

# Avoid These Top 10 Common Pitfalls In Your Federal Resume in 2012

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## **Problem # 1: Big Block Paragraphs**

One of the biggest problems I saw in 2011 with client federal resumes was the use of a Resumix format that I call the "Big Block." The original instructions for Resumix, which is now nearly gone, said to write as much as possible, use as many keywords as possible from an occupational series or vacancy announcement, and fill in all of the character space allowed. It was a common myth that you had to write it in one paragraph.

The big block legacy lives on today. The format that I saw most often this past year in my federal resume writing class for federal employees was one huge paragraph for the work experience section of the resume.

**THE FIX:** Instead of one big paragraph, create 5 to 7 paragraphs that are 5 to 10 lines long. Each paragraph should feature one skill set or one accomplishment. This format will be more successful and more readable for someone in human resources (HR) who could be reading from 30 to 500 resumes.

## **Problem # 2: Weak Presentation of Your Accomplishments**

In many resumes that I have reviewed, accomplishments are often either not included or blended in the middle of a paragraph that could be up to 100 lines or more. The HR specialist or the hiring manager will not be able to determine what you have achieved for your current agency.

**THE FIX:** Tell a good story about your accomplishment! With the stiff competition for today's federal positions, it's important that the accomplishments stand out in separate paragraphs so that they are readable and engaging. Your goal is to get the interview. It's time to let the hiring manager know that you could be a valuable asset to the new organization as a result of your past performance.

## **Problem # 3: Lack of Proof**

Most vacancy announcements now include a self-assessment questionnaire where you score your skill level. Did you know that you must also back up your questionnaire answers with proof in your resume? We often find this connection between the questionnaire and the work experience section missing. If your questionnaire is scored at the perfect level, then the resume **MUST ALSO** match those levels. The HR specialist will compare your answers to your resume, and they do have the authority to reduce your score if your resume does not demonstrate the level of expertise that you are stating in your questionnaire.

**THE FIX:** After you have completed the questionnaire for an application, make sure you go back through your work experience section and check that your work experience section provides adequate proof for your questionnaire answers.

## **Problem #4: Keywords Are Missing**

The busy HR specialist will be looking for keywords from the announcement. If they receive 500 resumes, they will focus their search on specific skills. Many applicants use the same resume to apply for a variety of job announcements, and these applicants will not be recognized as having the specific set of skills needed for a position.

**THE FIX:** Make sure your resume is updated to match each announcement. Analyze each vacancy announcement for keywords by looking for 5 to 10 words that are repeated throughout the announcement. I know this takes time, but with a little practice you will be able to analyze an announcement and add the keywords into your resume in about half an hour.

## **Problem # 5: Not Taking KSAs Seriously**

It is well known that the KSA narratives were eliminated in November 2010 with Hiring Reform. But the reality is that you are not completely off the hook with KSA writing. KSAs are frequently still listed in the vacancy announcement. They are there so that you will know what Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities are required for the position. They are also most often covered in the questionnaire. Most resumes that we review do not include accomplishments that speak to the KSAs in the announcement.

**THE FIX:** 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 that experience. Write examples of accomplishments or write statements that clearly demonstrate that you have the KSAs for the position. Including these accomplishment statements within the text of your resume.

## **Problem # 6: Resumes That Are Too Long**

USAJOBS resume builder has no limit for length. You could actually put a 20-page resume in the builder, and we have seen people try to do just this. It's important that you TRY to limit your writing to a range of about 5 to 7 pages, even if your career is long and accomplished. Hiring officials will focus on the most recent five years of your career. They will also read and consider up to the last 10 years of work experience. Prior to 10 years, they will scan quickly.

**THE FIX:** The USAJOBS builder does not automatically optimize the space of your resume content, so your resume could print out longer than you expect. Print out your current resume to see how long it is, and adjust it accordingly.

## **Problem # 7: The USAJOBS Upload Resume Feature**

The upload resume feature seems to work well for vacancy announcements where the questionnaire managed by applicationmanager.gov. PROS: The resume that you upload can be formatted for plain paper reading. You can use bold type, centering, indentations, and other helpful styling techniques. CONS: If the announcement is posted by NASA, DHS, or other agencies not using applicationmanager.gov, the integration between the resume and the questionnaire may not be perfect.

**THE FIX:** I am starting to use the Upload resume feature, but when I do, I ensure that I include the critical compliance information, such as: month and year, hours per week; supervisor name; supervisor phone; salary; full address and location of the employer for each position for 10 years.

## **Problem # 8: Too Many Words Spent on Irrelevant Jobs**

Sometimes employees get into a job that is not great. Or you may have a job in the past that simply has nothing to do with the position for which you are applying. I have seen resumes that spend too much time describing the jobs that I would basically call irrelevant.

THE FIX: What should you do? You can keep the job(s) on the resume; just keep the description short. You can write about any transferrable skills that will be helpful for your preferred career, but don't dwell on unnecessary details.

## **Problem # 9: One Year Specialized Experience Is Not Taken Seriously Enough**

The One Year Specialized Experience is a deal breaker for your application. This is a very simple, but sometimes overlooked, requirement. One of the very first sections I look at in the vacancy announcement is the qualifications section and the One Year Specialized Experience.

THE FIX: Ask yourself, "What is the best position in my experience that supports the One Year Specialized Experience requirement?" I hope you have an answer to that question from the last five years of your work experience; if necessary, you can go out to 10 years. At the Resume Place, we make it a priority to feature the One Year Specialized Experience in a resume with accomplishments that prove the level of that experience.

## **Problem # 10: Not Getting Selected for an Interview**

I realize that this problem isn't really a specific problem with your resume. However, the current reality is that many current federal employees can get Best Qualified and even Referred, but they don't get selected for an interview. If you have personally experienced this, then take it to be an indicator that there IS something in your resume that could use adjusting.

THE FIX: Get to the bottom of it! Carefully review your resume again, using this top 10 list and the top 10 list of 2011. If you still cannot determine where your resume needs strengthening, consider getting some professional eyes to help you look over your resume for its weaknesses.

Wishing you the best for your federal job search in 2012!

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# Avoid These 10 Common Pitfalls In Your Federal Resume 2011

Work Experience  
Section

**First a note:** Remember that your resume will actually be read in USAJOBS, not scanned.

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

The HR specialists are learning now to READ a federal resume, 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 Resume 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 Resume 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 resume length.

## **Problem #4: Gaps in dates**

The federal human resources specialists DO NOT CARE if there are gaps in dates if they are short (one 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 resumes 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 resume, 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 resume must change about 100%. This is an extreme career change resulting in a very difficult resume 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 resume 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 resume ANYWHERE, you will probably not be Best Qualified, Referred, or even Minimally Qualified.

## **In closing...**

Your Writing Strategy for Work Experience in Your Federal Resume: The Federal Resume is NOT the same as a Private Industry Resume. It is longer (although, no longer than five pages), more detailed, must include keywords from a federal job announcement, and must demonstrate your specialized experience. This resume 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 resumes vs. private industry resumes, 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.