

Top Tips for Producing a Brilliant CV

Jon Lawton writes

Getting the Structure Right

In simple terms a CV needs to include details of your career history, experience, responsibilities and achievements along with your educational qualifications and personal details.

We know that employers make selection decisions almost exclusively based on what you have achieved; and the more senior the role, the truer this is. That's not to say qualifications are unimportant but the greater the length of time from graduation, the less significant it becomes.

In laying out your CV, order the content as follows:

1. Name and contact details
2. Profile
3. Career History, Experience, Responsibilities and Achievements (See later) - most recent first
4. Qualifications
5. Personal Details and Interests

General rules

- Two pages maximum, unless you are asked for a more detailed version
- Give less and less space to your career history the further back you go
- Use your achievements to reflect your responsibilities.

Be clear who you are

Lots of CVs are confusing and difficult to understand. Why? Well, it's because we all want our CV to appeal to the widest possible audience. To do that we include everything about our career in the belief it will broaden our appeal. In marketing terms, we produce a brochure that has no clear focus or target market because we want it to appeal to everyone.

If you have more than one identity, or more than one career option, create more than one CV. Retailers with a clear market offering are

often the ones that are most successful - take a tip from them, produce a CV that makes it clear exactly what you are offering. There is no rule that says you can only have one CV if you have a number of identities and a number of target markets.

Lastly decision makers are not expecting an unabridged account of your career to test your honesty and integrity. You cannot lie on a CV, but there is no need to include all those experiences in your working life that do not support the identity you are marketing.

Profiles can make or break

Heading your CV with a "Profile" is fairly common practice these days, and in the main they can be a useful way of helping the reader understand what they are looking at in terms of "identity".

The difficulty occurs when we forget that and focus entirely on the subjective superlatives that paint us as superhuman achievers. Do you know how many "charismatic leaders" are currently in the job market?

Write a profile in the third person and clarify your identity and experience first. Then, perhaps one sentence with one or two of the less cliched subjective - superlatives sprinkled in. If you satisfy my requirement for a clear identity first, then I will mentally allow you the opportunity to present me with some of your more positive characteristics. If you go for the subjective superlatives initially or you over do the quantity, you somehow offend me with your apparent arrogance.

Let's be clear about what you have achieved

Expressing your career experience in a CV is perhaps the most critical issue which determines your success rate as measured by CVs out to interview invitations.

How many of you have restructured a CV by

taking an old one and then simply updated it by cutting and pasting parts of your latest job description?

Whatever style you choose the rules are:

- Start each achievement with an active verb in the past tense. Then at least I am sure you actually did it opposed to being responsible for it... Have you noticed that most Job Description accountabilities are written in the present tense – bit of a giveaway eh!!!
- Illustrate the benefits to the Organisation of what you did. The more numbers to quantify the benefits, the more powerful the statements, but where benefits are less tangible try and describe the qualitative elements. To use the jargon, lots of CV's have plenty of features without any clear benefits, and it's the benefits that really grab attention.
- Lastly, 8 bulleted points of substance look better on the page than 20 short statements of one line in length. There is something about the length and look that influences our impressions of "gravitas and robustness". That said, you only have two pages, so finding the balance is no easy matter, but remember "Look and Feel" comes a close second to Content.

Thought comes before action

Start from scratch with a blank piece of paper. Never simply update a CV. Tempting I know, especially if you are action orientated, in a hurry, and see the CV as a necessary evil to persuade others to meet you.

The truth is that done properly your CV should be a reflection of your thoughts, deliberations, and conclusions about who you are, what you have done, what you enjoy, and what you want to do next. If you don't know the answer to these questions you can be sure it will become apparent at interview.

Even worse would be that your lack of clarity went unnoticed at interview and you accepted an offer, thereby making what in

hindsight turned out to be a serious career mistake, simply because you had not thought things through properly.

Doing a CV properly from scratch has 2 key advantages; it presents you to your target market in the best possible light, and it causes you to reflect on all those issues that you are likely to be asked about at interview. Just as important, it helps you develop the personal criteria by which you can judge which offer to accept and which to reject. It's not the CV itself that's so important it's the process you go through to produce it that matters even more.

Monsters to Avoid

Finally, we see a lot of CVs, so take a look and see if yours fits into any of these categories. If you recognise any of them perhaps you need to talk to us before launching yourself at a prospective employer.

- The updated 80's CV - or hair equivalent of "The Mullet"
- The Outplacement Product - put simply – I've been made redundant, feel free to apply stereotypical views about why! CV
- The I can be anything you want me to be, just as long as you give me a job CV
- The I followed a system on the Web CV
- The let me give you a reason to reject me immediately CV
- The cut and paste, job description CV
- The I haven't got time for all this CV nonsense CV
- The let me tell you my life history CV
- The it's OK to be economical with truth CV
- The I may consider working for you CV
- The let's make it look like a Christmas Tree CV
- The I'm far too important to need a CV
- The 'have I told you about my National Service?' CV

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