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# SkillBrief



## Recognizing Red Flags

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As you screen resumes, you should check for "red flags" – warning signals that something is not quite right about the applicant or the person's apparent suitability for a position.

### Unexplained career gaps

Such gaps commonly indicate periods of unemployment. But it could be that the candidate is concealing information. For example, an applicant may not be proud of a career gap spent

- in a rehabilitation center
- suffering from depression, or
- incarcerated

You may find that a candidate has a good reason for a career gap. For example, the candidate might have taken time off to

- serve in the military
- travel
- take care of a sick parent, child, or other family member
- recover from a serious injury or illness, or
- be with a new child

### Job hopping

Job hopping refers to candidates who repeatedly work in jobs for only a short period before moving on. It could signal a recurring problem. For example, a candidate may have a problem with authority – leading to repeated resignations or dismissals.

Job hopping might also indicate that candidates haven't yet found jobs meeting their requirements – in which case, you'll need to think carefully about whether your vacancy suits them. Some candidates may use job hopping strategically, to build a professional network, to keep progressing in their career, or to maintain passion by taking on new challenges.

### Vague statements

Vague statements may fail to explain the candidate's responsibilities in one or more previous jobs. Vagueness may consist of

- a lack of definition – A previous employer might have failed to define the candidate's job clearly. Despite knowing exactly what the job entailed, the candidate might repeat the vague wording in a resume.
- an inflated job title – Candidates might use misleading job titles to exaggerate their authority or responsibility in previous jobs. Job descriptions should indicate the relationship of the job to what the company does to stay in business.
- ambiguous phrases – This kind of phrasing may convey the idea that the candidate has solid experience in an area whereas the candidate may have done very little of the relevant work.

### Static careers

You may find that a candidate changes jobs but keeps moving into new jobs at the same level. Or you may find that the candidate has held the same position at a single company for an unusually long time.

Limited promotion within a company or across a career suggests that the candidate is not advancing to greater levels of responsibility. This could indicate that the candidate doesn't do a good job. Alternatively, the candidate may be stuck in a comfort zone and lacks the ambition to push for promotion.

However, this red flag might also result from the candidate's circumstances. The candidate may hold a specialized job. Or it may be impossible for the candidate to attain a higher position until a senior person either retires or resigns.

### Sloppy resumes

A sloppy resume may be untidy, contain spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, or other errors. Such resumes may indicate a candidate lacking in presentation skills. Or the candidate isn't serious enough about the position to put in sufficient effort to create a presentable resume.

Two further red flags are

- potentially irresponsible behavior – Although candidates may enjoy dangerous and risky activities in their free time, you should be careful that these activities don't impact their work performance.
- a lack of commitment – a candidate may overemphasize activities or events unrelated to the advertised position due to a lack of interest in that position.

### Dealing with Red Flags

Sometimes a resume appears to meet all your requirements. On closer inspection, you spot a red flag issue. If you feel the candidate is right for an interview, highlight the issue and make a note to address it during the interview. You may wish to employ a system using the letters "C," "D," and "T."

- C stands for clarify – If you find vague statements, or you're confused about an item on a resume, you place a "C" on that item to remind you to get clarification.
- D stands for define – When you come across a term that you don't understand, place a "D" on the term to remind you to ask the candidate to define it.
- T stands for tighten – When a detail in a resume is not specific, place a "T" on it to remind you that you need to ask the candidate for substantiating information. Information that may need tightening could include dates, growth statistics, and multiple positions in the same company.

The "CDT" method is a simple way of dealing with red flags. Other methods exist, or you can develop your own.

If you've decided that some candidates are unsuitable – based on their resumes – make sure you're excluding them for the right reasons. You should avoid letting your unconscious biases influence your decisions about which candidates to interview. Two areas of unconscious bias are

- personal preferences – Although you may think you base your decisions on professional criteria alone, your personal preferences may sometimes influence you.
- potentially discriminatory information – When candidates include information such as their age, race, religion, or dependents, it's possible that you'll use these attributes to discriminate against them.

To remain objective, focus on each candidate's ability to do the job. Try to block out factors that don't directly relate to the candidate's likely on-the-job performance.

Sometimes a resume may contain warning signs – or red flags – alerting you to potential risks in hiring a job candidate. Common red flags include unexplained career gaps, job hopping, vague statements about responsibilities, lack of promotion, sloppy resume appearance, and an overemphasis of hobbies.

You should highlight red flag issues for candidates you don't exclude from further consideration so that you can follow up on them. However, if you decide to exclude a candidate based on their resume, ensure that personal bias has not influenced your decision.