

# The 5 Most Common Mistakes in Executive Resumes... and How You Can Avoid Them

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A Special Report prepared by Louise Kursmark

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A resume is not the most mysterious of documents. Most people understand that their resume should provide details of their career history, qualifications, and skills to interest a potential employer.

Yet within that broad framework, there are few rules to follow, no firm guidelines to help job-seekers put together the document that can have a material impact on their immediate and long-term career success.

From reviewing executive resumes for more than 15 years, I've come to recognize five significant mistakes that most people make when writing their resumes. Attention to any one—or, better yet, all five—of these areas will improve the effectiveness of your resume and, in turn, increase the speed and effectiveness of your job search.



## 1. Lack of clear focus and immediate impact.

Can readers tell—immediately—who you are (your functional area of expertise, probable job titles, and industry expertise)? Do they know—instantly—what you're good at and your most impressive career achievements? If not, you'll lose many readers who will not take the time or make the effort to delve into the depths of your resume. Not only that, but if you don't establish context right up front, you diminish the meaning and impact of all the information that follows.

## 2. Poor organization, structure, and format.

In today's fast-paced world, attention spans are short. Your resume must be crisp, concise, and compelling. It must present “sound bites” that jump off the page and have an immediate impact on the reader. In advertising language, you must convey your “USP”—unique selling proposition—what it is that makes you special and different from the competition.

This doesn't mean that your resume has to be brief. It does mean that it must be well organized and crisply presented so that readers can quickly skim through to pick up the information they need.

The organization and structure of your resume should guide readers through the document, encouraging them to pause on important facts (such as job titles, company names, and key accomplishments) and providing easily absorbed chunks of information so that they don't get bogged down.

To accomplish this, be sure to break up long paragraphs—edit or subdivide so each is no more than four or five lines. Break up long lists of bullet points so that no more than four or five appear before some kind of break that provides “breathing space” for the reader.

Again, don't think your resume has to be short. For most executives, two or three pages is ideal. And you can pack a lot of information into those pages if the material is organized and structured in a way that makes it easy to follow.

**3. Emphasis on job details rather than accomplishments.**

What's more important—what your job consisted of or what you did in that job? Career professionals, recruiters, and hiring authorities agree that your unique contributions are the most critical information on your resume.

Of course, they want to know how many people you led or the size P&L you managed. It's important to provide the context of your positions. But keep that information brief, and focus on what you did within that context—how you grew the organization, increased profitability, improved efficiency, boosted competitive advantage, outperformed competitors, and other key benchmarks of executive performance within your area of expertise.

**4. Vague, unsubstantiated, or meaningless accomplishments.**

You might think you've focused on your accomplishments, but take a critical look at what you've included. Are your statements vague ("Improved market position"), unsubstantiated ("Achieved significant revenue growth"), or meaningless—not really accomplishments ("Led a task force on efficiency and productivity")?

You will need to delve deep to uncover the real results and meaning of your achievements. This will make all the difference in your resume.

**5. Inclusion of nonessential or irrelevant information.**

Does your resume have a clear, consistent focus? Or have you included information such as irrelevant projects or long-ago job details that will sidetrack readers? Everything in your resume should add value. Don't take up space in this important document with information that is not material to your current career goal.

**Avoid these five mistakes** and make your resume crisp, concise, and compelling to capture attention in a crowded market.

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