

Keeping an eye on recruiter behavior

NEW STUDY CLARIFIES RECRUITER DECISION-MAKING

Here is every job seeker's dream world:
a place where they know exactly how recruiters' minds work; where the reasons for hiring decisions are obvious; where the criteria for an effective resume and job search are as clear as day.

Of course, that world doesn't exist. We can't read recruiters' minds, and certainly not with any level of scientific accuracy. Or can we?

According to a new report,* *TheLadders* recently conducted the first formal, quantitative study of recruiters' on-the-job behavior. This groundbreaking research employed a scientific technique called "eye tracking" – a technologically advanced assessment of eye movement that records and analyzes where and how long a person focuses when digesting information or completing activities. The study gauged specific behaviors of actual recruiters as they performed online tasks, including resume and candidate profile reviews. Thirty professional recruiters took part in the study during a 10-week period.

The findings provided specific data regarding the following:

- *Individual resume and online profile details viewed by participating recruiters*
- *Specific items that captured recruiters' attention during reviews*
- *How long recruiters spent viewing each item*
- *How quickly their eyes moved from item to item*
- *What content was overlooked*

It's tempting to call the results eye-opening, but they clearly offer valuable insight into recruiters' real-world behavior. The information is also useful to recruiters themselves for increasing efficiency and effectiveness.

Exploring the issues

The research investigated three primary issues. First, did recruiters perceive and process professionally written resumes differently than those generated by job seekers? Second, how long did recruiters actually spend reviewing each candidate's resume? This section sought to evaluate research (based on recruiters' self-reports) suggesting that recruiters spend as much as **4 to 5 minutes per resume**.

Lastly, the study scrutinized the process recruiters use to review online profiles. The researchers measured where recruiters look, what information is most valuable to them, and what data they use to determine a candidate is a potential fit. The study hypothesized that some types of online profiles are significantly less efficient than others when recruiters are searching for qualified candidates.

Making every second count

According to the research, recruiters tend to follow a consistent visual path when reviewing both resumes and online profiles, so an organized layout is crucial. Because professionally written resumes have a clear visual hierarchy and present relevant information where recruiters expect it, these documents quickly guide recruiters to a yes/no decision.

In fact, the study found that, using a Likert-like scale** ranking of 1 to 7, recruiters gave professionally re-written resumes an average rating of **6.2 for “usability.”** This was a **60% improvement** compared with a **3.9** rating before the re-write. This finding supports participating recruiters' comments that the re-written resumes were **“easier to read.”**

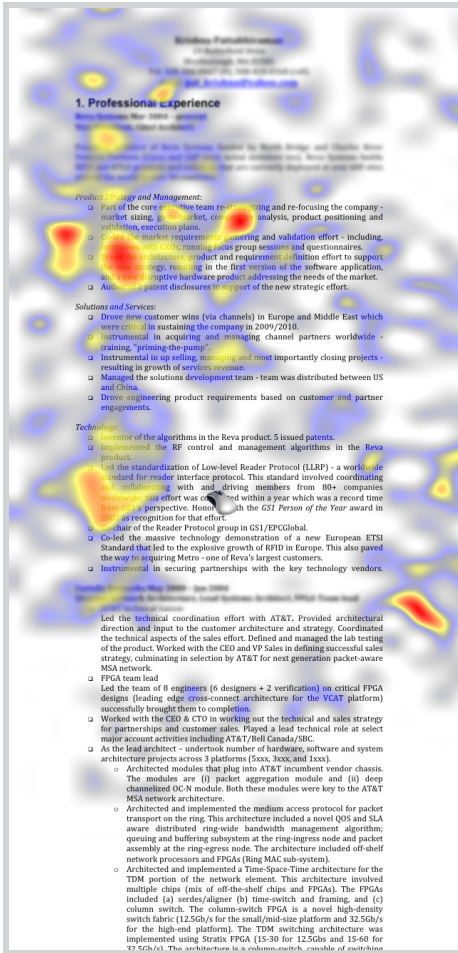
Professionally prepared resumes also scored better in terms of organization and visual hierarchy, as measured by eye-tracking technology. The “gaze trace” of recruiters was erratic when they reviewed a poorly organized resume, and recruiters experienced high levels of cognitive load (total mental activity), which increased the level of effort to make a decision. Professional resumes had less data, were evenly formatted and were described as “clearer.” They achieved a mean score of **5.6** on a seven-point Likert-like scale, compared with a **4.0** rating for resumes before the re-write – **a 40% increase**.

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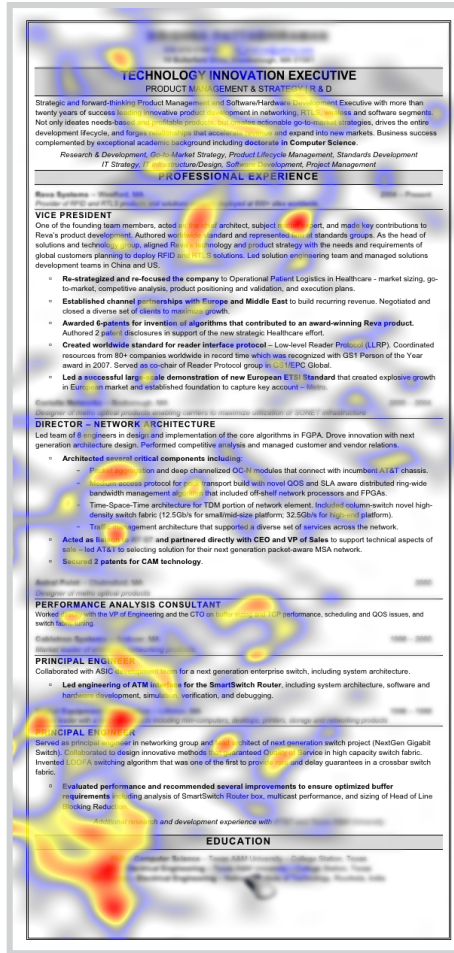
SECONDS

The study found that recruiters spend only 6 seconds reviewing an individual resume.

** A Likert Scale is a psychometric ranking system that offers users a series of choices ranging (for example) from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This type of scale is used in a wide variety of questionnaires in many fields.



Recruiters rated resumes with an obvious information hierarchy as “easier to read.” On a Likert scale of 1 to 7, self-written resumes (above left) averaged **3.9** versus **6.2** for the professionally rewritten resume (above right), a **60% increase**.



Regarding online profiles, reviewers were clearly distracted by common visual features such as pictures, ads, etc. These distractions wasted time and detracted from more pertinent and useful candidate information such as experience and skills. Such visual elements reduced recruiters’ analytical capability and hampered decision-making. In some cases, irrelevant data such as candidates’ age, gender or race may have biased reviewers’ judgments.

Some of the most surprising findings involved the fundamentals of recruiters’ resume review process. For example – and despite recruiters’ different

self-reports – the study found that recruiters **spend only 6 seconds reviewing an individual resume**.

The study’s “gaze tracking” technology showed that recruiters spent **almost 80%** of their resume review time on the following data points:

- Name
- Previous position start and end dates
- Current title/company
- Current position start and end dates
- Previous title/company
- Education

Beyond these six data points, recruiters did little more than scan for keywords to match the open position, which amounted to a very cursory “pattern matching” activity. Because decisions were based mostly on the six pieces of data listed above, an individual resume’s detail and explanatory copy became filler and had little to no impact on the initial decision making. In fact, the study’s eye tracking technology shows that recruiters spent about **6 seconds** on their initial “fit/no fit” decision.



Recruiters' eyes, while reviewing LinkedIn profiles (above) fixated on strong visual elements, spending **19% of their time looking at profile pictures**. In contrast, recruiters viewing TheLadders candidate profiles (below) reviewed more key information in less time, a **55% improvement in readability over LinkedIn**.



That profile photo isn't helping

The study showed that recruiters who used the TheLadders candidate profiles (versus LinkedIn) experienced a significantly lower cognitive load. They were able to review key data points faster because TheLadders profiles were **55% easier to read than LinkedIn**.

LinkedIn's profiles had higher levels of visual complexity, and their ease of use suffered substantially as a result. Advertisements and "calls-to-action" created clutter that reduced recruiters' ability to process the profiles. Finally, eye tracking-based "heat maps" of LinkedIn profiles showed that recruiters fixated for an average **19% of the total time spent** – on profile pictures, instead of examining other vital candidate information.

Key recommendations

Turn to a professional for resume rewrites; insist on an organized layout and a strong visual hierarchy; and make sure online profiles are easy-to-read, without distracting visuals – that is, it makes sense to follow the style found on TheLadders.com.

In conclusion, consider the expression, "The eyes are the window to the soul." In this case, the eyes and eye-tracking technology have given us valuable insight – and valid data – about recruiters' behavior. While we may never be able to read recruiters' minds, this study gives us a much clearer view of what they are thinking and how they make decisions.

[Click here](#) to learn more about TheLadders resume re-writing services >