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Making your CV work for you / Use common file formats

It should be a concise and accurate summary of your relevant skills and achievements

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And then there were 900.

Since a blurb for The Sunday Times' Find A Job column started appearing in newspapers last month, the e-mail has been flying in fast and furious, totalling 900 at the latest count.

Job seekers, and their resumes, came in all forms.

Applicants ranged from hopeful fresh graduates and people keen on a mid-career switch to retrenchees giving the job search a last shot, as well as foreigners based here.

Several people sent in their resumes with lengthy cover letters and scanned copies of all their educational certificates.

A few others left their personal details in the main body of the e-mail rather than as a separate text document.

Some in the design field submitted colourful slideshows of their background, work experience and previous work samples.

Some resumes ran to more than 10 pages, while others were in file formats that could not even be opened.

According to human resource experts, a poorly written resume can often doom a job search even before it begins.

"A resume is like a movie trailer. It should show just enough of the interesting parts in the most attractive manner possible to make viewers want to pay to watch the whole thing," said Mr Paul Heng, managing director for human resource firm Next Career Consulting.

Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of corporate services at HR consultancy GMP Group, said that now is an especially important time to make sure you have a properly done-up resume.

He added that "a good resume helps to position the job seeker as a prime candidate among the huge pool of applicants", particularly in this current economic climate where there are more job applicants to each job vacancy.

His firm has seen an increase of about 30 per cent to 40 per cent in applications for every advertised job vacancy in recent months.

A good resume is one that accurately summarises one's abilities and achievements in a concise, comprehensive and chronological manner, said Mr Paul Lee, a talent resourcing manager at Cargill, an international agricultural, food and risk management firm.

As recruiters like him typically sift through 20 to 40 resumes a day, with less than five minutes spent on each one, an ideal resume should be kept to about two to three pages long.

Five pages is the maximum, and only for those with longer or more varied work histories.

Another common mistake most job applicants make is not customising one's resume for the position applied for.

"Some job seekers think the more experience and skills they put in a resume, the higher chances they will have of being hired. This is not true. Recruiters will look out only for things relevant to the job position you have applied for," said Mr Philippe Capsie, the country manager of HR firm Manpower Singapore.

Often, this may even leave a bad impression on recruiters.

Mr Stephen Tjoa, the executive director of human resources at accounting firm KPMG, said he has received applications from people who would get his name right but mis-spell the company name or name a competitor company instead.

"It shows that the individual preparing it doesn't have a keen eye for details, which reflects poorly on that person's ability and accuracy as an accountant."

Mr Tjoa said the most unusual resume he has come across in his 18-year career in recruitment was from a woman who sent in an A4-sized picture of herself in a swimsuit at the beach, together with her resume. She was applying to be an auditor.

"It did help her to stand out but it was attention of the wrong kind," he said.

Under Ministry of Manpower guidelines on fair recruitment practices, employers should not stipulate age, race or marital status as a requirement for employment. Words or phrases that suggest any preference should also not be used in job advertisements.

Most HR experts agree that factors such as one's expected salary or photo should also be omitted except when specifically requested by recruiters.

A simple "negotiable" when it comes to expected salary will suffice, said Ms Rita Ow, a regional human resource director for Avid, a global digital media technology firm.

She explained: "Salary negotiation is usually the final stage of the recruiting process, not the first. When we have a vacancy to fill, we do have a budget and may exclude those resumes whose expected salary is way above the budget. Unless you will not consider any opportunity that is below your expected salary, don't put that in."

Should one decide to put a photo at all - typically more relevant in sales and marketing positions - it should be an indoor shot not bigger than passport size.

"It is not unusual to see young job applicants including their leisure pictures, such as those taken on holiday or in a club. Job seekers must recognise that the resume is not a Facebook profile. They have to portray a professional image to the employer," said Mr Goh.

While many assume that putting a more attractive picture can boost one's chances of landing the job, Mr Heng warned that this could be a double-edged sword.

He said: "A female recruiter looking to hire an assistant, for example, may feel threatened by an applicant who looks younger and prettier than herself. It's theoretically unethical, but that's human nature."

Sometimes, technology may be as much hindrance as it is help.

For example, one job seeker - a senior manager in his 50s - who wrote in to The Sunday Times has the word "jellybean" as the user ID in his e-mail address.

While this may be fine for personal correspondence, HR experts recommend starting a separate e-mail account with one's name and surname as a user ID to seem professional. This would also help one keep track of ongoing applications and job offers.

Resumes should also be saved in the lowest Word document format to ensure that all recruiters are able to open them, regardless of their computers' operating system.

"Many people also like to convert their resumes into PDF file formats because they are afraid to have others edit their information," said Mr Heng.

"But that's really unnecessary. Recruiters already haven't enough time to look through your resume; why would they be so free to tweak it?"

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