



Creating High-Impact Resumes and Cover Letters

A Lawyer's Guide to Getting You to the Interview Stage

By Susanne Aronowitz, Esq., PCC

Submitting job applications can be an exercise in frustration. You invest hours crafting documents to perfectly capture your accomplishments, and then the employer fails to notice your awesomeness. I get it, and I'm here to share my strategies for grabbing an employer's attention.

Rather than simply telling the employer about your background and accomplishments, it's important to **frame your experience to address the employer's needs**. Unless the employer can readily see how your experience and knowledge will create opportunities for them, they probably won't be compelled by your interesting professional journey or your aspirations.

The employer has a need — make sure your resume reflects your ability to address it.

Here is my step-by-step process for creating high-impact materials.

1. Don't talk yourself out of applying

It may seem obvious, but one of the most common reasons candidates don't get job offers is that they never submit their applications. They get intimidated by the job description, and if they can't check every box on the employer's wish list, they talk themselves out of applying. As the job seeker, it is your responsibility to make the best possible case for why you are a good fit; it's the employer's job to evaluate the strength of your application and assess whether you are a viable candidate. Don't do the employer's job for them by not submitting your application — or by apologizing for what you perceive are shortcomings in your credentials. Instead, give the employer the opportunity to choose you.

Evaluate the job description in detail and honestly appraise the qualifications listed. Do you meet most of them? If you don't meet them exactly, can you make a compelling case that your experience is analogous? Remember, the job qualifications are the employer's wish list — most candidates cannot meet all the criteria. Next, look at the list of job functions. Ask yourself, if you had adequate training, supervision and resources, do you think you could perform those functions? If so, do you think you would enjoy performing them? If your answer to both questions is "yes," proceed to the next step.

2. Analyze the job description

Take a closer look at the job description. (*Print or save a copy so you can refer to it when you are selected for an interview.*) Use the following questions to identify the skills and qualities the employer is seeking. Think about how you can communicate your strengths and experience to

address their needs. Your answers will help identify your motivation for joining this organization and allow you to form a connection.

Questions to consider:

- What problem is this role designed to solve?
- What are the key skills you must have to perform this role? (*Hint: Pay attention to the verbs.*)
- What expertise do candidates need to have?
- What opportunities can you create for the organization or team?
- What examples can you provide to demonstrate excellence in these (or related) areas?
- What makes you uniquely qualified for this job? Use the answer to this question to formulate the brand or theme you want to communicate throughout your application.

Finally, ask yourself these questions:

- Why do you want to align yourself with this organization?
- Why do you want to serve its mission and its clients/customers/stakeholders?
- What about this opportunity will keep you motivated to perform at your best, even when work is difficult?

3. Customize your resume and cover letter

The appearance of your documents matters! Use an easy-to-read font like Segoe, Calibri, Aptos or Garamond and create a consistent look and feel across all application documents. Create a letterhead at the top of the page that includes your name and contact information. Use the same letterhead on all documents.

Preparing your resume

Professional profile: Open your resume with an eye-catching professional summary or profile. Create a brief statement (approximately three sentences) that captures what makes you a distinctive candidate and highlights the value you bring to an employer. Consider customizing this section for each position you apply for, exemplifying how well suited you are to the specific organization.

Experience: Your professional experience should follow the summary. List each job in reverse chronological order, placing the employer's name and your job title along the left margin and corresponding locations and dates along the right margin. If you have significant professional experience, a two-page resume may be appropriate. Immediately after the employer's heading, include a one- or two-sentence overview that highlights the scope of your responsibilities and offers some context about your employer.

Next, include a series of bulleted sentences that highlight your specific responsibilities and accomplishments. Start each sentence with an active verb and do not include personal pronouns in your description. (*If it helps, you can imagine that there is a silent "I" at the beginning of each sentence.*) Use a variety of verbs to communicate your skill set, and try to incorporate

verbs from the job announcement. Weave in phrases toward the end of each sentence to reveal your expertise, level of responsibility and impact. Describe your current job in the present tense and all prior jobs in the past tense.

Be strategic in constructing your descriptions. Highlight the aspects of your past jobs that overlap with the prospective role by placing them first in your descriptions. Minimize details that will be difficult for prospective employers to connect with. Remember, the goal of the resume is not to display your favorite achievements, it is to share information that your prospective employer will find most meaningful. If these overlap, all the better, but keep your focus on the employer.

Consider using subheadings to highlight the nature of your expertise. Depending on your situation, you might aggregate several bullets thematically under each subheading, or if your role was quite varied you could use a different subheading at the start of each sentence. (See the sample resume below for examples.)

Education: Your education follows your professional experience. List all the institutions from which you earned a degree in reverse chronological order. The farther away in time you are from graduation, the less you should be including details regarding campus activities.

Additional sections: If you are an attorney, include a separate section entitled “Bar Memberships and Professional Activities” where you can include your licenses and any bar/professional organizations to which you belong. If applicable, consider including additional sections to highlight selected publications, selected presentations, awards, languages spoken or other relevant information.

Don’t get bogged down in providing too many details. The goal of your application is to generate enough interest for the employer to advance you to the next stage of their hiring process. Resist the temptation to overwhelm the reader — your resume is a marketing document, not a professional audit. By using your strong analytical skills to highlight the most salient aspects of your background and expertise, you will create the opportunity to share your story in greater depth in an interview setting.

The sample resume provided at the end of this article illustrates ways you can arrange and present your information.

Preparing your cover letter

The cover letter is your opportunity to communicate directly with the reader. For those applications where a cover letter is welcomed, use it to help the employer visualize you performing the role. To do that, consider these questions before composing your letter:

- What information does this employer need to recognize you are the right candidate?
- How can you articulate that you have the skills and knowledge to solve problems and create opportunities for them?
- How can you exemplify your desire to serve the organization and its stakeholders?

Do not use the cover letter to present a chronological narrative of your career or to rehash your resume. Instead, highlight the aspects of your background that will be most compelling for the employer. **Address the elements most valuable to the decision maker, and then elaborate on each of those themes with evidence to support your position.** Taking this approach will help the reader recognize your value.

Organizing your cover letter

Craft strong topic sentences to introduce the focus of each paragraph and guide the reader through your letter. Note that paragraphs 2 and 3 might require more than one paragraph each to present your interest and qualifications effectively.

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| Paragraph 1: Introduction | Offer a brief statement summarizing what makes you a compelling candidate and indicate the role you are seeking. If you have a pre-existing history with the organization or were referred for the position, mention it here. |
| Paragraph 2: Interest and motivation | Highlight your interest in the organization using the answers to the motivation questions from Step 2 of this article. Emphasize why you want to support the organization's stakeholders and further their goals (rather than stating what working with this employer will do for you). Offer examples that show your connection to the work, and demonstrate how you will apply your expertise and knowledge to support the success of the organization and its clients. |
| Paragraph 3: Skills and qualifications | Identify the key skills necessary to perform this role using the skills and qualities you uncovered in Step 2. Organize the paragraph(s) around these skills, and offer specific examples that demonstrate how you have developed or excelled with them. Do not organize the paragraph around your prior jobs or work chronology. The key is to help the employer visualize you using these skills within their organization, not someone else's. Help the employer see what's in it for them by hiring you. |
| Paragraph 4: Reiterate interest | In the closing paragraph, reiterate your excitement about the role and your interest in speaking with them. |

4. Review and proofread!

Revisit the job announcement. Have you covered all key themes and points? Have you provided the employer with the information they seek? Proofread carefully. Consider reading your materials out loud to catch typos and awkward sentences. Share your application with trusted colleagues or your coach for a final review. Set your application materials aside for several hours and reread them with fresh eyes. When you are ready, save your application as a .pdf and submit it according to the process identified by the employer.

Congratulations! You are on your way to meeting your potential future employer.

Lyn Legal

123 Main Street, Anytown, California 65401 | LLegal@gmail.com | (415) 555-1111 | LinkedIn

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Create a brief statement (two or three sentences) that captures what distinguishes you as a candidate and highlights the value you can bring to an employer. Customize this section for each application to showcase how well suited you are to the specific organization.

EXPERIENCE

Employer Name *[Style Option 1: This example uses separate subheadings for each line.]* City, ST
Final Job Title Month year – Present

Oversee legal, compliance, privacy and employee relations functions of telecommunications company with operations in 12 countries.

- **Corporate Governance:** Advise boards of directors and board committees on SEC disclosures and succession planning. Serve as corporate secretary.
- **Transactions:** Manage complex mergers and acquisitions ranging from \$100 million to \$50 billion.
- **Compliance and Investigations:** Counsel leadership team on compliance and disclosure requirements. Engage with SEC and FINRA and conduct internal investigations.

Employer Name *[Style Option 2: This example groups the information thematically.]* City, ST
Job Title Month year – Present

Oversee legal, compliance, privacy and employee relations functions of telecommunications company with operations in 12 countries.

Corporate Governance

- Advise boards of directors and board committees on SEC disclosures and succession planning.
- Draft Board and governance committee meeting agendas, resolutions, minutes, and calendars.

Transactions

- Manage complex mergers and acquisitions ranging from \$100 million to \$50 billion.

Compliance and Investigations

- Counsel leadership team on compliance and disclosure requirements.
- Engage with SEC and FINRA and conduct internal investigations.

EDUCATION

University of State School of Law City, ST
Juris Doctor *[Note: Most schools award a "Juris Doctor," not a "Juris Doctorate"]* Month year

Awesome State University City, ST
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science *cum laude* Month year

BAR MEMBERSHIPS AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

State Bar of California, Member

City Bar Association, Corporate Law Section Member

ARTICLES AND PRESENTATIONS

"Interesting Article on Unique Area of Law," *City Bar Association Magazine*, Winter 2023

"Know Your Rights," Presentation at Anytown Community Center, September 2021