

# 6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from Their Resumes ASAP If They Want to Get Jobs with the Most Prestigious Law Firms

By A. Harrison Barnes

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ATTORNEY SEARCH



## ***6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from Their Resumes ASAP If They Want to Get Jobs with the Most Prestigious Law Firms***

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### **Helpful resources**

We've put together a collection of attorney resume and cover letter resources written by experienced legal recruiters. [View our resources >](#)

*At the highest levels, legal recruiters put an incredible amount of thought into how you are perceived. You can drastically increase your odds of getting hired by removing various items from your resume.*

*I have seen many attorneys screw up their futures with resume mistakes that could easily be avoided. Most recruiters do not even understand the rules I am about to share with you.*

*You are about to get an inside view of how I and the most prestigious law firms review and think about your resume. I have reviewed over 500,000 resumes throughout the past two decades from attorneys trying to **get jobs in the largest law firms**. I've been responsible for placing thousands of attorneys in the largest and most prestigious law firms in the world. You are about to learn what I know.*

### **OVERVIEW**

With a resume, you are applying to be a firm's employee and go to work for them.

Your resume is essentially an application.

The only things your resume needs to communicate are that you are (1) the most ready and (2) the most capable of doing the job. Every legal employer expects you to come to work, fit in and put in a lot of hours.

The partners you are working for as an associate want soldiers and not dilettantes. The more you talk about your needs and interests, the worse off you will be.

If you are applying for a job in a large law firm, your record, for the most part, speaks for itself.

- Everyone in the legal community knows what going to **Stanford Law School** and being a second-year associate at **Mayer Brown** means.
- Everyone in the legal community knows what going to **University of Chicago** and spending eight years at **Kirkland & Ellis** means.
- If you are **in law school and looking for your first job**, everyone knows what going to Duke for college and being in the top half of your class at **Columbia Law School** means.

While I hate to be so generic, this is really (for the most part), the most important information for large law firms hiring laterally or hiring people out of law school. Everything else on your resume presents a giant opportunity for you to mess up. **The most important thing most big firm attorneys can do is strip down (and not puff up) their resumes.** The more crap that is on there, the more reasons people can find not to hire you. If you take one thing from this article, you need to understand that.

Most large law firms do not like people who try to stick out. In their experience, these people can be problems:

- They will leave if they do not get lots of praise.
- They may turn on the firm and undermine employee morale.
- They are likely to seek unnecessary attention from clients (and may even try and steal them), and
- They are most likely to leave if something better comes along.

Being in a large law firm requires a lot of selflessness:

- You need to let partners, senior associates and others take credit for your hard work.
- You need to put in time before the large rewards come.
- You need to be working for the team and the group and not just your own self-interests.
- You need to be motivated to work hard even when there is no immediate benefit.
- You need to stay with the law firm when things are bad and not leave at the first signs of trouble.

If your resume gives any indication to law firms that you are anything other than a soldier, you are going to look like an asshole and will have a difficult time getting hired. It is not about you. It is never about you. It is about the employer.

I've been looking at resumes all day, every day for almost two decades. I look at hundreds each day. I see tons of resumes that are full of worthless information, and it makes me sad. People who write this much about themselves are missing the point. They rarely get hired.

There are a huge number of applicants for most **legal jobs** (more than you want to know) in large law firms. Why risk making even a small mistake on your resume if it is likely to prevent you from getting hired? Here are the six big mistakes that I see attorneys make on their resumes. You need to remove these items from your resume immediately.

## The 6 Things to Remove from a Legal Resume Infographic

*TOO MANY PERSONAL  
DETAILS*



1

*IRRELEVANT WORK  
EXPERIENCE AND  
EDUCATION*



2

*RIDICULOUS  
FORMATTING AND  
CONTENT BLOCKS*



3

*INAPPROPRIATE WORD  
USAGE, TONE AND  
MISTAKES WITH DATES*



4

*LYING OR EXAGGERATING  
ON YOUR RESUME*



5

*SAYING ANYTHING  
NEGATIVE ABOUT ANY  
FORMER EMPLOYER*



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1

## TOO MANY PERSONAL DETAILS

Most attorneys have information on their resumes that is polarizing or just plain stupid to have on there. It's often not a bad job market. It's a bad legal resume!

I'm just thinking off the top of my head here; however, here are some personal details I have seen on resumes over the past week or so (all of which are bad):

### Avid hunter and outdoorsman.

Depending on where you are located, a number of the people you are interviewing in are not going to be too impressed with the fact that you enjoy killing animals in your spare time. This is not a good idea. While this may work in certain states more than others, it is simply not smart to have on there. If you piss off just one interviewer, this will harm you.

**Member of the First Baptist Church.** Nothing wrong with being part of a church. However, if you are interviewing with a law firm in a large city, the odds are pretty good you will

## More helpful resources

If you are really interested in learning more about resumes, read the 130+ page book I wrote for our sister company, Attorney Resume. It goes into a lot more detail about attorney resumes. [Read the book >](#)

If this is all too much for you, then just have your legal resume professionally crafted by Attorney Resume. [Hire an expert >](#)

If you send me your resume, I will review it and give you some feedback. [Submit your resume >](#)

be interviewing with gays, Jews and people of various religions and backgrounds. Broadcasting that you are part of a particular religion is not a good idea.

**Member of the gay law students association.** There is nothing wrong with being gay (and proud of it!) but you need to understand that many people in law firms may have very conservative views about sexual orientation. There are plenty of gay attorneys in most law firms in big cities, but they got their jobs without advertising this on

their resumes. There are people in every law firm that have prejudices against gays. Why would you put this on your resume?

**Member of the Black Law Students Association.** Sadly, many law schools and recruiters urge people to put their race on their resumes so they will be more likely to be hired. Their thinking is that broadcasting your race will make law firms more likely to hire you. What if the firm has recently been sued for racial discrimination? What if the firm has hired a series of non-performers who were

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of a particular race? Your objective is to get a job. My experience has shown: If I send out two equally qualified attorneys who are black (same practice area, caliber of law schools and law firms), and one has a bunch of stuff about their race on their resume and the other does not, the person without the racial information is more likely to get interviewed and hired. Discrimination? Maybe. Or, it could just be that the law firm does not like the person playing the "race card" to try and get a leg up on the competition. Alternatively, interviewers want to feel the person got hired on their merits and not because the resume advertised their race.

#### **Member of the Muslim Law Students**

**Association.** Same logic as above. Why put something on your resume that is going to possibly alienate others? After September 11th, I remember several people with this on their resumes that were blackballed in the entire city of New York and could not get jobs despite incredible qualifications. Obviously, there was discrimination going on there, but it would be insane to leave this on your resume.

#### **Member of the Jewish Law Students**

**Association.** Anything that can alienate others should be removed from your resume.

**Missionary for two years (LDS) in Brazil.** Do Mormons approve of gays? Weren't blacks barred until the 1970s from holding the Mormon priesthood? You get the idea. Why risk alienating others?

**Married mother of three.** *"Married? You are gorgeous but not that qualified. I'm moving on. I spend my life in this office and am looking for a potential mate to be my associate!"*

Never a good idea to put this on your resume. Don't kill the messenger here (this is just how many attorneys think). *"Three kids? Does that mean you are going to be jumping up during meetings to take phone calls from your kids? Does that mean that you are going to miss work when they get sick? What if you cannot find childcare?"*

**Creative email address.** While I have taken a bit of liberty here, I've seen some emails like this in the recent past: sexluvrockroll@hotmail.com, weedlover@aol.com, likelongmen@gmail.com. I'm not kidding. These are more common than you think. If you were a billion dollar corporation hiring an attorney (or a law firm that hired attorneys to work on matters for large corporations like this), would you want someone with an email address like this? Leave this stuff off of your resume. No one wants to see it. Make sure your personal email address is professional.

**Your work email address.** This is very common. *"Really? You want us to communicate with you at your work email address?"* What this says is pretty simple:

- a. My current employer is paying me
- b. I'm looking for a job at work
- c. I must not respect my employer very much
- d. I must not be very loyal
- e. I must not care what my employer thinks of me
- f. I don't care if my employer learns I am looking for a job on their time
- g. Maybe I was fired and my employer knows I am looking which is why I don't care (hey, I'm bad at my job anyway!)
- h. I'll do the same to you if you hire me!
- i. I'm an idiot!

*Don't use your work email address.*

**An email address like Harvard.edu, Stanford.edu, UChicago.edu, Princeton.edu, Yale.edu.**

*"You went to a prestigious college or law school! Good for you! What have you done since then? Do you think you need to advertise what a great school you went to? I went to Ohio State you arrogant asshole!"* Get a Gmail or similar personal email address. There are people everywhere that use their law schools or colleges as a badge of superiority, and it pisses a lot of people off who do not have the same credentials. Many people in large law firms grew up poor and worked very hard to get into prestigious state schools that their parents could afford and then worked very hard once they were in college. Princeton? Are you kidding?

Why would you want to have an email address or put something on your resume that could alienate you from

others before they even meet you? Going to a prestigious college or law school is a very good thing. What is not good is wearing that on your sleeve. It can drive people away from you and make others (even partners) feel inferior and insecure. That can prevent them from hiring you.

**A private high school.** Most people did not attend St. Paul's, Exeter, Andover, or other elite private high schools. Most attorneys in large law firms went to public schools where they worked hard. Being an attorney is also a largely middle-class profession, and the parents of most attorneys could not afford to send them

to \$50,000 a year private schools. Putting this information on your resume can alienate others and is never a good idea.

**Member of Mensa.** Mensa is an organization for people with high IQs. While there is nothing wrong with being a member of Mensa, what is most humorous about this is that most people who put this on their resumes did not go to the best colleges or law schools. Most attorneys at big law firms are extremely intelligent anyway, so this looks stupid. In addition, this screams underachiever: "If you are so freaking smart, why did you go to such a bad law school and why can't you get a job?"

**A link to your personal blog.** Don't get me started. You will show exactly the sort of

person you are if you do this. Interested in health? Then why work 3,000 hours a year in a large law firm? A personal blog provides opportunities to get

in trouble. During a law firm merger, I once saw a partner (with a good amount of business) lose his job. The law firm taking over in the merger found his personal blog and did not like a section he had on there about why he did not like being an attorney and what he would do if he quit.

**Home addresses far away from the office.**

Los Angeles (where I work) is a giant area. Commutes between different areas of Los Angeles can often be two hours or more. If you are applying for a job more than an hour from your home, it is best just to leave your home address off of your resume. If an employer

***"Why would you want to have an email address or put something on your resume that could alienate you from others before they even meet you?"***



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hires someone who needs to commute a great distance to work, they know that the odds are very good that this same person will leave if they find a job closer to their home, especially if the pay is close (or equivalent).

**Trips during law school or between jobs.**

You know what? The partners in the law firm bringing home \$2 million a year never traveled during law school. They've also certainly never taken time off to "travel" while looking for a job. Are you out of your mind? Leave this stuff off there.

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## ***IRRELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION***

Anything you put on your resume that is not related to practicing law is a bad idea and almost always fatal. Here are some stupid things I have seen recently:

**Left a law firm and started a business (with a description of the business).** "You started a business and failed? Sorry, our law firm does not hire people who fail. What's wrong? You did not like practicing law? You think you are better than us?" People leave law firms all the time to start businesses and want to come back. It is rare that large law firms will ever welcome these attorneys. Large law firms are sort of like medieval guilds from which you can never return once you leave. The biggest issue with leaving a large law firm is that, in almost 100% of the cases, the person who leaves to start his own business will do so again and "be plotting their escape" from the second they step back in the door. In addition, these people

are a threat to partners because they could steal their business. These attorneys are rarely hired. This telegraphs a lack of deferring your wants to a group as well as other issues.

Many attorneys believe having a solo practitioner law firm is a good thing. Again, this is also a bad thing. Law firms assume (rightly so) that you likely did not work on important matters while a solo practitioner, did not get good training and (often) only did this because you could not get a job with a large law firm. Additionally, you are also a threat because you may steal the law firm's clients. Law firms will avoid you if you were a solo with your own business.

**Any business you started before becoming an attorney.** In almost 100% of the cases I have seen, attorneys who had businesses prior to going to law school are always bad hires and end up leaving. While there is nothing wrong with having an entrepreneurial nature, a large law firm requires you to sublimate your needs to that of the group and trust the group. Entrepreneurs are always looking for a better angle and situation (like businesses are always trying to come out with better products).

### **How to tell if you are more of an entrepreneur than an attorney**

I know a guy that makes over \$500,000 a year (in cash) washing windows in a suburb outside of Detroit. He has been doing this for decades. He has two pickup trucks and about...



\$1,000 in equipment (4 or 5 ladders, some rags, squeegees and buckets). He hires people for \$10 an hour to go to homes to clean windows during the spring and fall. He works about six months a year. *Would you rather do this or work as an attorney for \$180,000 a year?* Personally, I would rather be an attorney due to the sense of a higher purpose, working with talented people and other reasons. Many people would rather run the window washing business. If this is you, you are far more of an entrepreneur than an attorney.

**Took business courses while at a law firm and got a certificate.** *"Wait a minute. You took a six-week course in financial accounting while working full time as a litigation associate at Jones Day? Are you serious?"* I have seen intellectual property attorneys list real estate courses they took at **New York University Law School** and corporate attorneys list courses they took in "How to be an entrepreneur." Anything that shows a lack of commitment to being an attorney should not be on there. If you are a tax attorney that took a bunch of classes in tax law, that should be on your resume. Just do not put anything on there that is likely to detract from showing your commitment to being an attorney.

**Too much emphasis on what you did as an undergraduate.** *"You were in a fraternity? You must be the type of person who made it difficult*

*for me to sleep when you were partying all night while I was trying to get good grades in college."* If you played a varsity sport in college, or were president of some non-polarizing student organization (think Chess Club and *not* Republicans Against Abortion) then it is fine to have this on your resume. In general, though, no one cares about:

- Your race
- Your religion
- Your pro-feminist leanings
- Your socialist leanings
- Your political affiliation
- Your sexual orientation

*Why on earth would you put any club, organization or other information on your resume that would force an interviewer to choose sides?* Wars, protests and killings occur due to peoples' passion for one religion, political affiliation and other organizations. Leave this off your resume.

**Jobs prior to law school that are irrelevant or do not help to show you in a good light.** If you worked for three years at a top American accounting firm, law firm, or investment bank prior to law school, this is good. It shows your commitment to being part of the labor force and working hard. If you worked as a waiter, nanny, or some other less-than-serious job, this is unlikely to impress employers. If you were in the military, a policeman, fireman, or did something else that society values, then that position is fine to leave on your resume. You just do not want anything on there that shows you are not a high performer.

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### **Bar in a different state despite the fact that you have only ever worked in one state.**

Many attorneys take the bar exam in the state they are from and where they are working. Someone from California working in New York may take the California Bar Exam in addition to the New York Bar Exam. Someone in Chicago may take the bar exam in Florida. This does not help you. Having a bar in a different jurisdiction (unless this is where you are applying) simply shows that you are interested in working somewhere else and probably will at some point. Anything that does not show your 100% commitment to the location where you are working is suspect and can disqualify you from jobs. Take this off your resume.

**Parenting time between jobs.** Women sometimes take years off between jobs. In the experience of 95% of legal employers, if a woman takes more than a year off, she is (1) unlikely to come back to the workforce for long, or (2) is likely to jump around to jobs seeking less and less accountability when she does come back. Law firms want people who are 100% committed and willing to work hard. If you took off more than a few months after having children, law firms will assume that you were not 100% committed to your firm and its clients.

**Your class rank and grade point average (unless it is extraordinary).** Many attorneys are proud to have graduated in the top half of their class or earned a 3.0 grade point average. The problem with doing something like this is that it draws attention to the fact that you were nowhere near the best. Why on earth would a large law firm hire you if you are not the best?

## **Rules for when to list class rank and grade point average on your resume**

### **Top 10 law school**

If you were in the top 20% this is fine. I still do not recommend this, though. If you were in the top 10%, I recommend this.

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### **Top 11-25 law school**

Top 10% and above is OK. I recommend this, though, in the top 5% only.

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### **Second-tier or third-tier law school**

Top 5%.

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### **Fourth-tier**

Only list if you were #1 through #5 in your class.

**Skills that everyone should have as an attorney.** You are being paid to analyze complex legal matters as an attorney. Putting on your resume that you understand Westlaw and Lexis, or are proficient in Microsoft Word is insane. I see this every day, however. Please get this off your resume. You make yourself look really stupid when you list this on your resume. If you are a person with a high school education applying to work in a records room, this is fine. It does not belong on the resume of an attorney seeking a position in a major U.S. law firm, however.

**Grades in law school classes (or worse yet, college classes).** This is something I see all the time too. No one cares. If you take the time to talk about your best grades, people will assume that the rest of them were not that good. Leave this off. It makes you look like you are not big firm material.

**Classes you took in law school.** No one cares about this either. If you list this, you look weak as well. The fact that you took corporations classes in law school does not qualify you to be a corporate attorney. Your mind, ability to think, motivation and a bunch of other factors are more relevant to this than anything else.

**Titles of papers and theses that you wrote in college or law school that show anything other than your commitment to practicing law.** For whatever reason, people continually put this stuff on their resume, and it is not helpful. If you are a patent attorney and wrote about something science-related that's great; however, for the most part, looking like an intellectual is not the smartest thing you can do. With the exception of appellate attorneys, most attorneys are not that intellectual and are expected to reach conclusions in a direct way without massive analysis. I have seen attorneys list topics like:

- *Why Corporations are Cheating Americans Out of a Middle Class Life*
- *An Analysis of Female Genital Mutilation Ceremonies in the African Subcontinent*

- *Why Gays and Lesbians Need Separate Proms: A Case for Separate But Equal in Public Education*
- *Why Black Reparations Should be Priority #1 of the Obama Administration*
- *Plato v. Socrates and the Foundations of Western Empiricism*

An attorney sitting in a small office in a high rise who has been working 50 hours a week for decades for demanding clients in an ultra-competitive environment has

no time for that nonsense. If you are sitting around writing that sort of stuff while he is proofreading a 200-page stock prospectus for the eighth time at 2:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, you are not going to identify with him. He also does not have much time for people with these sorts of interests. In addition, why are you interested in this crap anyway?

Listen: I've been there. Most professors push their agendas (mainly quite liberal) on their students who parrot this stuff back for good grades. But your resume is not a place for this. You are trying to get a job with people who are working for huge corporations and want to keep the money rolling in. Anything that suggests you will not cooperate will harm you.

**A ridiculous regurgitation of stuff everyone in your position does.** There are certain things every litigator does (e.g., respond to discovery, conduct legal research, write memos, draft motions, draft discovery and review documents). Putting this on your

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resume makes you look like a moron. *Get it off there!* If you drafted an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, or did a trial you can put this on there. Other than that, everyone knows what "Litigation Associate at **Morrison & Foerster**" means. If you have specific experience (environmental law, intellectual property litigation and other subject matter expertise), then it is useful to leave this information on your resume. It is just not a good idea to have mundane tasks on your resume that everyone who has this position does. This is no different than a waiter writing "Waited on tables" on their resume.

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## ***RIDICULOUS FORMATTING AND CONTENT BLOCKS***

Nothing can get you disqualified from getting hired more easily than stupid formatting errors. I see these all the time. I have no idea where people pick this up, but I will lay out the most egregious formatting issues I see:

**Use of colors and fancy/unusual fonts.** For some people, their resume becomes an art project. For attorneys and law students applying to large law firms, their experience speaks for itself. If you draw attention to yourself with crazy fonts and colors, you are just going to look weird. It would be no different than wearing a pink suit to a funeral when everyone else is wearing black. You are applying to work in a giant law firm and be part of a group of people who are (1) conforming, (2) working together and (3) basically pretty dry. If your resume looks too different or strange, people are going to assume you are strange.

You do not want to look strange. Your objective is to get a job.

***Listing words for HR software on the top of the resume.*** Someone out there is telling attorneys to do this. I have literally seen resumes with words like this at the top right under the person's name: "attorney, lawyer, counselor, litigation, law firm attorney, Westlaw, Lexis, AV Rated". Huh!?! If you are the one doing this to legal resumes, *please stop!* You are doing incredible amounts of damage to good people.

**Putting your objective on the resume.** This one confuses me so much. Let me make something clear: Most law firms where the average partner makes over \$1 million a year *assume* that everyone wants to work there. You do not need to put something like some of the statements I have seen on your resume:

- Objective: To get a job with a major U.S. law firm.
- Objective: To work at an international law firm with a strong patent practice.
- Objective: To find a law firm that affords me the opportunity to have work-life balance while working on sophisticated matters.

***Shut up!*** No one cares what your objective is. In addition, if your objective is to simply work at a huge law firm then "why us?" Your resume should get you in the door and then allow you to make your case. No giant law firm is going to hire you with this crap on your resume. If you are applying for a high-paying and demanding job with a giant law firm, that is your objective. Do not waste space on your resume with this.

### Putting "References Available upon Request" on the resume.

Are you kidding? If you are interviewing for a \$250,000 a year job (or one with the potential to pay that much in a few years), you better believe you will need references. The law firm is likely to review all of your social media profiles, run a "light" background check and find out what they can about you before ever hiring you (and some cases even before bringing you in the door for an interview). You better believe you will need references. Do not waste any law firm's time putting this on your resume. In addition, it sounds pretty presumptuous.

**Putting a summary of yourself on your resume.** Here are some that come to mind I've seen recently:

- Ivy league-educated corporate attorney currently practicing at the law firm ranked as the 32nd largest in the world.
- Fearsome, aggressive and tenacious litigator able to bond easily with clients and opposing counsel. (This was a first-year attorney.)

Great! Again, no one cares. *"Is that how you see yourself: Ivy league-educated? Most of our attorneys went to the **University of Minnesota**. You sound like a pompous asshole! Our law firm is not even in the top 200 largest law firms. Is that all that matters to you? Why are you applying here?"*

The point is that describing yourself one way could turn off some people. Let your potential employer reach their own conclusions about you. You will look like someone with a lot of time to think about yourself if you put this on there.

**Having a resume that exceeds one page.** Your resume should never be longer than one page if you are applying to work for a major law firm (even as a partner). For associates, you can prepare a second page that describes the work you have done (which can be more than one page) but that is it.

*Patent Attorneys.* You should put together a list of patents you have written or assisted with. You should always have this second page attached. Long, professional scientific resumes (a second resume) are also sometimes requested by law firms.

*Corporate and Real Estate Attorneys.* Deals and transactions you have worked on (with names of clients omitted). You can send this regardless of whether it is asked for (and should).

*Litigators.* Many law firms will ask for writing samples. Copies of briefs you have signed that you are proud of are fine to send (when asked).

**Your picture.** I am not sure why people do this. It is very common in resumes from the former Soviet Union, India and the Middle East. There are some Americans who do this here, and the ones who do this are generally good looking. You should not include your picture on your resume. It is just too far-fetched. If you are a good looking man or woman, I have some good news: This tends to make it much easier for you to get a job (this is just how it works in big firms). However, most people will find your picture online anyway before bringing you in. Your picture belongs on your LinkedIn or **Law.net** profile, for example. Not on your resume.

**Putting your interests on your resume if they can be polarizing.** You are being hired to be an

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attorney and sit behind a desk and make lots of money for the law firm and yourself. The law firm does not care the least if you are interested in:

- Cooking
- Animals
- Reading historical Judaic literature
- Spending time with your family
- Volunteering at church
- Horseback riding
- Polo
- Golf

If you have "benign" interests like cooking, this is not going to impress most law firms. In general, I recommend leaving your interests off. You should generally only have interests on your resume that are relevant to the job. Otherwise, leave them off.

I had a candidate once who listed his interests as "polo and golf". This came up in interviews, and when this came up, he would talk about how he was a member of a certain hunt club and golfed at another club where the initiation fee was \$250,000 a year. (He had very wealthy parents.) Unfortunately, most attorneys at large law firms got there by working very hard and not playing polo and golf. While golf has increasingly become a middle class game, polo certainly is not.

Advertising you are from lots of money, or have something to fall back on if your job with a large law firm does not work out is a huge mistake. In most law firms' experience, independently wealthy people are likely to leave when the job becomes difficult.

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### **INAPPROPRIATE WORD USAGE, TONE AND MISTAKES WITH DATES**

When someone reads your resume, they can tell a lot about the type of attorney you would be by the words that you use. Here are some crazy things I have seen that you should not be doing:

#### **Using giant words that not everyone knows.**

Attorneys are paid to communicate clearly and concisely. Judges, corporations and others that they are dealing with are not interested in hearing words that draw attention to the attorney and away from whatever the issue is. Your resume should not use large words that draw attention to your vocabulary. No one cares. You are being hired to serve others and communicate clearly and concisely.

#### **Using adjectives to describe yourself.**

Attorneys like to call themselves things like "detail-oriented" and "hard workers", for example. You need to keep in mind that when you are applying for jobs where the upper income bracket could be over \$1 million, and you have an outside shot at this, any positive adjective you could possibly use ("outside the box thinker"...blah, blah, blah) is already assumed. You are competing with the best. Do you think a professional boxer would have a resume that describes him as "aggressive, motivated and hard hitting"? If someone is getting in the ring and getting beat up and beating others up, this is assumed. Don't weaken your profile with the use of a bunch of adjectives.



**Using too many words.** Many attorneys love to write and talk. No one wants to read a long diatribe of a resume that goes into unnecessary detail about you in a ton of words. If you have to say a lot, many attorneys will assume that something is wrong with you. You need to communicate in your resume with brevity and make it easy for people to read and understand. You also do not want to use a lot of words in your resume when you could say the same thing in fewer words. Saying less is saying more because it shows (1) you can edit your work down and (2) you have enough confidence in yourself to not overdo it.

**Including testimonials in the body of your resume.** Quotes

from superiors and others should not go in your resume. Quotes from reviews often

go in peoples' resumes as well. Not a good idea. This makes you look desperate for attention. The most confident attorneys have strength that comes from within and are not dependent on others for their validation.

**Using words the wrong way (or misspelling them).** Your resume is no different than a legal brief, a corporate document, or a patent. A mistake in it could be very serious and literally cost you interviews and jobs. Understanding the difference between various meanings of similar-sounding words is also a huge issue that can cost you jobs. Here are some of the biggest screw-ups I see that have hurt attorneys (that are never caught by spell-checkers and make you look dumb). Learn the difference between:

- "Principal and Principle"
- "Discreet and Discrete"
- "Precede and Proceed"
- "Insure and Ensure"
- "Adverse and Averse"
- "Eager and Anxious"
- "Affect and Effect"
- "Criteria and Criterion"

**Spelling errors.** Even more serious are spelling errors. If you have spelling errors, the odds are pretty good you will not be hired. Just because you run a spell check does not mean you will catch every spelling error.

**Omitting exact dates.** You need the month and

year, not just the year. Attorneys who were at a job a few months, or lost a job for one reason or

another, like to put in years for employment dates rather than months and the year. Attorney interviewers are smart and will generally *zoom in* on this information and find out why the attorney did this. *They will always assume the worst!* If you worked at some place for a short time, that is fine. You do not need to cover it up. Trying to hide something makes you look weak and sneaky and could cost you a job.

**Inappropriate dates.** On a weekly basis, I see the following:

- Attorneys with dates on their resumes indicating they started as an associate at a major law firm a decade before they even graduated from law school.
- Attorneys who have the same date for two



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different jobs.

- Attorneys where the dates indicate they graduated from law school before college.

You get the idea. This needs to stop! Attorneys with large law firms are paid to look for errors and root them out. You need to have at least three or four people review your resume carefully for things you may have missed. Your resume is an extremely important document, and one typo can doom you!

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## LYING OR EXAGGERATING ON YOUR RESUME

Attorneys (even partners) lie and exaggerate on their resumes all the time. I've seen attorneys go so far as to lie about the law school they went to. Why? I have no idea, but it happens regularly. I've seen several attorneys (and partners) even lie about the firms they have worked at. I would estimate that as much as 20 percent of **partners looking for jobs** lie (or exaggerate) the amount of business they have. Other attorneys lie about the number of hours they billed. Most attorneys who are fired (or leaving a firm under bad reviews) lie about why they are leaving (you should never put why you are leaving on your resume, but some do).

I do not understand (at all) the psychology that goes into this. If you have insecurity issues and want to be someone different, you have three choices: (1) work harder, (2) get a therapist, or (3) do both.

Here are some facts:

*If you get caught lying by a law firm that hired you* (because you lied about your law school or past employment), they will immediately fire you if they find out. No questions asked. About 50 percent of the time, they will also report you to the state bar. They rarely will report you to the police (because they are embarrassed). This happens quite often, and I have seen this happen numerous times in my career.

*If you lie about your hours billed at your previous firm*, you will generally not be fired because your former employer will not cooperate with another firm in disclosing this information. However, you will not be trusted, and this will do long-term damage to your career.

*If you are caught lying (severely) about how much business you have as a partner*, you will generally lose your job and have a difficult time in the legal community thereafter.

*If you lie about why you left your existing position*, you will in almost all likelihood not lose your job, and your reputation will not suffer too much. In some cases, though, the firm may go ballistic. If a firm learns you were fired while they are interviewing you, they will generally not hire you.

Attorneys should never lie on their resume. Doing so is very dangerous. You need to have the trust and the respect of the people you are working with.

6

## SAYING ANYTHING NEGATIVE ABOUT ANY FORMER EMPLOYER

I've never understood this one. Many resumes of attorneys will, for reasons I cannot understand, contain negative statements, or subtle hostility in their descriptions of their former employers. The message this sends to the employers is simple: If you hire me you will be the next person criticized. Do not do it. Regardless of your need to justify your departure from a former employer, saying anything negative about a former employer on a resume is not a good idea.

## CONCLUSIONS

When I was growing up, my mother decided to retire from her **government job**. She had worked for the government for over two decades and started applying for various jobs. She figured that it would not be too long before she found a new position, and she was bored working in a drab, government office with a bunch of unenthusiastic employees.

Unfortunately, we were living outside Detroit (in a horrible job market), she was older and did not have a lot of experience in anything else other than doing civil rights investigations and teaching art history at a local university.

After months of not getting interviews, she decided it was time to rework her resume. She

believed that the problem was not her. It had to be her resume! This became an obsession for the next year or so.

- She took a course on resume construction.
- She hired an expert to advise her on her resume.
- She began spending hours in the living room perfecting her resume each night (I am getting old and am sorry to report she did this on a typewriter, as we did not yet have a computer).

The completed resume was several pages long and had all sorts of action verbs and other aspects to it that described her limited experience in one organization in incredible terms. The completed resume contained:

- Tons of bullets
- Large words
- Massive amounts of formatting
- Things she had done decades ago, and
- All sorts of irrelevant information.

Her resume could easily have been one page. It did not need to have all this detail. It would take a person an hour to go through it and fully understand it.

When I was in law school and started applying for jobs, I took the example of what she had done and did the same type of resume for myself. When my law school roommate saw it, he picked it up and showed it to others. Others soon saw it and were making fun of it. I was embarrassed and quickly realized what I was doing wrong: I was **applying for entry level jobs** and my resume made me look like a complete asshole obsessed with everything I had ever done.

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It might have been a bit cruel, but the resume was copied and passed around the campus, and the students all made fun of it. I had sections about increasing sales in my asphalt business, being the youngest instructor in the history of a department at the **University of Chicago**, being nominated by my school for a Rhodes Scholarship, being president of my fraternity, every varsity sport I had played in high school, my SAT scores and even the prestigious boarding school I attended.

No one cares! This information separates you from others and does not make you part of the team. I looked like an ass and had to learn that less is more.

That was one of my first lessons in the legal profession. This is fundamental to how we as attorneys need to behave when working with others: We are expected to fit in, get along and try not to act better than our peers. A stripped down and simple resume accomplishes these goals in the large law firm environment. *Saying less is saying more in the big firm world.*

## About resumes

### ***Read the book Attorney Resume Secrets Revealed***

*What Law Firms Look for in a Lateral Resume*

*Sending a Transaction Sheet with Your Attorney Resume*

*Resume Fraud Rampant in the Workforce*

*Legal Resume Writing Tips*

*How to Write a Legal Resume*

*What Should I Put on My Legal Resume?*

*Should I Submit My Resume through a Friend in the Law Firm?*

*How Out Should I Be on My Resume?*

*What is the Best Way to Get My Resume and Cover Letter Noticed?*

*Legal Resume How To*

## About cover letters, interviews and law firms

### ***Download the BCG Attorney Search Cover Letter Guide***

*Law Firm Diversity: They All Talk the Talk, But It's Harder to Walk the Walk*

*21 Major Job Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs*

*How to Explain Job Hopping*

*Interviewing Tips: The Five Musts of Interviewing*

*What is the Best Way to Get My Attorney Resume and Cover Letter Noticed by Law Firms?*

*The Dos and Don'ts of Cover Letter Writing*

*What Law Firms Want to See in Your Cover Letter*

*How to Prepare Outstanding Cover Letters*

## Helpful resources

Get your resume professionally done by Attorney Resume >  
Contact Harrison Barnes about your resume >