

TIPS FOR WRITING THE FEDERAL RESUME

By John M. O'Connor, BA, MFA, CRW, CFRW, CCM, CFJST
President - Career Pro Resumes and Career Pro Inc.

For most people in career transition, writing resumes or in search for federal positions, there seems to be an abundance of bad advice. One person says it's best to fill out forms. Another person recommends using the new federal resume formats and refers you to websites and books on how to get hired in the federal government system. Most people come to the conclusion that it's just too hard to figure it all out. They either don't apply for a federal job or get discouraged after applying because interviews don't materialize as fast as they might in the corporate or civilian job market place. Pursuing a government job and offering your talents to help this country have never been in bigger demand. If you are qualified you may even be doing your country a disservice by not offering your talents at the federal level. Uncle Sam may need you!

It's important for you to set goals in any endeavor in life, especially your career life. With 1.8+ million employees, the federal government serves as this nation's largest employer. Issues in Homeland Security, Defense, and Public Service have never been more pronounced. Never in the history of the United States has the federal government's role been more important. Where might your role be in this large body of water? How can you find your way through to the right federal employment match in a reasonable amount of time? How will you play the game and play it properly so your candidacy will be taken seriously and you will have a chance to gain federal employment?

Let's start with these tips in writing a proper Federal-style resume:

Don't assume your civilian, corporate or non-profit work will translate to the needs or missions of agencies, programs and services within the federal government. You need to be able to succinctly and properly detail every piece of your main experiences professionally, other experiences, special skills, background, awards, training, education, achievements and special interests. Does that mean that the Federal-style resume is a dumping ground for as much as you can muster and put in a resume? The answer is no. Unfortunately, federal hiring managers have to deal with jobseekers that feel this is the professional way to handle the Federal-style resume. It's not. You may need professional assistance to ensure that your background creates an interest in the reader. Know the mission of the programs and organizations that you are applying to, and plan to interpret your background for these critical elements.

Don't overlook any professional experience, project, achievement or potential key piece of information in your documents. You need to methodically detail all pieces of your background before you decide to use the information. Things like special interests may be relevant to the discussion, but if you don't write down your international travel experiences for example you may forget to use them or list them in a special section. The same holds true with technical skills, training, education and part-time jobs. Many positions may require or prefer skills or experiences you thought were irrelevant.

Don't assume that the federal recruiter or reader of the documents understands acronyms or industry-specific terminology. For most people who are in a type of industry like telecom, technology or consumer products for example, have their own industry-specific jargon. Most jobseekers become so familiar with their own terminology it takes an interpreter, a writer or career coach to extract from them what they mean and interpret transferable skills. This must be done when you change industry and it certainly must be done to feature your skill sets and transferable hard or soft skills to the federal employment marketplace.

Don't forget to properly format your documents for the Federal-style resume. Every application, electronic or non-electronic, has very specific ways that it should be written. The process of using the new Federal-style resume has changed greatly from the days of the old SF-171; however, formatting must be taken very seriously. Savvy federal hiring managers may quickly shoot down cute graphics, overwriting, unusual

structure or other seemingly innovative ideas. Pay very careful attention to the requirement details of each vacancy announcement and other rules.

Don't overlook any of the elements of the application package needed to apply for a federal position. It takes more than putting together a solid resume to apply for federal positions. Understand the process, vacancies, job standards, KSAs and other components of the application process or do not expect positive results.

Do take great care on polishing every piece of your federal application and Federal-style resume for each announcement. Using a one-size-fits all document, and shot gunning your resume to federal job vacancies, may damage your candidacy for federal job interviews and offers. You need to build your documents up with the kinds of achievements and specifics that any employer would recognize and be attracted to and tailor them to the announcement. It's hard work but it needs to be done. For example, detail projects, budgets, key roles, contributions, results, your impact on the results, and people (team members, superiors, other organizations) who worked with you to achieve results.

Do plan your federal employment goals according to a realistic schedule for getting hired. In many ways the perception of most job seekers is that *it's just going to take forever to get hired by the federal government, all the hoops you have to jump through just aren't worth it.* That of course is not the right attitude toward a search, but often becomes the lament of those who will not go through the proper processes to understand how to get hired into the federal government. The truth is that it may take three months, six months or a year to gain interviews; however, I personally have had my clients get called in that time period or even the same day we sent in an electronic, federal application! All signs point to the fact that the federal government has become more efficient and much quicker at processing applicants. Just like corporate America, the federal government's hiring managers look for and want the best candidates, and timing now more than ever, is very important.

Do practice all elements of interviewing so that you can back up your application and Federal-style resume with excellent verbal replies both by telephone and in-person interviews. Lack of belief sometimes stops candidates from preparing themselves for tough interview questions. If you are a military person you need to understand the goals and missions of the organizations you seek to work for in the federal government. It's not enough for military people to assume that federal hiring managers know the value of what they have done in the military. Use professional assistance to ensure that your military background meets and exceeds the expectations of federal hiring managers not totally familiar with military language. Similarly, corporate or non-profit sector employees must refine their experiences, achievements, special projects and additional information to fit the requirements of the vacancy announcement, focusing on keywords and other elements.

Do network and plan to network with key federal employees or those who understand the processes for federal employment. The federal government is not an amorphous structure located in Washington, D.C. Many jobseekers forget that the federal government looks much like this country, very diverse and a true melting pot of some of our best talent. By keeping up with federal agencies and departments through the people who staff them helps. If there is a chance to meet someone, talk to those who work in federal government, interact with agency personnel or simply network then do it. Find out why they like what they do, what to expect in federal employment and how they do their jobs. Be creative. This self-study helps.

Do master the non-electronic and electronic guidelines and submission formats for the Federal-style resume and application process. Know the rules for electronic submission because they all are not uniform throughout the federal employment process. You may or may not be able to add Profile statements, submit additional materials or send certain pieces of information in your federal electronic resume. You must know how to use and how to integrate keywords and other key filtering elements that will be scored and used to include or eliminate you from others seeking the same position.

Let these rules be a guide to you in finding federal employment. Gather as much information as you can to win in this very exciting federal career path.

*John O'Connor is President of Career Pro Resumes and Career Pro Inc. **In 2004, he became the first private practice Certified Federal Job Search Trainer (CFJST) in North Carolina.** He is also a Certified Electronic Career Coach (CECC). With a unique fiction writing pedigree with fiction publications as well, he obtained a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. With over 14 years experience in professional career transition, resume writing and career coaching, O'Connor applies his considerable job market expertise to career transitioners nationally.*

He has been featured recently (May 2003 and May 2004 feature) in the Raleigh News & Observer, Resume Writers Digest, The Gladiator, Execunet, Career Masters Institute Monthly Newsletter, Monster Career News and other national publications such as JIST. Additionally his diversified experience includes serving as a college professor. He can be reached via email at john@careerproinc.com and by phone at 919-787-2400.