

Résumé Writing: Mind the Details

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Writing résumés is difficult for Ph.D. scientists. That's a pretty bold statement, but as the person responsible for talent management at a Fortune 200 company, I have seen that technical candidates often fail to meet the challenge of writing a résumé that accurately represents both their technical skills and their leadership skills.

In part, that's because this is no easy task to perform. So, in this article I will review this and other common challenges that graduate students face when applying for positions in industry and will give some ideas for addressing them. If you are looking for an article that talks about watching your spelling and grammar or about the differences between functional and chronological résumés, you might want to turn to [another Tooling Up article](#). This one focuses on the big picture.

Supervisor or Scientist?

One of the most common mistakes I've seen in résumés from science Ph.D.s is trying to make the résumé do too much. They have tried to make their résumé sell them as both a technical expert and a technical leader.

Corporations have made this mistake for a long time. If you are a strong technical expert, they assume, then you must be a good technical manager. But many good scientists fail once they are promoted into management. There is no link between being a good scientist and being a good supervisor. Don't try to write your résumé to fit both. [Learn about the job](#) you are applying for and target your résumé accordingly. If you are applying for more than one job, customize your résumé for each of them. Spend some time on this.

If the job is for a laboratory supervisor, write your résumé to highlight your management skills. Emphasize your success in the selection, development, and training and management of people. Ph.D.s who have not been lab supervisors at their university have told me that they do not have management experience, but you have to look beyond titles. If you have been a teaching assistant, you have trained and developed people. If you have tutored someone, you have trained someone. If you have helped form a team to work on a class project, you have selected people. If the team was successful in delivering that project by the due date, you must have managed the team well. If you have held an office in a student scientific professional group, you have held a leadership position.

These are just some examples of the kinds of experiences you can include in your résumé that reflect your ability to apply skills needed to manage others. The people reading your résumé are looking for real, convincing evidence that you have leadership skills, but they aren't necessarily looking for leadership titles.

If the job requires technical expertise but not management skills, it is important to highlight not only your specific technical knowledge of the topic the company is hiring for, but also the scientific skills that differentiate you from the other Ph.D. scientists who will apply for the job. This is another trap many of your

colleagues fall into: overemphasizing narrow technical knowledge rather than more general scientific skills.

Technical knowledge quickly becomes dated--today's latest science is tomorrow's undergraduate drudgery--but scientific skills stay with you. Many of the résumés from Ph.D. scientists I have seen list all their coursework, publications, and presentations, but a synopsis of their unique talents has often been missing. These might include creative problem-solving techniques that they have successfully applied, innovative experimentation design, or perseverance in the face of technical challenge.

Managers know that they will find a number of Ph.D. scientists who have the narrow technical skills they're looking for in specific opening, but they usually prefer to hire someone who has shown excellence in applying scientific skills rather than the Ph.D. who has a great depth of knowledge in a single technical area. This is because in industrial science, the Ph.D. is hired for a career that usually grows beyond the technical knowledge he or she was initially hired for. That means that, in general, for a technical opening you should show in your résumé how you have demonstrated the ability to apply your technical skills in a range of areas, because generally this is looked upon more favorably than if your work has been concentrated in a single area.

Technical or Not?

Another challenge scientists face when applying for a technical position is writing a résumé to fit the audience. The first reader may be a recruiter who doesn't have specific scientific expertise; other readers are likely to be fellow scientists. Writing a résumé that fits both audiences is a challenge. The scientific manager will be seeking evidence of technical expertise, so you should consider having a technical-expertise section in your résumé. One good approach is to highlight publications and technical science problems you solved. To facilitate this, rather than just listing your publications and projects, you should provide a skills list associated with the publications and projects.

But you mustn't forget about nonscientific readers. Very likely, they won't be able to understand your technical skills and accomplishments in much detail, but they can understand the significance of awards you have won, conferences you have presented at, and publications you have contributed to. Patents, too, are achievements that nontechnical recruiters will perceive as good indicators of technical ability. So when writing your résumé, include evidence that highlights the significance of your technical accomplishments, not just the accomplishments themselves. You might want to tell how many recipients received the award, how many people attended a conference you presented at, or the circulation size or impact factor of a publication. This information will allow the reader to gauge the impact of your achievements.

Making It All Work

Writing a résumé with the proper focus starts with understanding the job you are applying for. Once you know whether the position is for a technical expert or a scientific manager, you can write a résumé that highlights the appropriate skills and knowledge. Targeting your résumé to technical and nontechnical readers is a key to ensuring that both will give it a second look.

I recommend the book *Resumes That Knock 'Em Dead*, by Martin John Yates.

Yates's book is full of practical tips on creating a résumé that will help you get an interview. Using a book like that and tips from articles like this will give you the Insider's Edge on putting together an effective résumé.