

## CVs and Cover Letters

### **Making Your CV Work for You**

Until your interview, you are only as good as your paperwork and perhaps telephone manner.

This makes your CV and covering letter crucial. They are essential tools in most job searches. Like any marketing document, a CV should help you sell yourself.

### **Preparation:**

Think about your skills, competencies, qualifications and experience. What are your unique selling points and strengths? Think in terms of what you have achieved.

If you are replying to a specific job advertisement, review what key words and tasks were used in the advertisement. Which of these words applies to you? Use these words in your CV.

### **Helpful Hints:**

Remember that you want your CV to be read and responded to. Include enough information to stimulate interest, but not so much that you bore the reader. If you provide small, digestible pieces of information you stand a better chance of having your CV read. Three pages maximum is preferred, but keeping it to one page is even better! Every word must contribute to the overall message - so keep it brief and ensure that the content is relevant to the job you are applying for.

Ensure that your CV is well structured and well laid out; this gives the impression that you think logically and makes it easier to review. Remember - a CV that is hard to read is often put aside and forgotten. When writing the CV, remember that self-opinion is best avoided. Aim to include factual information or objective evidence and remember to focus on the benefits of your achievements.

Pay close attention to reply instructions in advertisements (e.g. spelling of a contact's name). Always have someone else on hand to check your spelling and grammar. Nothing can ruin your chances of getting a job faster than easily preventable mistakes. Avoid colored paper or fancy fonts, if you plan to fax or e-mail your CV, you'll get a much better result with clean fonts and a simple lay-out.

### **The First Page:**

This should contain your personal details, your home address and contact details located right at the top, followed by a brief summary of educational credentials and qualifications. An overview statement should be included covering your strengths in the relevant area, skills and experience, and the type of position sought.

### **Pages Two/Three:**

Here you should highlight your employment history. Present this in reverse chronological order, (i.e. last job first). If you have only worked for one company, break it down with an entry for each position or project dealt with. For each position held, briefly describe responsibilities and work undertaken.

Do include achievements, not just regular tasks, if possible, quantify them in sales, financial or production terms.

Each professional position that you've had must include at least one statement of accomplishment. For your current and recent positions, you may want to have several bulleted items under the job that list your most significant experiences.

List your hobbies and interests in no more than three lines, and only if they are relevant to the position in question. Any voluntary or charity work or external posts you hold are worth including. Always include any languages, courses or training you may have done, or any professional memberships.

It is recommended that two referees be given at a later date - including the referees' official titles, addresses and telephone numbers.

### **The 'Covering' Letter:**

CVs are seldom used alone, they should always be introduced by a letter or a telephone call. The letter can really let your personality come through. Remember, recruitment consultants and employers read hundreds of CVs, an interesting introductory letter can make yours stand out.

Your letter can be used to pick up points which modesty or space prevented you from including in your CV (i.e. to highlight your key strengths relevant to the job). An introduction letter can save you from having to rewrite the CV each time you want to target your application to a specific advertisement or sector.

Nevertheless, keep your CV up to date. Using an out of date CV looks sloppy at best and may exclude you from consideration.

## What Not to Include in Your CV

You may have spent years building up the necessary skills and qualifications to come across as the perfect applicant for your dream job. Don't go and blow it all now by including any of these fatal mistakes on your CV!

**Jargon and Fluff** - Avoid using acronyms and jargon when writing your CV. Employers will lose concentration if they have to stop and work out the meaning of every acronym on your CV. Also avoid unnecessary fluff – keep it clear, to the point and back up any lofty statements with hard facts.

**Comedy email addresses** - An inappropriate email address like [sillybilly@hotmail.com](mailto:sillybilly@hotmail.com) will mark you out as unprofessional. If you don't have a professional-sounding email address then set one up before you start applying for jobs, especially if you are posting an online CV!

**Irrelevant information** - When compiling your CV, don't include irrelevant information and make sure anything you do include can be interpreted as a positive attribute for the job. List your most relevant and transferable skills on the first page and keep the document under two pages long.

**Fancy paper** - Your CV should be recognised for the quality of information it contains. The way to do this is with a clear CV template, not with fancy fonts, coloured paper or complex layouts. Use plain white paper, & print on one side of the page only.

**Too much personal information** - You don't need to include your marital status, age, place of birth or gender on your CV. These could lead to identity fraud. Unless any of these are demonstrably relevant to the position, the employer doesn't need to know.

**Long, convoluted sentences** - Use short, snappy sentences that grab the reader's attention and portray you as someone who gets things done. You don't want to lose the attention of your audience. Use bulleted lists for skills and achievements and use an online CV template with clearly marked-out sections to make it easy for the reader to follow.

**Un-truths** - Common as it is, exaggerating achievements on your CV or making them up from scratch is one of the best ways to get blacklisted by an employer. If you do make it through to the first interview, only to be discovered as a fraudster, you're unlikely to get a second chance.

**Negative thinking** - Avoid including anything negative in your CV. Don't be tempted to give 'reasons' why your career in a certain position did not progress as you would have wished and don't include 'reasons for leaving'. Negative-sounding words are also out – don't say 'problem', for example, say 'challenge' instead.

**Criticism of previous employers** - Always remember that you are posting your CV to an employer. Don't criticise your previous employers or the way they run their business or there's a good possibility the reader will view this as disloyalty.

**Repetition** - We all have words that we prefer to use, but be sure that you haven't repeatedly used the same word or phrase through the CV, or you will appear unimaginative.

**Referring to yourself in the first or third person** - Do not start sentences with either 'I', 'he' / 'she', or your own name. It is best to leave out all of these and use a report-writing style instead.

**Mistakes** - One of the most common error is spelling mistakes. Remember to spell-check & proof read your CV several times, & find someone else to check through it. It is easy to miss grammatical and spelling mistakes on the first read-through. In the hands of an employer, just one mistake could label you as careless and lacking attention to detail.

## What Happens to Your Online CV?

**The new world of CV data management** - If you are applying for jobs online you may have noticed that your CV may end up looking quite different to the one you initially submitted. All that hard work and energy spent on perfecting the layout and design could be a complete waste of time when job seeking today.

**A shift in recruitment technology** - Larger recruiters and hiring companies receive thousands of CVs every week, so they're understandably put off when they have to wade through and decode CV created with clunky old formats that use antiquated CV writing techniques.

Nowadays, the CV is processed before anyone in a decision-making role even sees it. The key information contained in the CV is extracted, reformatted and placed in a database where it can more easily be searched and accessed by recruiters. Everything but the raw information is discarded.

Advances in technology mean that recruiters are now able to save time by scanning, extracting and storing online CV data into appropriate database fields. This means that profiles can be searched, retrieved and printed in seconds when the agency or HR department is looking for a suitable candidate for a job opening.

It also means that you need to think differently about how you put together your CV, in order to sell your skill sets more effectively. Although the new technology is intelligent enough to extract most information from most CVs, it's important to remember that now you may be submitting your document initially to a computer, rather than a person.

While the rules about honest and compelling CV writing still apply in the digital world, the art of getting your CV noticed has moved away beautiful designs and special effects. Clarity and standardised formatting are now more important than

ever before. If your online CV template was created with a complex layout or unusual font that the system cannot decipher, the information it retrieves may contain errors and omissions.

**How to put together a machine-readable CV** - Searchable CV data fields typically include these basic elements: name, address, phone number, skills, experience, qualifications, work based achievements and salary history and requirements.

It is therefore preferable to make your CV clearly segmented and labelled so that this information can be extracted without errors from your CV by the software. Spend more time on the content of your CV and less time on the design. Employers rated work experience, work based achievements and the list of the jobseekers' previous jobs and positions as the most important parts of the CV. Work based achievements were defined as specific accomplishments that could be attributed to the candidate, rather than generic responsibilities

**Standard CV formats** - Since CVs don't have a standardised CV template and keep changing with the trends, it's difficult to feed the information into the CV database and candidates' CV data is often prone to errors and incompleteness.

To prevent these kinds of errors, it's best to use a simple and straightforward format with no fancy lettering or detail. There are also standard online formats you can use which the software is able to recognise.

Some online CVs are fully integrated into recruiter and HR databases. iProfile is one of the companies which enables you to add, delete or edit your information to reflect your current status. Recruiters instantly have access to the new and improved you. As a job seeker, you still have interview, but making your CV data searchable to the most recruiters will certainly increase the odds for getting that dream job.

### Great Cover Letters

The only function of this letter is to get your CV read, and to get you a meeting. Think of your letter like the first page of your CV, as a one page advertisement for you. Make your letter brief, enthusiastic, and interesting.

- Ensure that everything in the reader's name, job title address is correct.
- Try not to begin every sentence and paragraph with "I". Focus on the reader of the letter and his/her perspective.
- Research. Refer to the problems, opportunities and headaches your target company is facing. Remember SWOT as a prompt: what can you say about a company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats?
- Indicate in brief paragraphs what you are applying for, who you are, why you are interested, and what you have to offer. Don't oversell. State briefly why you are a good match for the job.
- Refer the reader to your enclosed CV. Pick 3 or 4 of your top achievements & repeat them in the letter, using different terms to the way you have expressed them in your CV. Choose achievements relevant to the job.
- Don't put anything in your letter which gives any excuse to put the letter aside, e.g. apologising for your lack of a particular requirement, or mentioning your age, or referring to negative aspects like why you left your last job.
- If your letter is a speculative approach (i.e. to a company that isn't currently advertising a job), try to ensure that your letter is read by a decision maker.
- Think carefully what action you are asking for. If you are seeking a meeting, ask for one.
- Telephone to check that your letter has been received by the intended recipient.
- Ask 1 relevant question, or mention 1 reason why you might be able to help the employer, & suggest a meeting.

### Job Application Forms

- Read the form and its instructions carefully. Sometimes it's useful to photocopy the blank form so you can fill it out in rough first.
- Read the Job Description thoroughly. Try to work out what problem the job is there to solve. Try to work out the top 5 competences required by the job.
- Make sure that you do not miss out minimum requirements used to screen applicants, e.g. specific qualifications, experience, technical skills... If there is something you lack, don't just ignore the requirement, but explain why your experience or know-how is of equal value.
- Use a highlight pen on your CV to pick out relevant achievements or examples, and make sure you match the top competences required by the job.
- Use black ink only. Write legibly. Try to leave some white space around text so the completed form is still visually pleasing rather than cramped and over-full.
- Use bullet points where appropriate. Remember that the form will be read at high speed. Emphasise key info.
- Regard sections headed "Other Information" as an opportunity to sell yourself. Make sure you communicate strengths and achievements. Do NOT leave any questions unanswered - write "not applicable".
- Complete form promptly-make sure it is returned by the deadline. Always copy the completed form for records.
- It can be a good idea to telephone to confirm safe receipt of your application form. If there's doubt, send a copy.
- Write only a brief covering letter unless you are asked to put particular information in the letter itself. Use the letter to remind the reader how you match the key requirements of the job.

## Successful Interviewing

**You rarely get a second chance to make a good impression on a prospective employer, so at your interview it is important that you get it right first time.** Below is some advice on how to prepare for that all important first meeting.

### **Preparation**

- Prepare yourself, interviews are two way meetings. They are both an opportunity for the interviewer to find out about you and whether you are a suitable candidate - and for you to find out about the organisation and if the position will provide you with the challenge and job satisfaction you are looking for.
- Think about your skills, qualifications and experience and ensure that you can talk confidently about what is written on your CV. Particularly ensure that you can talk about the skills relevant to the position you are going for.
- Prepare some questions to ask at the interview. At the first interview it would be wise to restrict your questions to the details of the job and the organisation. Salary and benefit discussions are best left until a second interview or a job offer is made.

### **Do your homework**

- Find out as much as possible about the company prior to the interview. A good starting point is to look up their website and find out about the products and services they offer, the location of the office/s, and the number of employees. Ask the consultancy if they have any extra information on them. You could also phone the company and ask them to send you an annual report.

### **Dress code and appearance**

- Ask your consultancy what the client's dress code is. For office work, smart business dress is a must.
- Ensure you are well groomed with tidy hair, clean shoes and clothing. Do not wear too much perfume or aftershave and keep make-up, jewellery and nail polish simple.

### **Travel and timing**

- Plan your journey beforehand to ensure you arrive a few minutes early. Allow for possible travel delays. Just in case of a major hold up, make sure you have the contact's telephone number so that you can call if you suspect you'll be late.

## The Interview

### **What to expect**

- Interviews come in many forms - panel interviews, one to one interviews, group interviews etc. Ask your consultancy what form of interview it will be beforehand. You may be asked to take a test before the interview, depending on the type of organisation. These might consist of psychometric or aptitude tests.
- There are many different interview styles and each interviewer will have their own personal style. Some interviewers will fire questions at you while others will start off with an open question such as "tell me about yourself" leaving you to do most of the talking. The majority of interviews will be somewhere between the 2. Be prepared for any style of IV.

### **Two-way communication**

- Make sure the employer knows the benefits of employing you. It is important to sell yourself by telling the employer details of your relevant skills and experience that you have to contribute to the organisation.
- Try not to monopolise the meeting - let your interviewer talk.
- Find out what the key parts of the candidate specification are so you can show how you meet them.
- Ask how the job contributes to the success, efficiency and profitability of the organisation.
- Show that you have done some research.
- Don't give negative information or bad news if you are not asked for it and don't criticise previous employers or jobs. The key is to turn negative information into positive information.

**The next steps** - Agree exactly what the next steps will be, such as who will contact you to let you know if you have been successful and by when. You should also find out whether there will be second interviews and who will conduct them. If you are really interested in the position make sure you tell the interviewer.

**After the Interview** - Tell the consultancy how the interview went and get feedback from them.

**Negotiation** - Everything is negotiable. If the final offer is not what you had hoped for, ask the consultancy to talk to the client. Say that you like the job but the package is not up to your expectations and ask if the company can be at all flexible.

## **Recruitment Consultancies and CVs**

- The Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) has an important role to play in raising recruitment industry standards through members who must adhere to a Code of Practice. REC members believe candidates have a right to decide how their details or CV are put forward to clients, so have issued the following guidelines about best practice.
- Always ask the recruitment consultancy for a copy of the CV they are intending to send to clients on your behalf.
- Ask the recruitment consultancy to explain its policy on submitting your CV or details to a prospective employer.
- Will they always contact you before putting you forward? If you always want to be consulted before your name is put forward for a vacancy, tell the consultancy- but bear in mind that employers often put consultancies under a great deal of time pressure. To avoid missing opportunities you will need to stay in close contact with the consultancy.
- If you are happy not to be consulted on each occasion, again tell the consultancy, but make sure you inform them in writing of any companies that you do not wish to receive your CV.
- Only allow the consultancy that first contacts you about a specific vacancy to act on your behalf. Multiple submissions by different consultancies can confuse potential employers - they do not multiply your chances of success.
- Always ask the recruitment consultancy if it is a REC member. Members of REC comply with Codes aimed at giving you a high standard of service and they are subject to REC complaints and disciplinary procedures.

## **Your Legal Rights**

Employment agencies and businesses are not allowed by law to charge you for finding you temporary work or permanent jobs (except in relation to theatrical performers and models and in certain cases au pairs). They must also not make their services conditional upon you using other chargeable services e.g. CV writing; training courses.

### **Employment agencies and businesses must:**

- Obtain adequate information about you to enable them to select suitable placements or vacancies including confirmation of your identity, experience, training, qualifications or other authorisation necessary and that you are willing to work in a position before putting you forward.
- Not disclose information about you to third parties other than for the purpose of finding you work; for legal proceedings or to any professional body of which you are a member, without your consent.

In addition if you are looking for temporary work through an employment business they must agree with you:

- The terms and conditions and the basis on which you are engaged;
- The type of work you may be supplied to do
- The minimum rate of pay for such work,
- Intervals of payment
- Length of notice, if any
- Details of any paid holiday.

Any subsequent variations must be notified to you in writing.

Agencies must give you all available information about the nature of the hirer's business, the kind of work, the hours and the rate of pay applicable and make sure that you have any necessary qualifications and that your taking up such work will not contravene any laws.

Not prevent or restrict you from taking up employment directly with a hirer.

Not refuse to pay you because they have not been paid by the hirer.

Not supply workers as replacements for a hirer's employees who are involved in an industrial dispute.

In any advertisement quoting rates of pay, state the nature of the work, its location and the minimum qualifications required in order to receive such rates of pay

This is not an exhaustive list of the restrictions or obligations imposed on recruitment companies. If you need further information about these rights and the legislation covering employment agencies, you should contact:

**The Employment Agencies Standards Office,**  
Department of Trade and Industry, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1

