

the young manager

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writing a skills résumé– translating nonwork experience into highly marketable skills

New young managers with highly marketable skills learned during extra-curricular school activities but little, if any, previous job experiences often don't make it to first base in their job search. The reason? Most rely on traditional chronological résumés to open doors for them, but such résumés, with their emphasis on previous work experience, fail to do justice to the wealth of skills they possess. What young people need to use, in the opinion of the author, is a skills résumé, a document that enables its writer to translate his or her nonwork experience into functional skills attractive to employers. Using a narrative format rather than the more formal approach that is typical of AMJ articles, the author demonstrates the process for identifying the skills a résumé writer possesses, sometimes unknowingly; how to translate these skills into functional terms that an employer can appreciate and also how to write a skills résumé; and the advantages of such a résumé to would-be managers, new young managers, and mid-career executives.

midge stepped down from her perch on the dais, a position she took during job-search seminars conducted weekly on Wednesdays and Thursdays in a small eastern business college. Today's discussion ended a series on the decision-making process. Midge tried in these sessions to get undergraduate and graduate students and alumni (there were a good number of old timers in middle- and upper-level management who came back to their alma mater for job-search counseling) to focus on their patterns of decision making by assessing how they managed their past "decision passages," as Midge called them. If they performed the exercise thoroughly, they could use the assessment data as the bases for developing and maintaining a more productive decision-making style in the future. Tomorrow, the discussion would focus on the *skills résumé*, a vehicle for translating experiences into functional terms that employers can appreciate.

As Midge stepped down from the dais, Jane, Greg, and Frank asked to see her for a few minutes. Exhausted, Midge sat herself in the nearest chair and looked at the trio, well aware that they were going to ask her to talk to them right then and there about the skills résumé since they would not be able to attend tomorrow's session. Jane, a graduate, and Greg, an undergraduate, were on their way to an advertising conference in New York; Frank, an alumnus who had recently been laid off from his 15-year management position with a large electronics firm, had financial business to take care of tomorrow and next Wednesday.

Midge thought to herself, "I'm too tired now; I can't do this justice," but she said, "Sure, let's sit down and see how much we can cover in the time available."

A crash course in self-marketing

To lay the groundwork for the subsequent discussion on the skills résumé, Midge quickly went over for the group the points she would be making the next day in her opening remarks:

- The important task, whether it be for the beginner looking for the first time for a job or for the veteran job holder looking after several years in the same job for a new one, is to translate skills and abilities into functional form so that employers find them attractive.
- We often shortchange ourselves by not looking thoroughly at *all* we have done in our lives, because of a fixation we have with occupational levels that we have formally attained and job titles that have been assigned us. Beginners especially fall into this pit. They have not yet started their formal careers, so there is a dearth of such occupational titles in their lives. But many of

the projects they have undertaken outside professional life—say, as part of leisure, volunteer, or educational activities—are as rife with the opportunity to develop skills, talents, and abilities as those undertaken in the business environment. Would-be managers, though, are not the only ones who fall prey to this problem. Individuals in mid-career, too, get locked into occupational titles, thus failing to utilize valuable skills developed in avocational activities.

- A job with a certain title in one institution may require a set of skills different from those required in a job with a similar title in another organization. That's why stressing job titles in our self-marketing efforts is not the best approach. By locking ourselves into job titles, we may fail to reflect our true skills. At the very least, it narrows the picture we present to a prospective employer of the skills we possess.
- We expect employers to examine with some sort of magical insight a series of job positions and titles we have held and to ferret from them the skills we possess. Such expectations are generally unrealistic.
- Undoubtedly, the skills we possess and apply are what make us successful or unsuccessful on the job. Therefore, it ought to be clear in our own minds what our skills are. Then we can utilize an effective vehicle for communicating them to potential employers. That vehicle is the skills résumé.
- Getting a job is a sales process. We "sell" our skills, talents, abilities, and personality to an employer. But before we can successfully market our product—ourselves—we have to be convinced of its worth. A way to achieve an appreciation of ourselves is to take careful inventory of our accomplishments, cataloging the wealth of skills we possess, sometimes unknowingly.

A realistic blueprint of ourselves

- Not infrequently we lack creativity in presenting ourselves to potential employers. We mistakenly assume that there are fixed types of persons whom employers desire, and we try to make ourselves into one of these types instead of trying to discern who our experiences, achievements, and background have made us. If we can accurately formulate a blueprint of ourselves, we might find, much to our surprise, our freshness and originality disarm and impress the employer whose thinking we have erroneously stereotyped.
- We tend to see employment as a process conducted by machines rather than by humans. So we do not exert any effort to put ourselves in an employer's shoes and look at ourselves through his or her eyes. If we were capable of such empathy, we would be better able to anticipate what a given employer

would appreciate in a candidate and what he or she might reject. We then could respond effectively by playing up those qualities that we possess and that the prospective employer is looking for.

Incidentally, this empathic process requires doing homework, such as re-searching the institution—its goals and needs, its temper and personality, its current strengths and weaknesses—and what it generally looks for in employees and what it decries. We need data on these issues if we are to be in a position to put ourselves into the shoes of the employer empathically.

•We do not think positively enough. Too often we start the job-search campaign with a skeptical and insecure attitude. A healthy skepticism is appropriate for the tight job market most of us find ourselves in: but once we enter the job market, we should arm ourselves against any pessimism by a firm belief in the effectiveness of our job-search strategy and the employment process. Otherwise, we may fail because of our own negative outlook. Positive thinking about the process as well as about ourselves is a sustaining force that often begets success.

Writing a skills résumé

As Midge completed her discussion of what she called the “foundational points” of her lecture, she realized that she would have to take shortcuts in order to pour into the time available what she ordinarily took several hours to develop. But her three listeners looked eager and urged her on.

“All of this leads me,” she said, as she leaned her head back to rest her neck, “to our main concern: how to compile a skills résumé. There are undoubtedly several routes one can take to gather the data for a skills résumé,” Midge continued. “If you were listening to another counselor or instructor, you would probably hear another method. I’m going to describe the one that I have had success with. It is comparatively simple and efficient. But to be done well, each of four steps must be completed carefully and thoroughly.” The four steps, Midge said, were:

1. Logging achievements.
2. Factoring achievements for skills, abilities, and talents.
3. Gleaning from the factored data generic or “umbrella” skills and summarizing them.
4. Composing a résumé that is as creative, attractive, and brief, yet thorough, as possible.

Midge could rattle off the process rapidly because she had recounted it many times to many individuals and groups, yet each time she reflected as she did so that what looked like a quick process took time and care if it were to

yield a valid and forceful document. She knew there was always a danger that some individuals would attempt to go through the process quickly and superficially. She also knew they would probably end up finding little or no satisfaction with the finished product. Thus, in recounting the four steps, Midge always found herself admonishing, "Take all the time you need. You'll not regret the energy, time, and care you put into it when you come away with a document that reflects you at your best and gets you several interviews."

Midge also reflected on how she came to formulate the process. It was a composite of ideas gleaned from several sources, including Richard Bolles, author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*; John Crystal, co-author with Bolles of *Where Do I Go from Here with My Life?*; Hal Pearson and Gladys Bishop, formerly with Polaroid in Boston; Mainstream International in New York; colleagues in career counseling; and friends.

"No matter what projects are logged, Midge told the trio, it is necessary for them to be described in sufficient detail so that, in a later step in the exercise, skills can be sifted from the description. Just listing jobs and titles or writing an achievement in vague generalities is inadequate, even hurtful, since it can disguise skills."

A log of achievements

Midge explained to her audience of three that step No. 1 in the process involves sitting down with pencil and paper, preferably a tablet, and lining each sheet down the center. "In the left-hand corner," she said, "you should list achievements or accomplishments in your life." Midge defined an achievement as being "anything you are proud of having accomplished at any time of your life or in any facet of it—professional, educational, or avocational."

Midge pointed out that an adequate list of achievements for most of us should contain from ten to 20 entries. The specific number depends upon how long we have lived and worked. Each entry should be made up of a detailed description of the achievement, not just a position title or a name of a project. The point of describing what we did in the achievement, Midge explained, is to unearth the skills it involved and the abilities and talents we demonstrated in the process of accomplishing it.

“Here are descriptions of three achievements typical of an undergraduate in his senior year,” she said, pulling from a folder in her bag three copies of a handout she had prepared for distribution the next day. Greg, Jane, and Frank each were given a copy.

The entries on the handout read as follows

Entry A. “From the time I was a freshman in high school to the time I was a junior in college, I worked in my father’s ski store. At first, I worked as a salesperson. Later, I assumed more responsibilities. I stocked shelves, arranged displays, did the purchasing by phone and by letter, and balanced the books. After I entered college, I worked full time during two summers at the store, acting by then as assistant manager to my father, assuming full responsibility for a month—sometimes two—during his vacations. I supervised employees and learned to work with a range of people—employees, vendors, customers, salespersons.”

Entry B. “During the summer between my junior year and senior year in college, I secured a position with an automobile dealer. The position was in sales. But my boss soon discovered that I had management ability and experience and promoted me to a management trainee position.”

Entry C. “During my junior and senior years in college, I managed the college pub. While in student government, I initiated the establishment of the pub. Since the attitude of the school was anything but liberal when it came to the use of liquor, it took some doing to get the administration of the school to allow beer and wine to be sold. Working together with the vice-president of finance and the buildings and grounds supervisor, I located a perfect spot on campus for the pub; I secured a ‘license’ from the student government to set up shop and went through the proper state and city channels for permission to operate the place. I hired personnel, managed the pub, and made considerable profits for the student government.”

Individuals in mid-career might log similar achievements, Midge told Frank, but, in addition, would most likely include some—if not all—of their past occupations.

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Anticipating a criticism from Greg, Midge acknowledged the fact that “the

entries on the handout represented those of a typically successful young person.”

“I was going to ask,” said Greg, “how many of us are lucky enough to have a father who has a business in which we can get experience or to be able to say we ran a college pub?”

“You will be surprised,” Midge assured Greg. “Start logging your achievements. You may not log entries quite as dramatic as these; but, then again,” she said, “you may. Even less dramatic achievements contain translatable skills; that’s the important thing.”

Greg nodded as if to indicate that he could already think of some of his own that fit into this less-dramatic category.

“The first step, which requires recalling and recounting past achievement, in itself calls for a high degree of objectivity. The call is even greater in the second step, which involves the identification of skills, talents, and capabilities within the achievement descriptions.”

Identifying skills

Factoring achievement—the second step in the exercise—Midge always maintained, was the one most subject to contamination. But this was understandable. Whenever we view a facet of our lives, we tend to be nearsighted and nonobjective. This is why great control, objectivity, and clearheadedness are required on the part of the participants in the exercise. The first step, which requires recalling and recounting past achievement, in itself calls for a high degree of objectivity. The call is even greater in the second step, which involves the identification of skills, talents, and capabilities within the achievement descriptions.

“The best approach is to get another person(s) to factor your achievements at the same time that you do, then compare results. Then you’ll probably come closer to actual fact,” Midge always advised.

The step called “factoring” is done in the right-hand column of the lined paper, on which has already been scribbled the ten to 20 achievements. A careful examination of the achievements can highlight phrases and words that

suggest skills, talents, or abilities. One should circle or underscore these phrases or words, then translate them into skills if they do not already appear in that form and write them in the right column.

To demonstrate the process, Midge took Entry *A* and read it aloud. She suggested that her “captive audience” circle such phrases as “salesperson,” “assumed more responsibilities,” “stocked shelves and arranged displays,” “purchasing by phone and by letter,” “balanced the books,” “assistant manager,” “assuming full responsibility,” “supervised employees,” and “worked with a range of people.” Midge then proceeded to translate these phrases into skills and abilities. She stepped back on to the dais and wrote on the blackboard in a column the following: “sales,” “handle increased responsibility,” “organizational ability,” “attend to details,” “purchasing,” “phone management,” “letter composition,” “knowledge of finances,” “management,” “supervisory ability,” and “human relations.” In some cases, the words and phrases were identical to those circled; in others, they were a translation into functional terms. “These are the words and phrases you would write in the right-hand ‘factoring’ column of your achievement log,” Midge observed.

By now, both Jane and Greg were excited. They could see that many projects they had completed, though non-job-related in the sense that they were not completed while holding a job for which they had been hired, contained skills and abilities they could translate into functional skills.

Looking ahead on the handout, Jane said, “Greg may think Entry *C* is unusual, but it is a good example of the kinds of things we do at school but forget to examine for skills. We somehow think they are illegitimate because they weren’t demonstrated in a job we were hired for.” Smiling at Greg, she added, “I’m going to list my position this past year as student government vice-president. It contains a gold mine of functional skills.”

Midge was pleased by such thinking. It clearly showed that she was getting her point across. “While we’re at it,” she said, “let’s finish factoring Entries *B* and *C*.”

Together the group circled for Entry *B* the phrases “management” and “management trainee position.” For *C*, the trio circled “managed the college pub,” “initiated,” “took some doing,” “working together,” “secured a license,” “went through the proper state and city channels for permission,” “hired personnel,” “managed the pub,” and “made considerable profits.”

Translating the phrases in Entries *B* and *C* into skills, the group came up with the following suggestions, which Midge added to the list already on

the board: “sales management,” “initiating ability,” “assertiveness,” “human relations skills,” “organizational ability,” and “management.”

A pattern

“You will find,” Midge said, as she pointed to the board, “that patterns of skills emerge in the factoring process.” She noted that the trio was scrutinizing the list to verify her statement. As she began to speak, the group interrupted to tell her that it had already identified three generic patterns—“sales,” “managerial ability,” and “human relations.” Midge sighed. The group had not only seen three patterns but taken the next step and converted them into generic terms.

“We’ll come back to those patterns of generic skills later,” Midge promised.

Midge went on to explain that if we log achievements from all stages of our lives, we readily unearth patterns of skills that can be clustered in generic groups. Summarizing that pattern is step No. 3 in the exercise. Midge explained that the summary of skills could be done in outline form, as a narrative, or as a simple list. The essential characteristic of the summary, she said, is that it be complete. “You want your skills inventory to be comprehensive,” she stressed. “Later you can be selective and draw from it what you wish to put in your résumé.”

Midge always liked to add one additional point when she was advising groups to be thorough in the preparation of summaries. “You’ll find that, besides giving you a large reservoir of skills from which to draw for the actual document you put together,” she said, “being thorough in summarizing your skills better prepares you for your interviews.” She remembered how many individuals had told her this. “Not only that,” she added, “but you will probably have a more positive feeling about yourself after you’ve examined all of your skills.”

The final document

The final step—the composition of the skills résumé—was, in Midge’s opinion, actually the least difficult part of the exercise. “Once you identify and summarize your skills through a process similar to the one I have just gone through with you,” Midge told the group, “you have the data you need. Now all you have to do is select from them, organize what you select, and create an attractive document.”

Recollecting a point Midge had made earlier in her preliminary remarks, Frank asked, “This is where putting yourself into the employers’ shoes comes

in, doesn't it? If we can see through their eyes, we can better select and highlight those data that will attract them."

Midge nodded, secretly enjoying Frank's supportive observation. Smiling, she said, "Yes, it's important to know who your target audience is and what it is looking for in a candidate. If you plan to give the résumé to a variety of employers, which is not a bad idea these days when you have to search long and hard for a single nibble, then it's wise to try to create a document that demonstrates your versatility and therefore has wider appeal."

Without glancing at the clock, Midge knew it was getting late and that she should move more quickly through the subject. Still, she wanted to make clear to the trio that they should compose their résumés so that they were as creative and as brief as possible. "Avoid fluff," she cautioned, "but include anything that gives evidence of skills that you claim you have."

Midge was always reluctant to define the specific format that the résumé should adopt. With very loose direction, individuals, she had found, were often more creative, sometimes producing very attractive products. She remembered one marketing student who had astounded her by creating a three-page résumé that artistically used overlays and drawings as background for the printed matter. Had Midge presented a rigid formula for the résumé format, this student might have compromised her creativity and possibly as a result have failed to get the invitations for interviews that she received from several advertising agencies.

While overlays and sketches may appeal to marketing firms, they may be inappropriate in a résumé submitted to a CPA firm. Remembering this, Midge repeated the point she had made earlier about the need for empathic identification with a prospective employer, pointing out that putting oneself in a prospective employer's shoes can be helpful to an individual as he or she prepares a skills résumé.

The skills summary

Having emphasized the need for creativity and the lack of a hard-and-fast formula for the résumé's format, Midge plunged into a discussion of that section of the résumé in which the writer delineates his or her skills. "It's the most important part of the résumé and the most difficult to compose," Midge told her audience.

Brushing the hair back from her hot neck, Midge continued, "Somewhere at the beginning of your résumé, possibly after you have given some personal

data and outlined your education, you should have an entry titled 'Skills Summary.' In it, simply list your generic or umbrella skills."

Midge referred her audience to the blackboard. "Remember," she said, "we decided that the generic skills evident in the three sample entries we examined earlier were 'sales,' 'managerial ability,' and 'human relations.' If we had ten to 20 entries from this student, the list of generic skills might be larger, but let's assume that it is not. Let's assume, too, in order to facilitate our conversation, that these entries and these skills are Greg's." He grinned, knowing that she was teasing him.

Midge suggested to Greg, then, that he place a section titled "Related Experiences," "Achievements," "Accomplishments," or some such title after the Skills Summary section. Whatever the heading, Midge explained, this section should present supportive data for the skills Greg said he possessed in the Skills Summary section. Midge emphasized that without this section, the résumé would be invalid. "You cannot just say you possess this or that skill; you have to give some proof that you possess it. For the material you need, you should refer to the information obtained during the logging and factoring stages.

"In this—let's call it 'Related Experiences'—section," Midge continued, "you take each skill listed in the Skills Summary and write briefly what you have done to demonstrate that you possess the skill."

Relating experiences

The group agreed to try it out. It selected the second generic skill—"managerial ability"—in Greg's Skills Summary and composed a hypothetical entry for his Related Experiences section. In a very short time, Greg was writing the following under the heading "Managerial Ability" on the board:

—While in high school, assisted in the management of my father's ski shop. Purchased equipment, stocked shelves, arranged displays, balanced books. While in college, assumed more responsibilities took over full management during father's vacation; supervised employees; conducted business with vendors, customers, and salespersons.

--Starting in sales position at an automobile dealership during summer of junior year in college, was promoted to management trainee because demonstrated management ability.

-- Established and managed a college pub for two years while in college. Initiated the project, negotiated details in organizing the pub, hired and supervised personnel, made considerable profits for student government.

In reviewing the entry, Midge observed that, perhaps, “stocked shelves” and “arranged displays” in the first part of the entry might have been saved for the entry that would support the generic skill “sales.” She also suggested that identifying by name the automobile dealership, the father’s business, and the college where the pub was established, along with including specific profit figures and the number of employees supervised, could “beef up” the résumé. If this had been other than a hypothetical situation, Midge said, she would insist that this information be included.

Midge then glanced at the clock. She knew there was not sufficient time for the group to compose entries for the other two generic skills—“sales” and “human relations.” She simply brought the discussion to a close by noting that entries like the one the group had just composed for Greg’s hypothetical résumé should be formulated for each generic skill cited in the Skills Summary. “Also,” she added, “as we’ve just seen in our own effort, entries should contain neither too much detail nor too many generalities.”

Somewhat frustrated that there was not enough time, Midge began to collect her belongings. As she did so, she observed, “You realize we haven’t said much about the other sections of the résumé. But I think these will give you little trouble. You’re familiar with them because they appear in most traditional résumés. For example, there are sections with such headings as ‘Professional Organizations,’ in which you list organizations of which you are a member; ‘Publications’ (a beginner seldom has published significantly; this section would probably be appropriate for someone in mid-career like yourself, Frank); ‘Awards,’ in which you list any significant honors you may have received; ‘Travel,’ a section worth including in your résumé if you have traveled extensively; ‘Hobbies,’ in which you list any unusual ones that might be a feather in your cap; and ‘References.’ In the last,” she said, “a simple statement like ‘available on request’ should suffice, although you should conscientiously select individuals whom you are going to ask references from, so you are sure they are persons who will give you good recommendations.”

On the subject of work

Midge then paused as if to give her next statement more emphasis. “ ‘Work Experience’,” she said, “is a traditional section. You might want to include it if you feel the chronological list of positions you have held will stand you in good stead. Beginners like you, Jane and Greg, often have few or no significant jobs to list. Your experiences might be better included in the entries supporting your skills.

“The nice thing about the skills résumé,” Midge mused, “is that you can

include skills demonstrated in nonwork experience, a fact that should be obvious to you by now. Who's to say a skill developed and refined in a school project, for example, is not a relevant skill? The trick lies in translating it into functional terms."

As they wound up the crash session, Frank anticipated one of Midge's concerns. She had wondered if she had related the discussion enough to his particular situation. But he assured her, "Don't worry about me. I can adapt what we've done here this evening to my particular task." Midge knew it was less difficult for the mid-career person to perform the exercise for one reason. There are generally more experiences and accomplishments to draw skills from simply because mid-career persons have lived and worked longer than beginners. However, Midge also knew that both mid-career executives and beginners find it difficult to translate experiences into functional skills that attract employers. If her captive trio had learned something about how to do that, she was pleased.

"I think I can do it," Frank assured her. "Thanks for the help."

Midge smiled at Frank and lifted her voice to Jane and Greg as she stepped into the hallway. "Tell me about the conference when you return next week," she called out.

"O.K.," she heard them say. Midge paused to hear Jane remark, "You know. I got so involved in the subject of the last two hours, I forgot all about what we learned earlier concerning decision making."

It was Greg's turn to tease Midge. He yelled back, "Are you sure you made a good decision when you consented to talk to us about the skills résumé tonight? It's seven o'clock, you know."

Midge smiled and continued down the hall. Tired as she was, she knew she had made a very good decision. □

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