Resumes of Job Seekers with Visual Impairments: Characteristics and Quality

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Abstract

Introduction: High unemployment rates and employment barriers for people with visual impairments are well documented in the literature. Minimal research has focused on job search challenges for this population, with little to none on creating effective resumes. As quality resumes are often vital for employment, this study examined the quality and characteristics of resumes of adults with visual impairments.

Methods: Researchers reviewed and scored resumes submitted by 99 job seekers with visual impairments as part of a larger job search intervention study. Researchers used an adapted 9-section rubric to score resumes on standard resume sections and characteristics and scanned each resume using an online applicant tracking system (ATS) checker, for an overall assessment of resume quality.

Results: Most resumes scored low in critical areas, including the header, education section, experience section, layout, style, language, and tone. Few resumes met the overall criteria for an acceptable resume. The ATS extracted about 84% of resume content and sometimes extracted incorrect information for particular elements, likely attributable to formatting issues.

Discussion: The results indicate a need for improvement in resume preparation and knowledge for job seekers with visual impairments. Job seekers must present their skills and qualifications effectively with clarity, visual

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appeal, and ATS compatibility to increase their chances of securing an interview. Addressing this knowledge gap could help improve employment outcomes for this group.

Implications for Practitioners: Our findings indicate the need for more attention to resumes in the rehabilitation process related to securing employment and have implications for creating effective resumes.

Introduction

Individuals with visual impairments (including those who are blind or have low vision) face unique challenges in the job search process (Grussenmeyer et al., 2017; Silverman et al., 2019), and their resume design and content reflect these challenges. According to recent research, individuals with visual impairments experience higher unemployment rates compared to the general population. McDonnall and Sui (2019) found that the unemployment rate for adults with visual impairments was double that of the general population, highlighting the substantial challenges they face in the job market. These job seekers often encounter barriers such as accessibility issues, employer discrimination, and a lack of accommodations (Silverman et al., 2019), which contribute to their disproportionately high unemployment rates. Considering the importance of resume quality for a successful job search (Shore et al., 2020), a high-quality resume can help bridge the gap in the job search process for job seekers with visual impairments and showcase their skills and qualifications effectively.

Studies focusing on resume characteristics have documented that relevant work experience, skills, education, writing quality, and visual formatting are key determinants of an applicant's likelihood of obtaining an interview (Levitt et al., 2019; Sterkens et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2010). Recruiters expect resumes to demonstrate how applicants will fit into the company's values, job vacancy, and team personality (Tsai et al., 2011). Individuals with disabilities may need to craft resumes that highlight their accomplishments and qualifications while being mindful of the potential for disclosure of their disability, the method and timing of which is highly personal and influenced by many factors, such as the visibility of their disability (Jans et al., 2012). Grussenmeyer et al. (2017) examined the accessibility of job seeking for individuals with visual impairments, in which participants reported some difficulty with creating resumes due to issues like font and visual output. However, resume research specific to individuals with visual impairments has otherwise been limited, with none focusing on resume characteristics.

Applicant tracking systems (ATS) have become increasingly common in the hiring process, used by a majority of employers to manage and screen large volumes of applications for open positions. These software systems are designed to automate the initial review of resumes, filtering out candidates that do not meet the specified criteria (Henderson, 2024). Today, more than 97% of Fortune 500 companies utilize some form of ATS, highlighting the prevalence of these systems in the modern job market (Myers, 2023). While ATS can streamline the hiring process, they also introduce potential biases and challenges for job seekers, including the risk of qualified candidates' resumes being automatically rejected due to formatting or keyword issues. Resumes must be designed to be compatible with these systems, which often prioritize specific formats, fonts, and content organization. Individuals with visual impairments need to carefully structure their resumes to ensure they are readable and searchable by ATS, while maintaining accessibility for themselves and enhancing visual appeal for potential employers.

Given the disproportionately high unemployment rate for adults with visual impairments, the common employment barriers they face, and the widespread use of ATS, it is important to examine the characteristics of resumes for job seekers with visual impairments and the challenges posed by ATS. This study will explore the characteristics and quality of resumes of job seekers with visual impairments, with a particular focus on content and formatting considerations. By understanding the unique needs and challenges faced by job seekers with visual impairments, assistive technology specialists, rehabilitation counselors, career counselors, and other service providers can better support this population in securing employment.

Method

Participants

Participants were part of a larger study examining the effectiveness of a virtual job search intervention (Cmar & Antonelli, 2024). Inclusion criteria included being age 18 years or older, having blindness or low vision, living in the United States, not working but seeking work, and being generally job-ready, defined as having a system to access printed materials, having basic computer skills, and not attending or planning to begin postsecondary education or vocational training. The sample included 99 participants who submitted a resume at baseline.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 81 years (M = 46.08, SD = 15.03), and 62 (62.6%) received vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. Of participants reporting income (n = 80), 67 (83.8%) earned less than $40,000 per year, and 13 (16.2%) earned $40,000 or more. See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics.

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Female	66	66.7
Male	32	32.3
Non-binary	1	1.0
Race		
White	66	66.7
Black or African American	18	18.2
Asian	8	8.1
Other	7	7.1
Hispanic ethnicity	12	12.1
Age (in years)		
18–33	24	24.2
34–49	30	30.3
50–65	34	34.3
66–81	11	11.1
Education[a]		
High school diploma (or equivalent), or some college	28	28.6
Vocational, technical, or associate degree	20	20.4
Bachelor's degree	35	35.7
Master's degree or higher	15	15.3
Vision level[a]		
Totally blind or legally blind with minimal functional vision	54	55.1
Low vision or legally blind with some functional vision	44	44.9
Preferred method for accessing written materials		
Audio	45	45.5
Large print or magnification	29	29.3
Braille	22	22.2
Standard print	3	3.0
Visual impairment onset age[a]		
Early onset (birth–3 years)	33	33.7
Middle onset (4–24 years)	33	33.7
Adult onset (25 years+)	32	32.7
Additional disabilities or chronic health conditions		
Yes	45	45.5
No	54	54.6

Table 1. Continued

Variable	*n*	%
Last worked for pay		
Within the last year	32	32.3
More than 1 year ago	60	60.6
Never	7	7.1

[a] Missing for one participant.

Procedure

The study protocol was reviewed by the institutional review board at the authors' university and granted an exempt determination. Participants were recruited nationwide through email, websites, listservs, and social media. To enroll in the study, participants completed an electronic pre-screening survey, discussed the study with research staff, and provided informed consent. Then, they completed an electronic baseline survey and provided their resume as one measure of their job search skills. The resumes were deidentified to maintain confidentiality and reduce the potential for bias during the scoring process. Research staff reviewed each resume; removed the participant's name, contact information, location, and to the extent possible, information that may reveal their gender; and replaced personal details with standardized identical content.

Measures

Resume Characteristics

Resume characteristics included type, length, file format, and disclosure. *Resume type* has four categories: chronological, combination, functional, and non-standard. The "non-standard" category comprised resumes that did not fit into the other traditional categories. *Resume length* is the number of pages with any resume content, rounded up (e.g., a 1.5-page resume would be recorded as 2 pages). *File format* indicates the original format of the resume file, as submitted by the participant: Microsoft Word document (DOC or DOCX), Portable Document Format file (PDF), email (i.e., text sent in the body of an email), Google Docs file (GDOC), and OpenDocument text file (ODT). *Disclosure* is whether the resume includes information that reveals the participant's visual impairment (yes or no).

Resume Quality

To evaluate resume quality, we used a scoring rubric adapted from a study of undergraduate students' resumes (Tillotson & Osborn, 2012). We updated the rubric to reflect findings from the most current resume research (e.g., Levitt et al.,

2019; Randazzo, 2020); broadened it to accommodate various types of resumes, experience levels, and career fields; expanded the rating scale; and added detail to the scoring criteria to promote reliability (Moskal & Leydens, 2000). Two experts, a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor and a former university career center director, reviewed the adapted rubric and indicated that it would be a good tool for evaluating resumes, providing evidence of face validity. They also provided feedback on the scoring criteria, which we incorporated into the final version of the rubric.

The adapted rubric (available from the first author upon request) has nine sections: (1) header, (2) professional summary (optional), (3) education section, (4) experience section: position/company information, (5) experience section: descriptions of accomplishments (or skills descriptions for functional resumes), (6) other sections (optional), (7) layout, (8) style, and (9) language and tone. Each section is scored on a five-point scale ranging from 0 (missing, unprofessional, or inappropriate) to 4 (above average); sections with a score of 2 or lower need improvement. The *overall score* reflects the average score for the nine sections of the rubric, with higher overall scores indicating stronger resumes. An overall score of 3 or higher indicates an acceptable resume.

ATS Compatibility

ATS compatibility measures included ATS parse rate and extracted content, as determined by an online ATS checker (Enhancv, 2024). *ATS parse rate* is the percentage of relevant information extracted from the resume by the ATS checker. *Extracted content* indicates whether the ATS correctly identified and extracted the following information from the resume: phone number, email address, LinkedIn profile, education section, and experience section.

Data Analysis

Two independent raters reviewed each deidentified resume, documented its characteristics, scored each section according to the rubric, and noted their rationale for assigning the scores. The raters then compared scores and discussed inconsistencies until reaching a consensus for each section. The consensus scores were used to calculate the overall score for each resume, and the scoring notes were used to identify common errors. Research staff scanned each deidentified resume using the ATS checker, saved the report, and entered the ATS compatibility data into a spreadsheet. Another staff member independently reviewed each ATS report to verify the accuracy of the data. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, means, standard deviations) were computed with SAS 9.4.

Table 2. Resume characteristics.

Variable	*n*	%
Type		
Chronological	47	47.5
Combination	32	32.3
Non-standard	14	14.1
Functional	6	6.1
Length		
1 page	45	45.5
2 pages	42	42.4
3 or more pages	12	12.1
File format		
Microsoft Word document	71	71.7
Portable Document Format file	18	18.2
Text in body of email	5	5.1
Google Docs file	4	4.0
OpenDocument text file	1	1.0
Disclosure		
Yes	32	32.3
No	67	67.7

Results

Resume Characteristics

Resume characteristics are presented in Table 2. The most common resume types were chronological and combination. Resume length ranged from 1–7 pages ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.10$). Most participants submitted their resumes in Microsoft Word format, and nearly one-third disclosed their visual impairment on their resumes; for example, by stating they are blind or visually impaired, identifying as a braille reader or screen reader user, indicating they attended a school or training program for people with visual impairments, or listing consumer organization involvement.

Resume Quality

The overall resume quality scores ranged from 0.38–3.56 ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.72$), with only 11 resumes (11.1%) having an overall score of 3 or higher. Tables 3 and 4 provide an overview of the resume quality ratings for each section. The sections with the highest average scores were "other" sections, professional summary, and header, whereas language and tone, layout, and style had the lowest scores.

Table 3. Resume quality frequencies by section.

Variable	Score	*n*	%
1. Header	0	0	0.0
	1	27	27.3
	2	31	31.3
	3	31	31.3
	4	10	10.1
2. Professional summary[a]	0	9	13.6
	1	18	27.3
	2	1	1.5
	3	18	27.3
	4	20	30.3
3. Education section	0	7	7.1
	1	29	29.3
	2	20	20.2
	3	23	23.2
	4	20	20.2
4. Experience section: Position/company information	0	3	3.0
	1	39	39.4
	2	16	16.2
	3	29	29.3
	4	12	12.1
5. Experience section: Descriptions of accomplishments	0	11	11.1
	1	17	17.2
	2	35	35.4
	3	30	30.3
	4	6	6.1
6. Other sections[b]	0	3	3.5
	1	16	18.4
	2	15	17.2
	3	29	33.3
	4	24	27.6
7. Layout	0	12	12.1
	1	49	49.5
	2	12	12.1
	3	17	17.2
	4	9	9.1

Table 3. Continued

Variable	Score	*n*	%
8. Style	0	12	12.1
	1	25	25.3
	2	25	25.3
	3	29	29.3
	4	8	8.1
9. Language and tone	0	24	24.2
	1	24	24.2
	2	35	35.4
	3	8	8.1
	4	8	8.1

[a] Optional section; not included in 33 resumes.
[b] Optional section; not included in 12 resumes.

Section 1. Header

Most resumes (*n* = 58, 58.6%) scored 1 or 2 for the header. The most common error in this section was information that was hard to read or not prominent. Examples include not using a bold or large font for the name, using a small font (i.e., 7–9 point) for contact information, and not using white space or other formatting to separate this section from others. In some resumes, the contact information was located below another section, at the bottom of the document, or in the header of a Word document. A few resumes did not include a phone number or email address, and several had an unprofessional email address.

Table 4. Resume quality means and standard deviations by section.

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*
1. Header	99	2.24	0.97
2. Professional summary	66	2.33	1.49
3. Education section	99	2.20	1.26
4. Experience section: Position/company information	99	2.08	1.14
5. Experience section: Descriptions of accomplishments	99	2.03	1.08
6. Other sections	87	2.63	1.17
7. Layout	99	1.62	1.18
8. Style	99	1.96	1.17
9. Language and tone	99	1.52	1.18

Section 2. Professional Summary

Of the 66 resumes that included a professional summary (e.g., objective, overview, profile), 42.4% ($n = 28$) had a score of 0–2 for this section. The most common error was lack of clarity in the career objective, field, or position sought. Examples of unclear phrasing include "an exciting position with a growing company" and "seeking full-time employment with opportunities for advancement."

Section 3. Education Section

Most resumes ($n = 56$, 56.6%) scored 0–2 for the education section. The most common errors were (a) missing information (e.g., school, location, degree type, major) and (b) inconsistencies in layout or formatting. Some resumes did not have an education section, and others did not include a heading for the education section, did not use the word "education" in the heading, or did not list entries in reverse chronological order.

Section 4. Experience Section: Position/Company Information

Most resumes ($n = 58$, 58.6%) had a score of 0–2 for this section. The most common errors were (a) missing information (e.g., job title, company name, location, dates of employment) and (b) inconsistencies in layout or formatting. Other issues included not listing entries in reverse chronological order; not including any job details; having lengthy, unexplained employment gaps; and including dated work history (e.g., from the 1960s to 1980s).

Section 5. Experience Section: Descriptions of Accomplishments

Nearly two-thirds of the resumes ($n = 63$, 63.6%) scored 0–2 for descriptions of accomplishments. Common errors in this section included not starting phrases with action verbs in past tense and not quantifying accomplishments. Additionally, some resumes did not include any descriptions of accomplishments and used first-person pronouns (e.g., I, my, our) in the descriptions. Some descriptions were complete sentences or paragraphs rather than bullet points.

Section 6. Other Sections

Of the 87 resumes that included at least one additional section (e.g., skills, certifications), 39.1% ($n = 34$) had a score of 0–2. The most common error was disorganized or unclear content (e.g., listing "iPhone" under "computer skills"). A few resumes also had inappropriate or unprofessional information in these sections (e.g., marital status).

Section 7. Layout

About three-quarters of the resumes (n = 73, 73.7%) scored 0–2 for layout. The most common errors were (a) inconsistent layout or spacing (globally) and (b) inadequate use of white space (i.e., visually cluttered). Examples include extra space above or below headings, line breaks in the middle of lines, page breaks in the middle of pages, inconsistent alignment of similar elements (e.g., dates, bullet points), little to no spacing between sections, and large blocks of text.

Section 8. Style

About two-thirds of the resumes (n = 62, 62.6%) had a score of 0–2 for style. The most common errors in this section were (a) inconsistent formatting across similar sections and elements and (b) inconsistent information in locations or dates. Examples include inconsistent font type, color, size, and capitalization; inconsistent use of bold and italics; and different-sized bullets. Some resumes had little to no formatting, and others used a small font (i.e., 8–9 point) throughout the resume.

Section 9. Language and Tone

Nearly all of the resumes (n = 83, 83.8%) scored 0–2 for language and tone. Common errors included grammar or spelling errors and unclear, passive, or wordy language. Most resumes had multiple grammar or spelling errors, many of which were detected by Microsoft Word's spelling and grammar checker.

ATS Compatibility

Parse Rate

The average ATS parse rate for all 99 resumes was 84.22 (SD = 16.14, range 40–100). Chronological resumes (M = 88.06, SD = 12.17) and combination resumes (M = 87.50, SD = 12.17) had the highest parse rates. Functional resumes (M = 55.33, SD = 20.06) and non-standard resumes (M = 76.21, SD = 19.98) had the lowest parse rates.

Extracted Content

The ATS extracted the correct phone number from 96.0% (n = 95) of the resumes. Of the other four resumes (4.0%), three did not have a phone number, and the ATS extracted an incorrect phone number from one (i.e., merged the phone number and zip code). The ATS extracted the correct email address from 90.9% (n = 90) of the resumes; 6.1% (n = 6) of the resumes did not have an email address; and 3.0% (n = 3) had an email address, but the ATS either did not extract it or extracted it incorrectly. One resume had part of the phone number formatted as a

hyperlink, and the ATS extracted the hyperlinked phone number instead of the email address. Another resume included references, and the ATS extracted a reference's email address rather than the job seeker's email address. The final resume had the email address split between two lines, and the ATS did not detect it.

The ATS extracted a LinkedIn profile from 10.1% (n = 10) of the resumes, all of which included a full LinkedIn public profile URL (e.g., linkedin.com/in/name) or a hyperlink to the profile. It did not detect a LinkedIn profile from one resume that included the short format of the LinkedIn URL (i.e., /in/name) without a corresponding hyperlink. The remaining resumes (n = 88, 88.9%) did not have a LinkedIn profile.

The ATS parsed the experience section from 96.0% (n = 95) of the resumes. Of the remaining four resumes (4.0%), one did not include any job details (e.g., job titles, dates of employment). The other three resumes included those details, but one lacked a heading for the experience section, one had the heading on the same line as the first entry without any formatting or separation, and one used "Employment" rather than "Experience" as the heading. All four of these resumes had little to no formatting.

The ATS parsed the education section from 78.8% (n = 78) of the resumes; 7.1% (n = 7) of the resumes did not have an education section; and 14.1% (n = 14) had an education section, but the ATS did not detect it. These resumes had one or more of the following issues or characteristics: (a) unformatted education heading, (b) no white space around the education heading, (c) education merged with another section (e.g., qualifications), (d) no degree information in education entries, (e) education listed in a table, and (f) two-column resume layout.

Discussion

Given the low employment rates of people with visual impairments and the barriers they face during the job search process, we analyzed the resumes of 99 job seekers with visual impairments. We described the basic characteristics of the resumes, examined resume quality based on a scoring rubric, and investigated ATS compatibility. Most resumes needed improvement (i.e., scored 2 or lower) in these areas: header, education section, experience section, layout, style, language, and tone. Overall, the ATS extracted about 84% of the content from the resumes, and few resumes met the criteria for an acceptable resume (i.e., overall score of at least 3).

The resumes reviewed in this study had several positive features. Most resumes were of the recommended length of 1 to 2 pages (Tomaszewski, 2024) and included the most important elements (e.g., contact information, experience, and education; Randazzo, 2020). Although many resumes had organization and formatting issues, some were well-organized and visually appealing. Several resumes contained rich, effective descriptions of the job seekers' work experience, showcasing their

qualifications and relevant skills. Some resumes included quantifiable accomplishments, coinciding with recommendations for effective resumes (Tomaszewski, 2024).

Despite these positive aspects, the overall quality of most resumes in the study was somewhat low. A large proportion of the resumes had grammar, spelling, and other writing errors, which may adversely affect interview and hiring decisions (Sterkens et al., 2023). Other common errors that often lead to rejection were layout, spacing, and formatting issues (Randazzo, 2020). Depending on the job seeker's skills, these aspects of resumes can be fairly straightforward to address through careful editing or review by another person.

Conversely, addressing the content-related issues identified in this study may take more effort or consideration. Many resumes lacked key details about the applicant's work history and education, the two most important factors for securing interviews (Levitt et al., 2019). Additionally, some resumes listed very old work history in the experience section, contrary to recommendations (Tomaszewski, 2024). Several resumes showed long, unexplained gaps in the job seeker's work history, which can reduce the likelihood of interview selection (Levitt et al., 2019). Some resumes with employment gaps used a chronological format, the most ATS-friendly resume type (Henderson, 2024). However, employment gaps can be more obvious on chronological resumes, so job seekers with gaps in their work history must balance ATS compatibility with presenting their work history in the best light.

Most resumes in this study had ATS compatibility issues. Functional and nonstandard resumes tended to have low ATS parse rates. Layout, formatting, and other style issues sometimes resulted in incorrect ATS extraction of critical information like contact details, education, and work experience. ATS compatibility issues might lead to automatic rejection of resumes, even for well-qualified, experienced applicants (Tomaszewski, 2024). Recommendations to improve ATS compatibility include (a) using clear and concise language, well-structured sections, and consistent formatting to ensure proper parsing by ATS; (b) avoiding formatting like text boxes and multiple columns, which can interfere with ATS screening; (c) selecting an ATS-compatible template; and (d) incorporating relevant keywords and phrases throughout the resume to increase the chances of being selected by ATS.

Limitations

Some important limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting these findings. This study focused on job seekers aged 18 years or older, so the results may not generalize to younger or employed people with visual impairments. Additionally, we lacked information about participants' target jobs and could not

evaluate the match between their resumes and specific job descriptions, including the use of relevant keywords. Next, the scoring rubric was intentionally broad to accommodate different resume types and career fields; therefore, it may not capture details such as field-specific conventions and terminology that may be important for specific positions and employers. Finally, the online ATS checker used for this study, as with others publicly available, may use different algorithms to parse resumes than some ATS used by employers.

Application for Practitioners

Based on our findings, resumes clearly need more attention during the vision rehabilitation and employment preparation processes. Several key insights from this study can be beneficial for practitioners involved in preparing people with visual impairments for employment. First, encourage job seekers to start by reflecting on the story they want to tell through their resume and how to connect that story to the job of interest. If they have difficulty with this task, ask them to first identify their transferable skills and past experiences that relate to the job. Second, job seekers should quantify their accomplishments on their resume; for example, by including quantities like the number of accounts managed and the percentage of increase in sales or social media engagement. Third, job seekers should pay particular attention to their resume's layout, style, and language, all of which affect visual appeal and readability and can influence employers' perceptions of an applicant's professionalism. A resume template can be a good starting point for an appealing layout, although accessibility and ATS compatibility should be considered when selecting templates. Fourth, some issues identified in the resumes, particularly regarding layout and style, can likely be attributed to gaps in participants' technology skills. In many cases, basic word processing features, including spelling and grammar checkers, would have reduced or eliminated most inconsistencies in font styles and sizes, spacing, and alignment, in addition to identifying spelling and grammar errors. Practitioners should be aware of these issues and support job seekers in developing sufficient word processing skills for presenting their qualifications effectively in their resume, especially since such skills would likely be beneficial on the job. Finally, it is important to have someone with resume expertise review the resume, not only for content, language, and aesthetic reasons but also to ensure that the resume is optimized for accurate ATS extraction of critical information.

Job seekers should also be aware of the potential for disclosure of their visual impairment on their resume and carefully consider whether and how to include such information. Many factors could influence job seekers' decisions regarding disclosure, such as their career field, the visibility of their visual impairment, and their personal preference (Jans et al., 2012). Although disclosing a disability such as

visual impairment early in the application process has the potential to invite employer bias (Jans et al., 2012), it could be advantageous in certain situations (e.g., applying for jobs in a disability-related field or at a government organization).

Finally, our findings highlight the importance of professionals staying current on the latest resume recommendations, including those related to ATS. In addition to understanding how employers use ATS, how ATS works, and how to optimize resumes for ATS compatibility, they should consider how to balance ATS compatibility with potentially contradictory recommendations for human review. Considering the prevalence of ATS use by employers, most job seekers could benefit from using free online ATS checkers to identify and correct issues that might cause their resume to be rejected by an employer's ATS. Importantly, free ATS checkers and employers' ATS may use different evaluation criteria, so it may be advisable for job seekers to use multiple systems to get a more comprehensive assessment of the resume.

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