

Writing Effective Resumes and Cover Letters:

Q&A with Janet Albert

The Bridgestar talent-matching team receives numerous questions from job-seekers about the importance of resumes and cover letters, such as “How should I organize my resume? How can I make it really stand out? Do people actually read cover letters? How long should they be? What do I need to highlight if I’m trying to transition into the nonprofit sector?”

Bridgestar sat down with Janet Albert, Bridgespan Executive Search Senior Director, to discuss these and other questions. With over 15 years of experience in executive search, Janet has reviewed thousands of resumes and cover letters. We hope her insights will help you draft, refine, and finalize yours.

Bridgestar: What are the key things you look for when you’re reviewing resumes?

Janet Albert: The first thing that catches my eye is whether or not the resume is laid out clearly. It sounds simple, but I want to be able to scan a resume quickly and say “I get what this person is about.”

The visual appeal of the resume is very important. Does your resume look clean and consistent? Is there a balance of text and white space? Do you use bold and italics well so that the appropriate things jump off the page? And are the formatting and structure consistent throughout?

My preference is for resumes organized in reverse chronological order. This gives me a sense of your career track record, trajectory, and accomplishments. In contrast, functional resumes can make it difficult to understand your career progression, which is a key part of assessing fit. I also tend to worry that a candidate is using a functional format to mask a less-than-stellar career progression.

From a more content-focused perspective, I look for a focus on accomplishments rather than activities, responsibilities, or educational background. For the first few years of your career it’s reasonable to use terms like “responsible for” or “part of a team that.” Likewise, it’s fine for new graduates to list their educational background first. But by the time you’re applying for senior management positions, the focus of your resume should be on professional accomplishments—for example “Doubled size of endowment in two years,” or “Put in place centralized resources to increase efficiency and cut costs by 10%,” or “Instituted performance management plan and reduced turnover of field staff,” or something else that shows what you have accomplished for the organization.

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Do people really read cover letters? Or is it just a matter of making sure there are no typos?

Albert: Everyone values them differently. I do read cover letters and find them to be very helpful. This is especially true if you are making a transition from the for-profit sector to the nonprofit sector: I'll look to your cover letter to help tell me why this move makes sense for you and for the organization. The cover letter gives you an opportunity to position yourself, to show that you have done research on the organization and thought about what you will bring to the table. A good cover letter sets me up to read the resume with this context in mind.

In my experience, the cover letter is more important to nonprofit clients than to those in the for-profit world. Especially at smaller nonprofits, clients look for applicants' ability to write well. Because resources are often scarce, senior nonprofit managers have less support, leaving them responsible for a great deal of writing. A cover letter with a grammatical or punctuation error will definitely raise red flags even for the most accomplished applicant. Of course, this is true in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors alike!

What makes a good cover letter?

Albert: The basics are simple—your cover letter should be well-written, concise, and free of typos. Overly wordy or flowery cover letters are not helpful. Your cover letter should also make it clear why you are interested in the position and why you are a good candidate. The best ones let a bit of personality shine through, without being over-the-top. Avoid mentioning arcane interests. They may give a potential employer a sense of your personality, but you really want to stick with how your experience lends itself to the job you're applying for.

If you are a bridger—an individual who is making a shift into the nonprofit sector for the first time—it will be particularly important for you to emphasize how your prior experience will translate to the sector, which will help direct me to the relevant parts of your resume when I get there. The most compelling cover letters articulate a candidate's strong passion for an organization's mission and can point to specific experiences that demonstrate that passion.

How long should cover letters and resumes be?

Albert: Cover letters should be one page, maximum. Resumes should be two pages, maybe three, not longer. If you have a long list of publications or speaking engagements that you want to share, you can create that list as an addendum to the resume, rather than giving me a six-page resume. It's also important to use a font size that is easy to read. If you have to reduce your font size (e.g., below a 10

point font) to limit the number of pages of your resume or cover letter, you may want to go back and revise to be more concise.

How can bridgers customize their resumes for a nonprofit job search?

Albert: There are several things you can do to ensure that your resume encourages nonprofit organizations to consider you for the job. The biggest thing is this “translation” piece I mentioned. Articulate your experiences and skills in a way that emphasizes their transferability to the specific job you are pursuing. For example, highlight functional expertise such as marketing, technology, or accounting. Or emphasize having managed individuals from different backgrounds and departments (e.g., engineering and product development) or across multiple geographies.

In addition, make sure to highlight all of your relevant nonprofit involvement and the skills you have developed through that work. People often include formal positions, such as treasurer of the board of a local nonprofit, but make the mistake of omitting less formal involvement such as developing brochures to help market their child’s preschool, or fundraising or recruiting volunteers they did for a local political candidate. Having a specific section of the resume dedicated to community involvement or nonprofit work can help make this experience more visible to the resume reader.

Finally, avoid jargon. Remember that people reading your resume—especially hiring managers, as opposed to professional recruiters—may not be very familiar with the specifics of your current field and may get turned off by the use of too much jargon. For example, industry jargon, terms, and acronyms such as “cycle time, turnkey, bandwidth, quick ratio, JIT, CBA, JCAHO” and others may leave enough questions for a nonprofit manager that they set your resume aside until they have more time to absorb and think through the language. In the same vein, nonprofit leaders may not know companies in your industry. Consider having a one-line description for each employer that would include the organization’s area of focus, revenue or budget size, number of employees, and geography.

What are some of the worst mistakes people make?

Albert: Typos and grammatical errors are the worst. If I see them I have to think one of two things: either you have poor attention to detail, which is not what I want in an employee, or you didn’t care enough about this opportunity to take the time to edit your resume or cover letter thoroughly. Making errors on employment dates and/or leaving jobs off your resume can also raise red flags.

Another big mistake is applying to something totally irrelevant. As a recruiter, if I see your resume come in for a number of jobs that aren’t really relevant to your skill set, it will be hard for me to take you seriously,

even for a job that does fit. I want to see that you are consciously thinking through each opportunity, rather than sending out a batch of resumes to cover every opportunity that comes up.

Any other tips?

Albert: First, if you have broad, cross-functional experience, do tailor your resume when applying for jobs. If you are applying for a director of operations role that has a finance emphasis, ensure that the version of your resume that you submit emphasizes your finance experience. For a director of operations opportunity with more of a strategy focus, you might want to emphasize your strategic planning experience instead.

Second, keep your resume updated. If you're going to take the time to apply for a job, you need to give a potential employer or recruiter your most recent information. This will make the recruiting process more efficient.

Finally, remember that sometimes you can do everything right on your resume and cover letter and still get no responses for a while. The job search process can be long, tedious, and frustrating. My advice would be not to lose heart; eventually the right opportunity will surface and the end result will be well worth the wait.

Bridgestar (www.bridgestar.org), an initiative of the Bridgespan Group, provides a nonprofit management job board, content, and tools designed to help nonprofit organizations build strong leadership teams and individuals pursue career paths as nonprofit leaders.