

## Abstract

You can positively influence the decision of potential employers for your application by making powerful, positive first impressions through the designs of your application documents and preparation for the job interviews. This is possible by promoting first and foremost particular qualifications which correspond to those job requirements that best and uniquely characterize the duties of the offered position. These qualifications stand in contrast to those qualifications which are commonly acquired at university today, e.g. English/communication skills, Microsoft Office Package and keyboard skills, team/personal skills etc.

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## **The Key to Designing Successful Job Applications**

Applying for a job involves two steps. First, you send written application documents. In the English-speaking world this generally means simply a cover (US) / covering (UK) letter and a resume (US) / CV (UK); no other documents are usually sent initially although they may be requested later. If these documents convince the personnel (or "human resources" = HR) decision-maker, you are usually invited to an interview (in person or over the phone), which is the second step.

Though it may sound strange, in the real world, the best-qualified person for a position does not always get selected for the position. The main problem is that many well-qualified people have no clear understanding of how to present their qualifications in a powerful, effective manner in their application documents and later in interviews. What about you?

### 1. The Significance of First Impressions in the Job-application Process

It is important to understand that the hiring process is rarely carried out entirely on the basis of logic. The judgment of HR staff is frequently determined by their instinct, primarily shaped by their first impression of the application documents. The time spent reviewing these documents – which you have worked on for many hours – may be no more than twenty seconds to thirty each! Hence, you can see how important it is for you to provide your most impressive information to the HR staff as quickly and easily as possible.

This point cannot be overemphasized: Your written documents have to make a favorable first impression in your application documents. Your task is to design a cover letter and resume in a way that will convince the HR person to invite you to an interview.

In regard to the interview, although it is possible for HR staff to arrive at a different opinion as the interview progresses, experience shows that they gain an initial impression very quickly, and then a kind of inertia in thinking sets in. In other words, during a job interview, HR staff are much more likely to affirm their initial impression of you than to change it.

**The key to success in the job application process is to make powerful, positive first impressions during every contact you make with a potential employer.**

If you have no clear concept of how to promote your qualifications effectively, generally you will fail to make a favorable first impression in your application documents and will rarely be invited to an interview. The good news is that those applicants who actually do make powerful, positive first impressions are such exceptions to the rule that HR staff are always pleased to find such promising

applicants; it therefore becomes unlikely that they will change their minds much about their initial impression. However, the reverse is also true: Once an unimpressive or unfavorable first impression has been made, HR staff are reluctant to upgrade their initial assessment.

### 1.1 Standard Preparation Procedure

To benefit from this understanding that first impressions play a major role in achieving success in the job-application process, you must first deal with two questions: 1) What makes a powerful, positive impression on potential employers? And 2) How can this be achieved through the design of your application documents (the cover letter and the resume), as well as through your performance in job interviews? These matters need to be clarified at the very start of the application process, i.e. before you create your application documents.

To start this process routinely you must find out what the requirements for a particular position are, no matter whether it is a position that is advertised or one you hope to find by contacting a potential employer through your own initiative. Usually you can find lists of the requirements for a particular position or area of work in corresponding job ads in publications or on the Internet. Beyond this you can also ask knowledgeable people who can help you identify these requirements.

In a next step, you need to determine how well you can meet these requirements through your qualifications. If you do not meet a particular requirement, you should try to minimize potential damage. If, for example, a particular position requires leadership experience in the workplace, you can alternatively mention your leadership experience in volunteer work, in sports, at university, or in the community. Show not only that you have a similar, alternative qualification but that you are also confident with regard to the overall strength of your application. Additionally, you need to determine whether there are possible requirements that are not specifically mentioned in a job ad, like presentation skills for a position in marketing. Promoting such relevant qualifications demonstrates your professionalism.

Matching requirements for an offered position with an applicant's qualifications

requirement a	↔	qualification a
requirement b	↔	missing qualification b? → alternative qualification to b
requirement c	↔	qualification c
unmentioned requirement d?	↔	qualification d

### 1.2 The Basis for Making Powerful, Positive First Impressions in Job-application Documents and Interviews

To be sure, matching qualifications with requirements is nothing new for you. However, the decisive key for success lies in separating these requirements/qualifications into primary and secondary levels of significance. Primary requirements uniquely define the duties of a specific position. These clearly contrast with secondary requirements which apply universally to a broad variety of professional positions. **Consequently, you can best make powerful, positive first impressions in your application documents and interview responses by promoting your primary qualifications first.** To understand this insight better, let us see how the primary requirements for one position can be significantly different for another position although these positions share many common secondary requirements.

Whether any particular requirement and corresponding qualification is determined to be primary, secondary or irrelevant depends on the position under consideration. Let us compare the requirements for two very different positions that graduates with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration would be likely to apply for: Marketing Manager Assistant vs. HR Manager Assistant. The common requirements for these two positions are as follows:

- University degree in Business Administration or comparable degree
- Management/Leadership experience preferred
- Experience managing schedules/budgets
  - Microsoft Office Package plus keyboard skills
  - Organization/Team skills
  - Person/Soft skills
  - English/Communications skills

Clearly the latter four requirements are common skills expected to be employed in nearly all university-graduate positions: However, as these requirements are hardly unique to the specific duties of the offered positions, they are secondary in their significance for applications. In other words, highlighting these qualifications is not an effective approach because these skills are generally acquired at university by most everyone. By contrast, the initial three requirements above are specific to these two positions; and although they do not distinguish these two positions from each other, they are nevertheless primary requirements because they distinguish business-management positions from say engineering positions or common labor positions requiring no university degree.

The requirements listed below which these two positions do NOT have in common clearly distinguish the tasks of these positions from one another. In other words, these requirements are primary in their significance:

#### Marketing Manager Assistant

- Specialization in Marketing
- Experience in market research / data mining
- Design/Execution of marketing campaigns
- Customer-service experience

#### HR Manager Assistant

- Specialization in Human Resources
- Hiring skills/experience
- Training of personnel
- Knowledge of labor relations, employment contracts

The primary requirements identified here clearly distinguish between the types of work of these two management positions. In an application for one of the positions you have to highlight the correct corresponding primary qualifications because many of the primary qualifications for the one position are most likely irrelevant in an application for another position. Since those qualifications that correspond to the primary requirements of an offered position are the very qualifications that best identify this position, you need to promote in your application documents and interviews the fact that you have precisely these qualifications in order make a powerful, positive first impression on the potential employer. Note as well that the primary requirements in a job description are the requirements that are likely to change significantly in the job descriptions for different positions, even those within the same field. This understanding should make it clear to you why customizing each of your applications is so crucial to the success of your applications.

## 2. Achieving Strong First Impressions in the Job-application Process

### 2.1 The Cover Letter

Once you have determined the primary requirements of an offered position as well as your corresponding qualifications, you need to look at how your primary qualifications can best be highlighted in your application documents to make a favorable first impression on the reader. In the case of a cover letter, presumably the first contact you will have with the potential employer, it would be unconventional to start off the letter immediately by discussing your primary qualifications.

The following depicts the format generally employed for writing the beginning sections of cover letters in English-speaking countries.

1. The subject line identifies the position or area of work you are applying for.

2. The first paragraph of a cover letter customarily states which position you are applying for, how you found out about the opening and/or why you are motivated to work in this position (and/or for this company).
3. As the second paragraph is usually the first place you can promote your qualifications, by then your cover letter has already made some initial impression on the reader instead of the desired powerful first impression you intend to make. There is however one excellent technique you can employ to overcome this dilemma: Use bullet points in the second paragraph to highlight your primary qualifications! As there is usually no other usage of highlighting in the cover letter, the reader's attention is directly attracted to this part of your letter before reading anything else: Therein lies the opportunity to make your powerful, positive first impression.

The following cover-letter excerpt concerns the effective usage of bullet points to promote a student's primary qualifications for a six-month internship application to a Brazilian automobile manufacturer:

I can offer you the following professional skills at your new assembly plant in Sao Paulo:

- Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering with specialization in Automotive Engineering [the right kind of degree for automotive production-line work]
- Research expertise/experience in automotive design [uniquely suitable for this work]
- Optimization of supply chain / work processes of production lines [ditto]
- Portuguese skills from working at a Brazilian automobile assembly plant [not a common qualification like speaking English – certainly a major advantage in Brazil – plus work experience in the same kind of internship position at a competitor's plant]

## 2.2 The Resume

In the past in traditional resumes an applicant's primary qualifications were first provided in the sections entitled "Education," "Work Experience" and "Skills", located in the middle to lower half of this document. And although these items were bulleted, they were not the only highlighted information in the document. In other words, not only did this information appear late in the document (i.e. too late to make a first impression), it could even easily be overlooked.

However today, with the introduction of two new initial sections to modern resumes entitled "Objective" and "Summary", you are now able to position your primary qualifications near the top of the resume to gain the desired powerful, first impression. The "Objective" section identifies the position/field that you are applying for (information necessary for the reader to determine the significance of your qualifications). The "Summary" section provides the perfect opportunity for you to feature your primary qualifications in bulleted fashion at the top of your resume. Naturally these qualifications appear again later in the appropriate sections of the resume.

Below you will find two examples of a resume summary for different positions by the same applicant who has learned to customize applications and highlight his/her primary qualifications.

Summary for an entry-level Marketing position

- Earned Bachelor's degree in Business Administration with specialization in Marketing and Management
- Prepared/Executed direct Marketing campaigns [if in a well-known company, name it: ... campaigns in the Marketing Department of ...]
- Designed web sites with understanding of Web Marketing Principles
- Employed web analytics tools including HBX and Google Analytics

Summary for an entry-level Accounting position

- Earned Bachelor's degree in Business Administration with numerous courses in advanced Accounting, Financing, Investment and Taxation

- Recorded/Classified/Reported/Analyzed financial data in an Accounting Department [if in a well-known company, name it] data in the Accounting Department of [company]
- Gained training/experience in operating SAP ERP for financial reporting
- Assisted in preparation/execution of department audits

### 2.3 The Job Interview

In the job interview you should again make a powerful, positive first impression, in this case by promoting your primary qualifications as soon as possible in that phase of the interview that focuses on your suitability for the offered position. Job interviews like the application documents generally follow a particular order of activities.

Typically job interviews begin with small talk to break the ice, to relax you and to gain some impression of your social skills. In the next interview phase the company typically describes itself in broad strokes before depicting the offered position in detail. Although these initial phases of the job interview normally do not provide you with any opportunity to present your qualifications, you should nevertheless ask questions about the company and the position based on your research in order to demonstrate your professionalism and genuine interest in the position/company. When attention is finally turned to your qualifications, the real interview begins (self-presentation, history of education and training, examples) ... and, unfortunately, this is the moment you are likely to stumble if you are not prepared to promote your primary qualifications right from the start.

Typically the first question in this phase of the interview is a broad invitation to make an opening statement about yourself. This presents the ideal opportunity for you to make a favorable first impression by effectively presenting your primary qualifications for the offered position:

The most common form of this question is simply, "Could you please tell us about yourself?" Alternatives include "How would you describe yourself?", "How would your present supervisor describe you?", "Please describe your educational/professional background.", "What are your qualifications?", "What can you offer us?", and "Why should we hire you?"

As many applicants lack a clear understanding of what to say at this moment in order to make a powerful, positive first impression about themselves, they either aimlessly blurt out whatever comes to mind (when/where they were born, where they are from, how old they are, etc.) or start by promoting secondary qualifications. In doing this, they pass up the best opportunity to turn the attention to their primary qualifications. Moreover, they demonstrate lack of professionalism by show that they do not understand how the interview process really works. Therefore, be sure to prepare an effective answer for this kind of question and practice it well to be able express yourself fluently and convincingly. As the interviewers seek to determine whether your claims of qualifications are believable and whether you demonstrate spirit, confidence and professionalism in the way you conduct yourself, you should therefore support the highlighting of your primary qualifications by providing suitable examples with a strong, emotive voice that comes down at the end of every sentence. Then in the rest of the interview seize the opportunities when they come to promote your other position-relevant qualifications.

You must also be prepared for the unusual case when the interviewer starts off the qualifications phase of the job interview by asking questions that do not invite you to present your qualifications. If the question posed by the interviewer does not concern your qualifications for the offered position, you have to try your best to find a way to highlight your primary qualifications nevertheless. Let us look at possible effective responses to the following lead-off questions that do not invite you to discuss your qualifications but rather test your expertise or inquire about your motivation.

"What are some of the responsibilities of an HR Manager Assistant?" – First of all, an HR Manager Assistant has to determine well in advance the development of the company's demand for employees. *I acquired experience in this task when I served an internship in the HR Department of ... [company title].* As a further responsibility an HR Manager Assistant oversees the job-application process, whether the required positions are filled internally or externally. *In one of my courses at the ...*

[university title] where I earned my Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, we simulated the job-application process by playing the roles of both the HR officer and the applicant. ...

"Why do you wish to work for us?" – First of all, I wish to work for [name of the company] because you are the market leader in [field of work]. Moreover, the position you are offering presents just the right challenges for me now that I have completed my Bachelor's degree in ... [degree title]. Moreover, I have worked as a ... [position title] for ... [company title]. I am also well qualified for this position because ... [continue to promote further primary qualifications].

Through these examples it should become clear that you need to be prepared to deal with a variety of potential lead-off interview questions by generating a response that ensures effective promotion of your primary qualifications.

Now you should be able to go to job interviews with great confidence! To be invited to a job interview already means that the potential employer thinks quite favorably of your qualifications. Assuming you eagerly and effectively use the earliest opportunity in the interview to promote your primary qualifications, you will benefit from the so-called "halo effect": After making a powerful, positive first impression, inertia quickly takes hold in the minds of the interviewers, making it difficult for them to find serious problems with your application.

### Summary

- Start the application process by identifying the primary requirements unique to the offered position and your corresponding qualifications.
- Feature these primary qualifications by bulleting them in the second paragraph of your cover letter and in the *Summary* section at the top of your resume.
- Finally, when the job interview turns to focusing on your qualifications for the offered position, take the opportunity immediately to feature your primary qualifications as soon as possible, even in the case when the questions asked do not invite you to do so. You must always find a way to realize this.

Making powerful, positive first impressions on potential employers by effectively promoting your primary qualifications as quickly and effectively as possible in your cover letter, resume and job interview will substantially increase your chances for success in your job applications.

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