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The New Résumé: Dumb and Dumber

Job Seekers Play Down Their Credentials to Avoid Looking Overqualified

By JANE PORTER

Kristin Konopka sent out nearly 100 copies of her résumé in January in search of receptionist work, but got only one callback. That's when Ms. Konopka, a 29-year-old New York actress and yoga teacher, took her master's degree and academic teaching experience off her résumé.

The calls started coming in. The slimmer version of her résumé landed in 30 in-boxes and earned her three callbacks and two interviews. "It definitely picked up the interest," says Ms. Konopka, who realized quickly that people don't "want to hire anyone who is overqualified."

Securing work in a tight economy means more job seekers might find themselves applying for positions below their qualifications. Many unemployed professionals are willing to take paycuts for the promise of a paycheck. But to get a foot in the door, candidates are gearing down their résumés by hiding advanced degrees, changing too-lofty titles, shortening work experience descriptions, and removing awards and accolades.

In the past eight months, Jamaica Eilbes, an information-technology recruiter for Milwaukee employment agency Manpower, has had to weed out more overqualified résumés than usual from the stacks that cross her desk each day. "I'd never feel comfortable putting a really high-level candidate into a lower level position," says Ms. Eilbes, who recruits for Manpower and other clients. "We don't want to take you on if we think you are going to jump ship."



Matt Collins

But in recent months, Ms. Eilbes has seen more master's and doctoral degrees at the bottom of résumés instead of at the top. She's also seen candidates omitting or trimming job descriptions that showed they had substantial years of work experience. Résumés on which job descriptions taper off as they progress down the page raise Ms. Eilbes's suspicions. "How do I know I can trust them later down the road if there's something on their résumé they decided to take off so they could have a better chance at getting that job?" she says.

Still, for some professionals who find themselves constantly rejected despite decades of

experience, scaling back the truth -- or at the least, some of their experiences -- can feel like the only chance at an interview.

Lenora Kaplan, 49, has 26 years of marketing experience but doesn't want her résumé to show it. When she lost her job as vice president of public relations at a small Las Vegas marketing firm in January, Ms. Kaplan searched for work with little success. At an interview for a shopping-mall marketing-director position in February, she was told that the hiring budget had only enough for a junior-level employee and that her résumé showed she was overqualified.

Many of the jobs she comes across ask for far fewer years of experience than she has. "There is nothing to apply for" at my level, Ms. Kaplan says. She quickly realized her job experience was pricing her out of too many positions. Her solution: To try not to look as senior level as she really was. So she eliminated certain jobs and removed details about speaking engagements and board positions.

In some cases, job seekers are being told by hiring agencies to tone down their résumés if they want to get hired. When Bridget Lee, 29, moved to New York from Shanghai eight months ago and put her application in at three temporary agencies, she was told to play down her work experience before they would send her résumé to potential clients. The temp-agency version of her résumé changed titles like "manager" and "freelance trend researcher" to "staff" and "office support" and omitted entirely her title as partner of a small marketing agency. "It's been a lesson for how I present myself," Ms. Lee says.

Career counselors advise against making too many drastic changes. But they also say the demand for this kind of restructuring is on the rise. In the past three months, Tammy Kabell, a Kansas City, Mo., job-search coach, says more clients are requesting her help to "dumb down" their résumés, whether by changing job titles, playing down experience, or altogether omitting some impressive achievements. One recent client, a 61-year-old former chief learning officer at a tech company, insisted on omitting her C-level job title from her résumé. She was fearful her application would be weeded out by the Web search-optimization tools companies use to manage résumés.

Some résumé writers advise reworking a résumé into a functional one stressing transferable skills instead of past job titles and accomplishments. "Instead of focusing on the big achievements that might scare an employer away, you can spell out what you can bring to an employer in the next position," Ms. Kabell says.

Of course, reducing your résumé to a skeleton of what it truly should be isn't likely to land you the job you really want. While it took Ms. Lee eight months to get a call back for a job that matched her real experience, this month she landed a position as a temporary account manager -- with potential for permanent work -- at a New York design firm. The interview and job offer weren't earned using her dumbed-down résumé, but rather with the original.

"You have to make those creative edits when it comes to short-term work, but in terms of long-term work, you have to stay true to your experience," says Ms. Lee.

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