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**Today’s Resumes are so Dumb and Dull**

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You would think that resumes would get better with all the help available on the Internet. Who can avoid the pop up ads, headlines blaring, “The 5 worst things you can add to your resume”, or “The 5 top strategies for the perfect resume”, or “Free resume templates” and so on. Some of the advice is quite good and sensible — no spelling errors, double space, two pages maximum, sell don’t tell — but in the end it all boils down to one question: “Is my resume good enough to get me an interview?”

In the old days—a mere 15 years ago—resumes were typed on a word processor or fancy IBM Selectric (with the cool golf ball typeface), directly onto creamy vellum paper with only a small bottle of Whiteout at the ready for any errors. Resumes were sent by snail mail, with cover letters carefully attached like talisman, to alert the recipient to the treasure that lay within. Each resume cost about $2.00 in materials to send and it took about three weeks to get a reply back. If you mailed two applications a week you were doing well. You might be competing with twenty or thirty applicants; fifty to seventy-five if the position was advertised in the Career Section of the Saturday Globe or Toronto Star.

Today, the cost of sending out a resume is measured in electrons, not postage stamps, and labour is measured in the click of a mouse. Hundreds of positions are available on job boards and response rates number in the thousands. At one time, a clever or witty cover letter could get the attention of the hiring or HR manager. Now you have to humour a software program with Boolean algorithm. So you would think resumes would look better given the ease of production and distribution. Instead, they look dumber and duller.

The problem is yet another example of commoditization in the digital age. Everyone reads the same blogs and gets the same B-school advice. We then tailor our resumes to reflect this “new found wisdom” and augment our insecurity by hiring resume writing professionals. Where we once slaved over each word, agonized over job history, tried to sound confident but not cocky, say enough to be interesting but not too much to bore, we have now simply outsourced our thinking to the language of marketing and branding. Where we were once people with passions, strengths, and weaknesses, our resumes now look like a constellation of competencies revolving around a value proposition, topped off by an obligatory laundry list of “volunteer” or “do good projects” to round out the picture.

Employers have responded to this data onslaught with even more draconian word screening, and interviews have gone on for months. Everyone seems to have read your resume but no one can remember your name. Your experience is unique and precious, but we have several dozen candidates with identical qualifications, even down to your weekend work as a volunteer firefighter. It seems amazing how many forest fires need to be put out each year in this great land of ours.

But what’s really missing from many resumes (who, despite Spellcheck, can still not distinguish between “principal” and “principle”) is a sense of humility, clarity and simplicity. Here are some suggestions for improvement.

1. Try using facts—they may lead to truth. If you are “results-oriented” show some results you have achieved. Numbers would be helpful, too, as quantifiable data is easy to understand. (We doubled the business in one year, from $1 to $2 million)
2. Focus on Outcome not Process—this requires even more facts. If you say you are “quick and decisive”, a great “problem solver”, “love a challenge”, and my favourite, a “strategic thinker”, give an example of what you did that led to a great outcome. It is like telling me you love working on Rubik’s cube puzzles, but neglect to mention that you have never solved one.
3. Keep it simple and straight with less spin—yes, more facts. Don’t imply you went to Harvard when you only attended a weekend workshop there. The regular grads will get real upset. It is like saying you worked for NASA when you really just delivered pizza to the engineers. The danger here is that you may actually get the job and then have to fly the shuttle. (Yes, I know they retired the program in 2011 but you get the point.)

It is time for job applicants to take back their resume, write it with blood and sweat, so that you own it. You will be authentic when you walk through the door for an interview, and not some homological construction like Robocop.