

Resume Pitfalls

10 Mistakes You Should Avoid

CHRISTY HALL BENSON, CLA, NCCP

Since becoming a paralegal instructor, students have often asked me to review their resumes. Each semester, as the number of resume-related inquiries increased, I began incorporating resume writing into my legal writing classes. Before I began teaching students resume-writing skills, I researched books and other professional publications, talked to career counselors and interviewed office administrators. I learned a lot from this process and from my students. As a result, I was able to

send a resume with an objective stating that you wish to obtain a paralegal position at a corporation. Customizing your resume for each potential job will increase your chances of landing an interview.

In Margaret Pickard's book, *Job Placement Strategies for Paralegals* (Thomson Delmar Learning, 2008), she describes a resume as your personal billboard. A resume is "not simply a listing of your employment history or your educational background; it is an advertisement of what you can offer a prospective

related to the paralegal field such as cashier or waitress. You should list each employer separately in reverse chronological order on your resume.

Mistake #4: You omit dates of employment.

You should always include dates of current and previous employment on your resume. Omitting dates of employment could imply that you have something to hide. Because potential employers can easily verify dates of employment, you must be completely honest

A resume is "not simply a listing of your employment history or your educational background; it is an advertisement of what you can offer a prospective employer."

identify a number of key resume mistakes. Whether you are a paralegal student looking for your first job or a seasoned paralegal looking for a change, below are 10 resume mistakes that can prevent you from landing a job.

Mistake #1: Your resume contains spelling and grammar errors.

If your resume contains spelling or grammatical errors, you will not be considered a serious candidate for the job, and you may eliminate yourself from the running altogether. Numerous attorneys in my career have given me the task of screening resumes for new paralegal hires. They directed me to throw away any resume that contained even a single typo. My attorneys never even saw those resumes, nor did they want to. Employers equate a sloppy resume with sloppy job performance. I can't say it enough: double-, triple- and quadruple-check your resume before sending it anywhere. Sometimes it is difficult for us to catch our own mistakes, so it is a good idea to have someone else read your resume for errors. The last thing you want is for your resume to end up in the trash rather than on an attorney's desk.

Mistake #2: You use the same resume for every potential employer.

It is important to tailor your resume for the job you want rather than sending the same resume in response to every job for which you are applying. For example, if you are applying for a paralegal position at a law firm, do not

employer," she says. Don't burden the hiring manager to make the connection between your skills and the skills they desire; highlight relevant skills you know the employer is seeking to show you are perfect for the position. For example, suppose you are replying to a job ad that seeks a paralegal skilled in Westlaw. Westlaw is listed on your resume as the 10th bullet point under the section describing your current position. You could move this bullet point to the top of the list so the employer will notice it at first glance without having to read your long list of job duties and skills. Make it easy for the employer to see why they should hire you and how you are uniquely qualified to meet their criteria.

Mistake #3: Your resume is too long.

If you are an entry-level paralegal, limit your resume to one page unless you gained substantial work experience prior to entering the paralegal field. Seasoned paralegals can have resumes up to two pages, but never submit a resume longer than that. You may want to avoid listing too much experience on your resume; unfortunately, age discrimination is a consideration, and even more likely, employers may think they can't afford to hire you. You must weigh the risks of listing too much experience on your resume against the benefits of letting the employer know the full extent of your abilities.

Experienced paralegals should include positions covering a total period of about 10 to 15 years. This rule only applies if all of your experience is related; do not list positions un-

related to the paralegal field such as cashier or waitress. You should list each employer separately in reverse chronological order on your resume. In most cases, include the month as well as the year (e.g., January 2009 – Present; May 2000 – December 2009). If you have large gaps between jobs, you might list only the year; however, list both if possible. You should not include dates on your resume that are irrelevant to your professional credentials in an attempt to explain resume gaps (e.g., stay-at-home mom – June 2009 to January 2011). Be prepared, however, to explain any gaps in employment history in a job interview. Every one of my employers has asked about reasons for gaps in employment during the job interview, so do not be caught off-guard by this question.

It is acceptable to omit graduation dates on your resume if you have been out of school for a long time. I have been a paralegal for almost 20 years, so I do not want a potential employer to be able to determine my age from my resume; however, I have always given dates when asked. You are also usually required to list dates on employment applications. For new paralegal graduates or paralegals with less than five years of experience, it is a good idea to include the date you graduated from paralegal school. However, avoid listing the name of your high school or the date you graduated from high school on your resume.

Mistake #5: You overexaggerate your credentials.

Always be truthful on your resume. You may suffer serious career consequences for fabricating or exaggerating your credentials. If you lie on your resume, you put your integ-

rity and credibility at risk. Under no circumstances should you ever exaggerate your skills, overstate your work history or lie about your certification. Employers routinely conduct background checks to verify resumes and can easily verify paralegal certifications, so you should never tell an employer you are certified if you are not. You should also not fabricate your education. For example, your perfect job may require a bachelor's degree. If you were only three credits shy of graduating, it may be tempting to list a bachelor's degree on your resume. Some employers require copies of college and paralegal school transcripts to substantiate your educational background and will contact the educational institutions you attended to confirm graduation. You should be prepared to verify your degrees by providing copies of diplomas or transcripts upon request.

Mistake #6: Your resume lacks action verbs.

Use action verbs (e.g., drafted, managed, prepared) in your resume to present yourself as a "doer" and achiever. You want a potential employer to notice your skills and accomplishments. Replace passive statements like "duties included" or "responsible for" with action words. Action words make your writing

stronger. See how action words increase the impact of the job duties below:

Rather than: Duties included legal research and analysis.

Say: Conducted comprehensive legal research and analysis.

Rather than: Responsible for contract review and drafting.

Say: Drafted and reviewed contracts to meet company's objectives.

Rather than: Duties included monitoring legislation and advising management.

Say: Proactively monitored changes to state and federal laws affecting company and advised management.

See the sidebar for a list of action verbs you can include in your resume.

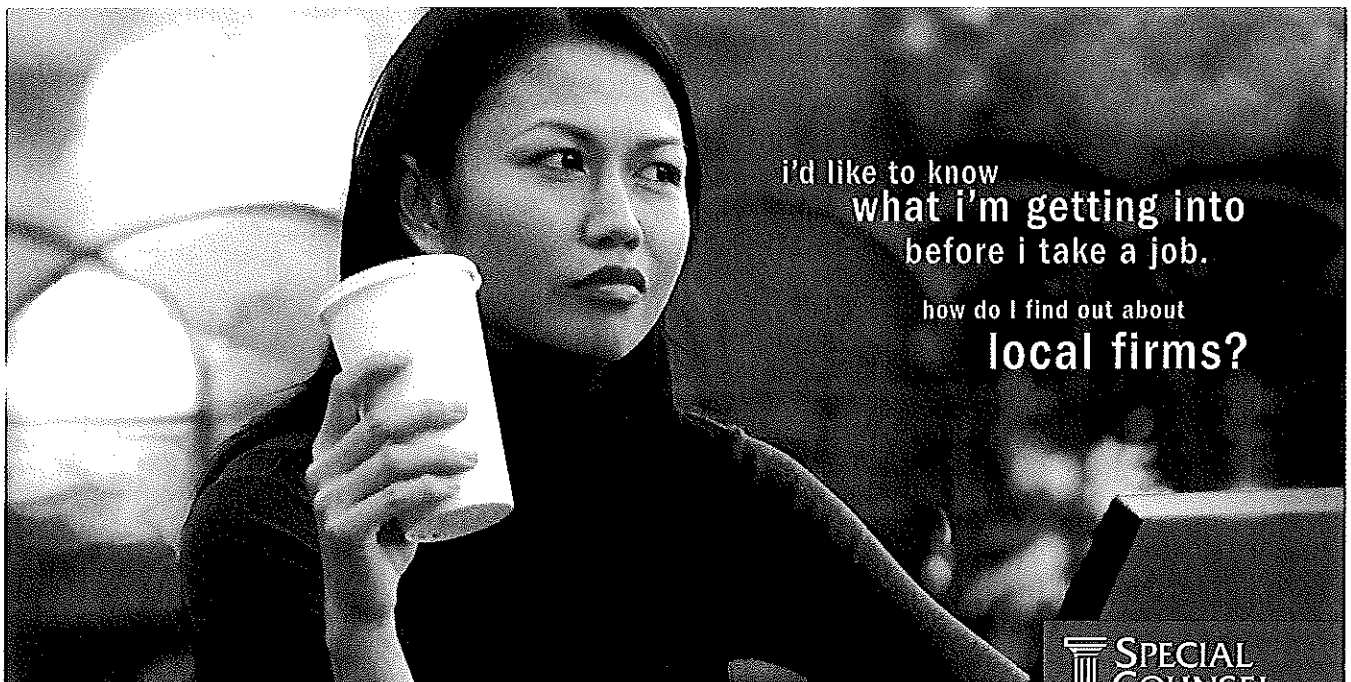
Mistake #7: Your resume includes personal information.

Don't include personal information on your resume (e.g., height, weight, age, date of birth, place of birth, marital status, sex, ethnicity/race). It would be illegal for an employer to ask you about any of these factors during a job

interview, so why voluntarily disclose any unnecessary details on your resume? You should also avoid any information that could be perceived as controversial such as church or political affiliations. In addition, avoid listing hobbies, number of children or other irrelevant facts on your resume. When determining what details to include, ask yourself whether the information is relevant to the position you are seeking.

Mistake #8: You list your salary requirements.

Under no circumstances should your resume ever list your salary requirements; highlight only your professional credentials and skills. If a potential employer requests salary information, it is better to include it in a cover letter rather than on the resume itself. In any event, it is best not to provide a specific amount but instead indicate that salary is negotiable. You do not want to eliminate yourself as a candidate because an employer thinks you are too expensive. Conversely, you do not want to undersell your earning potential by providing a low-ball figure when an employer may have budgeted a higher salary for the position. The issue of salary is best left for the interview stage, and you should | **continued on page 23**



i'd like to know
what i'm getting into
before i take a job.

how do i find out about
local firms?



THAT'S WHAT WE DO, EVERY DAY.® Special Counsel, the leading provider of legal staffing services nationwide, is a resource not only for attorneys, but also for paralegals, legal secretaries, and other legal support professionals. Our nationwide offices and network of connections within local legal communities can help you get your foot in the door at a job that's perfect for you—in almost any city and at every stage of your career. Call us today.

(800) 737-3436
specialcounsel.com

©2010 Special Counsel, Inc. All rights reserved.

continued from page 15

never raise it yourself. If you are pressed by an employer to provide a dollar figure, it is better to give them a higher number than what you would accept to leave room for negotiation.

Mistake #9: Your resume includes your references.

Don't list references on your resume. References belong in a later stage of the job search and should be provided only when an employer specifically requests them. When an employer asks for references, type them on a separate sheet of paper. It is acceptable to state "References available upon request" at the bottom of your resume if room permits, but this statement is not necessary. It is understood that job candidates will provide references to any potential employer.

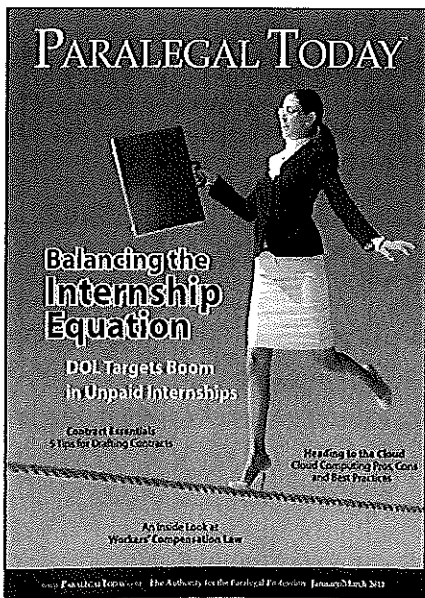
Mistake #10: Your e-mail address lacks professionalism.

An essential element of a resume is your e-mail address. Never include an inappropriate e-mail address such as ilikebrunettes@aol.com or mymanishot@yahoo.com. While this kind of e-mail address may be cute to your friends, it is unprofessional. Another faux pas is listing the e-mail address of your current employer as the contact e-mail on your resume. You can easily create a free e-mail account with a professional-sounding address using Gmail, Yahoo! or AOL. For example, Sara Smith might use ssmith@gmail.com or sarasmith@yahoo.com. □

Christy Hall Benson, CLA is a paralegal instructor at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she teaches Advanced Legal Research & Writing. She has a bachelor of arts in journalism and mass communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a paralegal degree from Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina. Benson has written many articles on legal writing and can be reached for questions or comments at Christy@thewrite-advice.com.

Resume Action Verbs

achieved	described	investigated
acted	designated	launched
adapted	designed	led
addressed	determined	maintained
administered	developed	managed
advised	directed	marketed
allocated	distributed	mediated
analyzed	documented	modified
applied	drafted	monitored
approved	edited	motivated
arranged	effected	organized
articulated	eliminated	originated
assembled	engaged	participated
assessed	enlisted	performed
assigned	established	planned
assisted	estimated	prepared
assumed	evaluated	presented
attained	expedited	produced
clarified	facilitated	proposed
collected	formulated	proved
communicated	gathered	provided
compared	generated	recommended
compiled	handled	reconciled
composed	identified	recruited
coordinated	implemented	reduced
conducted	improved	renegotiated
consulted	increased	reorganized
contributed	influenced	represented
created	informed	researched
decreased	instituted	resolved
defined	interpreted	reviewed
delegated	initiated	revised
demonstrated	introduced	scheduled



PARALEGAL TODAY

The Authority for the Paralegal Profession.
Serving the field for over 25 years.

Advance in Your Career!

In today's uncertain times it is vital for you to stay well-informed on the latest trends, techniques and developments that impact your work in the paralegal profession! A great way to do that is by reading *Paralegal Today*, the leading, independent magazine for paralegals and legal assistants. Published for over 25 years, this well-rounded, highly respected magazine brings you useful, actionable news, surveys, ideas and reports... important information that helps you improve your skills and enhance your value to your firm or organization.

As a subscriber to *Paralegal Today* you receive both the handsome print edition plus the full online digital edition at no extra cost. You also enjoy a robust Web Site featuring a job bank, a helpful ListServ and other special advantages. Subscribe now!

Your subscription includes **BOTH** the print and the online edition!

- Useful, pertinent editorial content
- Contemporary graphic design
- Robust website with Job Bank, Listserv and other advantages
- Online digital edition included free.

Published quarterly
Subscription Rates (USA):
\$28 for 1 year, 4 issues
\$49 for 2 years, 8 issues

Subscribe or Renew Online at:
www.paralegaltoday.com

OR CALL TOLL FREE: 1 877 202-5196

A Publication of Conexion International Media, Inc.