



The Right Words

The power of keywords goes far beyond resumes in driving your career forward.

By Wendy Enelow

As an HR professional, you already know that keywords can make or break job seekers' attempts to snag an interview, because their resumes are fed into a company's applicant tracking system or other resume scanning tools. But there's an art and science to picking

the right words—and the power of keywords goes far beyond resumes. They are just as important when you are writing thank-you notes or crafting your LinkedIn profile or personal website—and even in verbal exchanges during interviews. Why? Keywords

communicate critical information about your skills, qualifications, experiences and achievements.

Consider the impact that this small sampling of HR keywords and phrases can have on how a prospective employer or internal hiring manager perceives you and your HR expertise:

- Compensation and benefits.
- Diversity and inclusion.
- Employee communications.
- Employee relations.
- Human resource information systems.
- Job analysis.
- Labor and union negotiations.
- Leadership development.
- Manpower planning.
- Onboarding.
- Organizational development.
- Performance management.
- Recruitment.
- Retention.
- Staffing.
- Succession planning.
- Talent development.
- Training and development.

Each one instantly communicates a specific function. Take “benefits administration,” for example. In just a word or two, you've shared that you have experience in designing benefits plans (which may include health insurance, dental insurance, life insurance, disability insurance and pensions), selecting benefits providers and administrators, negotiating provider contracts, working to expand employee benefits while reducing costs, and more.

Where to Use Them

Keywords can and should be used in multiple communications related to your job search:

Resumes. Use keywords in your summary, list of competencies, past job descriptions, achievement statements, education section, affiliations and descriptions of your volunteerism.

Cover letters. Leverage keywords to emphasize your skills and job titles—current, past and targeted. Consider adding

a bulleted list of items representing key areas of competency.

Interview follow-up letters. Using keywords, remind the hiring manager of three to five valuable skills, qualifications and attributes you would bring to the position and the organization.

LinkedIn profiles. As with your resume, use keywords in your summary, job descriptions, achievement statements, education section and other places. Today, LinkedIn is the No. 1 resource for recruiters to find qualified candidates. How do they do that? By performing keyword searches, of course!

LinkedIn also allows you to upload digital and multimedia files (e.g., PowerPoint or SlideShare presentations, charts, tables, graphs, infographics and videos), so you can strategically integrate even more keywords. Although these terms might not appear in preliminary searches, they definitely provide an added bonus when a person reviews your profile.

As a professional resume writer, I find that one of the greatest perks of using LinkedIn profiles is the generous allocation of 2,000 characters for the summary and for each job. This ample allowance gives me room to fill each section with the appropriate keywords, working them naturally into the text. Unlike a resume, which limits you to one or two pages, LinkedIn allows you to be “free to write” and integrate all essential information.

Interviews. Keywords and keyword phrases can be interjected easily throughout the course of conversation during an interview—whether for a new job outside your current organization or for an internal promotion or lateral job change. And, just as with written documents, a single keyword or phrase can communicate a great deal.

My advice to interviewees: Listen carefully to each question, sit back comfortably in your chair and think for five seconds, and then answer the question, incorporating keywords as they relate to

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the conversation. You’ll probably find that you’re already doing this and simply haven’t thought about it in such a deliberate fashion.

Critical Categories

There are five categories of keywords:

Hard skills. These are specific, teachable skills that can be easily measured. They are what people often think of when someone mentions keywords. They might include math proficiency, for example, or the ability to use certain software.

Soft skills. This gets at the “how” you do what you do. It includes collaboration, communication, confidence, consistency, cross-cultural sensitivity, efficiency, honesty, initiative, innovation, interpersonal relations, organization, passion, prioritization, team leadership ... and the list goes on.

Employment details. These are the facts: job titles, employer names, industry experience, product experience, length of employment, budgets, staffs and all the other particulars about your career. Here’s an example: If you’re applying for a position as senior vice president of HR, chances are that the hiring manager (internal or external) will want to see that you’ve worked as a vice president in the past.

Education and training credentials. These keywords are easy. They are your degrees—MBA, B.A., B.S.; your professional credentials and certifications—SHRM-CP, SHRM-SCP, Certified Professional Coach (CPC); and the educational institutions you’ve attended.

General information. Some keywords

and keyword phrases will be most relevant if you’re actively job searching. For example, by using cities, states, ZIP codes and countries as keywords, employers can quickly identify candidates within their locality. This category of keywords might also include honors and awards, board positions, professional affiliations, volunteer activities, and civic associations. These words have power because they communicate volumes about your professional success, network of contacts, contributions to the community and more.

Next Steps

Now that you understand how broadly keywords can be used, start using them immediately. Leverage them to your advantage to get noticed, give yourself a competitive edge and communicate the depth of experience you’ve acquired throughout your career.

I would be remiss if I didn’t comment on the importance of honesty in your use of keywords. If you’ve been working and managing in HR for more than 10 years, you can probably feel confident using such keywords as “expertise in” or “leadership of” where relevant. However, don’t oversell your skills. If you’ve been performing a function for only a short time, write about your “experience in” or “assistance with” it.

Let keywords be your driving force, and you will succeed in showcasing your expertise and advancing your career. ■

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