

Wall Street Journal Article

***The Keywords to Put on a Resume –
An AI tool may read it first. Here's how to make sure
it passes muster***

By Heidi Mitchell

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Message to Holy Family Job Search Members

- This PowerPoint Presentation is based on a May 16th, 2022, article in the Wall Street Journal.
- I put the content in a PowerPoint document to enhance the readability of the resume example and to allow additional suggestions from the 24/7s. The last slide contains some further suggestions on resume support.

Before a job recruiter gets a peek at a résumé these days, an AI tool may likely judge it first. And its main criteria are keywords.

If there is a job for a CFO, for instance, the AI would be told to look for the phrase “chief financial officer” —but also terms that might relate to it, such as “Fortune 500” or “team collaboration.” The AI—part of a type of software known as an applicant-tracking system—can then plow through hundreds of résumés in a second, find the ones with the most keyword matches and pass them along to a human.

So, applicants should just drop in as many keywords as possible to boost their chances, right? Wrong. To leverage keywords correctly, job seekers must strike a delicate balance, experts say. Too few keywords means the AI will reject the résumé. But too many keywords may turn a résumé into a word salad that will turn off a human recruiter.

Here's a look at some of the crucial things job seekers should do—and avoid—to get the most out of keywords.

DON'T Forget the Basics

Two of the most obvious questions about keywords are “How many do I need to include?” and “Are there any generic ones that work for different types of jobs?”

First, there is no correct number of keywords to use, says Wendy Enelow, a professional résumé writer and author of “Modernize Your Resume: Get Noticed...Get Hired,” adding that 10 is often a good minimum, but she has seen effective résumés with dozens.

On the other hand, she says, there are keywords that could work across many jobs or industries—less technical ones such as “interpersonal relationships” and “efficiency.”

DO Search for Clues

The good news is that there are many places to look for hints to keywords. A good place to start is with the posted job description itself, says Julia Pollak, chief economist at [ZipRecruiter](#), an online employment marketplace. Pull critical words from the posting, and similar listings, and use them to replace comparable terms that are already in the résumé. For example, applicants might use “application of intelligence” instead of “experience” in a job description, or “human-centric” instead of “client-facing.” Job seekers might also find potential keywords in other parts of the site, like corporate bios, the company blog and employment section.

“The algorithm is looking for a strong match between skills and the job at hand,” says Ms. Pollak, “so it’s smart to put those skills first, using simple, clear terms that people in your industry regularly use.”

Job seekers should also do some googling. Somebody looking for a job in logistics, for instance, might search for “top logistics keywords” or “top ATS [or applicant-tracking system] keywords” by your industry, Ms. Pollak says.

DON'T Forget The Unexpected

Companies sometimes look for keywords that won't be easy to deduce from corporate sites or googling. Recruiters may have their applicant-tracking system scan résumés for specific company or brand names, for instance—because they want to poach people from certain companies or snap up people who have worked on certain products.

So, be sure to include knowledge of technologies like those in the [Microsoft](#) suite or coding languages such as Python. If you've worked on projects for major brands or companies, mention how you have interacted with them. “Knowledge of competitor companies, or of larger companies in the same industry or an adjacent industry, can be particularly valuable,” says Ms. Pollak. “If you've worked for or with any—whether as an employee, consultant, or vendor—show it off.”

A job seeker's location can be an important keyword, too. If jobs are hybrid or in-person only, or if the job requires local or regional knowledge, listing a metro or state location on the résumé will be critical.

DO Be Honest

Job seekers have come up with some ingenious tricks to fool AIs. But there is a big risk of getting caught—and losing a potential job.

Ms. Pollak, for instance, has seen people cut and paste an entire job description into their résumés. Doing that will likely get a lot of keyword matches from an AI, she says. On the other hand, copying a description is a known bad practice, and some AIs have been programmed to catch it.

But even if the cutting and pasting gets a résumé past the AI gatekeeper, a human will see it next—and probably dislike it. Hiring managers don't want to see tricks, Ms. Pollak says. "They want specific quantifiable descriptions of your skills and competencies." Some people take the cut-and-paste idea even further and put the job listing into their résumé using a white font color. So, an AI can scan the text, but a human eye won't see the words that have been dropped in.

Once again, an AI might not spot the trick. But many human recruiters are savvy to this strategy—and if they find somebody using it, the consequences can be harsh. A candidate could get disqualified immediately and possibly even blackballed.

"It's a sign of gaming, and hiring managers don't want gamers," says Ms. Pollak. "They want trust and consistency—that matters more than any hard skill."

DON'T Just List Keywords

Some applicant-tracking software doesn't only look for keywords—it gives extra points for résumés that put words around keywords, says Julie Schweber, a senior knowledge adviser with the Society for Human Resource Management.

That means writing sentences or phrases about a job experience is far better than simply listing keywords in bullet points.

Surround keywords “with strong verbs like ‘designed,’ ‘developed,’ ‘built,’ ‘wrote,’ ‘grew,’ ‘led,’ ” says Ms. Pollak. “Our CEO always says to write like a cave man, with clear, crisp, strong language.” You might also pile up more keywords that way—if the AI is trained to look for “leader,” for instance, then using the verb “lead” could be a close match.

At the same time, look at ways to describe your work that add potential keywords but also click with a hiring manager. For instance, Ms. Enelow says, “ ‘Worked as a teacher’ can be transformed into ‘Designed and taught classes, created instructional tools and advanced educational innovations.’ Then, when a hiring manager looks at your résumé, you will look like an experienced person that could fit the job in question.”

DO Use Synonyms and Acronyms

Because different applicant-tracking systems will search for different keywords, job seekers should consider using varied words for the same skill or title. “You don’t know if the system will be searching for ‘CFO’ or ‘Chief Financial Officer,’ so depending on how I’m using it, in a title versus something else, I will make sure to get both of those terms in there,” says Ms. Enelow.

Including a headline or objective is one way to cram keywords into the top of a résumé, experts say. In the case of a chief financial officer looking for another CFO or executive vice president job, says Ms. Enelow, “I would have a headline like, ‘corporate finance and global business partner’ and underneath that say, ‘Fortune 500, joint ventures, mergers’...all of which are nouns describing what any CFO does. I put them up at the top because that way she is instantly saying, ‘I’m doing this work, and at this level.’ ”

DO List Your Objectives

Putting an objective at the top of a résumé can be a big help if someone is transitioning to another industry. It is an old-school style but provides an opportunity to use keywords suited to the job they want—instead of relying on keywords related to the industry they left.

“A marketing person looking for a job in training and development could write: ‘Objective: Opportunity to leverage my corporate-leadership skills in training and development, organizational-needs assessment and talent-pipeline development and management,’ as long as the job seeker has experience in those areas,” Ms. Enelow says. “Look at all those keywords.”

Resume Example

- The following six slides show sections of a resume with specific recommendations from the WSJ writer with a few added **points in red** from Holy Family Job Search Ministry 24/7 volunteers.
- The resume example features a former elementary-school teacher who is seeking a job in corporate training and development.

ANDREW LAWSON

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Outstanding presentation, communication, and interpersonal relationship skills. Collaborative training and leadership style with ability to inspire others to achieve. Dedicated to advancing educational innovations to drive learner success.

Technology Portfolio:

MS Office Suite – Word, Excel, Publisher, PowerPoint. Google Drive – Docs, Forms, Sheets, Meets, Classroom.

Notes from Previous Slide

1. Include your LinkedIn page, recruiters look for it. Put your name, one phone number, email address and LinkedIn page **on separate lines.**
2. Headlines can include critical keywords.
3. This section offers a quick look at how you want to be perceived in the job market. The double-column list of keywords is clean and concise. Use keywords that directly relate to the posting. **(Never use Microsoft table as ATS will not read them.)**
4. This section shows other “soft” keywords that can be vital
5. Show all the technology keywords used by recruiters

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Educator, Chairperson & Staff Liaison – Darwin County Public Schools – Chicago, IL 2014 to Present
Classroom Educator responsible for design, customization, and delivery of group and individualized learning programs. Serve as Staff Liaison to educational teams, administrative personnel, learners, association members, and others. Recently appointed Learning Chairperson, guiding other educators in defining educational strategies and integrating technology tools to drive continuous growth and development. Taught 650+ students during tenure.

- **Increased student learning performance year-over-year, averaging 80%+ for 5 consecutive years.**
- Produced Master Schedule for entire school and all personnel, facilities, instructional materials, activities, and more, impacting 600+ learners and 100+ faculty and staff annually.
- Successfully managed immediate transition from in-person to virtual learning during pandemic. Minimized learner disruption, created digital teaching and multimedia tools, and fostered student engagement.
- Partnered with other educators, administrators, and management teams to drive forward learning innovations.
- Led ongoing data collection, analysis, and reporting functions to assess learner behavior and performance, training program effectiveness, and quality of both on-campus and off-campus instruction.

Notes from Previous Slide

6. Job Title includes more keywords and showcases multiple roles. **It's OK to show year only, especially if you have employment gaps greater than six months.** Combine two similar jobs to keep resume simple.
7. Add specific metrics for accomplishments, **and it's OK to estimate percentages and financial results.**
8. Description and bullet points are packed with keywords. Key words do not have to be in separate sections for ATS to find them. **Only use bullets, never squares or other shapes.**
9. Begin each bullet point with powerful action verbs like “Increased”, “led”, or “Partnered”.

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EARLY CAREER POSITIONS:

Sales Associate, Recruiter & Trainer – Modern Design, Inc. – Chicago, IL

Built 18-person field sales organization into one of the top-performing networks in nationwide company. Managed recruitment, training, and management functions for new hires and seasoned sales professionals. Led sales presentations, developed customer outreach communications, and grew sales by average of 18% annually.

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Assistant Director – Gifford & Miller Academy, Inc. – Rainier, IL

Dual responsibility for training and managing 30 employees and for developing curricula and teaching classes. Coordinated recruitment, training, and development for professional and para-professional staff, directed administrative affairs, and managed purchasing, inventory control, facilities, recordkeeping, and reporting.

EDUCATION:

MA – Teaching – University of Chicago – Chicago, IL

BA – Psychology & Child Development – Colorado State University – Boulder, CO

Notes from Previous Slide

11. Older job can show a broader range of experience and additional skills. Don't feel compelled to list dates but be concise in wording.

12. Some employers are looking for specific schools, but most experts say that schools attended are less important than what you studied. Don't use too much precious space on this.

- Recent college grads might have a one-page resume. Mid-career job seekers should typically have a two-page resume. In most cases, do not list jobs from the before the year 2000.
- Use 11-point type with you name in 12-point type. Do not use borders or horizontal lines as they confuse ATS systems.

More Resources from Holy Family Job Support

- <https://hfjobssupport.org/>
- Under the banner “Job Search Help”, you can find a summary of good resume practices and many specific articles.
- Holy Family Job Support Ministry offers four workshops, including a resume workshop. Check them out at <https://hfjobssupport.org/workshops/>
- Attending the workshop allows you to create a “good” resume. Working with one of the 24/7 volunteers helps you create a “great” one.
- Check out the “Featured” section of Denis Curtin’s LinkedIn page for detailed advise on creating ATS ready resumes. See <https://www.linkedin.com/in/deniscurtin/>
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