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Should resume layouts always be creative?

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Division: Persuasive Communication (also relevant for organizational communication)

Introduction

In the employee selection process, resume screening is one of the most common tools that organizations use when selecting their candidates. Previous research has argued that the layout of a resume can have a substantial impact on the likelihood of being shortlisted by a recruiter. For example, Arnulf, Tegner and Larsen (2010) found that resumes with a formal layout are considered less attractive than resumes in a creative layout with circles and squares. However, like related studies (e.g., Lipovsky, 2014), Arnulf and colleagues only measured the impact of resume layout on recruiters’ decisions of acceptance after elaborate resume screening, ignoring how resume layout could affect initial shortlisting decisions that often take place in a split second. Therefore, the current study measures the effects of resume layout on recruiters’ initial shortlisting decisions, combined with measures of attractiveness and hiring recommendation after unlimited screening time.

To study the effects of resume layout, we apply three resume layouts with increasing amount of creativity in layout: formal, intermediate, and infographic. We expect the effect of these layouts to be different for different job positions: since recruiters are known to match an applicant’s knowledge, skills and abilities with job requirements (Werbel & Gilliland, 1999), it may well be that they appreciate creative infographic resumes better when they are hiring for a creative job position, while a more formal layout is required for ‘non-creative’ job positions. The above leads to the following research question: What is the effect of creativity in resume layout on recruiters’ shortlisting decisions, both for creative and non-creative job positions?

Method

An online survey was conducted to answer the research question, in which 143 recruiters and HR employees with a mean age of 33.7 years old ($SD = 9.7$) scored two resumes on several dimensions. In a 3x2 mixed design, creativity in resume layout (formal; intermediate; infographic) was tested between subjects, while job position (creative; non-creative) was
tested within subjects. All participants had considerable experience with resume screening, and declared to screen at least ten resumes every year as part of their profession.

For the manipulation of job position, two real-life vacancies for starters were taken from www.nationalevacaturebank.nl. The vacancy text for the creative position was for a marketing and communications officer, asking for competencies in social media marketing, advertisement design, and creative thinking. For the non-creative job position, a text for an accountant was used, referring to administration tasks and financial reporting activities. Both texts were manipulated in three layouts (see Fig. 1). The formal layout had one column and black text on a white background; the intermediate layout added some color variation and applied a two-column structure; the infographic layout presented information in graphs with different color shades, shapes, and sizes.

![Fig. 1: The formal (left), intermediate (middle), and infographic (right) layouts.](image)

Participants scored the resumes on four dimensions. After inspecting the resume for six seconds, they were asked for an initial shortlisting decision: is this person a fit or no fit for the job position? After unlimited inspection time, questions on 5-point Likert scales followed about attractiveness towards the applicant ($\alpha = .82$), attractiveness towards the resume layout ($\alpha = .84$), and hiring recommendation ($\alpha = .72$).

**Results and discussion**

For the initial hiring recommendation, the results do not show effects of layout ($F_{(2,140)} =$
1.94; n.s.) or job position (F_{(2,140)} = 2.71; n.s.), and no interaction effect (F_{(2,140)} = 1.21; n.s.). However, when recruiters had unlimited inspection time, there are interesting interactions between resume layout and job position for applicant attractiveness (F_{(2,140)} = 30.3; p<.001), resume attractiveness (F_{(2,140)} = 11.4; p<.001), and hiring recommendation (F_{(2,140)} = 3.13; p<.05). The patterns are depicted in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2: Interaction effects for applicant attractiveness (left), layout attractiveness (middle), and hiring recommendation (right).

Although patterns are not the same for the three variables, there are some interesting commonalities. Firstly, for all variables, the formal layout is appreciated better for the non-creative accounting position than for the creative marketing position. The opposite is true for the infographic layout, especially for attractiveness towards the applicant. For the intermediate layout, there are hardly any differences between the scores for the two job positions.

In general, these results suggest that recruiters are not primarily guided by layout when taking initial shortlisting decisions within six seconds. After unlimited inspection time, to persuade a recruiter, the amount of creativity in resume layout should resemble the amount of creativity required for the job position. In case of doubt, an intermediate layout seems to be the safest option.

References