

5 Critical Elements of Any Résumé

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Whether you're a freshly minted graduate or a professional with decades of experience, your résumé should include five critical elements. Including these five parts will help you clarify your thinking, focus on key skills and accomplishments, and craft a résumé that will help you stand out from the crowd.

If you're searching for a new job, check your resume and make sure it has these five critical elements:

An Engaging Summary

Vicki Bacal, owner of The Resume Specialist in St. Louis Park, Minn., reminds job candidates that a résumé objective is "frowned upon. It has been for over 20 years." Instead, kick your résumé off with a section that briefly summarizes your professional qualifications. "The objective used to tell the employer what the candidate wants," Bacal explains. "The summary is focused on what you, as a candidate, can do for the employer. This is the feel-good section. It's equivalent to the handshake. Highlighting soft skills here gives your resume a core of humanity."

Proof of Expertise

"Core competencies" is a good title for this section if you have two to five years of experience or are switching careers. For people with longer work histories, "professional skills" might make more sense. Job seekers applying for trades or technical positions can use "technical competencies." This section where you list your skills, knowledge and experience, Bacal says.

Relevant Experience

This is the section most people focus on, but they end up paying more attention to job duties and descriptions than accomplishments, Bacal says. You should include results, effects and contributions made at your former jobs, along with the company name, job title and years (not exact dates) of employment.

Education Highlights

Institution, dates attended and the degree or certification you received are listed in the education section. Professional development, continuing education, on-the-job training and other nontraditional education should be included here as well.

The Final Touch

It's possible there are other things you could add to your résumé that don't quite fit in any of the other sections. For a technical position, this could include experience with proprietary or customized software. For an executive position, you could include leadership activities. If there are major awards, recognitions and accomplishments that deserve a little more attention than a detail in another part of the résumé, they can go here.

There will be differences in some of these sections depending on whether you're a recent graduate, changing careers or looking to move up in leadership. If you have a question about whether you should include something, Bacal suggests writing "so what?" after it. "If you can't answer it, then take it out or rewrite it." As an applicant, "my overriding concern is, how can I differentiate myself from all the other people applying for these jobs? How you do it is to point out the frosting on the cake, not just the cake."