

Resume Characteristics that Influence Interview Decisions

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In order of importance, findings indicate that candidates with (1) Relevant, Current & Continual Work Experience, (2) a College Degree or Enrolled in College, and (3) Achievements listed on their resumes were more likely to be selected by hiring managers for employment interviews.

Employers have high expectations when it comes to filling their vacant positions. Meanwhile many confident job seekers say, "if I could just get the interview, I could get the job."

Landing that interview, though is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly when most employers use applicant tracking systems to filter thousands of resumes quickly for job specific requirements. If you are lucky enough to get through this first filter, you have a very good chance of having your resume reviewed by a corporate recruiter and making it to the hiring manager's inbox.

So what happens when your resume gets reviewed by a hiring manager? What are they looking for when it comes to your resume? How do they decide who to invite to an interview?

Rather than speculate about what might drive interview decisions, this study based its conclusions on actual interview decisions made by hiring managers.

From a pool of over 1,000 resumes, 200 qualified resumes were randomly selected and analyzed. Candidates in our sample had an average of 9.2 years of work experience. It should be noted that these candidates were being considered for positions that required either a college degree or equivalent work experience. All resumes selected met the basic qualifications for the job as described in employers' job advertisements, and all candidates were called to verify their qualifications. These resumes were then presented to hiring managers.

In collaboration with Dr. Kenneth Levitt of Frostburg University School of Business, The WorkPlace Group examined 15 distinct resume characteristics (see *Table 6*).

Our objective was to predict which candidates would be selected for employment interviews based on 15 resume characteristics. Resumes were evaluated and coded for each of these 15 characteristics by two trained coders.

Multiple regression was used to determine which resume characteristics were most predictive of interview decisions.

A significant regression equation was found, $F(4, 95) = 7.014, p < .000$, with an R^2 of .228.

PREDICTOR	SIGNIFICANCE
Relevant Work Experience	$p < .025$
College Degree	$p < .010$
Currently enrolled in college	$p < .042$
Achievements	$p < .000$

Important Findings

The above table shows the resume characteristics best predicting the candidates selected for employment interviews. In order of importance, candidates with (1) Relevant, Current & Continual Work Experience, (2) a College Degree or Enrolled in College, and (3) Achievements listed on their resumes were more likely to be selected by hiring managers for an employment interview.

Moderating Factors

Several statistically, significant correlations between predictors and other characteristics help us understand how hiring managers evaluate resumes.

Employment vs. Unemployment

Results show that hiring managers considered both the amount of work experience in relationship to the number of months unemployed as well as the number of unemployment gaps displayed on the resume.

Candidates with more work experience and continual employment were more likely to receive a job interview. In fact, 80% of

candidates with relevant work experience and no employment gaps on their resumes were selected to be interviewed.

For candidates with qualified resumes who were unemployed for 20% or more over the past 10 years, only 50% were selected for employment interviews.

Unemployment History	# Invited to Interview
20% or more of their career unemployed (past 10 years)	1 out of 2
Have no unemployment history (past 10 years)	4 out of 5

A statistically significant inverse relationship also exists between the number of gaps in employment and hiring managers' decisions to interview. As the number of gaps in unemployment increased, a candidate's chance of being offered an interview decreased.

Even a gap of 30 days or more decreased a candidate's chance of receiving an interview from 76% to 63%.

Unemployment gaps greater than 30 days	# Invited to Interview
No gaps	76%
1 to 2 gaps	63%
3 to 5 gap	43%

College vs High School Diploma and the role of Achievement Indicators

Table 4 shows the breakdown of interviewed and rejected candidates by high school diploma and college degree. As can be seen

in this table, there is a greater preference for degreed candidates. Sixty percent of college graduates are interviewed in comparison to 52% of candidates with high school diplomas.

Table 5 shows those selected for employment interviews to have, on average, greater work experience, to be enrolled in school and/or

As is illustrated in Table 5:

For those with high school diplomas, resume gaps over 30 days as well as months unemployed were equally distributed among those interviewed and rejected. On average, candidates with high school diplomas chosen for employment interviews had 104 months

Table 4
Interviewed vs. rejected candidates

College Degree		High School Diploma		Total	
Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected
65 (60%)	43 (40%)	48 (52%)	44 (48%)	113 (57%)	87 (43%)

Table 5
Resume characteristics most influencing hiring managers' interview decisions

All candidates							
Work Experience (mean # months)		Unemployed (mean # months)		# of Gaps in Employment over 1 month		Achievement Indicators / Enrolled in Degree Program	
Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected
114	106	10	16	Less than 2	More than 2	1 or more	0 to 1

High School Diploma							
Work Experience (mean # months)		Unemployed (mean # months)		# of Gaps in Employment over 1 month		Achievement Indicators / Enrolled in Degree Program	
Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected
104	85	10	10	Less than 2	Less than 2	2 or more	0 to 1

College Degree (Associates Bachelors Masters)							
Work Experience (mean # months)		Unemployed (mean # months)		# of Gaps in Employment over 1 month		Achievement Indicators / Enrolled in Degree Program	
Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected	Interviewed	Rejected
121	128	9	22	Less than 2	More than 2	1 or more	0 to 1

Numbers in table rounded to nearest whole number

have more achievement characteristics than those rejected.

of work experience and 2 or more achievement indicators or enrollment in a degree program. In contrast, high school graduates who were rejected on the basis of their resume had, on average, 85 months of

work experience and either were not enrolled in a degree program or lacked one or more achievement indicators.

Candidates with college degrees who were selected for employment interviews tended to have 2 or less gaps of 30 days or more on their resumes and an average of 9 months of unemployment. In comparison, college degree holders who were rejected had 3 or more gaps of 30 days or more and an average of 22 months of unemployment. Candidates with college degrees, selected for employment interviews also tended to have 1 or more achievement factors or be enrolled in a higher degree program (for example, an associates degreed candidate enrolled in a bachelor's program).

Unlike the high school diploma group, work experience, beyond the minimum required on the job requisition, did not make up for increased number of resume gaps over 30 days or excess time unemployed.

Discussion

It's worth noting that there were no gender preferences in this study. Approximately the same number of men and women received interviews. Grade Point Average (GPA) also did not serve as a strong determinant in predicting who was invited to an interview, nor did it override or serve in the place of the factors that did. This is likely due to the fact that GPA is far more important to employers when evaluating candidates who will or have recently graduated than those who have several years of work experience post-graduation.

Although most employers emphasize the importance of leadership qualities, resume characteristics comprising our leadership index did not seem to significantly influence interview decisions. This may be due to the nature of the jobs in our sample or the fact that the characteristics making up our leadership factor are secondary to more dominant factors such as work experience. It's equally feasible that corporate recruiters and hiring managers rely on other selection methods like an in-person interview to infer leadership characteristics.

It's also worth noting that in our sample, those with high school diplomas had, on average, fewer resume gaps and shorter unemployment durations in comparison to those with college degrees. This may be explained by the fact that those with high school diplomas had as a group an average of 95 months (29 fewer months) of work experience in comparison to college degree candidates who had 124 months of work experience.

Who Do Employers Interview?

Employers most want candidates who have current, relevant work experience with few gaps on their resumes, a college degree or enrolled in college, and indicators of success. These are the most highly desirable candidates.

Work experience matters but having more experience does not always serve as a substitute for other key influencers. For those lacking a college degree, having more

job-related experience does appear to make up for not having one.

After considering both educational level and work experience, hiring managers look for other positive success indicators.

Achievements speak volumes and stand out to hiring managers. Being enrolled in a degree program or having multiple achievement characteristics increased the likelihood of a hiring manager selecting a candidate for an employment interview.

Theory Behind the Results

Our findings suggest a risk-averse decision-making heuristic in place.

Candidates with job-relevant and adequate work experiences, possess a college degree and do things that advance their job knowledge and skills appear safer bets than those without these characteristics or don't do these things at all. For example, two candidates with qualified resumes identical on all factors except for one having no resume gaps and the other having 3 resume gaps will likely result in only 1 employment interview. According to our research the candidate with 3 gaps of employment has a 43% chance of receiving an interview. To state it another way, half the likelihood of the candidate with no employment gaps on their resume.

Hiring decisions are high-stake decisions. As such it makes sense that employers would err on the side of caution and focus in on the most desirable candidates.

From an employers' perspective, selecting candidates with current, relevant work experience and achievement factors is far less risky and a better use of employers' time than interviewing every candidate.

The question then becomes what are the "best" indicators to use from a resume that predicts or is indicative of subsequent job performance and tenure.

The focus of this field study was limited to how candidates with qualified resumes were selected for employment interviews. We did not measure who received job offers, began employment, job performance or tenure post hire. In other words, we don't know if the interview characteristics that influenced the decision to grant an employment interview are indeed predictive of performance and tenure criteria post hire. To the extent they do not correlate well with post hire criteria, recruiters and hiring managers should adjust their decision making heuristics.

This research has many implications for both employers and job seekers.

For job seekers: the study suggests that individuals who become unemployed should diligently work towards re-employment as quickly as possible. Taking time off before assertively beginning to look for new employment is not advisable.

In fact, the longer you are unemployed, the less likely it is for you to become re-employed.

This is the case even when your resume meets the basic requirements of the position.

To increase your chance of re-employment when you are unemployed, consider enrolling in a college degree program. If you don't have an Associates' degree, consider working towards one. If you have an Associates' degree, now is a good time to begin a Bachelors' degree program. The key word here is enrolled, not necessarily completed. In addition, consider advancing your qualifications by completing items from our Achievement index, such as learning a second language, earning job certifications, and joining a professional association.

For employers: this study shows that factors on the resume beyond just pre-requisite qualifications drive interview decisions. This means an employer's candidate pool is immediately reduced to those selected to be interviewed based on the resume itself. Well qualified, talented individuals may be passed over because of employment gaps displayed on their resumes or the number of months they have been out of work.

Employers are well advised to train recruiters and hiring managers to minimize "unconscious biases" they may have regarding what gaps in employment and time spent unemployed truly convey about a candidate.

Beliefs held regarding those with gaps or long-term unemployment may not reflect reality. Great employees can be victims of circumstance or simply have a string of bad luck.

While a resume may tell us whether the candidate has the right experience for the job, it may not tell us the whole story. Here are some tips for helping to identify hidden talent among the unemployed and the underemployed:

1. When reviewing a candidate's resume, evaluate their employment history for the past 10+ years, rather than the past 5 or 7 years. Consider candidates who had a consistent progression in their career prior to their most recent roles.
2. While reviewing a candidate's resume, pay particular attention to candidates with educational credentials and certifications not required in their current or most recent role. These are likely to be candidates who are currently underemployed workers or working on developing themselves for a career change. They will welcome an opportunity to work for your company.
3. When reviewing candidates look for individuals who are continually developing their skill sets, such as taking courses or attending certification programs.

4. Consider speaking with candidates before rejecting them for employment gaps on their resumes to ensure you understand the circumstances around their job transitions or employment gaps.

Apart from resume gaps and unemployment periods, employers should investigate the resume characteristics associated with job performance and tenure criteria post hire. By identifying these factors and incorporating them into your talent acquisition and assessment strategy, the quality of the candidate pool can be improved and better hires can be made.

Preliminary findings initially presented at the Eastern Psychological Convention in NYC on March 4, 2016

Table 6

Resume Characteristics Studied

Total months in the work force
Total months in current jobs
Total number of regular positions
Gaps in employment over 1 month
Total number of months unemployed
Number of months unemployed from last job
Gender
Currently enrolled in a degree program
Highest degree completed
Degree relevant to position applying for
Number of years out of school from last degree
Grade Point Average (GPA)
Experiential Index
- Military Experience
- Volunteer/charitable work
- Non-relevant certifications
Leadership Index
- Leadership position in a volunteer, charitable or professional association
Achievement Index
- Job relevant certifications
- Number of languages fluent in other than English
- Member of a professional organization
- Member of Honors society
- Peer reviewed publications and patents
- Professional presentations

About the Author

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