
The Difference is You

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► Every year I meet an assortment of college grads with freshly minted business degrees ranging from HR to IT and everything in between. The big challenge they all face is how to make their resume stand out and how to ace the interview.

Unless you've already chosen a career path of what is termed a learned profession [doctor, lawyer, engineer, accountant etc.] your resume can end up looking like everyone else's. Having helped thousands of college grads over the past 20 years, and having been one myself, I've developed a tailored approach to what makes a difference in a resume and an interview. Here is some sound advice:

In 2009, there will be over one million college graduates on the street looking for work and most of their resumes will look the same. They are typically on one page with a cookie cutter look and feel. This approach will generate some interviews, but it would be better if your resume reflected who you really are.

Your resume should prepare the interviewer and you for the actual interview. Start with a blank sheet of paper and write down your thoughts on who you are, how you got to be you, who you want to be, and how you plan on getting there. Take a look at your childhood, reflect on how you were raised. How did your parent's influence you? How did you do in high school and college? Why did you choose the schools you attended? What choices did you make that influenced where and who you are now? When you do get to the interview stage this will already have set you apart.

Next, during the interview, there are three things to blend into the dialog:

1. When you were the happiest. There is no need to mention when you were sad [no one wants to work with sad people].
2. What your most notable achievement is. This should already be on your resume, and the interview is the time to bring the experience to life.
3. What the biggest [positive] decision you ever made is and how that decision impacted your life. This is an opportunity to emphasize how you've met challenges and succeeded, not how you've overcome problems [no one wants to hear about your problems].

Years ago we asked our first employee in Rochester to tell us something in her life she was most proud of. We told her it didn't matter if it was in third grade or yesterday - maybe she won the science fair - maybe she won the 100 yard dash. She couldn't find an answer and broke into a cold sweat. Then she remembered she won an award in high school for perfect attendance; and then she said, "Oh, and I also received an award from my college employer because I never missed a day of work in 4 years." Needless to say, none of this was on her resume. Can you imagine an employee who was never home sick from school and proudly never misses work? We could, and she was hired on the spot. She turned out to be just what we thought she would be: dependable, reliable, dedicated, and one fabulous employee.

Recently, one of my friends asked me to advise his daughter. She had just spent the previous year networking and interviewing, but did not receive any substantive job offers. He mentioned that of his three children she has always been the most dependable. When I asked her to tell me something about herself, she said she was just frustrated with the whole process. Then I asked her if she was dependable. She asked me how I knew that. I asked again, "Are you?" No answer. So I told her that her Dad told me. She said, "Yes, I am." The point is that during the interview you need to be able to take center stage and talk about something that's tough to put into writing - the intangibles. Of course, that is why I started by encouraging you to put as many of the intangibles in the actual resume to begin with. As for my friend's daughter, yes, she got a good job the next week and has been there two years. The client tells me she is very dependable.

And, finally, after the interview don't forget to send a thank you note - handwritten, with a real stamp, and sent the same day. An e mail won't be nearly as appreciated or noticed. You'll be remembered [and hired].