

Avoid These 10 Common Pitfalls in Your Federal Résumé Work Experience Section

by Kathryn Troutman

Monday, January 3, 2011

Do you want to avoid the most common pitfalls that I have seen in the Work Experience section of the federal résumé? Whether you are just sitting down to draft your federal résumé, or if you already have what you consider a polished draft, here is an important list of often-found problems, and what to do about them if your résumé is suffering from these ailments.

First a note: remember that your résumé will actually be read in USAJOBS, not scanned.

Considering that the Federal human resources (HR) specialist will receive 100 to 400 (or more) résumés per application, and that the USAJOBS résumés are READ / SCANNED by HUMANS (not an automated system, scanning for keywords), the résumés should be succinct and powerful.

The HR specialists are learning now to READ a federal résumé, so that they can find the specialized experience, examples, accomplishments, and experience they require to determine if you are Minimally Qualified, Qualified or Best Qualified, which is the new Category Rating system for applications. A Best Qualified score is 90 to 100; Qualified is 80 to 89; and Minimally Qualified is 70 to 79. Under 70, you do not get considered.

Problem #1: Too Many Jobs

The Official Federal Résumé Writing Rules in the OF-510 from the Office of Personnel Management states that you should include Recent and Relevant positions. So, if you have more than 10 positions in your entire Work Experience section, review the positions to determine which positions are the most recent and relevant. The best number of positions in the Work Experience section is 4 to 7 at most. LEAVE OUT: short jobs, non-relevant jobs, repetitive jobs, non-paid jobs (move them to Additional information, or leave out), interim jobs.

Problem #2: Including your entire life history

The SF-171 (prior to 1996) was a life history. Every job, every address for every employer, every supervisor change, every salary change, every period of unemployment was a "job block" in the SF-171. The SF-171 was broken down by letters: A,B,C,D. Many SF-171s would go up to letter R or S. The SF-171s were 30 to 50 pages. That seems amazing, right? The Federal Résumé average length is 4 or 5 pages!

Problem #3: Going back too far

If you are over 50 and you held professional positions in the 1970s and 1980s, LEAVE THEM OFF. The human resources specialists are interested in the only the last 10 years of your work experience (back to 2000). If you want to give some background, you can write about your experiences back to 1990. But there should be NO DATES before 1990. This will help with age discrimination and sheer résumé length.

Problem #4: Gaps in dates

The federal human resources specialists DO NOT CARE if there are gaps in dates if they are short (1 year or less). If you have positions in your list of jobs that are not recent or relevant, then you should LEAVE THEM OUT. The HR specialists are looking for experience that supports your candidacy for their job. They want to see specialized experience in their field of work.

Problem #5: Too many temporary or contractor assignments

If you are a temp or government contractor and you have 15 assignments with one contracting firm, write them under the name of the contracting firm as ONE JOB, not 15 JOBS. Within the Contractor "job block" add highlights of your contracts that were more impressive, challenging, and results-oriented than others. Feature the contracts that resulted in new or impressive projects.

Problem #6: Too many short, irrelevant jobs

Again the positions should be recent and relevant. If you have one six-month position that is a repeat of another, is not relevant and clutters up the solid work experiences. Simply take it out.

Problem #7: Few or no accomplishments

Most résumés that we receive do not include accomplishments. If you want to prove that you have a certain Knowledge, Skill, or Ability, you will need to add an achievement that proves you have the experience. The proof is in the pudding.

Problem #8: Accomplishments with no context, challenge, or results

If you do include a one-line accomplishment, it may or may not help the HR specialist to see what obstacles you overcame, how the accomplishment helped to meet the organization's mission, how you solved the problem, or why it was an important accomplishment. For the federal résumé, the accomplishment needs more details to engage the HR specialist and the supervisor.

Problem #9: Super career change

If you are currently in Corporate America and are seeking a job with Customs & Border Patrol as a Mission Support Specialist (for example), the résumé must change about 100%. This is an extreme career change resulting in a very difficult résumé to craft. I recommend my book *Ten Steps to a Federal Job*, or professional help with this translational writing of skills, keywords, mission, language and the WORKS.

Problem #10: Keywords are missing

Most first-time federal applicants simply do not include keywords from a target announcement. If you see the word SUPPLY in the announcement 20 times, that means that this word MUST go in your résumé within the top 5 lines of your Work Experience section. The HR specialist is looking for a Supply person, and if you don't have that word in your résumé ANYWHERE, you will probably not be Best Qualified, Referred, or even Minimally Qualified.

In closing . . .

Your Writing Strategy for Work Experience in Your Federal Résumé: The Federal Résumé is NOT the same as a Private Industry Résumé. It is longer (although, no longer than 5 pages), more detailed, must include keywords from a federal job announcement, and must demonstrate your specialized experience. This résumé is equal to a proposal for work for the government. It is a technical document that should carefully match a job announcement with serious consideration about your ability to perform the job. If you spend time and look at samples of federal résumés vs. private industry résumés, you could get Best Qualified and referred to a supervisor for consideration of an Interview; and may be hired into the Best Job in America with the US Federal Government.

Kathryn Troutman is the president of The Résumé Place, Inc., an established Federal Career Consulting and Federal Résumé Writing firm in Catonsville, MD. The Résumé Place is a GSA Contractor and Federal Career Trainer throughout government.