988). For example, Rosch (1990) has stated that "at least 90% of all employment interviews were granted only after a resume had been received and read" (p. 28).

Due to the importance of the resume in the job search process, much advice has been written, but little research conducted, on the best way to write a resume. This advice and research has concentrated on two aspects of resume writing: resume content and resume format.

Resume Format

Numerous research and self-help books such as *The Perfect Resume* (Jackson, 1981) and *Up Your Career* (Dauw, 1980) have been written about

effective resume format or structure. The term format refers to "the structural, mechanical component of the resume" (Stephens, Watt, & Hobbs, 1979, p. 25). Very little research using actual scientific methods has been done to validate the statements made in these publications about the format or structure of the resume. In their survey of Personnel Officers, Stephens *et al.* (1979) found that 60% of the personnel officers formed a "quick opinion based on appearance alone" (p. 33); thus concluding that the format of the resume needs to be given every consideration.

There are three major types of resume formats currently used in the job market: chronological, functional, and psychological.

Chronological

The chronological format consists of the candidate's past professional experiences listed in reverse chronological order, followed by the educational history, and then an optional section on the candidate's hobbies and activities. The educational history may come first, followed by the professional experience both in chronological order (Ryland & Rosen, 1987). The focus of the chronological format is on the work history. Research suggests that the chronological format should be utilized when the candidate has a strong career record (Ryland & Rosen, 1987).

Functional

The functional format puts less emphasis on dates and positions and more emphasis on skills, qualifications, and abilities of the candidate. The qualifications are "organized in functional categories" (Ryland & Rosen, 1987, p. 229) based upon the candidates strengths. This format is suggested for candidates who have a "scattered work history" or who wish to disguise a weak or limited job history (Ryland & Rosen, 1987, p. 230).

Psychological

The Psychological format was designed utilizing psychological research and theory (Aamodt, 1991). Impression-formation principles of priming, primacy, and Anderson's (1967) averaging versus adding principle are used to place a person's work and education information in the resume. Priming refers to the idea of preparing the reviewer of the resume for what

is to follow in the resume. Primacy refers to the early impressions made when reviewing the resume and the importance of those impressions. Phillips and Dipboye (1989) found that "the more favorable the interviewers' preinterview evaluations of an applicant's qualifications, the more favorable their postinterview evaluations of the applicant's overall qualifications" (p. 44). Further, Tucker and Rowe (1979) also found that "the final decision to accept or reject an applicant is closely related" to earlier impressions (p. 27).

Finally, Spock and Stevens (1985) found that Anderson's (1967) averaging model of impression formation was applicable to resume information presentation. Anderson's model states that different items of information are combined by an individual to result in an average value of the items. Spock and Stevens' (1985) research of personnel managers' ratings of desirability of resumes yielded significant results, concluding that "it is the average value of the resume entry rather than the total value of the entries that is most important" (p. 95). Thus the resume deemed more desirable will contain only high value items so the result is a high average impression.

One other area of research present in this format, is that concerning short-term memory storage. The short-term memory "briefly stores and processes selected information from the sensory registers" (Morris, 1990, p. 226). Rogers (1979) suggested that 90% of all resumes are read for less than 2 minutes. Thus it is the short-term memory that is at work processing the resume. The limit on how much information can be handled at one time by the short-term memory, is suggested by Miller (1956) to be seven plus or minus two items. The psychological format suggests that when listing information in the professional summary and the education highlights, only five to seven items should be included (Aamodt, 1991). This suggestion is made so as not to exceed the limit of information for the short-term memory.

The information in the psychological resume is thus set up to prepare the reviewer for information to come within the resume and to help the reviewer form favorable impressions before reading the rest of the resume contents. This is done by presenting a short summary, five to seven items of the candidate's strengths, high value items, before listing the candidates work and education history. Under the candidate's education history comes a short summary of the candidate's educational highlights, again high value, five to seven items. This format is recommended for all job candidates (Aamodt, 1991).

Although these are the resume formats, advice and research regarding which is the best is inconsistent. The advice offered in numerous self-help books on resume format is conflicting. The functional is preferred for the older worker, executives, and managers as the emphasis is on experience rather than education. However, Jackson (1981) in *The Perfect Resume*, recommends the functional format in cases where the candidate is entering the job market for the first time, has a variety of different and unconnected jobs, or career changes. The chronological is recommended for cases with a clear career progression, job history shows growth, or the "name of the last employer adds strong prestige" (Jackson, 1981, p. 66). Krannich and Banis (1982) also prefer the functional format in their book *High Impact Resumes and Letters*. They suggest that the functional format is logical as it organizes skills into "functional categories" and places the "focus on a specific objective and audience" (Krannich & Banis, 1982, p. 23). The chronological format is considered easier to read but is less exciting and not effective for cases of job changes or beginning a new career. While McDaniels (1978) recommends the functional format for individuals who have held a variety of jobs, in his book, *Developing a Professional Vita or Resume*, the chronological format is preferred for "general purpose use and job-hunting" (p. 80). Parker (1988) prefers, in *The Resume Catalog: 200 Damn Good Examples*, that the format consist of a qualification highlights followed by a functional format of professional experience.

The research on resume format suggests that the functional format is preferred by corporate professionals. Helwig (1985) surveyed corporate recruiters' preferences of three distinct resume formats: functional, qualifications brief, and narrative. The corporate recruiters significantly selected the more traditional, functional style of format. Ryland and Rosen (1987) surveyed professionals' preference for either the chronological or functional resume format in a variety of employment situations. Their findings suggested that the functional format was preferred across different job situations.

In summary, there are three major types of resume formats currently used in the job market: chronological, functional, and psychological. The chronological format places an emphasis on dates with a progression of work and education experience. The functional format places an emphasis on abilities and qualifications which are arranged in functional categories. Finally, the psychological format which places the emphasis on organizing the information to prepare the reviewer for information to

come within the resume and to help the reviewer form favorable impressions of the candidate. This is done utilizing impression-formation principles. Research and personal opinion supports the functional format for candidates just entering the job market or changing careers rather than a chronological resume format.

Statement of Purpose

This research focused on the effect of applicants' resume formats on their chances of being selected for an interview. Selection for an interview was emphasized instead of selection or hiring for a job as few recruiters will hire someone based upon the resume only. Instead, the resume is often used by recruiters to select applicants for interviews and further recommendation. The first hypothesis of this research was that, based upon past research and opinion, the functional resume format would be preferred by human resource professionals over the chronological format for interview selection. The second hypothesis of this research was that the psychological resume format whose components are based on psychological theory and research, would be the preferred resume format of human resource professionals over the chronological and functional formats for interview selection.

METHOD

Subjects

Four hundred human resource professionals were randomly selected from *Who's Who in HR* (Adams, 1990) to participate in the survey. The only criterion for selection was that all of the individuals selected have hired in the past or are currently involved with the hiring process. These are the individuals who in most organizations will determine whether an individual should be considered further for employment.

Materials

Three resumes were developed for fictional male college seniors pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in management. A male was utilized for the resumes to eliminate gender as a variable. Resume A was modeled after the Chronological format, Resume B after

the Functional format, and Resume C after the Psychological format. All three resume formats were one page in length and were printed on white paper by a laser printer (Henson, 1990).

The information within the resumes was kept constant as much as possible. The assumption about resume constancy was validated by a pilot study that had students rate the resumes for discrepancies involving content among the three formats. In keeping with the suggestions of Hakel, Dobmeyer, and Dunnette (1979), all of the work and education experiences were matched for equivalence through the pilot study.

A job description of a hypothetical job (manager trainee position) was included with the resumes. The description listed the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for the job.

The survey consisted of a return addressed, stamped postcard with the three male names listed and a box next to the name for the subjects to list their preferences for the selection of the resumes for an interview. The names were counterbalanced on the 400 postcards that were sent out.

Procedure

Each subject received a packet containing: 1) a cover letter identifying the researcher, requesting participation in a study concerned with screening applicants, and instructions; 2) a job description; 3) the three resume formats in counterbalanced order; and 4) a stamped self-addressed postcard with the names on the resumes listed for the participants to write their rank order of the resumes. The subjects were asked to rank order their preferences for inviting the hypothetical applicants for an interview for the position described in the job description. Because Hakel, Ohnesorge, and Dunnette (1970) found that the "contrast effect plays only a minor role in the evaluation of job applicants' resume" (p. 27), each subject received all three resume formats.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One hundred and ninety-six subjects returned the completed survey for a 49% response rate. One hundred and eighty of the returned surveys were usable. Sixteen of the returned surveys were not used due to three factors: incomplete information, ranks were all the same, or the subject commented that the resumes were ranked alphabetically.

The data were statistically analyzed utilizing a Friedman analysis of

variance by ranks to look at the differences between the ranks of the resume formats. The test statistic applied to the sum of the ranks was a chi-square. The results of the analysis yielded a significant chi square (2, 180) = 38.7111, $p < .01$.

As depicted in Table 1, further analysis between the chronological format and the functional format yielded a significant result, chi square (1, 180) = 20.0, $p < .01$. Further analysis between the psychological format and the functional format yielded a significant result, chi square (1, 180) = 32.0888, $p < .01$. However, further analysis between the psychological format and the chronological format yielded a non-significant result, chi square (1, 180) = 0.0, $p > .10$.

Table 1

Percentage of resumes placed in each rank

Format	Rank			Mean Rank
	1	2	3	
Psychological	42.8	35.5	21.7	1.79 ^a
Chronological	38.3	40.0	21.6	1.84 ^a
Functional	18.9	24.4	56.7	2.34 ^b

Note: Mean ranks not sharing the same subscript are statistically different from one another.

The results suggested that both the psychological format and the chronological format were preferred over the functional format by human resource professionals. There was no significant difference between the rankings for the chronological format and the psychological format. Contrary to research and opinion that stated the functional format should be used by recent college graduates, the functional resume was not preferred for the fictional male graduates in this study. In fact, the functional format was the least preferred by human resource professionals. One possible explanation is that limiting the resumes to one page may have limited the effectiveness of the functional format by utilizing a more concise format rather than describing skills, abilities and qualifications in a paragraph construction which would take up more space. However, most all of the research on resume format suggested that the resume should be concise and only one page in length.

Although hypothesis two stated that the psychological format would be the preferred resume format, the results suggested that the psychological format was preferred only over the functional format and not preferred over the chronological. One possible explanation for why the psychological format was not strongly preferred is that it was a relatively new format and unique. Unique and different formats are often viewed with some hesitancy. As Jackson (1981) stated "tossing customary forms to the winds" can be risky and only recommended for areas where creativity is "related to the job target" (p. 68). The "new and different" psychological format was preferred equally to the chronological format for the banking career field.

The surveys allowed the subject to write in comments if desired. Some of the comments regarding the functional format included "explicit job duties" but, "too hard to figure out what he wants", "resume too repetitive", and "did not like the style". Some of the comments for the chronological format included "easier to read the necessary information", "[psychological format and chronological format] were very close", "was the most succinct and therefore preferred it from a time-saving aspect", and "well presented". Finally the comments for the psychological format included "provided the most detail about skills and abilities", "well organized", "necessary information more pronounced", and finally, "strong presentation of skills, brief but informative overview of title and responsibilities. Came across as mature and professional".

One subject gave the following comment on the survey itself, "Clearly all candidates have the same background. However, when recruiters

interview/screen large numbers of candidates - presentation and format are critical. Candidates who can communicate background efficiently and effectively will be more successful."

One further consideration of this research is the generalizability of the findings. Currently, these findings suggest the Psychological or Chronological format be utilized by recent college graduates. Further research needs to be done on formats that can be utilized by someone who has been out in the workplace for some time and has more experience. The research also limited the number of resumes to be screened at one time, 3, thus research needs to expand to look at the more realistic situation where an individual has to screen a large number of resumes at one time.

Additional research should focus on the effect of format within specific career fields such as engineering, broadcasting, fine arts, education, and science. The research would look at whether professionals in careers viewed as more conservative, such as banking, as opposed to liberal fields like the fine arts, would prefer a conservative format resume. Also to be investigated would be the effect candidates' abilities have on the resume format. Would a candidate with average abilities be selected first using a functional, chronological, or psychological format as compared with the format preferred for a strong candidate?

In summary, for the practitioner the research suggests either the chronological or the psychological format would be the recommended resume format for a recent college graduate. The current emphasis on the functional format in career counseling should be reconsidered in light of this research.

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