Intro

2024 was a dismal year. I sent over 800 applications and only interviewed with 16 companies making my application-to-interview conversion rate ~2%. This year I've challenged myself to look at job applications like a sales funnel. If my conversion rates at the top of the funnel were low, then I would need to work on my application approach, resume and public profile. If my conversion rates were low at the middle or bottom parts of the funnel, then I would look at my interviewing skills.

Focusing specifically on my top of funnel approach, I have been able to get it to 10.59%, which has really put my mind at ease. Rather than taking 50 applications to get one interview (the 2% I experienced last year), now it only takes 10-11. This meant I could spend less time obsessing over mass job applications and could focus on applying for 10-20 or so per week. With this new approach, already within 6 weeks, I've been able to achieve 50% of what I achieved last year. These are the steps I took to make this happen:

The Resume

The length matters - so does density

You've all probably heard this already, but if you haven't, your resume is a marketing document, it is not a record of the truth.

You don't have to list everything you've done, you just have to list what's relevant to the reader, they don't need to know everything else about you.

My very first resumes were generic 2-3 page resumes that I would send to every company. Not only were they way too long, they were too dense. Today I have 34 different 1 - 1.5 page resumes each slightly tailored to specific needs (and in some cases, specific jobs).

I first simplified everything down to 1 page, and the magic of doing this first is that it forced me to be extremely concise. To hit that one page target, which would include everything from my summary, to experience, and education, I needed to remove all the corporate jargon and all the fluff that didn't add any value to the (marketing) story I wanted to tell about myself.

I was able to achieve this by condensing every achievement down to only one line.

For instance, this:

Uncovered the need for a Social Media solution through customer interviews, and developed the industry's first Social Media conversation tracking solution leading to an opportunity pipeline of €800k.

Was simplified to this:

Launched the marketplace industry's first Social Media solution, building a €800k pipeline

and this:

Spearheaded integrations with key industry players, leveraging joint customer mappings to highlight mutual product value and bolster [company]s product suite.

Was simplified to this:

Forged key partnerships and integrations improving ecosystem fit for 30% of customers

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One-line achievements not only made my resume more easily scannable, it created room for me to insert more achievements on the page.

The simple approach to any achievement followed this simple formula:

[I did this thing] - [it led to this result].

In other words:

[Action] - [metric or outcome]

This approach reduced the amount of effort it would take for hiring managers / recruiters to understand what I accomplished. There was no jargon, there was no grammatical finesse, it was a bare bones, simple and concise statement.

Should your resume be 1 or 2 pages? [updated apr 16]

I have some surprising stats. It doesn't matter, they're both roughly the same.

2 Page Resume Stats:
Submitted: 62
Converted into a conversation: 5 (6%)
Rejected: 31 (35%)

1 Page Resume Stats:
Submitted: 61
Converted into a conversation: 5 (9%)
Rejected: 23 (37%)

I applied for both Product Leadership (those with managerial responsibilities) and Product IC roles, and this pattern has basically held when broken down into those subsegments. While I acknowledge that these base sizes are too small to be definitive, it was enough for me to refocus my energy on going to market with my revised 2-page resume, and I have noticed some promising preliminary results by doing so.

I think the reason why I've gone with a 2-pagers is that psychologically, the 2nd page adds credibility. If your first page is designed to establish "this is who I am" your second page can subtly reinforce it by saying "I told you so".

The way that I've decided to lay this out on my resume is that my first page now includes:

1. Summary no more than 4-6 lines
2. All my relevant experience for the role (not going further back than 10 years)

My second page then includes:

1. Calling out specific area expertise. So if the role is an AI role, I have an AI section specifically highlighting my AI experience. If the role is product focused (which it always is), I mention my B2B product management thought leadership account on Medium.com
2. My education, and any product certifications

As I mentioned earlier, today I don't have a full 2-page resume anymore, my resume is a very easy to read 1.5 pages.

The devil is in the company details

The devil is also in the details. There are things that hiring managers need to know about your past work experience that people often forget to include, these are:

- What your former companies did
- what size they were

I include this information by simply adding it next to the company name like this:

Job Title
Company Name | €20M ARR B2C Martech Platform | Start Date - End Date

Realistically, most companies don't have the brand recognition that companies like Amazon and Facebook have, so when you only provide your company name, it's the job hunting equivalent of "I worked for Bob".

Most hiring managers want to bucket you as quickly as possible by assessing how similar your profile is to the profile they're looking for. If they can't assess you in 10 seconds, then they'll move to a candidate they can and will ignore your profile. What you don't want to do is accidentally get excluded because the hiring manager wasn't familiar with the companies you worked for, so this is why I recommend adding this in.

Maybe ageism is real, maybe it's not, it's definitely not worth the risk

I'm in my 40's - and just to be safe I removed all the dates from my education. No one needs to know when I graduated university. I don't mention my past 20 years of work experience, I only include my last 10 (this is also because anything you did over a decade ago is no longer relevant).

The only time I mention having more than 10 years of experience is when I want to establish industry credibility in my summary. Even then, I limit my numbers. Even though I have 20 years of experience, I really only highlight that I've had 13+ years at the leadership level, because that number establishes enough credibility while avoiding appearing 'old'. IMO Even mentioning I'm a professional with 20 years of experience runs the risk of generating the bias that I'm "too old" even though I'm only in my 40's (I'm a millennial goddammit not a boomer!).

The Tech Industry's dirty resume secret

It's ok to roll up your experience if it helps tell your story better. Again, your resume is a marketing document, it's not a legally binding transcript of the truth.

There are just some job titles that don't make sense to your career path. My last official title was not a commonly recognised title in the product management space. Not only was it nonsensical to the product space, it didn't really describe what I was responsible for. In fact, I DID have senior product responsibilities associated with that role - namely product strategy, building product partnerships, leading product integrations, crafting product presentations, product demos and presenting the product story to investors for M&A initiatives. In fact, I was the 3rd most senior person in the 70 person company, working with the founder and CEO to get the company sold, but the title I was given was hampering my ability to be taken seriously as a product leader so I combined the responsibilities and achievements from that role with my previous title as Director of Product Management. My final title became a combination of the two roles and I rolled up all my achievements across both titles into the one role. This wasn't something I decided to do on my own, I was informed that this was an acceptable approach after speaking with multiple people from the FAANG/SaaS unicorn space.

It turns out this is common practice in tech (more common than you realise). In one instance I spoke to a Staff PM from a globally recognised unicorn in Silicon Valley, and she would recount stories of people she knew who needed to prove 8+ years of PM experience, but who only had 4 years of experience in the PM role. They did however have an additional 4 years at the company in other departments, so they rolled up the responsibilities of their entire 8 year tenure into the PM title with a caveat in their achievements that mentioned "oh I also did these things too". Voila, they instantly became a PM with 8 years experience at a globally recognised unicorn. (Don't shoot the messenger, I'm just relaying what was communicated to me).

I personally don't suggest you roll up 4 years as that's a bit of a stretch, but ultimately what is most important is what you feel you can justify and defend. The most important question you

should ask yourself is can you do that job? If so, then do what you can to get noticed in a way that you are comfortable with. Just keep in mind:

1. Your references have to back you up on your story - so don't blindside them with something they won't be able to agree with.
2. You have to be able to justify it if someone asks you why you did it. IMO as long as you can say you did have *some PM-like* responsibilities in those previous roles, you can legitimately say you were simply focusing on telling the reader about your PM experience for those roles.
3. It's important for you to reshape how you see yourself and your past experience as that will dictate your future performance.
4. This is your story and you need to do what you feel comfortable with. Don't worry about what other people think.

Again, your resume is meant for you to describe how you fit the job you are applying for, it's not required to contain every distracting element that might negatively impact that mission.

It is important for me to stress - I am not advocating outright lying. I am advocating that you change how you see yourself and focus everyone's attention on the bits of experience that are genuinely relevant for the role while removing the distractions. When all is said and done, I fundamentally believe that you are not bound by what other people have called you - especially if the title they gave you was stupid. You and you alone should be in control of the future of your career.

An Important Caveat: You have to be careful with how you apply this in highly regulated industries or companies that have extremely mature and robust reference checks. Some companies will want reference checks from the HR department of your previous employer, in which case you need to balance marketability with accuracy. This is why I don't lie on my resume. I need to be able to confidently explain every "marketing decision" I've made to describe who I am and what I have accomplished.

Applying for jobs

The One Single Best Thing You Could Do

I track my job application stats pedantically. I track which jobs I applied for, whether or not I wrote a cover letter, whether or not I contacted the job poster/hiring manager, what stage each application was able to reach. From my numbers, I've learned that the single best thing you can do is something you already know you should do - contact the hiring manager or the job poster to get noticed.

My response rate after messaging the job poster or hiring manager is 24%. Out of 50 cold outreaches, I received responses from 12 people. It didn't mean that I always got an interview, but it DID mean they acknowledged my existence, which ultimately increased my odds of actually getting an interview.

You would think that everyone is already doing this, and because of this, you won't stand out, but that's not true.

For one particular job, a recruiter posted a role on Friday, I applied and sent her a cold outreach on LinkedIn on Sunday. She responded Monday saying she received 400 applications, of which 50 had messaged her directly. I didn't get an interview because I wasn't the right profile, but she looked at my profile on LinkedIn. She noticed me.

More importantly, something to note is that only 12.5% of applicants actually bothered to message the job poster - so if you think this is something everyone does, you're wrong - you still have room to do this and stand out.

At the end of the day, rather than being a faceless application competing with 400 other faceless applications, I became a human competing against 50 other humans. Those odds matter.

So how do I plan/write the cold outreach?

These are the steps I followed:

Stage 1: Identifying who to message

If there is a job poster I message the job poster.

If there is no job poster I search for: [COMPANY NAME] [TALENT ACQUISITION]

I then apply these filters to make sure I'm getting the right talent person if the company is large:

> Current Location [UK]
> Current Company: [COMPANY NAME]

I usually end up messaging at least one person - in some cases I message two people if I find the hiring manager as well.

Stage 2: Crafting the Cold Outreach

The next thing I do is go to ChatGPT and get it to craft the cold outreach for me. I'll share the prompt I used and some examples of successful messages that have led to a conversation.

ChatGPT Prompt I Use

> I am applying for this job
>
> ###JD BEGINS###
>
> <Copy and Paste Job Description>
>
> ###JD ENDS###

I'd like to write a cold outreach on LinkedIn to the [talent acquisition/recruiter/hiring manager] for this role just to help put a face to my application. Can you help me write the message I can send? Keep in mind because this is a cold outreach, I don't want the message to be too long to read. Please also make it sound authentic.

Stage 2 Notes / Caveats:

Notice I use ### to break up sections. This is just a bit cleaner for the GPT to read.

you will also need to provide chatGPT with your resume and professional details in the prompt so that it can draft an appropriate message for you. I streamlined this myself and have my own custom GPT. It already has all the information, my resume, every thought leadership pieces I've written, my S.T.A.R. story library, my linkedin profile, my example cover letters and writing style. I use it to help me analyse my suitability for jobs and for drafting outreach and cover letters etc. (I might dive into this later if I have time or if you guys are interested).

Example a successful cold outreach for a Talent Acquisition Team

Hi [TALENT ACQUISITION NAME],

I hope you're doing well. I recently submitted my application for the [JOB TITLE] role at [COMPANY] and wanted to take a moment to introduce myself.

With over X years of experience in [INDUSTRY], I've led [INSERT ACCOMPLISHMENTS]. I'm particularly excited about the opportunity to [WRITE A SUBTLE PLUG INDICATING YOU'VE READ THE POSTING] at [COMPANY], contributing to its success and long-term impact.

Thank you for considering my application. I'd love for the opportunity to discuss how my experience aligns with the role, so I hope we get a chance to connect.

[YOUR NAME]

Example of a successful cold outreach for recruiters

Hi [RECRUITER NAME],

I hope you're doing well! I came across your posting for the [INSERT JOB] role and wanted to reach out. With over X years in [INDUSTRY], I've [INSERT RELEVANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS].

I'm passionate about [INSERT KEY WORDS THEY MENTIONED IN THE JOB DESCRIPTION], and I'd love to have a quick chat about this role or any other opportunities you're recruiting for. I've attached my resume for reference.

The company size you apply for matters

When it comes to company size, there are 4 size categories that matter:

Start up (0 - 5M) → Small Scale up (6 - 50M) → Medium Scaleup (50-200M) → Enterprise (200M+)

Each phase of company size corresponds to the level of organisation maturity the company needs to deliver results at their size. The larger the company, the more matrixed and process oriented the company.

You can really only move one step to the left or one step to the right of whichever category you belong to, but it's probably easier for you to move down than up. If your experience is on the low end of a Small Scale Up, then companies from 0-50M are more likely to think you're an appropriate fit for them. If your experience is in Enterprise, then it's more likely for you to land a large scaleup than it is for you to land a start up because the words are too different. Of course these are huge generalisations, but in terms of being a general rule of thumb that will improve the odds of your application being taken seriously, I think this generalisation will hold.

Having said that, In 2024 - even though I have small scaleup experience, I was able to get into the interview process with large enterprise organisations - but they all questioned my ability to work within their matrixed environment. In the end, even after making it to the final culture fit round (which I know I passed with flying colours because the final round interviewers added me on LinkedIn and we got along very well) - they ended up choosing someone else. Did my small scaleup experience tip the scale in the other candidate's favour? Who knows. I just don't bother applying for large enterprise companies anymore and focus on company sizes I know I will have success with.

A note on FAANG

I think there's probably an exception for FAANG in that FAANG doesn't normally operate within a matrixed environment, so they will take people from other companies no matter the size, but that hiring journey will take 6 months, and really the best way to guarantee getting into FAANG is to be from FAANG or from another unicorn SaaS company (1B+ valuation). For people desperate for a job immediately, applying to join FAANG is out of the question.

The company industry you apply for matters as well

I don't think I need to mention this, but I will for completeness. Industry experience matters. Certain industries pair well together - like insuretech/fintech, martech/proptech, but others don't

like martech/fintech (I know this because I'm in martech and no one in fintech will even acknowledge I exist). So if you want to improve your odds of an application getting noticed - don't bother applying to industries that don't value your experience.

Surprisingly I have had some success with insuretech and regtech. I think the reason for this is that both insuretech and regtech seem to be laggards in the product-framework adoption space, which means they're hungry for people with product experience and are willing to take them from a wider pool of previous industries.

On the other hand, many fintech companies started after the dot-com boom, and because they are already highly mature in their product framework adoption, they don't need to find people that can bring that maturity, they need people who are both framework-mature and industry experts.

All of these tiny things - from adjusting the company size and industries you target, will impact your conversion rate, so they are all worth considering when applying for jobs.

The Cover Letter

Do cover letters work?

Not in the way you think. Over the last 4 months, I have written over 42 cover letters [updated apr 16] using a mix of AI composed cover letters and bespoke cover letters. Out of the job applications that included a cover letter, only 3 have converted into an interview conversation. I don't think it hurts to provide a cover letter as long as you are clever about how you produce them so they don't take up too much time to write. Having said that, if you write one and get selected to participate in the interview process, the hiring manager WILL read it. I just don't think it will move the needle in terms of impacting that initial conversion figure.

This stat might also loosely reflect what I've been hearing about the market, which is Talent Acquisition teams don't have time to read cover letters as they have too many applicants, so it's not really worth your time as a tool to get your foot in the door. However, of course if they ask for a cover letter, then you should probably provide one to fulfill the spec.

[new content updated apr 16]

I think we need to anchor the cover letter and its purpose to better understand how to maximise the benefits of a cover letter. To do this we should consider the order of operations in terms of where this cover letter sits. For the hiring manager and talent acquisition person, It's probably the 3rd impression you provide.

- 1st impression - the outreach messages you send to the hiring team
- 2nd impression - your resume

- 3rd impression - your cover letter

Each impression serves a different purpose: We know that the outreach helps put you to the top of the application review pile by showing drive and basically keeping you top of mind. We know the resume is the meat and potatoes of the initial impression because it proves you have the relevant experience to do the job.

So with those two tasks already addressed, what's the purpose of the cover letter?

The Purpose of a Cover Letter

The purpose is to show the hiring team something about you that doesn't surface easily in the resume format (e.g. your personality, passions, connection to the mission etc.). Rather than regurgitate your achievements, it's an opportunity to show enough personality to make the readers like you before they've even had a chance to meet you. This isn't only true for the HR person or the Hiring manager, but everyone else in the hiring process (if they get to see your cover letter, that is).

Given todays tough market - ***this is probably the real advantage that a well crafted cover letter will provide. It helps with mid-funnel conversion by giving all of your future interviews a head start by positioning you as someone they like.***

Phrases to avoid

What this means is you want to remove generic phrasing as much as possible. Think of this like you have 350 words to showcase your personality, you don't want to then waste it on phrases or sentences that can apply to anyone else.

For instance, you'll want to avoid common phrases like:

- "I'm excited to be applying for the [role]"
- "I'm a passionate and hardworking individual."
- "I believe I would be a great fit for the role"
- "I'm a passionate and hardworking individual."
- "I am confident that I can contribute to your team."

(FYI - I've literally used all of these sentences in one cover letter or another myself)

A proposed Cover Letter Structure

When it comes to structure, you can probably follow the simple structure of Hook - Line - Sinker.

The Hook:

Start off with something personal that will enable the reader to connect with you emotionally. Here's one that I used that took me to the final stages at a legal tech SaaS company (I'm still bitter about the loss as I got along really well with the team):

> Dear Hiring Manager,
>
> I'm fairly certain that the typical non-lawyer has two epiphanies in life related to joining the legal industry. The first epiphany is how great and glamorous it would be to be a lawyer after watching TV shows like Suits, Boston Legal and The Practice. The second epiphany is the exact opposite realisation when you research what it is they actually do. Sadly, I am that typical person, however that has not tempered my interest in participating in the industry.
>
> While it turns out that I do not have the passion to be a lawyer, I do have a passion for helping customers solve big problems with technology. In fact, I bring to the table a particular set of skills and professional experiences that I believe are ideally suited for [company x] and Legal-Tech in general. These include:
>
> yada yada yada

The Line:

Then lead onto the main bits you use as proof points to do the job. Take this opportunity to explicitly connect dots that aren't immediately apparent on your resume. Heck - even if they are immediately apparent, hammer those connections in because you can't assume that the reader will see the connections you want them to see.

The Sinker:

As a reader I want to come out of reading this thinking that the gods of fate put us together and that I must speak to you. So here's the sinker I used for [company x]:

> While my experience may not belong in a courtroom, it's deeply aligned with the needs of those who do. I've spent over a decade building high-performing product teams and introducing modern practices from the ground up, which is exactly what you're looking for in your next hire. I would love the chance to bring that experience to [company x] and help you continue delivering powerful solutions for busy legal professionals.

My LinkedIn Presence

I did everything documented in this LinkedIn event from ProductSphere. ProductSphere is a paid job seeking community where you receive resume/linkedin profile reviews and get to practice mock interviews tailored to jobs you apply for. It is great for job seekers who need support in their product job search and I highly recommend it. I Don't need to repeat what was

suggested in the live event, but I think you should watch it here:
https://www.linkedin.com/events/7295095616773246976/comments/

I have a banner, a headline, a summary, I used up all my skills, put in job descriptions and achievements for each. Notably my efforts here have led to some (not many) inbound requests for passive roles not yet posted. Getting your linkedin profile up to snuff is table stakes in this highly competitive job search game.

My Online Presence

I played a very long game and created a medium account to showcase my thought leadership. I have one follower - a former team member. However, I didn't write it to generate a following, I wrote it to establish my credibility to hiring managers. I stopped posting after a while because even though I loved creating my presentations, it's kind of depressing to not get acknowledged. I am surprised to say however, that it has played a role in getting me to final stage conversations with a number of opportunities. I know this because they mention it. So this approach does work, it's just not openly apparent when it does work. I suggest you all focus on building out your online presence as well.

My Networking

I don't really like networking, but I've started going to networking events. Some opportunities I received last year were from people I randomly met 6 months prior, so I've started networking more to increase the chance of that luck happening again. Again, we're just looking for improving odds.

I also joined the paid job seeking community, Product Sphere, which I mentioned earlier. I think it's really helped to build a sense of community (much like what this Whatsapp channel is offering as well). Free communities can also be found via the book Never Search Alone, which is an entire job hunting process on its own. It didn't really work for me, but I know a bunch of people who did find a JSC (job seeking council) they could relate to. Mine didn't really work.

My Numbers

I've started pedantically documenting everything I've done in my job search to create and monitor metrics. I now document every job I've applied for, the title, role, company, whether or not I did additional outreach or wrote a cover letter, the resume I used, and the stage of interviews I'm at.

I also documented all the actions I've taken to find a job. Every cold outreach, warm outreach, networking event, interview, mock interview etc. I've attended/conducted.

I have a google sheet, where one sheet is to document job applications containing the fields:

- Date

- Job Role Applied To
- Job Type (product IC / Product Leadership / Non Product)
- Company Name
- Did I conduct an additional outreach?
- Was the Outreach responded to
- Did I write a cover letter?
- Did the resume convert?
- Did the 1st stage convert?
- Did the 2nd stage convert?
- Third stage?
- Fourth stage?
- Resume Used
- Status of application
- Link to Job
- Notes

I also have another sheet in the same workbook to track my Actions:

- Date
- Action taken
- Job Role (if applicable)
- Company
- Contact name
- Contact Role
- Is it an Agency?
- Did it lead to a next stage conversion?
- Notes

And I have a sheet tracking my resume versions:

- Resume Name
- Description
- # pages
- Changes made
- # used in applications
- # converted
- # rejected

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning, last year was dark. I swore I was the butt of a cosmic joke - the plaything of a cosmic being that simply wanted to get my hopes up and dash them to see how I'd react. I made it to final stage interviews 6 times last year, each time the opportunity broke down, many times for reasons completely out of my control (cancelling the hire, relocating the position last minute, etc).

This year I've tried to take back control over my job seeking progress. This is why I started tracking all my numbers because it gives me a semblance of control. With my numbers I now get to pinpoints areas to improve rather than rely on the cosmic deities to grace me with good fortune.

Is this the end of the road? Probably not. But if I don't land one of the opportunities I currently have on the go, then I know the next blocker I need to work on is improving my middle/bottom funnel conversions.

It's a lot of work - but it is what it is.

Final Thoughts: This Year I Will Have No Shame

This year my motto is "no shame". I'm going to do whatever it takes to get a job and if that means putting myself out there beyond what I'm comfortable with and doing things I wouldn't normally do? Fuck it. I have a family to feed.

Good luck. God speed. Hope this helps.