

# What Do Recruiters Want to See in a Resume?

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Koya search consultants and career coaches see thousands of resumes every year. As part of our “Ask Koya” series, Koya team members offer their perspective and guidance on writing an effective resume.

## What should I think about when writing my resume?

**Alexandra Corvin:** Your resume should be a standalone document that tells your full story. Put yourself in the shoes of the reader (recruiter or hiring manager) and ask yourself what questions could, and should, the reader have about you? For example, is there a big gap in your resume? Did you make a big career transition? Think about what those questions might be, and proactively address them in your materials. Don't leave anything to assumption or interpretation. Tell your story the way you want it to be told.

**Marissa Martin:** Your resume should answer several key questions. How long were you at different employers? Was there upward mobility? Were you promoted in your roles? I would always ask any recruiter you are working with for advice: How does this resume look? Is there something I should tailor? Is there anything missing that I can add before you distribute?

**Amanda Sonis Glynn:** One of the biggest challenges of developing a resume is creating a document that will be as effective when someone scans it quickly as it is when they go through it carefully. Your resume should convey the story of your career in the most straightforward way possible. Don't presume that the reader will fill in gaps with accurate information, and don't assume that they will know which experiences or skills you consider to be most important. Instead, make that information incredibly clear and easy to find. Before tailoring your resume to a particular potential employer, spend some time reading the job description and familiarizing yourself with the organization's website, annual report, and other materials. The language and messaging that they use should be reflected in your resume and cover letter.

## How should I format my resume?

**Alex:** It's important to understand from the outset that you will be evaluated on how your resume looks, the formatting and style. Make sure it is easy to read and visually accessible. I advise candidates to stay away from overly designed resumes, and choose a clean, crisp format that is easy to read. I also recommend always presenting your resume as a PDF, so the format doesn't get changed depending on what version of Word the reader has or if they are viewing it on their phone.

**Marissa:** As recruiters, we're looking for a clean resume, something that's easy to read. Some basic formatting can go a long way, such as putting the company name first and then your role and then listing the dates very clearly.

**Amanda:** Use consistent formatting and parallel language (starting each bullet with an active verb, for example) to ensure that your reader can focus on the substance of your resume.



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## Should I put an “objective” on the top of my resume?

**Alex:** We don't need to see an objective. We know you want the job; you don't need to tell us that. Instead, I like to see a little blurb at the top that connects the dots of what might not be obvious from reading your resume, particularly if you're someone that's interested in making a career transition. Let's say you've been a fundraiser for the last 10 years and now you want to be on the program side. People reviewing your resume are instinctually going to put you in the fundraising box. So, if you're trying to make that switch, explain your desire for a transition, and highlight your intention and why you think you're qualified. People will not necessarily come to that on their own.

**Marissa:** I agree, you don't need an objective on your resume. I'm OK with a summary on the front, and I think you need to tailor it to the role. If you're looking at a nonprofit CEO position, I want to see some language about Board experience/governance, executive leadership, strategy, and fundraising in your summary.

**Amanda:** I typically advise people not to include an objective or summary. It is far more effective to show your reader what you hope to accomplish and what you are capable of doing (by sharing thoughtful, specific, and targeted bullets in your resume) than to tell them. That said, if you are looking to make a transition, providing some context is helpful. In that case, a concise objective connecting the dots for the reader is useful.

## How long should my resume be?

**Marissa:** If you've got five, 10 years of experience, you don't have to try and fit it all on to one page; you can go onto two or three pages. Your resume should tell the story of your career and your accomplishments. However, unless you are applying for a higher education or scientific position where a full CV is required, I don't need a list of every single event you've spoken at and everything that you've written.

**Amanda:** I generally advise people to have a resume somewhere between two to three pages long (unless they are applying for an academic position where a CV is appropriate). That said, there's no magic answer to how long a resume should be. Is the information necessary and relevant? I would rather see a longer resume where it feels like every bit of space is used appropriately than a short one that doesn't give me enough information about the candidate. On the flip side, a resume can be within that two- to three-page benchmark and still be too long if it isn't concise or provides redundant information.

## Should I include a photo on my resume?

**Alex:** Do not use a photo of yourself.

**Marissa:** Absolutely do not use a photo of yourself. Recruiters are looking for facts, successes, and numbers.

**Amanda:** Definitely do not include a photo on your resume, but do include a professional-looking photo in your LinkedIn profile.

## What contact information is important to include?

**Marissa:** A lot of people don't feel comfortable including their full address. I don't think you need to. Include your email, phone number, and LinkedIn at the top of your resume and in your email signature. The last thing you want is a recruiter trying to find your phone number. You can definitely put your pronouns on your resume, especially if you're looking at an organization that you know is progressive. But there are also organizations that are not like that, so tailor your resume to the culture of the organization.

**Amanda:** While I understand why people might be uncomfortable including a street address on their resume, it can be helpful to include basic geographic information (city and state, for example). In a lot of mission-driven organizations, having a connection to a particular community or a network that you can bring with you to your new position can be incredibly helpful. Moreover, any time someone doesn't include a location on their resume, I wonder whether they are local and, if not, if they would be serious about relocating for the position. Being upfront with that information allows the candidate to control that narrative.



## How do I best illustrate my experience?

**Alex:** Use bullets vs. prose. Instead of listing tasks, show your accomplishments through examples and specific numbers. Recruiters want to know the size of your organization's budgets, staff size, and direct reports. If you are a fundraiser, how much money have you raised and from what sources? Look at the position profile and tailor your resume to that profile. If the profile is talking all about fundraising and raising \$25 million and you've only raised \$15 million, but you started at three, people are going to be impressed with that.

Think about how you can quantify your experience and expertise with actual data. Percentage of budget increase under your leadership, number of direct reports, increase in clients served or dollars raised. These are all metrics that demonstrate impact and should be included in every resume.

**Marissa:** In the content of your role, I want to see numbers. I want to see where the organization was when you started, and where it is now. I want to see your results and what you really accomplished while you were there. More than anything, I don't like a resume that is just all your straight tasks, a laundry list. I'm looking for results and content.

**Amanda:** When I was in high school, I had a theater director who used to chant, "BE SPECIFIC. B-E SPECIFIC." I have that chant running through my head whenever I read resumes. Provide numbers, scale, and key accomplishments. For each bullet, ask "who, what, where, when, why, how?"; you won't provide information about every single answer in every single bullet, but this exercise can help prompt you to add relevant details. I don't want to read a resume that is essentially a job description. No one else—not even someone in the same exact role in the same exact organization—should have the same bullets as you. Show what you did in that role.

## Should I include my hobbies or outside interests in my resume?

**Alex:** I don't think it's necessary to include your personal hobbies unless it is additive to your story. For example, I was reviewing a resume of a woman who worked in an environmental organization, and she listed that she had visited all 50 states. I loved that because it helped paint a picture of who she is and was a great conversation starter. Love of travel, dining at new restaurants, etc., does not tell me anything about you relevant to the role or help paint you in a unique light. So, if it's additive, go for it. Otherwise, skip it.

**Amanda:** Every bit of space on your resume is prime real estate, so use it as effectively as possible. If your resume is running long, I would not sacrifice bullets relevant to your professional experience to include hobbies. That said, everything you include on your resume triggers a reaction from your reader, and if including information about your hobbies might trigger something positive—sharing information that rounds out your candidacy or provides a potential point of connection—then I would consider including it. But be aware that the opposite effect is also possible—something you list may trigger a negative reaction that you cannot anticipate or mitigate.

## What should I include in my resume when transitioning from a for-profit role into the nonprofit sector?

**Marissa:** When I'm looking at candidates that are crossing over from the private sector to the nonprofit sector, I'm looking for civic engagement. So, any sort of volunteering, Boards that you've served on, committees, task forces, these are really important because we want to show some commitment to the sector and the organization you're seeking to join. Specifically, if you're a crossover candidate from the private sector, I want to see a connection to the mission in the organization where you're applying. If you are interested in education, maybe you're on your local school council or you've sat on the Board for a local education nonprofit. I need to see that in your resume.

**Amanda:** Focus on transferable skills, using language that is consistent with the organizations to which you are applying. This is essentially the semantics version of "dress for the job you want"—there are a lot of different words you can use to explain the same exact concept. Make sure the words you use reflect the culture of the organization you want to move toward, not the one you want to move from.

It's also really important to highlight any volunteer, Board, or community engagement roles you've held. Treat those roles with the same care with which you've treated your professional experience in your resume. Use the same formatting and include titles, dates, and bullets that showcase the substantive work that you have done.



## I'm more senior in my career—should I list every job I've ever had?

**Alex:** If it's not relevant, you don't need to get into the specifics of each individual role from early on in your career. However, you do not want to surprise people or leave room for questions. You may consider listing earlier experience and years, so the reader understands the trajectory of your career but only include the details for the more recent and relevant positions.

**Amanda:** I'm a fan of transparency, and there are potential opportunities for connection or important experience in every job you've held. However, your resume bullets should be front-loaded. In other words, most of the information you include in your resume should fall under your more recent positions. Roles you've held longer ago may only show up in a list or with one general bullet providing a bit of context.

## I took time off from work to care for a family member—how should I address the gap in employment in my resume?

**Alex:** If you took time away from work to care for children or an elderly parent, do not feel like you have to hide it. As a recruiter, I would rather see that on the resume, so I understand your background in chronological order versus having to go and ask for it. You end up drawing more attention to it if it's not on the resume.

## Any final advice?

**Marissa:** When you seek resume advice, you're going to get 3,000 different answers. People are very particular in what they like and how they like it. And I don't think it's one size fits all, especially across different industries. A resume for an auditor is going to be very different than a nonprofit program manager. If you're looking across sectors, private sector and nonprofit, and at different levels, it can be really beneficial to have different resumes customized for those sectors/roles.

**Amanda:** Very often when people are applying for jobs, they create documents that they think will make them most attractive to the reader—they showcase the experiences and skills that demonstrate their ability to do a job well. This is obviously critical, but it's also important to create documents that will get you hired to do the job you want to do. You might be fantastic at qualitative analysis, but if you never want to crunch numbers again, don't highlight those experiences in your resume. If you want to grow in a particular area, include bullets that show what you've done so far in that space. Make sure your resume focuses on the places where there is overlap between what you can do and what you most want to do.

Finally, a resume is a very personal document: you are sharing your story, no one knows your story better than you do, and it is important that you represent yourself in an authentic way. At the end of the day, you want to create and share a document that you are proud of and that feels like it came from—and could only come from—you.

