

Knowledge based article

# A Guide To Making Your CV Stand Out



## 1. The CV and its Purpose

Just as there is no standard best way of drawing up a job advertisement, so there is no single best curriculum vitae (CV). Indeed, you may need more than one version: perhaps a longer one and a shorter one for different circumstances, and distinct versions highlighting particular aspects of your career if you are applying for different types of jobs.

### To get an interview

The immediate purpose of your CV is not to get you a job but to gain you a job interview, just as the purpose of the interview is to gain a job offer. But what sort of CV will influence an employer or recruiter to see you? The following points emerge from our experience and

## 2. The Principles of a Great CV

### Neat

Aim for the best standard which you can reach in layout and content. You will be judged by your CV.

### Short

It is difficult to define this, but many people can set out everything necessary, at least for a short career summary, on one side of an A4 sheet. Others will need two, sometimes three, sides of A4 paper, but remember that the ability to express oneself concisely is a strength.

Categories of applicants who may need extra space include:

- scientists or engineers, who may need to list, on a separate sheet, their publications or patents
- academic applicants with lists of publications

- applicants for many public sector posts
- computer specialists - systems and programming experience can be put separately

In any case, effective self-marketing on paper suggests that you should include on the first page key personal details, together with information about your education and your current or latest appointment. The reader interested thus far can fill that out by reading further; whereas in general the CV which omits significant information from page one will be unlikely to be pursued to page two.

## **Complete**

Since CVs are frequently detached from their covering letter for internal circulation, the CV should itself list your address and telephone number clearly.

## **Factual**

Let the reader infer what kind of person you are from what you have done and the way you express this. A good principle is to include in a CV only information that can be factually verified. Expressions such as "a candidate with drive", "a good mixer," etc, are best omitted; their truth can be conveyed much more effectively face to face in an interview.

## **Positive**

Aim to bring out what you have done: your achievements, strengths, contributions, profitability, transferable skills and experience, and so on. Responsibilities are important but are not in themselves indicators of success - the CV should be more than a catalogue of these. If you do not set out what you are selling, how can an employer know what is for sale? Asking "how was the company better off by my presence - compared with having nobody in that position?" can help focus on achievements. Use positive language and expressions; there is a list of useful strong verbs later in this document

## **Put-together**

Printed, with no fancy folders (for the UK job market, at least). Plastic folders and coloured covers are inconvenient and prove a nuisance. If you use a laser printer for your original, choose a standard typeface. If you fax your documents to meet a deadline, always follow these up promptly with a crisp paper copy; flimsy fax paper will not work to your advantage in the appearance stakes!

Research indicates that most employers and recruiters prefer the following:

- no photo
- personal details (address, telephone number, etc) first
- language proficiency to be stated
- last job first
- A statement of career aims; employers favour this more than consultants. But exercise caution here, since career aims can backfire if inappropriate to the job applied for.
- no “Personal Characteristics’ section
- achievements to be listed beside each appointment, rather than a table of appointments, followed by paragraphs of achievements
- covering the whole career
- leisure interests, perhaps under the heading “Other Activities” giving an opportunity to mention activities outside work – past and present
- something about the products and size of the companies you have worked for
- a brief summary of professional, managerial or other principal achievements is useful, if strictly factual
- no referees listed, except for public sector posts

### **Relocation and career aims**

To avoid having more than one version of your CV, you could refer to your attitude to relocation and your career aims within the covering letter which accompanies your CV.

### **Salary disclosure**

When to disclose your current or most recent salary to potential employers and recruitment consultants requires careful thought, since the salary is such an important aspect of the negotiation for any job. The recruiters regularly ask for this information but whether you should comply depends on the circumstances of your application.

If you reply to an advertisement which clearly states the salary range on offer, there is no reason to conceal your salary, although if it greatly exceeds, or falls short of, the figure shown, you will need a

convincing explanation for your interest. If “trading down”, for example, because of your desire to supplement your income from a pension, it is best to say so.

When writing speculatively to employers it is advisable not to disclose your salary in the first approach. The aim is first to interest the employer in you as a potentially valuable addition to the organisation, and then to consider your price.

By contrast, search or recruitment consultants in general have limited scope to vary the starting salary agreed with the employer. Hence, when applying speculatively to a recruitment consultant it is best to state the salary you would expect (and any relocation parameters). Again, this can be included in the covering letter, avoiding the need for more than one version of your CV.

## 4. The Stages to Preparing a CV

**There are two main stages in compiling a CV:**

- assembling the facts
- drafting and editing

The aim is to produce a document which a prospective employer or recruiter, in the course of reading rapidly through many applications, will put in the “YES” (for interview) pile and not in the “NO” or “QUERY” piles. The ideal document will be the one which includes all the required information, perhaps with a touch of originality, but excludes what is negative, superfluous or raises doubts in the reader’s mind.

### **Assembling the facts**

List out, from your personal data base, all your past experiences and achievements, identifying clearly your strengths. Put everything down. You will probably assemble far more than you can ultimately use in your CV, but the additional material may still come in useful, perhaps during an interview.

### **Drafting**

Next, draft, redraft and edit your CV until you have the best possible phrases to describe your experiences and achievements. Rather than “worked on the Thames Barrier, 1982-84,” say precisely what you did on that project; write “I have eight years’ experience of...” (rather than “I have had wide experience of ...”) and “increased the turnover from £1.6m to £6.4m in two years” (instead of “improved the turnover”).

**Think your way onto the reader’s wavelength**

Express your past experience in terms the reader will understand. Ex-Service personnel, for example, may need to take special thought here, speaking in terms of planning, budgeting, controlling, motivating, assessing, and so on, instead of "six months as 2 i/c 42nd PODQ at Riyadh."

## **Be bold**

Recruiters are influenced by evidence of previous successful managerial and leadership experiences. Spell them out and quantify them. If you introduced something new into the company, say so, especially if it was successful and continued to be used. Concentrate on the results, not the means, which you can spell out at the interview. Test your draft with a colleague or friend. Two minds are better than one.

## **Watch your language! Action verbs**

Consider using some of the verbs listed below to describe what you have done and achieved. However, bear in mind that strong verbs should be used selectively for maximum impact. Other useful expressions include: successful/fully; new; since adopted by; well accepted. Be careful of words like: liaised; coordinated; administered (acceptable in the public sector). With such words, the reader cannot be really sure what you did or what involvement you had.

Accelerated, Accomplished, Achieved, Approved, Balanced, Collaborated, Completed,  
Conceived, Conducted, Consolidated, Created, Decided, Delivered, Demonstrated, Designed,  
Developed, Directed, Disseminated, Doubled, Edited, Eliminated, Ended, Established,  
Evaluated, Extended, Finished, Generated, Implemented, Improved, Increased, Initiated,  
Instructed, Integrated, Introduced, Launched, Maintained, Marketed, Masterminded, Mediated,  
Monitored, Motivated, Negotiated, Ordered, Performed, Persuaded, Pioneered, Planned,  
Processed, Programmed, Promoted, Proposed, Purchased, Recruited, Redesigned, Reduced,  
Reorganised, Repositioned, Represented, Revised, Scheduled, Secured, Serviced, Setup,  
Simplified, Sold, Solved, Sorted, Sponsored, Started, Streamlined, Strengthened, Stressed,  
Stretched, Structured, Succeeded, Summarised, Superseded, Succeeded, Supervised,  
Terminated, Traced, Traded, Trained, Transferred, Translated, Trimmed, Tripled, Turned,  
Uncovered, Unified, Utilised, Vacated, Waged, Widened, Won, Worked, Wrote

## 4. Trends in CV Writing

### New approaches

Conventions in writing a CV are less rigid than they once were.

### Order

Personal details which do not flatter your case, for example, may be deferred to the last page, even if they concern something customarily presented on the first page. Thus if you are the MD of a large multinational, but left school at 15, you might prefer to leave “education and schooling” until the end.

### Style

In addition to the standard two page CV, as described below, the following styles of CV are also used:

**The career summary/resume** - a one pager may be preferable to send out speculatively; for recent graduates with limited work experience or for use in the US job market.

**The functional CV** - presents achievements and work experience arranged according to function or responsibilities. This is particularly useful when you want to emphasise your skills and de-emphasise the fact that they were not gained in one organisation or that you may have had several jobs in a short space of time. It is again useful for graduates who wish to draw on their experience from school, college and holiday jobs.

**The performance CV** - the opening statement/profile and the list of major achievements or key transferable skills is intended to grab the readers attention and help them to make the decision whether or not the CV gets added to the Yes pile.

**The scannable CV** - for maximising scannability by a computer. The CV should:

- be printed on white or light coloured paper
- not be folded or stapled
- be typed in a clear font (not shadows or reverses) and in 10 – 14 point size
- have no strong vertical or horizontal lines, boxes or graphics
- avoid a two column (newspaper style) approach.

The computer extracts key words, usually nouns such as BSc, Data Centre, Manager, so make sure your experience is described factually rather than in vague terms. Any CV which shows your quantifiable and qualifiable achievements, and which is laid out clearly, should be scannable.

## Summary statement

A recent development is a paragraph at the head of the CV enabling you to make a succinct statement about yourself which will almost certainly be read. Great care should go into what is said. The statement is a useful device. When applying for different jobs, for example, you might modify the statement rather than the full CV. If you wish to change your career or your job profile, your CV will not in itself indicate this and you can flag up the change in the statement, e.g. "A Personnel Manager with 15 years general experience now intending to specialise in employee relations." Bullet points might also be used.

## 4. The Key to Your Future

Your CV is of the utmost importance; it is the key to your campaign. Essentially it is a sales document - you must sound businesslike and convincing and present the information in an attractive way. Give it the time and effort it deserves but without wasting weeks striving for the perfect document. Not only will you produce a better CV but the process of producing it will enable you to understand yourself better in relation to your experience and achievements. You will gain from being fully aware of these and being able to talk about them with confidence. Before posting check to ensure there are no career gaps (a 3 month gap could mean a prison sentence!) or omitted pages, and always use first class post.

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