



## **Out With the Old, In With the New: Creating Achievement-Oriented Resumes**

by Chere B. Estrin, Ph.D.

I am usually pretty arrogant about resume writing because I've written several books on the subject and was of the opinion that there just isn't too much new out there that could capture my attention. Bzzzzzz! Wrong! (*And thank you for playing, Ms. Estrin.*) While preparing this article, I discovered I was just a bit too negative about no new techniques available. Seeking new ways to attract the attention of resume-weary prospective employers who review hundreds of the same old, same old, I actually spotted some new twists on traditional techniques.

### **Most Acceptable Format**

Before we get to the new twists, it's important that you follow the accepted guidelines and standards of resume writing for the legal field. The chronological resume is probably the one that most employers are familiar. On it, work experience is listed in reverse chronological order (most recent job first). The period of time during which you were employed is listed first, followed by the name of the employer and then the employer's location. A description for each job is also included. Following work history is a section on education, paralegal certificate first.



No matter if you are an experienced paralegal trying to show career growth, or paralegal student who recently received a certificate, the reverse chronological resume is probably the safest way to go. Employers prefer to see what types of job duties you held at each position rather than lumping all your job descriptions together in a functional resume. A reverse chronological format gives prospective employers a much more secure feeling about your career growth.

There is a difference in the reverse chronological format only if you are an entry-level paralegal vs. an experienced level professional. Here are three basic resume writing rules to follow based upon years of experience in the field:

1. Entry-level — Just entering the field:

List education section first. List your paralegal certificate, then post-graduate degree, if any; then undergrad degree. Education is followed by experience, computer skills, language skills, and associations. Keep the resume to one page.

2. Mid-level — 2-6 years experience:

Listed in reverse chronological order, the first section is work history. Show your present position first. Education is after work history, followed by computer skills, foreign language skills, association work, teaching experience and other work-related activities. One page is best; two is okay if absolutely necessary.

3. Senior-level — 6+ years experience:

Listed in reverse chronological order, follow the format for mid-level. After education, list any articles or books, speaking engagements, pro bono work, teaching experience. Here's the trick for senior level paralegals. If you don't want to go back more than 10-15 years, it's not completely necessary unless you are asked. There are times when you may NOT want employers to know you

have 30 years of experience in the field. One page is still best but two pages are probably most likely.

### **Achievement-Oriented Resume**

As you gain substantial experience in the field, you are going to want to convey more than job duties. The most compelling resume you can write is an achievement oriented resume. Lots of paralegals will say that they didn't achieve anything, they just did their jobs. Perhaps so, but if you reframe your reference, you will find that you did achieve hundreds of things, you just need to dig for them. The idea is to convey the results of a problem in order to demonstrate your unique abilities and skills. For example:

<b>Problem I Faced</b>	<b>Action I Took</b>	<b>Results</b>
Organize 10,000 e-mails recovered in e-discovery	Researched, purchased e-discovery program; trained 3 other paralegals on program	Able to produce hot docs and smoking guns in a matter of minutes

While attorneys take full credit for wins or large transactions, paralegals need to take credit for specific projects. Don't worry if you did not single handedly save the day. If you write, "Saved client \$300,000 by installing new software system instead of hiring temps," the reader will assume you had help with the project and you were probably not the person physically hooking up the workstation.

Be sure to differentiate between skills and accomplishments. Cite-checking a brief isn't necessarily an accomplishment. It's a skill. But quickly cite-checking a 75- page case-heavy brief in two hours so it can be filed by 5 p.m. is an achievement.

Being an excellent case manager isn't an accomplishment. It's a skill. But leading a project that resulted in finding key evidence in the case is an accomplishment.

Whenever possible, try to show how what you did to contribute to the firm's profit. This shows that you were thinking about the bottom line--and sometimes that is more important than what you actually achieved.

Where do you find your achievements? Employers want to be assured that you have grown over the years and you are not doing the same assignments you did when you first started out. In the paralegal field, growth is not always a vertical climb up an invisible ladder toward a management or partnership position. Rather, it is more of a horizontal or outward growth – more sophisticated assignments are given as a result of more years in the field. Go back and pinpoint areas where you:

- Achieved more with fewer resources
- Saved the firm, organization or client money
- Reduced costs
- Saved time
- Solved a long-standing problem
- Improved the staff or team productivity, morale or situation
- Achieved technological breakthroughs
- Reduced costs
- Improved bottom-line by maintaining high billable hours and zero to low write-offs.

We know that not everyone saves the firm \$1 million per year or improves billable hours by 150%. Some people really do "just do their jobs." Still, you can find accomplishments that sound impressive, and for the purposes of this

exercise, that's what counts. If you are a paralegal, chances are you have saved the day on more than one occasion. (Including finding the same original an attorney has lost 13 times.) But, a resume without accomplishments is not going to impress anyone. If your resume simply lists responsibilities, what have you really told an employer? Responsibilities are simply things that you were *supposed* to do and what you were hired to do. They don't tell the employer anything about what you *did* do. For example:

<b>Instead of saying:</b>	<b>Highlight your accomplishments:</b>
Prepared pleadings; drafted interrogatories; worked with client; organized documents for trial; attended trial; prepared trial notebooks; set-up war room.	Lead paralegal on winning team of high-profile case for Fortune 1000 client. Supervised 3 case assistants from inception through trial. Drafted motions; answers; prepared hard copy and online trial notebooks. Assisted in selection of cost saving vendors. Reviewed and analyzed RFP's curbing excess fees. Set up state-of-the-art war room and multimedia exhibits in out-of-state proceedings.

By telling a more comprehensive story, you can actually demonstrate problem solving skills, initiative and skill excellence. To create high-impact stories, think back over the assignments you have completed and what you did to assist attorneys. Describe the initial situation, what you did to fix the problem and the result of your efforts. Then summarize your story into no more than two or three lines.

Filling your resume with stories of Problem>Action>Result achievements will do more than attract the firm's attention to your resume. The work you do in creating compelling stories for your resume is also preparation for acing your job

interviews. You will provide interviewers with a source of questions and these achievements can be used as examples as you answer interview questions.

### **Avoid Trite, Overused, & Boring Phrases**

Using trite, over-used and boring phrases you found listed under “Action Words” in a resume writing book can get your resume placed on the bottom of the pile somewhere between “I’ll think about it” and “hmmm.....Let me wait and see what else comes in” stacks. *Think like the environment you are in:* if you cannot support the facts, you are NOT believable. For example:

<b>Don't say:</b>	<b>Instead:</b>
Team player	Give an example of a team situation where you performed well.
Work well under pressure	Give a specific example of a pressured situation such as a closing, trial, deadline where you succeeded with excellent results.
Excellent organizational skills	Give an example of an assignment where you took a project from chaos to superbly organized.
Outstanding leadership skills	What project did you lead? Give an example.

### **Add “Struggle”**

"Reduced client fees by 40%," is fine -- but sounds as if it could have been achieved with one phone call to a vendor. Therefore, it's not really believable. It sounds weak -- or if not weak, it doesn't sound nearly as strong as if "struggle" were added.

Whenever possible, add the agony of the process. Lawyers love agony. That's one reason they're in the business. Show the dragons slain, describe the 14,000-foot mountains you climbed without oxygen, and mention the bushels of

broken glass you crawled across to complete your assignment. Don't exaggerate, but don't minimize, either. Let's reword the above accomplishment, adding struggle:

*Received 140 billion e-mails in discovery from client with outdated computer systems. Working within strict budget guidelines and limited workforce, reduced and consolidated clients' vendors from six to two, negotiated deeply discounted fees for volume, and cut operating costs 40%, a savings of \$323,000 per month in fees to the client."*

## **Getting Started**

Almost all paralegals have work accomplishments but they're not always easy to see. You may have to ask for help from your colleagues. Do several drafts of your resume. Always have someone else review it. Typos and grammatical errors have a way of breeding overnight when you least expect it.

The difference between a good resume and a great resume is the character and strength of the accomplishments. Your resume should read \$10,000 - \$15,000 above your last salary level and it will if you take the time to accentuate your past achievements. Be sure to prioritize your accomplishments by putting the strongest ones first.

No matter how many years of experience you have, if your resume is full of hard-hitting real accomplishments, you will shorten your job search considerably. Doors will open more easily. You'll be interviewed more often. Your interviews will go much better, and you'll be hired sooner, which is, in the end, what you want. Good luck, and happy writing!

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