

## Build a Better Resume in Eight Steps

by Jim McKean, Partner, Career Investments



Your resume carries your personal brand to the marketplace. It is your first and most important marketing piece. Build it carefully. Here are some things we think about when we help people build their resumes.

- 1. Take a fresh look.** The first step is to take a fresh and honest look. Read over your current resume quickly, giving yourself no more than a minute or two. Now turn the paper over and write down the two to four phrases that come to mind.  
  
And be honest. Don't write down what you are hoping people will see. Write down your honest impressions. Is it neat or messy? Is it easy to read or a chore? Do your accomplishments stand out or do you have to look hard for them? This fast first impression is probably the closest you can get to the experience of a stranger seeing your resume for the first time. Will they see what you want them to? If you are honest, maybe not. But don't worry, we can fix that.
- 2. Think airtime.** Broadcasters call the length of a story or segment "airtime." Important stories get more airtime. In a resume, the space you give a job or experience is the equivalent of airtime. Are you giving your most impactful and relevant experiences the most space on your resume? Many people emphasize their most recent position and miss the opportunity to highlight important experiences they had earlier in their careers. Others want to give all positions the same amount of attention, even when some are less relevant to their career track. Think carefully about which positions get the most attention.
- 3. Leverage company prestige.** The quality of the companies you worked for are part of your brand. Don't assume people know. Under the company name and title line, include a sentence that explains and positions the business. Be sure to highlight the factors that are most attractive. World's largest supplier of widgets? An emerging tech company? Fortune 100 pharmaceutical manufacturer? Say so. It helps the reader to know the stage you are used to playing on.
- 4. What's under your management?** Everyone has something under management in a work position. If you have 25 people reporting to you, have a budget of \$450,000 or are responsible for a customer relationship worth \$4.75M annually, that's what you have under management. If don't have those things, you still have something you are responsible for – whether it's 1,500 invoices that need

processing every week or 500 production jobs a month, or a critical assembly step that needs to be completed 150 times an hour.

Notice how I used specific numbers to describe the scope of these responsibilities. Numbers add credibility, but they also give the reader another signal about the level at which you are used to operating. Similar titles in different organizations can have widely different responsibilities. The numbers reveal the difference. So use numbers where you can and try to consolidate your management scope under the first one or two bullets. Under each position, the first bullet or two should explain the scope and scale of what you had under management. Make sure it is clear. Use numbers where you can.

- 5. Think impact.** The rest of the bullets should list your impacts. I say “impacts” rather than “accomplishments” because I want you to focus on what you have done from the perspective of the organization and not yourself. I know when I am being completely honest with myself, a lot of my “accomplishments” had little lasting impact on my organization. They were just things I spent a lot of time doing. They may have needed doing, but they were “maintenance” activities and had little real impact.

Some people feel obligated to list everything they do or have responsibility for on their resume. This makes this important document read like a job description. Instead, think of your resume as an impact statement. Two or three impactful things are more powerful than a list of responsibilities. Follow your management scope bullets with your greatest impact, then second greatest impact, and so on. By impact, I mean the things that made the most difference to the company. Don't try to show everything you did, show the things that mattered.

- 6. Clear out the underbrush.** Those of you who are gardeners will understand this. If you want your best achievements to stand out, get rid of the low impact stuff. Two high impact items are more powerful on their own than when surrounded by 2 or 3 lesser accomplishments. This is easy to say, but to many people it sounds risky. What if you take out exactly what the recruiter is looking for? All I can say is “try it.” I think you will like the results.

- 7. Brand yourself.** What are you known for? Learn to focus on your strengths to explain yourself to the world. Don't try to be all things, say what you are truly known for and then use this branding language in your opening section, which you can call “Profile,” or “Skills Summary.” But make sure it is congruent with the experiences and impacts you show in the rest of your resume. Calling yourself “A passionate advocate for animal welfare” may be true, but if your resume shows no sign animal welfare activities, you will confuse your readers.

- 8. Distinguish yourself by finding the language.** Words matter. Don't use the same words that others use to describe yourself, your skills, or your experience. Say not only what you are good at, but at what level you are used to working. Compare "skilled IT project manager" with "selected to manage 5 software implementation projects with combined budgets over \$1.5 million and team members in three countries." Details add veracity and make you more compelling.

If you are depending making your resume stand out to automated resume software, you may need to use certain keywords. Try to use them creatively. Remember that once you clear the automation hurdle, a human will have to read and resonate with your resume.

Attention to these eight points can help turn a so-so resume into a winner.

**Do you need further help to improve your resume? Contact us at [info@careerinvestments.com](mailto:info@careerinvestments.com) to find out how we can help!**

**About the Author:** Jim McKean is a former consultant, strategist and IT executive turned career guru. For seven years as owner and principal of McKean and Company, he provided executive leadership in strategy, technology and business management to mid-size entrepreneurial businesses throughout Indiana. One of his major clients, Pratt Corporation, hired him to lead an 11-person department with a \$1.3 million budget where he was responsible for building a team that delivered numerous B2B applications. He holds an MBA from Indiana University and served as Manager of Research for Indiana University Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. He has been a systems analyst, a member of the Boards of two not-for-profits, and a writer. But his real passion is for the science and art of careers. As CI's Thought Leader, Jim leads the development of our unique tools and processes, writes a blog on career-related issues, and presents to corporate and community groups on this important life skill.

**About Career Investments:** Career Investments LLC is a talent and career management firm with offices in Indianapolis, Bloomington Indiana, and Chicago. During its team's 12 years in the industry, they have helped hundreds of talented individuals to advance their careers through job placement and direct career consulting services.