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by Tina Darmohray

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Radio Buttons and Resumes

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A while back I had Dave Clark, owner of a system administration recruiting and placement company, write a series of articles about preparing for a job search. One of his articles focused on how to prepare a good resume. While there are variations on the theme, for the most part, resume format has been a fairly static entity. At least that's what I thought until I came across an interesting twist during some Web surfing the other day.

Stanford has a Web site full of information about how to apply for positions with the University. There's a searchable database of open positions and information on how to apply. As expected, there's specific information regarding resumes. The Web site covers all the essentials: where to send your resume, how to send it, and even provides a tool to assist you in constructing an online resume if you don't already have one. The part I didn't anticipate was the detailed information on how to prepare your resume in order to maximize a computer's ability to scan it.

It's not surprising that a large organization is using a computer to scan resumes. What I found amazing, however, were the "tips" for writing a resume for just such a scan. First off, there is consideration for the mechanical end of scannability. These are things that will allow the scanner to read the information on the page accurately, like color of paper, acceptable fonts, spacing, expected headings, placement of key information, lack of "fancy treatments," and overall layout apparently all make a difference. So far so good. Here's the twist: you don't just maximize for optical scannability, you can also create the resume to "maximize hits." For me, it's these optimizations that make a good machine-readable resume different from a good human-readable resume. Apparently, in order to increase your "hits" you should "use key words" to describe your skills, be concise, and use "jargon and acronyms." In fact, it looks like "increasing your list of key words" is a feature. Suddenly it was clear to me why a litany of operating systems (you know, every version listed separately), programming and scripting languages, hardware platforms, application packages, protocol names, and anything else just short of the kitchen sink now appears under the "Skills" heading on so many resumes!

Stanford, apparently, is pretty focused on this scannability and optimization. I got the feeling that any resume intended for a human really didn't have much of a chance in their screening process. In fact, the last little tidbit on their resume Web page actually came out and said what I suspected. It suggests that you may want to have two versions of your resume: "One for the computer to read" and "One for people to read. Carry this one to the interview with you." I had to wonder if the ultimate machine-scannable resume might just have a name, address, and telephone number, followed by a Skills heading, with as many buzzwords and acronyms as possible, and just skip the prose that attempts to explain what it is that one has actually *done* for a living. Makes me wanna try it, just to test my theory.

When I described what I'd learned about the "modern" resume to a friend later that day, he suggested that going this far overboard stopped just shy of radio buttons and checkoff boxes on a Web page. Now that he mentions it, it might save us all a lot of trouble . . . .