

The Versatile Bio: An Indispensable Tool for Any Professional

In an era of quick, easy—and often very brief—communication spurred by tweeting, text messaging and posts on networking sites, the professional biography, or profile, is evolving as a vehicle for self-marketing. While a bio is still not intended to replace a resume or cover letter, this short-format description is taking on a key position in a professional’s career toolbox.

Whether you’re currently conducting a job search or simply recognize the value of keeping your networking materials up-to-date, you’ve probably already created hard copy and online bios. For some, these may include posts to a number of professional and social networking sites across the Web; for others it may be a single profile you have on Facebook. What you may *not* have, however, is a bio that provides a well-thought-out snapshot of who you are professionally.

Bios are often haphazardly created “on the fly” for immediate posting on a website or in an e-mail to a networking contact or prospective employer. As a result, they are sometimes not as focused and compelling as they could be. Taking the time to design a bio that accurately crystallizes your experience and skills not only helps you avoid having to “reinvent the wheel” every time you need this information; it also allows you to put your best foot forward whenever you have a need to describe what you can contribute to an organization.

From One, Many

Start with a three- or four-paragraph statement for your bio. These are traditionally written in the third person, but it is becoming more commonplace to use the first person when bios are employed for job seeking. If you prefer the third-person style, you can still make your description less formal-sounding by using your first name on second reference instead of your last: “Jane Swanson is an internal audit manager responsible for both operational and financial audits at XYZ company. Jane has extensive experience in preparing risk assessments and holds CPP and CPA Certifications.”

Today, however, the bio is no longer strictly the traditional one-page description of a person’s professional achievements. A profile is now composed in various lengths and styles to fit a growing number of purposes and media. You may want to e-mail a condensed version to a trusted acquaintance or colleague who is willing to make an introduction on your behalf, for example. If you’re responding to a job ad, you can use portions of your bio to prepare a cover letter to accompany your resume. And if you’re invited in for an interview with a company and are hoping to be invited back for a second one, you might use some of the wording from your bio in an e-mailed thank-you note as a means of briefly recapping your qualifications for a hiring manager. You’ll need even shorter bios for posting on professional or social networking sites, which often have length limits. In fact, on some social media sites, individuals post bios that are no longer than one or two phrases or sentences. As to the choice between third or first person, most abbreviated bios avoid the issue entirely: “Prepares and consolidates financial statements,

establishes and maintains internal controls, and manages all aspects of the general ledger.”

You can use the lengthier bio you’ve written to create shorter versions in advance. That way, you can spend time getting them exactly the way you want them rather than having to start over each time as a new need arises. This ensures that every bio you post is well-thought-out and consistent with the overall message you want to convey about yourself. As you get more and more concise, however, the task of distilling becomes more challenging. You’ll need to hone in closer and closer on your most fundamental qualities and achievements.

It may help to think of the bio as an updated elevator pitch—a 15-second sound-bite about yourself you could theoretically deliver to a prospective employer you’re sharing an elevator ride with. This is a very good exercise because it forces you to condense strategically.

Considering the bio’s versatility, it’s worth taking the time to write one if you haven’t already, or updating yours if it’s been awhile since you reviewed it with a critical eye. These pointers can help you craft a compelling profile:

- **Keep it short.** The reason for the bio’s appeal is simple: Its brevity makes it easily accessible and user-friendly, improving the odds that it will be read by recipients. Unlike a resume, you don’t need to recount your entire professional history in a bio or connect the dots of your career trajectory. Create bios of various lengths that you can cut and paste into professional or social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook.
- **Tightly focus.** Present what is most noteworthy about you as a professional, without being restricted by chronology. This may mean that you mention only the last few positions you’ve held, for instance, or even just your current one if you are limited in posting space. Also, touch on your most significant achievements—whether it be the certified public accountant credential you recently earned, your varied experience in cost accounting or your success at helping a privately held company structure a public offering.
- **Clarify your expertise.** Especially if you’re using your bio as a job search tool, be sure to write it with a prospective employer’s problems or goals in mind. For example, assuming your experience in corporate finance has made you adept at helping companies identify cost savings, restructure debt or minimize financial risks, be sure to emphasize that you can bring these capabilities to your next position.
- **Convey a ‘wow’ factor.** Always aim to include a “wow” factor – that is, your biggest, best or highest impact accomplishment that sets you apart from other accounting and finance professionals. This might be a published article, an impressive education credential or a coveted professional award or affiliation.

- **Show some personality.** In applications where you have sufficient space, consider including brief details about your background or personal interests, assuming this information helps to further differentiate you or present you in a positive light. For instance, if you are fluent in more than one language or have lived in numerous countries, this information is probably worth mentioning because it demonstrates that you bring an international perspective to your work. It also might be appropriate to include a humorous detail about yourself in some instances, depending on how and where you're using your bio and the nature of the information disclosed.
- **Don't feel like your bio is set in stone.** Your bio should be a living, breathing document. One benefit of online bios is that they can be updated and altered easily. Review your bios regularly to make sure they aren't stale and continue to illustrate your most marketable skills. If you maintain a presence on a website, even if you don't visit it often, you should make sure your profile is up to date.

A well-crafted professional bio can be a valuable tool for promoting yourself in a variety of forums. If you create one that highlights your best attributes, you'll find that it goes a long way toward helping you establish a strong and compelling professional identity.

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