

Cactus: Curriculum Vitae Notes

If you don't have a CV

Do you have a clear idea of what you are aiming for? Your own goals, ideals and your ideal new job (be realistic).

You may need to go back to basics and ask yourself "Who am I?"

A key step should be a self-assessment. You must have a realistic idea of your strengths and weaknesses, expectations, and your own unique selling points. You can't be all things to all people and your CV needs to be tailored towards a targeted sector. You have to focus.

Even if you already have a CV, you need to continually review and revise the document, so give yourself several minutes to ask...

- What are my strengths?
- In which areas did I excel in my previous position?
- In which working environment would I thrive?
- How can I minimise my weaknesses?
- What are my mid to long term professional goals?
- Which areas of past experience are no longer of any relevance?
- Can I define exactly what it is I do, professionally?
- Do I have a proven track record?
- What personal attributes can I bring to the role?
- How motivated am I towards this change?

The basics

Your CV reflects your professionalism. It needs to state quite clearly that you are the person for the job. So a great CV should contain:

- An attention grabbing summary section
- A clear, uncluttered layout
- Active and precise description
- Contact details
- Job specific information
- Articulate, concise language
- No mistakes
- No more than 2 or 3 pages

Consider carefully what the recruiter (agency or employer) would like to see on any CV.

- The right skills and quantifiable experience
- Suitable interpersonal and communication skills
- The ability to flourish in the company's environment
- The competence and confidence to adapt to the job

Your new CV

With PC skills being widespread the visual impact of CVs has improved dramatically. Attention to layout not only reflects your sense of professionalism but, more importantly, makes it easier for the recruiter to browse through.

A good advert in the Sunday Times or on Monster.com can bring in many 100's of applications, so if a CV is difficult to read, or information is buried, you won't get your opportunity to shine. Without creating a CV that looks like a Christmas tree, you should aim to effectively impart a limited amount of information which will ultimately secure you an interview. Quality takes precedence over quantity. Do not include photographs, as they could prejudice your application, and they make emails too large.

The most significant impact could be the introduction of a summary section. It can outline your professional profile, key skills and experience, and strengths and achievements. It may get you the interview, at the very least it will prompt the recruiter to look further at your CV.

Standard attributes

Key or power words to include in your CV.

- Competence and experience
- Relevant skills and the ability to adapt them to the new role
- Strategic thinking
- Creativity and problem solving ability
- Leadership
- Interpersonal and communication skills
- Personal management skills
- Integrity

Customising your CV

Each time you apply for a job your CV must be customised to suit that position. Identify the key strengths which you can apply to the role, imagine the ideal person they are seeking and match your CV as closely as possible to a profile of that individual.

Importantly eliminate those skills or strengths that are unlikely to appeal to the new employer. This makes space to elaborate on those key areas most relevant to the new role. Think about new key words to be used in the summary section.

Minimize previous roles that are not similar to the new job, and expand on the responsibilities which show your suitability for the new position. Mention specific examples to prove your point.

Don't make it obvious that you have changed things, it should look natural, so check formatting and layout.

Proofing and checking a CV

Very important. A small error, or misleading information, will seriously undo all your effort. At a professional level, grammar, spelling and punctuation should all be impeccable. Ensure that details, contact numbers and references are accurate (e.g. claiming to be proficient in Quark Express sounds dubious when the software package is actually called Quark Xpress!).

The spell checker on your PC is not enough. Get someone else to check it for you.

Facts and fiction

Although the CV is a sales brochure, do not fabricate anything, it will always find you out, maybe not now, but later when you are asked to deliver. Psychometric testing and good interviewing skills usually find you out. Rather than being vague, leave problem areas out of the CV and focus on other allied skills that you are confident with. Honesty is a good virtue, valued by employers, discuss the problem area in the interview, but don't dwell on it. Always use figures to quantify achievements, this creates reassurance.

If you lack a track record in the job, emphasize your skills which apply to the role. Present your willingness to learn as an advantage. Make changing career direction a positive thing, place emphasis on your determination and courage to make the move. Make your past sound relevant. Be open and honest.

Not a graduate? If you have succeeded without qualifications, then turn it into a positive and mention your focus and determination, you don't need to apologise.

Most multi millionaires are not graduates.

Gaps in your CV? If you've taken time out to travel or pursue a different activity this is now perfectly acceptable. However in many eyes it is not a 'proper job' so won't carry the same weight as workplace experience.

Spending 6 months as a 'hippy' does not say "focus, ambition and motivation" so be careful.

Quitting your previous job? If you are currently unemployed, the recruiter will want to know why you left. You can get away with short periods, otherwise simply say you left for personal reasons. The employer might be suspicious, be sure to back up your reasoning, and don't use it more than once.

Being fired! Never mention this on your CV. Even very successful CEOs occasionally get the sack and football managers have a particularly poor track record. Never let it ruin your confidence. The details can be discussed in the interview if necessary, answer any questions, but don't dwell on it.

Too much experience? This can be a frustrating situation, but it is easier to swing to your advantage. If you're older than the employer

is looking for, focus on how your experience can benefit them. Don't apologise for having wisdom and maturity. Objections are often centred on an unwillingness of older people to adapt, so reassure the recruiter you can adapt.

You can state your intention to step down the career ladder in order to solidify certain experience, or move into a bigger corporation.

Too many short jobs? The employer will no doubt wonder about how long you'll stay. By honestly confronting them, and stating your seriousness to remain in the position, you can avoid suspicion. Contract work is one excuse for a patchwork CV. You can also join several short jobs into one title (e.g. Freelancing trainer: ABC, DEF, GHI companies). Reassure them that you are now serious about your new direction.

CV Checklist

- Is it easy for someone 'speed read' your CV?
- Does it look tidy and organised, or too busy?
- Does it look appropriate for your industry - too formal or too funky?
- Grammar, punctuation and spelling?
- Is the CV relevant to this job?
- Is it concise, punchy and informative, have you used 'power' words?
- Have you used numbers to quantify claims? Can you back them up?
- Is there too much detail?
- Is the personal summary meaningful? If not, re-write it.
- Read it through one last time, any mistakes? Are you sure?

The Layout

There are two types of CV format and you should use the one that suits you best:

- Time based CV's: are more traditional, they list previous employers and job roles in detail, and are suited to professionals who have a formal history of experience. Start with your most recent.
- Skills based CV's: are better suited to contractors, graduates, people who have moved around a lot, or taken time out. They are also useful when making a complete career change. These types of CV's are more descriptive and focus more on skills and direct experience

Personal Details

Use either a letterhead style or a section at the end to include your name and basic contact details, as letters and emails become detached from the CV. Leave out date of birth, salary, marital status, NI number, driving licence and nationality details etc.

Hobbies and Interest

If you must include it, leave it to the end. People seem to do the most bizarre things in their leisure time, none of which helps their job application.. It is best to keep it to a couple of 'main stream' activities and maybe something of interest that you can talk about. But remember if the interviewer spends time talking to you about "bell ringing", they are not talking to you about how you can do the job you have applied for. Don't try to be too clever, recruiters can make snap judgements on throwaway lines in this section.

The summary section

The summary section should make an immediate impact on the recruiter, and it gives you a chance to show off your personality and personal attributes.

The Summary should be made up of the following in order:

A descriptive profile: Key features of your professional self, including your immediate ambitions. This should be punchy, precise and no more than 2 or 3 short sentences.

Key skills: Listed as bullet points. 6-8 points is sufficient, make sure they're relevant to the particular position and concisely written. Make sure you quantify your results (e.g. increased turnover by 40 per cent), and be careful of meaningless phrases (e.g. good team player). Don't let the text wrap as this wastes space.

Achievements: These should be presented in the same manner as skills, although about 3 significant achievements with numbers is enough.

Your most recent job experience: Which would be basic details of your most recent, or most important role so far. Include your job title, the name of company and date of commencement. This should be followed by a 2 or 3 sentence description of the role and about 6-8 bullet points of your key responsibilities, tasks and achievements in the role.

This should fill up the first page. If you've done a good job, the recruiter will be reaching for the phone to call you in for an interview before even reading the second page.

Secondary work experience and any relevant qualifications can appear on the second page. If you have a long, important, career history then you can indulge yourself a third page, but best not to.

Details of jobs held more than 10 years ago, minute details of more recent jobs, reasons for leaving a previous job, current and past salaries, details of referees and schools should be left out.

The Golden Rule

Less is more, avoid squeezing too much onto the page, use white space to effect and choose a font that is easy to read. Make use of power words and key phrases.

Avoid jargon (especially if you are changing industries, will anyone else understand?) Clearly state what you were accountable for and quantify or back up your claims in bullet form. No waffle and non-relevant experience. Don't worry if your CV has a few 'holes' in it from a year abroad or a study sabbatical, today's recruiters are very understanding providing you have a good explanation to back yourself up in the interview.

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