



Just Ask Jen
April 19, 2009

Resume Weak Spots...Highlight or Hide 'Em?

Q: I would like to apply for a position that states "Advanced proficiency with Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator is required" but I have no experience with this software. My education and work experience meet all of the other requirements except these and I believe I can easily acquire these skills at the community college with a few evening classes. Do I address this weakness head on in my cover letter and provide a solution? Or ignore this requirement and address it if I get an interview?

A: In an increasingly competitive job market, it is tempting to want to fudge our abilities on paper and then figure out what to say after we get the interview. We tell ourselves that once the hiring manager meets us and is blown away by our professionalism and can-do attitude, the little detail of our inability to perform a required task will fade into the background.

But it won't. Hiring managers assume that you meet the criteria as advertised. They understand that different candidates will have different strengths and weaknesses in various areas, but experience with a certain program is a pretty black and white issue. Spare yourself and your interviewer the awkwardness of the "well, I sort of know something about Adobe and I'm excited to learn more" conversation. When it comes to software know-how, you either know it or you don't. It's like being "sort of" pregnant; either you are or you aren't.

Look at the wording in the job posting. "Advanced" means you need to have a seasoned (versus introductory) knowledge of the software. This is not an expertise that a few evening classes will give you. "Proficiency" means that your employer expects you to walk in on Day One with the ability and understanding of how you can put this program to work for the company. "Required" means that proficiency is critical to your job duties. If the word "preferred" were used instead, you'd have some wiggle room.

Because of these three key terms, you definitely want to be clear about this software shortcoming upfront in your cover letter. Don't make it your lead sentence, but after you identify what your comprehensive expertise can do for the company and its clients, briefly mention this weak point toward the end.

Deliver this honesty while simultaneously weaving in a positive quality, because you can play "straightforward" one of two ways: inactive or pro-active. If you simply write "To be totally honest, I have no experience with this software" you come off as unqualified for the position. But if you write "While I don't have advanced proficiency with Adobe specifically, I do have a track record with previous employers for rapid software mastery



and have already begun a self-study Adobe program” you present yourself as a strategic, solutions-oriented thinker.

Being forthright these days is even more important than before because there are far more resumes for managers to sift through. And during this difficult business climate of less staff, fewer customers and limited resources, time is a precious commodity. Hiring managers are going to assume that you meet all of the “required” aspects of the position description, including one core unlisted requirement: respect for your potential employer’s time.

In submitting your resume, you are in effect asking a very busy person with far fewer resources than she’s used to for an hour of time to sit down and get to know you. Keep in mind that with the rising unemployment numbers being what they are, she’s probably received at least three times the number of applications she would normally get for a position like this one. Do you really want to face her at said interview and confess that you actually don’t meet the requirements your resume submission indicated you had? Potentially you’ll have wasted her time and lost her respect in one fell swoop.

And there’s another person’s time you need to respect...yours. Just because you’re no longer a graphic designer with XYZ Company doesn’t mean you’ve stopped being a talented graphic designer and have to then apply at any meat-packing plant that will take you. If my column ceases to run in The Baltimore Sun, I don’t cease to be a columnist...I just need to find a new home for my column.

In finding your new occupational home, don’t visit job neighborhoods that aren’t right for you. Honor your skill set by seeking positions that will put it to use, instead of trying to figure out ways to dodge position requirements that aren’t in your wheelhouse.

If you are still employed by another company, this is a great time to research job listings like the one you’re applying for and figure out what they all have in common so that you can begin training on your own before the need for a needed skill set arises. If every job you seriously consider applying for has an Adobe requirement, be pro-active and try to learn the program now before you need it.

If you’re unemployed, like many people you may be thinking that you need to get a job — any job — to keep the lights on. But ultimately if you slide under the radar with a skill set that doesn’t meet the needs of the position, eventually you’ll either be found out or burned out...and the end of both of those stories reads the same.

Think like an actor instead, and take a part-time position that frees you up to manage your job search, audition during the day, and still keep ramen in the cupboard while you land your next great role.



In your case, you have the education and experience that qualify for the bulk of the position requirements, and you seem open to learning the unknown software, so this is a solid opportunity for you. Take the stage.

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