



Career Compass No. 11: Frank's Rules for Resume Writing

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers advice on the age-old tradition of resume crafting.

I need to update my resume as I begin to look for promotion opportunities in my own organization as well as openings in other local governments. I have read some books on resume writing and ask informal advice from several colleagues but so much of what I hear is conflicting in terms of format, length, and information to provide. As a career advisor, can you help me?



I'll try but there is no perfect resume format or style. Every hiring manager has stylistic preferences. In any case, let me share with you my biases and provide some guidance.

1. Contact Information

You should put your contact information (home address, work and home and/or cell phone numbers, and work and/or personal email addresses) at the top of the resume. This is pretty standard.

2. Objective

Skip it. An objective takes up space on the resume plus it adds little value. If you apply for a specific position, of course the position meets your objective.

3. Length

It depends. For entry-level jobs, one or two pages are fine. For mid-level jobs, you should try to keep the resume to two or three pages. For senior manager or executive positions, three or four pages are appropriate.

4. Font

Hiring managers are often baby-boomers like me. Some of us are vision-challenged so use a font size of 12 and avoid use of italics or other fancy fonts such as Tekton Pro. You should use a clean, easy-to-read and business-like font such as Times Roman, Arial or Georgia.

5. Education or Professional Experience First?

Again, it depends. If you have a fair amount of work experience, you should place “Professional Work Experience” first in the resume and “Education” last. If you do not have much work experience and your educational background is solid, put “Education” at the front and then go to “Professional Work Experience.” List professional experience in chronological order with the most recent experience first.

6. Education

You should put your most recent degree first and include degree, university, and major (include program emphasis if it relates to the position sought). If you do not have a lot of experience in the subject area of the position that you are seeking (e.g., economic development, environmental management), you may wish to include several classes or major projects or papers in the subject area.

Under “Education,” you should include any certifications earned on the job.

7. Quantifiable or Verifiable Results

Wherever possible, you want to show tangible results from your job efforts. Therefore, you should quantify your job responsibilities and the results of your efforts or indicate verifiable results. For example:

- Supervise five full-time and three part-time staff
- Prepare and manage program budget totaling \$450,000.
- Led team that produced and is now implementing Revitalization Plan for disadvantaged neighborhood
- Secured new developer for blighted shopping center
- Negotiated IT vendor contracts totaling \$3.5 million
- Organized youth summit which attracted 275 teens and led to Council approval of a Youth Development Action Plan

See the sample resume below.

8. Listing of Skills, Knowledge or Qualifications

Don’t include a separate section on skills, competencies, knowledge, or qualification areas, especially at the beginning of the resume. It will appear to the reviewer that you are trying to hide your job experience until later in the resume. Most importantly, resume screeners in the HR Department or the hiring manager in the department want to immediately see your specific education and job positions.

9. Bolded Sub-Heads Reflecting Functions of the Position

This is important. Most resume screeners or hiring managers will spend five or six seconds scanning your resume. They will focus on your education and the listing of your job experiences. In scanning your resume, they tend not to read a lot of verbiage which runs together under each position listed. Therefore, I suggest you use bolded sub-heads under your most recent or your two most recent positions. These sub-heads should correspond and reflect the skills or functions of the positions that you are seeking. For instance, you can use some of the following sub-heads:

- Staff Supervision
- Budget Preparation and Management
- Program Development

- Facility Management
- Capital Project Management
- Team Leadership
- Environmental Sustainability
- Personnel Administration
- Labor Relations
- Civic Engagement

The bolded sub-heads may change or get tweaked for any new position that you seek. *See sample resume below.*

10. Internships and Volunteer Experiences

Do include internships and volunteer experiences under “Professional Experiences,” especially if you need to show skills and experiences beyond your limited paid work (you do not need to indicate if an internship is paid or unpaid).

If you do have ample paid work experience, you should not include internships or community service under “Professional Experience.” You can create a separate section entitled “Other Experience” or “Community Involvements.”

By the way, you may wish to say “pro bono” instead of “volunteer” service.

11. Professional Involvements and Affiliations (and Awards if any)

You should include a section towards the end of the resume entitled “Professional Involvements and Affiliations” in which you can list any memberships in professional associations, especially if you serve as an officer or on a committee or have taken on some other leadership responsibilities.

If you have a lot of professional or community involvements, you should select the ones that are most relevant or impressive.

If you or your team has earned any awards, this is a good section to list them.

A cautionary note: Don’t get carried away! You do not need to attach copies of awards and certificates. A simple list is more effective than pages of attachments.

12. Personal Interests

Unless your leisure or other personal pursuits are relevant to the position, don’t include them. Most hiring managers don’t care if you are a wine connoisseur, Methodist, surfer, runner, or devoted parent.

13. References

Typically, you should not put references in the body of the resume unless the hiring agency specifically asks for them. Listing references takes up space on the resume plus it is sometimes hard to ensure that your references will resonate with the hiring manager. If the agency does ask for references, you should use professional references only (again, unless they ask for personal or non-professional references) and include them in the cover letter. Usually, you should not include elected officials as references unless you worked directly for them or you are applying for a chief executive position.

Assuming that you do not list references, the hiring manager or HR department staff will request references for the finalists.

You should contact appropriate references early on and get them lined up even before any particular recruitment process is initiated. When asked for references, you should provide contact information.

Now, if you do not have extensive work experience, some well-regarded references included in the cover letter may help differentiate you from others who also do not have a lot of experience.

14. Cover Letter

I suggest that you provide a cover letter no more than one page in length, preferably one half to two-thirds of a page. You should ensure that the cover letter is not addressed “To Whom It May Concern” or to the “Public Works Director.” Rather, you need to find out who is making the hiring decision and address the cover letter to that person by name and position even if you are required to submit your resume to the HR Department.

In the cover letter, you should cite any professional experiences or qualifications or unique skills that make you particularly suited for the job or any traits that are being sought by the hiring authority. In other words, you need to emphasize in the cover letter your competitive edge in seeking the job.

15. Online Applications

Remember to include your resume with an online application. Most job boards allow you to attach or insert your resume into the electronic application. It is best to attach your resume as a pdf file. If the job board or web site does not allow attachments and only allows you to copy and paste the resume into the comment section, then get rid of all special characters and text effects. Bullet points, bold, italics, and other special effects should be removed because they either do not come through at all or are turned into other characters making the resume hard to read.

I recommend you complete any online application without referencing “see resume,” even if some of the information is duplicated. You want the hiring manager to use a familiar format (their application), augmented by your polished resume when considering you for a position.

Other Tips

Here are some other suggestions that you can consider:

- Gear your resume specifically toward the position or promotion that you are seeking. Do not rely on a standard resume.
- Keep a resume file and throw in notes about key accomplishments, awards and possible references as you think of them. This file of notes will help you easily update your resume when you need to.
- Update your resume and keep it updated even when you are not actively seeking a new job. It is easier to tweak a resume than create an entirely new one.
- Spell check!
- Ask a trusted colleague or coach to critique your resume and identify any skill or experiential gaps which you need to fill over time as you pursue advancement.
- Send your updated resume to coaches so they can keep an eye open for opportunities.
- Send your updated resume to executive recruiters and ask for an in-person or telephone meeting to explore opportunities in the profession (or, request a coach to send your

resume and then you can follow up with a meeting). Remember, requesting a meeting with a recruiter is not a burden on recruiters—they need “product” to peddle, especially in a time of scarce talent.

- Send your updated resume in advance of an informational interview with a department head or chief executive or other senior manager inside or outside your organization.
- Bring copies of your resume and references with you to any interview. Don’t assume everyone has a copy, even if you sent it in advance.
- Use your resume to participate in LinkedIn or other social media sites.
- When you apply online, print the application and resume you have submitted so you can see exactly what the hiring manager will see.

A Final Word

Again, the “best” resume takes time to develop and depends on your personal approach and preferences. So seek feedback and suggestions from a variety of sources. Good hunting!

Sample Resume

The following sample resume illustrates some of the suggestions above.

RICHARD JONES

226 Bryant Street
Palo Alto, CA 94301
650 400-8245 (Mobile) / 650 327-4211 (Office)
richard.jones@gmail.com

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Recreation Supervisor, Community Services Department, City of Palo Alto

August 2005 to Present

- **Staff Supervision** – Manage 5.75 FTE direct reports, 100-120 hourly employees, 80-100 volunteers; chair department’s safety and customer service committees
- **Budget Development** – Prepare and manage program budgets equaling nearly \$1 million; oversee revenue collections at two facilities; administer service, professional and revenue contracts
- **Program Administration** – Manage aquatics, special interest classes, customer service desk, facility reservations, summer camps, junior staff programs; managed field, park and tennis court reservations, special events; oversaw middle school athletics and teen programs
- **Facility Management** – Manage aquatics complex, community center; fields, parks, and tennis court complexes
- **Capital Projects** – Implemented automated point of sales and registration system at aquatics complex, initiated renovations of several sports fields engaging community partners

Special Projects Coordinator, City Manager’s Office, City of Palo Alto

January 2004 to Present

- **Legislative Advocacy** – Reorganized contract with consultant; worked with departments, City Council and community to establish new priorities

- **Workforce Development** – Manage city and regional internship program; organized job shadow day, tri-city youth summit, and management fellow programs
- **Leadership Development** – Serve as liaison to Next Generation Committee of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties; participated on city-wide Leadership Development Team

Recreation Coordinator, Community Services Department, City of Palo Alto

December 2001 to August 2005

Intern, Economic Development Team, Foundation for Global Community,
Palo Alto, CA

June 2001 to December 2001

CERTIFICATION / ACADEMIES:

Management Academy 2004, Palo Alto HR Department

Lead Worker Academy 2003, Palo Alto HR Department

Essentials to Managing the Palo Alto Way, Palo Alto HR Department

Citizens Police Academy, Palo Alto Police Department

Palo Alto Neighborhood Disaster Activity, Palo Alto Fire Department

Family Ambassador Program, Palo Alto Community Services

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS:

- Member, International City/County Management Association
- Member, Municipal Management Association of Northern California
- Member, California Parks & Recreation Society
- Member, Next Generation Committee of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties
- Board of Directors, Silicon Valley Chapter of the American Red Cross
- Treasurer, Board of Directors, Palo Alto Rotary Club
- Participant, Cal-ICMA Coaching Program
- Participant, Management Talent Exchange Program

EDUCATION:

Masters in Public Administration

College of Professional Studies

University of San Francisco

San Francisco, CA

B.A., Global Economic Relations

School of International Studies

University of the Pacific

Stockton, CA



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.