

## **Resume Writing in the Real World – Do Business Communication Textbooks Really Give Good Advice?**

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### **Abstract**

With an increasingly competitive job market, graduating students in Singapore have little else but a resume to convince companies to call them up for job interviews. Given the high value of resume in this context, it is no wonder that there is a deluge of resources on the topic. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether advice from Business Communication textbooks can reflect accurately current industry practices, especially in relation to an Asian context. This paper seeks to address the question by comparing the actual preferences of human resource (HR) professionals with information on resume-writing provided in Business Communication textbooks. In the study, eight HR professionals with vast experience in gate-keeping exercise were interviewed. Their opinions on the important aspects of resume-writing were examined against suggestions offered in eight selected Business Communication textbooks. The results from the study revealed that advice from these textbooks, to a large extent, did reflect current industry practices. However, some differences were also evident, mainly in terms of resume content that was deemed sensitive, *vis-à-vis* job applicants' personal information. A contributing factor to this disparity could be the context-dependent expectations of HR professionals that are not dealt with in the textbooks. The study addresses the need for more industry-related research on professional writing to equip language teachers with relevant knowledge in actual workplace practices in order to help graduating students to hone their communication skills in preparation

for the workforce in future.

## 1. Introduction

Singapore, a country without any natural resources, relies heavily on the human resource to power its economy. The rapid growth and development of the small island state has, over the years, led to an increasingly competitive job market. This is particularly true of the private sector where a job applicant, at the preliminary stage, has little else but a resume to convince the employer that he or she deserves an interview. Such is the value of a well-written resume that Keyser (1974, p. 64)'s observation of it being "the most important document [one] may ever write" is perhaps timeless. Graduating students and other job seekers who need help in crafting their resumes are spoilt for choice. There are numerous books and articles on this topic, ranging from general guides (e.g. Rosenberg, 2008; Schaffer, 2005) to those for specific job sectors. McKinney (2000, 2003, 2004) and the editors of McGraw-Hill (2006) for instance, have published a series of books on resume-writing for different careers such as teaching, nursing, firefighting and computing, among others.

The question that arises from a survey of these guides is how well their content mirrors real-life practices and more crucially, the preferences of employers. Hornsby and Smith (1995, p.4) note that while "[s]everal authors have discussed the importance of resume in the job search...only a handful have examined the content, format and appearance of resumes from an empirical perspective". There are, to be sure, notable exceptions in the way some of these guidebooks are put together (e.g. Bright & Earl, 2001), but calls for greater attention to be paid to this end have remained somewhat muted.

Research efforts seeking to establish empirical support for the various recommendations in resume guidebooks – e.g. inclusion of references, exclusion of photographs – have been

modest (e.g. Field & Holley, 1976; Olney, 1982; Schramm & Dortch, 1991; Stephens, Watt & Hobbs, 1979). Hutchinson (1984) summarized research from 1969 to 1983 to establish the content elements that employers would like included or excluded in a resume. This study was followed up a decade later in the work of Hutchinson and Brefka (1997), who surveyed the preferences of the top organizations in the United States (according to *Fortune* magazine). Their study largely supported the conclusions of earlier research work (with minor exceptions) showing that “personnel administrators have remained quite consistent in their preferences for resume content over the last decade” (p.74). Their findings were also corroborated by two other American studies conducted around the same time (Hornsby & Smith, 1995; Thoms, McMasters, Roberts & Dombkowski, 1999). Hornsby and Smith (1995), who approached 150 human resource specialists from eight industries, similarly found that it was important for applicants to list their job objectives and achievements from both their college or work experience. They also found that elements such as photographs and personal attributes (e.g. honesty, dependability) were not required for resumes. Where the appearance and structure of resumes were concerned, these studies also revealed a preference for one-page (Thoms et al., 1999), chronological resumes (Hornsby & Smith, 1995), rather than functional or hybrid ones, reflecting the employers’ concern “that applicants at all levels be able to chronologically account for previous work and educational history” (Hornsby & Smith, 1995, p.8).

While such empirical studies do allow job applicants to make informed decisions about what to include and exclude in their resumes, their usefulness is constrained by their relevance in foreign contexts where norms may differ radically. Many of the current resume guidebooks and research studies are American in orientation and targeted at American readers. However, in the situations in other countries, such as Singapore, different strategies may be necessary, possibly due to cultural influences. This is supported by Scollon and Scollon (2002)’s case study which

reveals that professionals from Hong Kong, Beijing and Finland approached the writing of resumes differently. These distinctions included type, length, as well as whether to include personal information such as age, marital status and gender. The case study revealed that resumes were generally not required for job applications in Finland as opposed to Hong Kong and Beijing. In fact, Finnish professionals normally presented their portfolios and emphasized “interpersonal trust” (Scollon & Scollon, 2002, p. 63) in the recruitment process. Conversely, resumes were important in Hong Kong and Beijing but the length differed. Hong Kong resumes tended to be longer, where even an eight-page resume was considered acceptable while Beijing resumes typically consisted of about two pages, similar to those of American resumes. This study highlights a salient point about contextual influences in resume preparation. Although past studies in America have shown resume-writing to be more or less consistent through time, there lies the issue of cultural context that has yet to be addressed adequately.

To our knowledge, besides Scollon and Scollon’s study, there is no other study addressing employer preferences on the content and structure of resumes with regard to foreign contexts and specifically, the Singapore context. The most relevant studies are those related to personnel selection techniques, of which resumes form only one aspect (e.g. Anderson & Witvliet, 2008; Phillips & Gully, 2002). No comment of local employers, however, is offered in those studies on what makes a quality resume. The findings from the empirical studies surveyed above serve merely as a guide, and will need to be compared against local studies to better reflect the norms and preferences of employers and hiring agencies in Singapore. Furthermore, as professional communication training in Singapore is heavily influenced by American resources, it would be helpful to compare the preferences of Singapore employers against the information on resume-writing found in these guidebooks, specifically business communication textbooks that are a staple for professional communication courses offered in the tertiary institutions in Singapore.

Such a comparison would enable language teachers facilitating such courses to provide their students with more accurate and reliable information on resume-writing depicting the local context, instead of relying solely on the textbooks that are more targeted at the American audience.

## **2. Research motivation and objective**

The impetus for this study came from a communication skills course that we teach at the university. The course, aptly titled, “Professional Communication” is offered to all final year engineering students with the aim of equipping them with the necessary skills required for communicating effectively in the workplace. These skills include learning how to prepare their job application package, constituting the cover letter and the resume.

Our suggestions to the students on writing effective resumes mostly come from the information in business communication textbooks as well as our personal experiences. However, these are not the only source of information. Our university offers a career centre for students to obtain guidance and advice on any matter relating to their future careers including learning how to write resumes. The centre periodically offers workshops and seminars for students to hone their resume-writing competency. In addition, resume assessment sessions are also available at the centre, allowing graduating students to obtain feedback on their resumes for applying jobs in the real world.

With the large amount of support offered to the students, it was believed that they would be highly confident and adequately competent in writing resumes. However, we found out from our classroom interaction with the students that instead of feeling more assured, they were more confused about how best to approach resume-writing due to contradicting information that they had obtained from both the career centre and from the Professional Communication course. The

contradictions are whether or not to include sensitive information such as referees, photos and personal details and how to select a suitable type of resume to be use.. Furthermore, many of our students had also raised the question of how much emphasis to place on resume appearance.

Our experience in teaching Professional Communication revealed to us that most of our students were especially good at writing the components of the course. This was understandable given the significance of resumes in securing job interviews in the local context. Therefore, we felt that it was our responsibility to provide the students with accurate and reliable information, to align academia with industry practice (Adam & Artemeva, 2002; Auerbach, 2002; Belcher, 2004) by obtaining the views of the people directly involved in job recruitment instead of merely depending on textbook advice.

This paper is a modest attempt to examine the preferences of HR professionals in Singapore regarding the preparation of resumes in relation to information found in selected business communication textbooks in order to determine if a gap exists between industry practices and classroom teaching.

It is hoped that the study will provide language teachers with a better understanding of the importance of cultural context in instructing resume-writing. Additionally, it is hoped that it encourages language teachers to reflect on best ways to teach professional writing - to collaborate with HR practitioners to provide more reliable information to improve students' awareness and writing skills.

### **3. Methodology**

To develop a better understanding of how HR professionals actually perceive resume-writing as compared to textbook advice, the study began with a series of interviews with highly experienced HR personnel who have all been actively involved in job recruitment. This was

followed by a careful analysis of a list of selected textbooks to ascertain if textbook advice was indeed sufficient for language teachers to teach resume writing effectively.

The comparison focused on the following aspects:

- Features of an effective resume
- Resume organization in terms of types of resumes and summary of qualifications
- Sensitive information including salary expectation, referees, personal information and the inclusion of photo
- Format and visual appeal

### **3.1 Interviews with HR professionals**

Eight recruitment professionals from diverse organizations including government statutory boards, multinational corporations (MNCs), and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were interviewed to gather their views on resume-writing. These professionals were selected based on their vast experience in the hiring process, having been involved in recruiting entry-level executives, executives as well as managers in their respective organizations for more than 10 years.

The face-to-face, structured interviews were employed to obtain detailed responses from the HR professionals. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. There were a total of seven interview questions (please see Appendix A) focusing mainly on issues that our students had often raised in class. Prior to the scheduled interviews, the questions were e-mailed to the interviewees so that they could better prepare for the interviews. To facilitate the data analysis, some of the interviews were tape-recorded with permission of the interviewees and there were also follow-up sessions with the interviewees to clarify any doubts about their responses.

### **3.2 Textbook analysis**

The guidelines on resume-writing from the eight selected Business Communication textbooks (please see Appendix B) were compared with the HR professionals' opinions. The textbooks were selected simply for their easy availability; they were offered by the two major publishers and they have been used by teachers and students in tertiary institutions in Singapore.

Our brief survey revealed that these textbooks generally have more or less the same author profile; all authors are North Americans who have been teaching and researching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the last 30 years, having taught and held high-ranking faculty positions in their respective tertiary institutions in the United States. In addition, they are also active and seasoned contributors to business communication books and conferences as well as consultants to Fortune 500 companies, schools and universities in their home country and abroad. We also discovered that these textbooks emphasize on similar contents regarding resume writing. Their introductions include the definitions of resume. This is followed by descriptions of the standard content elements to be included and typical language conventions to adhere to. The next section contains suggestions on creating visual appeal and in some of the textbooks, there is also a list of do's and don'ts for crafting a resume.

The interview questions for the HR professionals formed the basis of the textbook analysis. Considering the same set of questions in the textbook analysis ensured that we were focusing on the same issues as those discussed in the interviews. This helped the development of a clear-cut comparison, enabling us to arrive at the conclusion of whether there lies a gap between industry practices and classroom teaching.

## **4. Results and discussion**

To compare the views of HR professionals with textbook information, we started off with a

broad analysis of what constitutes an effective resume followed by looking at specific issues that were deemed controversial in resume-writing. These specific issues are related to organization, content pertaining to sensitive information, and format and visual appeal.

#### 4.1 Features of an effective resume

Based on the responses gathered from the interviews with HR professionals regarding the features of an effective resume, it is obvious that quality content ranks very highly among the features of an effective resume. This can be seen in Table 1 below that presents the HR professionals' opinions.

Table 1: HR Professionals' Opinions on the Features of an Effective Resume

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| <b>OPINION</b>  |
|---|
| 1. Provides basic details such as nationality, race and age or applicant's standard particulars such as contact information |
| 2. Highlights information that fits job requirements  |
| 3. Presents details of education results and achievements   |
| 4. Displays career objective which aligns with job requirements   |
| 5. Indicates career history with months and years   |
| 6. Describes work experience in terms of what was done, achieved and learned  |
| 7. Includes specific, relevant skills   |
| 8. Highlights best attributes   |
| 9. Provides self-introduction   |
| 10. Includes clear and concise descriptions   |
| 11. Gives information in point form and short phrases   |
| 12. Displays appropriate headings   |
| 13. Uses relevant keywords related to the job   |

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In Table 1, it can be seen that a majority of the opinions reflected the HR professionals' preference for quality content including information about work experience, educational qualifications, skills, career objective and personal information (Items 1 to 9). Other than

personal information, the findings support earlier studies (Hornsby & Smith, 1995; Hutchinson & Brefka, 1997) on resume-writing conducted in North America. These studies also revealed the strong emphasis placed by American HR professionals on work experience, educational qualifications, skills and career objective when short-listing applicants for job interviews. Given that these are key or standard information to ascertain the suitability of an applicant, it seems unlikely that the situation will change across time and space.

From the opinions gathered, it appears that personal details and attributes could also help to form an effective resume (Items 1, 8, and 9). This is supported by one of the HR professionals who stated that a job applicant must not show what he or she possesses in terms of skills and qualifications only because these would not be sufficient to make him or her “shine” in the midst of other applicants. In addition, the applicant needs to show that he or she has the right kind of attitude and personal background for the job. According to the HR professional, recruiters are looking “to gauge the job and motivational fit of candidates” and this is perhaps why there is a need to present an all-encompassing resume.

Although the suggestion to include personal details and attributes is not found in the textbooks, our analysis does reveal that there are some similarities between the textbooks and the opinions of the HR professionals in terms of the content to be included. It is described in most of the textbooks that relevant content ensures resume effectiveness. According to Dwyer (2005, p. 642), “a successful resume is specifically targeted to a particular position”. In the same vein, Adler and Elmhorst (2008, p. 518) indicate that “the most effective resumes are tailored to the interests and needs of a particular position and employer”. This resonates with the HR professionals’ preference for customized resumes that refer closely to the job requirements (Items 2, 4 and 7). The textbooks also describe other specific features of effective resumes relating to language and visual appeal that concur with the HR professionals’ opinions. For

instance, clarity and conciseness, according to O'Rourke (2007), are what makes resumes effective. Additionally, one of the key features of successful resumes includes using "jargon and buzzwords of industry and organization" (Locker and Kazcmarek, 2009, p. 469), which is in line with one of the HR professionals' views on employing relevant keywords related to the job (Item 13).

#### **4.2 Types of resumes**

One of the things that we discuss with students in our resume writing class is how to format the resume using a particular type of resume. The two main types of resumes usually introduced in textbooks are the chronological resume, also known as the traditional resume, and the functional resume. As its name suggests, the chronological resume focuses on the history of a candidate's typical experiences required for a job in reversed order. The headers for this kind of resume are standard, consisting of terms like "Education", "Work Experience" and "Extra-Curricular Activities". On the other hand, the functional resume which is synonymous with the skill-based resume, highlights the skills set of a candidate by using specific headers that are related to the job requirements.

In our opinion, presenting one's resume in a certain way is tantamount to projecting visual appeal as it could be a useful strategy to highlight important information that would render the resume effective. Except two HR professionals, all professionals agreed that the chronological resume was their preferred choice as they would like to see the timelines regarding each type of information. One of them stressed that the chronological resume is suitable for young job hunters while another, who did not indicate any preference, mentioned that instead of determining which type to use, it was more important for job applicants to arrange their contents carefully by placing highly important information at the top or on the first page of their resumes.

Overall, their views resonated with the findings from Hornsby and Smith (1995)'s study, which discovered that North American HR personnel generally preferred the chronological resume.

Different views on which type of resume should be used were provided by the textbooks. While Dwyer (2005, p. 644) described that the targeted resume is a good option as it "emphasizes relevant skills and experience for a specific job", both Adler and Elmhorst (2008, p. 520) and O'Rourke (2005, p. 470) advise job applicants to consider the job requirements in relation to their own qualifications and experiences before deciding on how to write their resumes. Other textbooks (Bovee & Thill, 2008; Locker & Kazcmarek, 2009) introduce the typical formats, most notably the chronological and functional resume but do not prescribe their usage. Moreira (2007, p. 31), on the other hand, explains that the chronological layout is not a compulsory format but is only ideal for people who have a stable working history. She recommends the skill-based resume for those who are changing careers or who are recent graduates. Among the textbooks selected for analysis, only two (Guffey & Du-Babcock, 2008; Krizan, Merrier & Jones, 2005) indicate that the chronological resume is preferred by most employers, being in line with the views of the HR professionals. It is also suggested that a combination resume might work favorably for individuals with little work experience (Krizan, Merrier & Jones, 2005, p. 463). According to the authors, a combination resume is actually a hybrid of both the chronological resume and the functional resume.

#### **4.3 Personal information and photo**

In our opinion, personal information such as age, gender, marital status, race, etc are non-essential in resumes as they do not help recruiters to determine if a candidate possesses the right expertise for the job. This is also the case for photos which in fact could harm candidates especially if they are used by recruiters to discriminate against certain individuals. However,

when we related this to our students, some of them argued that personal information and photo were in fact essential to some recruiters, as they had been informed in the career workshops organized by the university's career centre as well as companies which recruit fresh graduates. To substantiate the students' claims, this issue was brought up in the interviews with HR professionals. Of the eight HR professionals interviewed, six felt that giving certain personal information in the resume is helpful, especially for age, gender and marital status. Such information could help them understand the suitability of a candidate in working with an existing team. Furthermore, one of the HR professionals explained that although personal information was optional, it could provide a "holistic picture" of the candidate while another professional held the view that the maturity level of a candidate could be determined through such information. None of the HR professionals disagreed with the inclusion of a photo. In fact, three of them felt that it might be useful "to put a face to the name" and especially for frontline positions in sales and marketing. Generally, the interviews indicate that the HR professionals felt that personal information and photo could facilitate the selection process but they are not compulsory elements in resumes.

All the textbooks indicate that personal information and photo should be excluded. Some of them (e.g. Bovee & Thill, 2008; Krizan, Merrier & Jones 2005) cite U.S. legislation as the reason for the exclusion of personal information and photo. Krizan, Merrier & Jones (2005, p. 474) state that "employment laws prohibit employers from discriminating among applicants on the basis of race, color, religion, age, gender, etc [and] such information is not recommended". Another reason brings to question the relevance of personal information on a candidate's work competency. As Dwyer (2005, p. 642) puts it, "if age and marital status have nothing to do with [one's] ability to do the job, the question should not be asked". Nonetheless, the analysis of these textbooks also revealed that the authors' views on personal information and photo are not an

unequivocal non-inclusion. Some leeway is given for including personal information if “[it] enhances the employers’ understanding of why [someone] would be the best candidate for the job” (Bovee & Thill, 2008, p. 560). Likewise, a photo could be included if it can reflect certain significant features of a job such as in the case of modeling (Krizan, Merrier & Jones, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is some alignment between the needs of the industry and textbook information with respect to this controversial issue but it is necessary for students to understand the importance of relevance in choosing personal information to be included in their resumes.

The inclination towards personal information and photo in resumes could be culturally-motivated. As illustrated in Scollon and Scollon (2002)’s study, giving personal information might help HR professionals to know a job applicant better. This was also the sentiment of the local HR professionals interviewed. However, in the west, especially in North America, the situation seems to be somewhat different. Hutchinson and Brefka (1997)’s study on HR professionals’ preferences for resume content show that personal information, including date of birth, marital status, race, religion and physical or health status were not considered important. On the other hand, other types of information such as expressing willingness to travel or relocate and last drawn salary from previous employment were considered somewhat important. Given the importance of cultural influence on resume- writing, language teachers should ensure that students are aware of the fact that cultural differences could be a contributing factor in producing a successful resume, especially when this concept is not described in the textbooks.

#### **4.4 Summary of qualifications**

This information category does not seem to be a common feature in Singapore-based resumes as we discovered through the course of teaching resume-writing. In fact, we only started

introducing and discussing the term with our students when we chanced upon it in the prescribed textbook (Locker & Kazcmarek, 2009) for the Professional Communication course. We observed that not only were many of our students unaware of this term, they neither saw its importance nor knew how to write it in their resumes. For this reason, we chose to ask the HR professionals about it to determine its importance for recruitment selection in the Singapore context. One of them indicated that this category is “good to have but it needs to be concise, related to the job and not generic” while another echoed her by saying that “it should be kept concise”. The rest of the HR professionals were somewhat ambivalent on the matter. One HR professional mentioned career objective as being more important for a resume while another stated that it was not important. Additionally, another HR professional suggested putting the category at the top of the resume but right after career objective and still others did not offer any views on it.

Although we were first acquainted with the term in one of the selected textbooks, this term is mentioned in all the analyzed textbooks and seems to be an important feature of U.S. resumes. Moreira (2007, p. 24) calls it “the new name for the objective statement” where it provides the best opportunity for attracting the recruiter’s attention. Other textbooks (e.g. Adler & Elmhorst, 2008; Dwyer, 2005; Krizan, Merrier & Jones, 2005; O’Rourke, 2007), use the term interchangeably with other terms such as “profile statement” and “career objective”. All the authors indicate that it should be placed at the top of the resume, usually after contact information. Krizan, Merrier and Jones (2005, p. 469) further emphasize the significance of this category by stating that it is a “brief abstract” that some employers would like to see at the beginning of a resume to ascertain if qualifications match job requirements. The same sentiment is echoed by Bovee and Thill (2008, p. 558) who mention that the category “help[s] companies to categorize candidates” and is a useful tool to highlight a candidate’s strongest points “particularly if [he or she has had] a good deal of varied experience”.

#### **4.5 Salary expectation**

We decided to approach the HR professionals about the question of salary expectation as it was a question that many of our students had raised in class. From the eight HR professionals we interviewed, only one said “Yes” to including salary expectation while the others indicated that it was not an advisable move citing the common reason that most companies already have a salary structure especially for fresh graduates and it was non-negotiable. Accordingly, salary expectation could be included only if it is stated as one of the application requirements in the job advertisement but the suggestion of some of our interviewees is to provide a salary range with the term “negotiable” displayed next to it. In addition, two of them advised fresh graduates to “conduct some market research” or “check out the current market rate” before putting down their salary expectation so as to project an image of being well-informed about the job market situation and not to be disadvantaged during the selection process.

This issue is only given a cursory mention in all the textbooks we analyzed. When it is touched upon, the suggestion is a clear non-exclusion where the authors liken it to giving personal information (Bovee & Thill, 2008; O’Rourke, 2007). In this case, we can conclude that this topic is generally a sensitive one even within a non-western context but there may be some exceptions depending on company requirements. Ultimately, fresh graduates in Singapore are best advised to refer to the job advertisements carefully coupled with being cognizant of current job market rates before deciding on whether to include salary expectation in their resumes.

#### **4.6 Referees**

In teaching about resume writing, we are of the opinion that it is important to include information about referees since they are the ones who would be able to support a candidate’s application by vouching for his/her abilities. However, some of our students raised the issue of

its importance given that referees are usually placed at the bottom of resumes. The issue was taken up with the HR professionals and nearly all of them viewed it as an important part of the resume. One of them revealed that referees are important as they “show that you are upfront about your character”. Others reported that they are helpful “for quick reference checks” and would put a candidate in good stead if they are “known and respected” in the field. In fact, it may be helpful for applicants to consider including references from former employers or professors since they could be rated highly by some HR administrators (Hutchinson & Brefka, 1997). Only one of the HR professionals indicated that referees are “not very important” but could be useful for commercial recruiters who play the “middlemen” between companies and job applicants in the hiring process.

None of the textbooks we reviewed discussed the importance of referees as part of resumes. Most of them suggest attaching a separate document for referees (Adler & Elmhurst, 2008; Dwyer, 2005; Guffey & Du-Babcock, 2008; Krizan, Merrier & Jones, 2005; Moreira, 2007). According to Locker & Kazcmarek (2009, p. 482), “including references anticipates the employers’ needs and removes a potential barrier to getting the job”. However, in the end, the benefits they professed are downplayed when they suggest including referees only if one has “trouble filling up the page”. Another word of advice given in some of these textbooks is not to include the phrase, “references available on request” as it takes up space and seems to imply that a candidate is not entirely forthcoming or genuine in his/her application (Guffey & Du-Babcock, 2008; Moreira, 2007). Although the information from both the HR professionals and textbooks is somewhat contradictory, we think that this could be a result of contemporary contextual influences. A recent study (Lim & Rajah, 2011) conducted in Singapore has found that resume embellishment is common among graduating students, especially if they do not have a social network to help them ease into the workforce. This could be why most of the HR professionals

have begun to acknowledge the importance of referees notwithstanding their awareness that this information element is normally placed at the end of the resume.

#### **4.7 Format and visual appeal**

We believe that a successful resume, just like a successful job interview candidate should be all-encompassing. In other words, as a whole package, what counts as important is not just the linguistic aspect or content of the resume but the non-linguistic aspect or layout of the resume as well. Henceforth, we have always emphasized to our students the need to strike a balance between producing good content and creating visual appeal for their resumes. When we brought up this issue with the HR professionals, all of them agreed with us that format and visual appeal are important mainly for the sake of “facilitating reading”. Words that frequently came up during the interviews with reference to format and visual appeal were “neat”, “tidy”, “clear”, “concise” and “uncluttered”.

The HR professionals’ sentiments are presented in all the textbooks that were analyzed. Specifically, Dwyer (2005, p. 642) recommends resume writers to “format and order the information in the resume skillfully [to] demonstrate personal standards of excellence and good written communication skills”. She believes that employers value these two attributes. For the textbook writers, a resume’s format and visual appeal refers to white space, margins, alignment, font, paper quality and even the type of printer used.

Besides discovering that both the HR professionals and textbooks have the same opinion on this issue, we also observed that both shared the same underlying principle of effective formatting and visual appeal which is that it supports the building of first impressions in resumes. As mentioned by one of the HR professionals, “the resume gives employer a first impression of the applicant”. Similarly, Krizan, Merrier & Jones (2005, p. 480) state that “the resume’s

appearance is important because it is a potential employer's first impression". Given its important role in impression-building, we think that students should give due attention to their resumes' layout besides from dealing with content. In this regard, they need to be aware of the virtues of proofreading and editing their resumes before mailing them or in the case of electronic resumes, hitting the "send" key.

## **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

This study was motivated by the endless debates that we had with our Professional Communication students regarding resume-writing. It was unsettling for them and us, their teachers, that there were many conflicting opinions about how best to prepare a winning resume. What we suggested to them about resume-writing came mainly from business communication textbooks that were written by American authors. The question of whether we were in sync with industry practices led us to carry out this modest research which attempted not only to gather the preferences of local HR professionals on resume-writing but also to compare their preferences with the advice dispensed by the myriad of business textbooks that we have been using for our teaching.

The findings from our study revealed that the information in the textbooks was not far removed from the preferences of the HR professionals in the local context. We found many similarities in terms of the features of an effective resume, types of resumes to use, and formatting and layout. However, there were also differing opinions especially related to candidates' personal attributes and any other information that is deemed private such as personal particulars, photo and referees. Our study showed that this difference could be attributed to contextual influence that is generally not addressed in the textbooks.

Based on our findings, we can conclude that across time, resume has remained constant

in many aspects relating to content and visual appeal. Nonetheless, due to cultural differences, there are to be sure anomalies, as evident in our comparison of Singaporean HR professionals' preferences with that of textbooks authored by Americans. It is important for teachers to acknowledge such differences in their classrooms and to raise awareness that there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all resume. In order to be a successful resume writer, it is not enough just to consult guidebooks and to heed their advice unthinkingly. Rather, we recommend that teachers teach resume writing by first communicating the fundamental principles of good writing involving an awareness of the writing purpose, audience and context. Furthermore, teachers should create opportunities for students to analyze and discuss job advertisements as well as to explore the various hiring avenues (campus recruitment drive, networking session, recommendation, etc) available in Singapore to drive home the significance of context awareness. Instead of accepting the suggestions given in the textbooks, students should be trained to think critically about the suggestions and how they are applicable to their own situations.

The study was a small attempt to bridge the gap between industry practices and classroom instruction. While we understand that our findings from the HR professionals may not represent the opinions of the majority, due to a limited number of participants, the study has given us some interesting insights on the actual hiring practices of HR professionals in Singapore in order to enhance our teaching of resume-writing to cater to the specific needs of our students in the local context. Nonetheless, it is recommended that future research considers interviewing more HR professionals in order to provide a better reflection of general reality. In addition, research into HR preferences on resumes could also be extended to other parts of Asia to determine if cultural difference does indeed play a significant part in resume-writing and if so, whether teachers in Asia should consider producing their own textbooks to better reflect their situation and effectively cater to the needs of their students.

In effect, our study has revealed to us that the resume can be seen as a cultural artifact that implicitly represents the norms and beliefs of a particular social setting. In order to become successful resume writers, it would therefore be helpful for students to actively engage in the writing process by questioning and negotiating their understanding of what makes an effective resume instead of adhering strictly to textbook advice. For this to happen, teachers must take the first step in creating a more interactive environment in the classroom as well as constantly engaging with industry.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions for HR Professionals**

1. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of an effective resume?
2. Do you think it is really necessary for a job applicant to consider which type of resume to adopt before he or she begins writing?
3. Do you think the applicant's personal information (i.e. age, marital status, hobbies, etc) and photo should be included in a resume?
4. What is your opinion on including a summary of qualifications in a resume?
5. What is your opinion on including salary expectation in a resume?
6. Do you think referees are important in a resume?
7. To what extent do you think format and visual appeal in a resume is important?

## **Appendix B**

### **Business Communication Textbooks Selected for the Study**

1. Adler, R. B. & Elmhorst, J. M. (2008). *Communicating at Work: Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
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