

A GOOD TECH RESUME

Advice and examples

Note: this is a document I wrote in May 2020, and sent to a few people together with [resume reviews I offered](#). By Oct 2020 , this short guide has since turned into a 200+ page book: [The Tech Resume Inside Out](#).

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Context

This guide is a collection of common advice to write a better resume. It contains some background information on the hiring pipeline that's good to understand - and advice on why and how you should seek out referrals, where you can. It then covers areas I've most commonly given feedback on, when reviewing resumes.

This guide is WIP, and not complete. Hope it helps!

The Hiring Pipeline

Let's look at the bigger picture of how the interview process looks like to better understand why resumes are important. This process can often seem like a black hole. It could also feel like a hard-to-predict series of interactions with people until you - hopefully - get an offer.

Hiring managers and recruiters look at this process quite differently and call it the Hiring Pipeline. Why this name? It's because at every stage, there's a significant dropoff in the number of candidates still in the pipeline.

The Typical Hiring Pipeline

When you submit your resume through a job advert, the typical hiring pipeline is similar across all tech companies. There's a resume screen, a recruiter screen, a technical screen and a series of onsite interviews. You could get rejected at each round - or, if you did well, progress until you get an offer.

Here are the typical stages:

1. **Inbound sourcer CV screen.** Inbound sourcers are specialized roles at big companies. They are recruiters who are responsible for going through applications submitted by candidates on the job site. They scan your resume, spending 10-30 seconds to determine if you might be a match for the position. If you're not a good match, you might get an automated rejection message - assuming the company has a policy to send one. If the first scan is promising, they'll spend a bit more time reading your resume in depth. Afterwards, they might set up an initial call to double click on a few details, and determine if they'll have you start the interview process.
2. **Recruiter screen.** Only profiles who look promising to be a fit for the job make it to the recruiter screen. This is a phone call with the recruiter, confirming experience, motivation, and touching on soft skills.
3. **Technical screen.** A technical phone screen and/or a takehome challenge focused on coding. Candidates almost always interact with software engineers at the company at this point.
4. **Onsite interview.** Several (remote) onsite interviews such as coding, hiring manager and systems design (this one for more experienced candidates)
5. **Offer.** It is not rare for each actual offer starting with a hundred or more seemingly qualified CVs. If you do get an offer, massive congratulations - you probably had little clue until now just how competitive this process was.

The COVID-19 hiring pipeline: what hiring managers say

Chatting with several hiring managers at small, medium and large companies, those companies hiring are seeing an unusually large spike in applications. More people are applying to the currently open developer jobs, than it has been the case the previous years. Here are a few quotes from hiring managers:

"I saw 100 applications per day for a role I posted. I work at a well-known tech company, but this is beyond anything we expected."

"I just looked at our ATS and we've had more than 200 applications in less than a month for the 1 role I'm hiring for. This is about 20-30x the normal applications rate."

"I've had one role open on my team for 2.5 months and I have more than 2,000 applications now. This is easily 20x what we'd normally see."

"We are getting 80 applications per day across 4 roles. It is getting very difficult to manage, and I've not experienced anything like this before."

With applications at a higher than before level, tailoring your resume for the position, making and catching the recruiter's attention in the first scan are both key. Even more so are referrals. Let's talk more about these.

Why Referrals are Important

If you are surprised at how difficult getting even to a recruiter screen is, I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is that referrals make this much easier - if you have one. The bad news is that without a referral, it's actually more difficult to even have a human look at your resume or to get a recruiter call.

Referrals - short for employee referrals - are ways for employees to internally refer candidates. Pretty much all tech companies have a referral program that incentivizes employees to make referrals and rewards them for successful referrals. When their referral is hired, employees are paid a nice bonus, often in the thousands of dollars. Referrals are treated with priority because they work remarkably well. Referrals are far more likely to go through interviews successfully, to get an offer, and to accept an offer. They are also less likely to turn out to be a bad hire, who don't make it through their trial period. Studies like [Understanding the value of hiring through referrals](#) and [The value of hiring through employee referrals in developed countries](#) confirm this to be the case not just within tech, but for hiring, in general.

Let's revisit the hiring pipeline to see how referrals change your chances of getting noticed. I'm differentiating between a very generic employee referral, and between a "strong" referral. A generic employee referral could be an employee working at a company who you don't know personally, but after reaching out to them and asking for a referral, they referred you with your resume. A "strong" referral would be someone who works at the company who you have worked with, and they actively vouch for you.

Referrals help you in clearing the resume filtering stage: in many cases, you'll make it to the recruiter call easier, thanks to the referral. For strong referrals, you might have a recruiter call setup straight up.

So how do you get a referral? You ask for it.

- **Check your network** if someone you know happens to work at the company you are applying to.
- **See if you have second-degree connections on LinkedIn**, where someone you know is connected with another person, who works at the company. See if you can ask for an introduction to get a referral.
- **Cold outreaches for referrals on LinkedIn** can also work. It's less likely to work than when you have a shared connection, but it can mean a large boost, compared to not having any referral. If you send a LinkedIn connection request, be sure to add a clear and concise message in the request on you looking for a referral.
- **For well-known tech companies, consider asking for a referral on Blind**. Blind is an anonymous professional network for people working at larger companies, and it is common for people to ask for referrals. When you do, make sure to tag the company name, include your LinkedIn profile, describe why you think you are a good fit for the job, and link the job description as well.

If you ask for a referral, do this before you apply to the position. Most tech companies have referral systems, where employees are only eligible to refer candidates who are not yet in the hiring pipeline. This means that if you apply directly on the company's website, then ask for a referral, you often won't be able to get referred. This is because you will be considered an active candidate, your email and resume are already in the system. It can be a delicate balance on how long you wait to apply, versus getting a referral: you'll need to make the call if you want your application to go in faster, or to wait, and have it come with a referral, assuming you can get one.

Tech Resume Basics

The First Glance

Recruiters want to collect a few key pieces of information at first glance: and it is in your best interest to make this easy. If recruiters can't find this information, and there's lots of resumes to go through, they might move on to the next one. The key pieces of information are these:

1. **Years of experience.** The first thing they'll scan for is how long have you been working for. The recruiter will then mentally compare you to the internal level of the position - which is not always advertised. Say the position is for an L4 position at Facebook, Google or Uber, which is an SDE2 - a level above the entry-level engineer. This is someone with usually 3-5 years experience, give or take. The recruiter will quickly scan to the education section to confirm your graduation date - may this be university, bootcamp or something else - then subtract how much time has passed. If you make this information hard to find or it's unclear - you might end up in the reject pile, the same way as if you don't have sufficient years to warrant a hire.
2. **Relevant technology skills.** For the technology the position is recruiting for, how much relevant experience do you have? So e.g. if applying for a backend position for a company that mostly uses Java and Go, the recruiter would want to scan and see if they see Java or Go, and with what proficiency. If there are fewer applicants or the screener is thorough, they might go deeper and assume that if you have several other languages, you could pick these up quickly: but don't count on this.
3. **Work experience.** How much relevant work experience do you have? Do you come across as someone who has *consistently* delivered impact?
4. **Work authorization and visa status (when applying from abroad).** If your application seems like it's from abroad, do you already have work authorization? If not, what kind of visa would you need to get to be able to work for the company? Your application can seem like it's from abroad based on your contact details, the location of your last work or study experience, or even on your name. When you already have work authorization or a valid work visa, you'll want to add this clearly in any of these cases - else the recruiter might put your resume in the "needs visa" pile, prioritizing it only after they have reviewed local candidates.
5. **Anything that clearly stands out.** Anything that pops out on the first page of your CV. For new grads, this could be your school - if it's a well known one - or an award. For more experienced people it could be your company, a patent, a PhD, being a core contributor to a relevant open source product or something that is rare to see among the hundreds of profiles.

So how do you make this information stand out? You make sure most information is on the first page, and you use clear formatting, and good use of colors and bolding to draw attention to the relevant parts.

Ground Rules

Your resume should be two pages or less and contain basic contact details. Use good grammar and no typos, make dates easy to read, and don't include photos or other non-required information.

There are a few things that all resumes need to follow to be considered professional-looking resumes, in tech. These are the things that "go without saying" - and because of this, they are rarely written down. Make sure your resume follows every one of these:

1. **Good grammar and NO typos.** Typos and poor grammar on a resume come across as not having attention to detail and/or not having good control of the language. It will easily have your resume ignored. Use free spell checking tools, grammar checking like [Grammarly](#) and ask someone else to re-read your CV for correctness. The same applies to punctuation: ensure this is consistent across your resume.
2. **Contact details.** Include your email address and relevant contact information, like phone number and the city and country where you are a resident, at the top. Keep this short and don't take up too much space with these. You don't need to add your full mailing address as contact details: no one will send you a letter in the mailbox based on your resume. Should you later get an offer, you'll be asked for all your personal details: but that's a long way ahead.
3. **Dates in reverse chronological order.** Mark your work and education experiences clearly with dates. List them with the latest one on the top, listing out earlier ones underneath.
4. **Don't include photos or non-required personal information** like your date of birth, gender, citizenship, relationship information, number of children, religion, or others. See section TODO for more details on the biases this creates.

Two pages or less: this last one is not a strict rule, but a very wise one to follow. Aim to not go over this length: I've seen little reason to do so. For new grads and people with a few years of experience, fit in on one page. If you have less than a few years of experience, it's not expected you fill in the second page.

Simplicity and Consistency

For people to read what you write, it [needs to be written well](#). This applies to resumes as well. Resumes that are simple, concise, and are easy to read will be read more. Hiring managers and recruiters will, at most skim ones that are cluttered and overly verbose. To make your resume simple and concise, follow these principles.

1. **Clear, neat, and consistent formatting.** Use the same formatting throughout the resume. Use the consistent font sizes and make the resume easy to scan through in a glance. TODO - see the templates section for a good template.
2. **Good grammar and NO typos.** Did you notice the typo on “tpyos”? Typos and poor grammar on a resume come across as not having attention to detail or not having good control of the language. It will easily have your resume ignored. Use spell checking tools, grammar checking like [Grammarly](#) and ask someone else to re-read your CV for correctness. The same applies to punctuation: ensure this is consistent across your resume.
3. **Bullet points for easy readability.** Use bullet points that make the CV easier to read. Avoid paragraphs. Recruiters in tech companies are used to scanning bullet points - they are less effort to read.
 - Sub-bullet points: avoid. They clutter your resume, make it more verbose, and make it harder to read. If you find yourself using these, re-edit your resume and stick with one level.
 - Using dashes for bullet points, to save space: also avoid. They look out of place and are harder to read than bullet points.
4. **Dates: use consistent and easy to read formats.** A date like “06/11 - 07/12” is hard to understand. The reviewer now needs to think, “is the first date June 2011 or November 2006?”. Just write “June 2011 - July 2012”. Now they don’t need to think, and the year clearly stands different from the month. For any date span longer beyond a few years, you can also drop the exact month as it becomes irrelevant, especially when it is a date that is more than four-five years ago.
5. **PDF format.** Use this format and no other. Avoid formats like .doc, .rtf - they display inconsistently on machines that don’t have software like Word installed and can mess up an otherwise well-formatted resume.
6. **Be concise, and don’t spell out trivial things.** Ruthlessly edit your resume and drop sections that add little to no information. Ask yourself: “will the person reading the resume get information that helps them assess if I am qualified for this job?”. An exception to this can be when you deliberately do keyword stuffing - see TODO section on this.

Avoiding Biases: Personal Details and Photos

How would you react if a recruiter called you and told you one of the following:

- *"I'm sorry, but you're too young for this job based on your **age**."*
- *"While I'd love to proceed, we already have too many people in the office of the same **gender** and so we need to pass on you."*
- *"I have to reject you not because of your skills, but because you seem like a grumpy person based on your **photo**."*
- *"I think we should stop with the process as no one else in the office has **kids** so you wouldn't fit in."*
- *"I don't think you'd fit in with the British and Canadian people in the office, based on your **nationality**."*
- *"We like to have fun and we're all single, I'd rather not waste time with someone who is **married**."*
- *"Let's just end it here as there's no one else in the office with your **religion** and we don't want to have any arguments about this."*

Of course, you will never get a call like this: any company would find themselves in hot water if they admitted to discriminating against you on any of the above. Still, all non-essential personal information you add to your resume adds one more way that biases can kick in - either with the recruiter or the hiring manager. Adding too many personal details can result in a rejection based on bias.

Do not add personal details to your resume that can lead to negative bias during the resume screen. Biases are real, and you never know what unconscious biases you can trigger with the recruiter or hiring manager. Luckily, in tech, the criteria to get hired is based on your skills and your expertise. So do not add photos, date of birth, gender, nationality, and other details. For most resumes, you do not need more than your name and your e-mail address to apply.

Photos are never a thing for US-based positions or US-based tech companies. In tech, you don't need a photo to decide if they should move forward with you: it's about your skills, not your looks. In some countries, non-tech positions require photos, and this somehow got stuck in tech. However, all hiring managers and tech recruiters I've spoken to confirmed that photos add no value. They mentioned photos being distracting, playing to biases, doing more harm than good. If anyone really wants a photo of you, they can look at your LinkedIn profile, where you can decide if you want to add one.

Standing Out

Standing out by focusing on your results, the specifics and your contribution. Writing a resume for that specific job. How to optimise for tech companies versus companies with specific technology focuses.

Results, Impact and Your Contribution

When listing your work and project experiences, focus on what you achieved, as opposed to what you did. For the achievements, try to quantify these with the impact and (business) results. A framework you could use is "Accomplished {impact} as measured by {number} by doing {specific contribution}". This is similar to [the structure Google encourages](#) for resumes. You don't need to use the exact same wording. However, do make the impact clear, what your contribution was, and add specifics, where you can.

You want to convey that you are self-sufficient, that your work made a difference on your team, and that you are aware of your work's impact. To do so, edit your accomplishments with these in mind:

- **Use numbers.** Quantify your impact, where ever you can. Most resumes do not contain numbers: if you add these specifics, you will stand out. Instead of saying "*Built a tool widely adopted by the company*", say "*Led a team of 3 developers to build a dependency injection framework that was adopted by 15 teams and all 50+ developers at the company*". Numbers can be several things: number of people on the team, lines of code, code coverage % before and after, SLA changes, revenue generated by the project. They can be number of users, number of installs, number of five-star ratings, number of customer support tickets you proactively resolved- and many others.
- **Use active language** that shows what you have *done* and how you have been proactive. Use active verbs like "led", "managed", "drove", "improved", "rolled out" over passive ones like "improving" or "rolling out".
- **Mention specific languages and technologies** that you used towards the end of your description. Impact and your contribution are more important to convey than the technologies. However, it's worth calling out what tools you've used. Mentioning technologies in this context is more powerful for hiring managers and interviewers who are reading your resume in detail. Make sure that these technologies overlap with the ones you listed in your standalone, Languages & technologies section in your resume.

As an example, compare these two descriptions of the same experience:

Original statement	Edited for results, impact and specifics
Worked on the Payments team, developing microservices.	Improved the availability of the payout Go microservice from 99.8% to 99.9% by improving the monitoring/alerting system and proposing, implementing and rolling out a read-through cache layer using Redis.
Automated error handling process of our restful API services that reduced one of our clients support ticket rate.	Reduced support tickets by 80% for a large client by stepping up to rework error handling, ensuring 100% of error codes are mapped to appropriate HTTP codes, and non-mapped errors trigger exceptions on the Node.JS restful API.
Enhanced customer experience of the MySap platform through integrations of third party APIs such as zoom-rooms for remote meetings, square to handle recurring payment, etc.	Improved customer conversion by 30% of the MySap co-working platform by implementing recurring payments and integrating Zoom rooms, using PHP and Go.

The original descriptions are generic, while the edited ones do a good job reflecting more on achievements and specifics. The edited versions grab the attention of the person reviewing the resume more.

You stand out from the crowd by talking about the impact of your work and how you contributed to it, not just what you did. The more senior you are, the more of an expectation this is: but doing so will make you stand out in all cases. Your resume should showcase how you have consciously and proactively added value through your actions. People who do this are the ones sought after - developers who follow directions are a dime a dozen.

Don't be Humble

Your resume should sell you. Don't claim untrue things, but do aim to paint a great picture of yourself for the audience: the recruiter and the hiring manager.

- **Talk about yourself, not your team.** Avoid using "we" and use the first person instead (in most cases, you can drop the "I"). The resume is about you, and what you have brought to the table in the past. And what the company would get by moving forward with you.
- **Be concise but *not* humble.** Don't hide your achievements - and when in doubt, inflating them on the borderline will hurt less than hiding them. Your CV needs to make you stand out from an already competitive crowd.
- **Make your side projects & open-source contributions shine.** If you built impressive projects or have great open source contributions, bring attention to these in those sections of your resume. Follow the results-impact-contribution model in calling this out, where you can, as opposed to just linking to your Github profile with no explanation or an app you've built. If you don't sell it, the person reading the CV might not look at it in detail.
- **Do talk about extracurricular activities,** at the end of your resume. Talk about what their impact was, how they were difficult, and link to high-quality resources that you have created. For example, if you've organized a meetup with 100 participants, mention this. If you have a technical blog, link a specific, high-quality article, the reader can read. Many resumes are dry, and showing off high-quality or standout activities can make a good resume even better.

Write a Resume for That Job

The days of submitting one generic resume for all job postings are slowly coming to an end, thanks to COVID-19. There are more job seekers for every tech job than there have been in over a decade. This is great news for recruiters who are seeing lots of inbounds. However, it means you need to put in more work for your resume to grab the attention. To make your resume stand out, you need to write it for *that specific* job description.

Create a "master" version of your resume that lists out lots of details in your work experience and projects sections. Use the results, impact and your contribution language. Don't worry if this version goes beyond two pages - as long as you'll be able to trim it down for each job description.

Then, create a version of your resume for the specific job description, re-editing it, so it uses similar language to what is in the job details. Remove examples that don't help you with this position, or move them out of the way. If a job description is for an Android role with a focus on Kotlin and you have both Android, Kotlin, and web experience, make sure your resume shows your Android and Kotlin contributions - and perhaps move the web experience further down.

An example customization for that job

Take this excerpt from a job description at Amazon. I added the highlights to point out keywords and key areas that are opportunities to mirror in your resume - assuming you do have experience in these areas.

Description

Do you want to be part of a team that designs and implements **critical** payment related **services** for Amazon with air-tight security and **five-nine availability**, that serve millions of requests per minute? Do you want to be part of a fun group that explores cutting edge technology, with a culture of **learning** from each other and developing each other? Do you want to be part of an organization that will be in the center of projects that will shape the future of the **payments industry**? If you answer yes to any of the questions above, this position is for you!

As a software development engineer, you will:

- **Define, design, and implement multi-tier distributed services** that secure and serve customers' payment data, support cool new initiatives such as mobile payment, and provide **first-class customer experience** on Amazon's websites and mobile devices.
- **Lead** the team in designing, implementing, and testing of major features in the **next generation** of Amazon's payments platform.
- Estimate engineering effort, plan implementation, and **rollout** system changes that meet requirements for **functionality, performance, scalability, reliability,** and adherence to development goals and principles.

Basic Qualifications

- 4+ years professional experience in software development Computer Science fundamentals in **object-oriented design**
- Computer Science fundamentals in data structures, algorithm design, problem solving, and complexity analysis
- **Proficiency** in, at least, one modern programming language such as **C, C++, Java,** or **Perl**
- Effectively **collaborate** in a **fast paced environment** with **multiple teams** in a large organization (software development, QA, Project/Release Management, Build and Release, etc).

Preferred Qualifications

- Knowledge of professional software engineering practices and **best practices** for the full software development life cycle, including **coding standards, code reviews,** source control management, build processes, **testing,** and operations
- Ability to take a project **from scoping** requirements through actual launch of the project
- Experience in **communicating** with users, other technical teams, and management to collect requirements, describe software product features, and technical designs

Now take this part in your resume:

Before

Skills summary

- **Languages:** Python, PHP, Java, Go
- **Databases:** Postgres, MongoDB, Redis
- **Tools:** AWS/Azure/GCP, Docker, Git, Kafka
- **Other:** data structures, algorithms, full stack software design

Software engineer at ThisCompany

- Designing and developing back-end systems with different tech stack stack (Java, Python, Go)
- Created a generator of Grafana dashboards from microservice code
- Developed a reverse proxy for testing, caching calls to test-environment
- Introduced a beta environment, where new features can be roll-out for a selected amount of customers

This is not bad - but it is clear how this description is a generic one. It does not reflect on the job description at all. Let's make it specific for the Amazon listing. Highlights mark the updated phrasing that now mirrors the job description language better. Note that the content of the resume is exactly the same. After the changes, however, it reflects the language this specific company or job listing uses.

After - updating for *that* specific job listing

Skills summary

- Languages: **Expert** in Java and Go, **proficient** in Python and PHP
- Databases: Postgres, MongoDB, Redis
- Tools: AWS, Azure, GCP, Docker, Kafka, Git
- Other: **Data structures, algorithms, distributed systems, engineering best practices**

Software engineer at ThisCompany

- **Defined, designed, implemented and rolled out a multi-tier customer profile service, using Java, leading a team of four engineers. This service is used by five other teams.**
- Introduced **best practices on reliability, monitoring and alerting. Built a Grafana generator that creates dashboards from microservice code: this tool was adopted by more than 10 teams. Improved testing practices by developing a reverse proxy for testing, caching calls to test-environment, adopted by my team.**
- Improved how we do **rollouts** by introducing a beta environment, where new features can be rolled out for a selected amount of customers. Rolled out this environment company-wide.

The person behind the profile is still the same. However, a recruiter that reads both versions will more likely move ahead with the second, tailored version.

Different Companies, Different Focus

Top tech companies care far less about the specific languages used, but they do care about software engineering skills. Consultancies and agencies are more interested in very specific technologies and years of experience with those technologies. Tailor your resume for each.