A Major Resume Error: "MS-Office Skills"

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I have evaluated 100's of resumes both in the role of a career counselor and as a consultant to hiring decisions made with clients. While the most common overall flaw is the lack of specificity, one of its most representative examples is some variation of: "Experience with Microsoft Office" or "MS-Office Skills."

There is a very important factor for several reasons. First, it can lead to a significant mismatch between the candidate's expectations and the employer's requirements. While it might be resolved as part of the selection process, it is equally likely to result in the candidate not being considered at all. Second, according to a recent study from Burning Glass Technologies, an analysis of "middle-skills jobs" (roles that require high school but not college degrees), 78% of jobs call for fluency with technology. And the most commonly required skills are those involving spreadsheet and word processing, e.g., MS Excel and Word. According to the research, 67% of middle-skill jobs require proficiency with these tools – and the median pay rates are 13% more than jobs that require no digital skills.

It is the candidate's decision, and it's important one, to decide how these skills might play into career goals or as part of a particular position being considered.

Candidate Actions

The first step is an important caveat: NEVER put "MS-Office skills" or "Experience with MS-Office" on a resume. In reality it states absolutely nothing about your skills or experience! HR or the Hiring Manager don't know if this means "you've seen a colleague using MS-Word" or you're an "Advanced Certified MS-Office Technician."

Second, what is your level of accomplishment with the MS-Office tools? Notice the question is not "what is your level of skill?" because that's going to lack specificity. Even if

you more dramatically state "Expertise in MS-Excel," it's still virtually impossible for someone to know what that means. What have you done with MS-Excel, or MS-Word, or MS-PowerPoint – or any other key software? For each of your jobs, write a 2-3 line statement describing what features you used (beyond opening, saving, and printing files), what was the result of this work, what percentage of the job involved this work?

- Developed and implemented a financial reporting system, based on MS-Excel, using complex macros, Pivot Tables, and financial formulas. Trained employees in five departments on the data entry and printing functions that reduced monthly financial reporting from 10 to 2 days after month end.
- Introduced automated MS-PowerPoint presentations into multiple trade show kiosks, based on unique templates for each of our 20+ products. Presentations included animations, advanced branching, and interactive (touch-screen) functions.

Third, now that you've prepared your examples, decide how you want to portray these accomplishments on your resume. Do you want to emphasize these accomplishments as a key part for each of your jobs? Is it the first accomplishment you want to list for a position? Or is it second, or third? Or is it something you don't want to include for a particular job because it wasn't a "significant accomplishment" or was only 10% of the job?

Notice that nothing here suggests listing your "MS-Office Skills" as a separate item or part of a "Skills" list. The "skills" are embedded in your accomplishments. Having the skill" is not what's important. "Doing" something with the skill is the evidence – particularly when it's part of your top 3-4 accomplishments for a position on your resume.

If You Don't Know the Employer's Requirements

Unfortunately, it's also common for potential employers to lack the specificity of what they are looking for in ads. They too might post something with little more than "MS-Office Skills Required." It's harder for you as a candidate to discover the real requirements of the job from a potential employer – at least, in most cases, until you get a phone or in-person interview. But then you should have the opportunity to ask questions including "how much time does the person in this job spend working with…?" "What are the specific expectations of this job for advanced use of…?" A bolder step in some cases, even before formally applying, might be a phone call to the HR Representative or Hiring Manager asking for additional information on the "MS-Office" requirement.

A Too Common Problem

The "lack of specificity" problem presented here is way too common and occurs in far too many instances on both sides of the hiring process. And it's not just related to MS-Office or software skills. It applies to almost all general skills statements, e.g., "strong interpersonal skills." Yet the solution is clear: specificity. And remembering: "It's what you do with what you have that counts, not what you have." The benefits to both the employer and the job seeker are clear!

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