

CV Writing : Tips & Guidance

Love them or hate them, Curriculum Vitae are a mainstay of recruitment. Showcasing your experience and achievements, no-one is better placed to write your CV than you. So why do we find it so hard? It's a double whammy of two main contributing factors; 1) We are our own worst critics and 2) we often have blind spots when it comes to our 'zone of genius' (more on that later).

Based on many years working in operational and people leadership functions, having recruited roles at a variety of levels and having supported people at all stages of their career make their next move, I've seen what works and what doesn't. These tips will help your CV stand out – just enough - from others, will help focus your thinking which in turn will help to prepare you for interview and will minimise the risk of bias (or worse) in the selection stage.

Layout

Personal details – top and centre. Name (first and last only), Contact telephone number, Email Address and Linked In profile. Do not include a picture, a postal address/location or date of birth.

Personal Profile – This is the part of the CV that most recruiting managers don't get past. It is the make or break of whether they carry on reading and ultimately whether you get invited to an interview. This is the part you should spend most time on and keep going back to refine it. By the end of reading this, the recruiter should have an idea of your skillset, experience, approach and why you want this job. All in about 6 lines. Start by thinking "If this is all they get to see of me, what do I NEED them to know."

Career History – MAXIMUM 10 YEARS! Do not go past this unless there is a very good reason to. The main purpose of this rule is to avoid (un)conscious age discrimination (positive or negative). The benefit is that you don't end up with an overly lengthy CV. Career history should include name of company, position held, duration of position held, MAIN responsibilities (it's not a job description) and KEY achievements (the things you will be remembered for).

Qualifications – Only include ones that are relevant to the role. If your academic life was short and you've proved your career on your performance in role, feel free to leave this section out altogether.

Hobbies / Interests / References / Driving License – If you have an interesting hobby that would be a good ice breaker for an interview, include it. Otherwise, feel free to leave this section out. No need to say references available on request and only mention a driving license if the role demands it.

Content

If I could give you only one piece of advice, this would be it...

Explain what you did AND how you did it.

For example, 'I delivered projects on time and to cost' is great, but it doesn't tell me the skill that you brought to be able to do that. 'I delivered projects on time and to cost by creating strong relationships with my stakeholders and communicating with them in their preferred style' is a much more compelling version and one that as a recruiting manager I would want to explore more at interview.

This approach also brings in your behavioural capability and a smattering of self-awareness. Recruiting managers want to know whether you know how to get the job done and how your approach might land in the organisation you are applying for. They also want to know that you know how you do what you do. Introducing the 'zone of genius'...

The zone of genius is the thing (or things) that you do, that you find so effortless and easy that you don't actually realise just what a skill it is that you have. You think that anyone can do that thing (because it comes easily to you so it must be easy for everyone, right?) and you don't rate it all that highly on your list of things that you are amazing at, for that very reason. When you've worked out what it is, make sure it's in your personal profile, referenced in the behavioural elements in your career history and talked about with pride at your interview.

You might not know what yours is, and that's ok. It will show up. But is one of the reasons that you don't know down to you being your own worst critic?

This is a big stumbling block for people for a whole range of reasons (self-confidence, self-awareness, British-ness, not wanting to be thought of as arrogant, fear of being called a liar etc etc). The fact is that you've got to find a way to get past this. Try these tips

- Pretend you're writing about someone else. Take an observer's perspective and notice what the person you are writing about (you) has achieved, why was their way so effective, what barriers did they overcome, how did others react etc etc.
- Make a list of all the things you're excellent at/huge achievements and all the things that you are good at/moderate achievements. When you're done, scribble out/delete the title of the list and replace the 'good at' with 'excellent at' and the 'excellent at' with 'totally awesome' (or words of your choosing). Chances are that's much more accurate.
- Ask people. Ask colleagues what they think you do better than most. What others could learn from you. If the thought of that makes you want to stick pins in your eyes, you could do it by email or enlist the support of a trusted colleague to collate it for you.

Versions

When you first write your CV, write as much as you like. The number of pages it extends to does not matter. This version will be going nowhere. This is your master version. Once you have created your master, use this to create an individual CV for each role that you apply for. It is crucial that the language that you use in your CV matches the language in the job description/role profile. If the organisations deploys automation in the selection process, these are the words that will have been programmed. (Try websites like jobscan.co to compare your CV with the role description).

Length

The CV you submit should be two pages long, font size no smaller than 10, normal margins, with plenty of white space between sections.

And finally...

CV writing is not easy. Don't be too hard on yourself. Do keep going back to it and tweaking it. And when you've got a version you're happy with – keep it up to date! Good Luck.