Seven secrets to writing the perfect CV

The ‘perfect’ CV, you would like to think, would be the one that proved beyond all doubt to your recruitment consultant that you were the right candidate for any role to which you had applied, and that would make their eyes light up with glee as they reached frantically for the phone. Unfortunately this doesn’t happen very often – the perfect CV for every application doesn’t really exist, unless every job that you apply for is virtually the same! Nonetheless, with a few simple techniques you can write a CV that will ensure that the right people sit up and take notice.

Firstly, be prepared to adjust your CV for every new application that you send. It is time consuming, but if done properly you will reap the rewards. Ask yourself firstly whether you have at least some of the ‘essential’ skills listed on the advertisement. Be honest. Is it obvious from your CV? Is there anything that you could expand upon that might give you the edge? If the job advertisement specifies that the successful candidate MUST have experience of ‘supporting Exchange Server 2003’, this must be apparent on your CV. This could be the difference between having the words ‘Exchange’ and ‘Server’ in your technical summary, and not mentioning which versions you are familiar with, and mentioning a key project that you worked on recently involving Exchange Server 2003 which would make you an ideal candidate. Get it right first time; in the long run you will waste less time on sending out weak applications by concentrating on sending a good CV for a role that you are genuinely well matched to.

Talk about your achievements. ‘My job is to answer the telephone and talk to customers’ says very little about your current job. Whereas ‘I developed excellent relationships with the customers I speak to and gained excellent feedback’ suggests that you actually care about the role, and customer service is important to you. Try to strike a balance between explaining what your job entails, and providing evidence that you are good at it. Recruitment consultants might see a hundred applicants for a customer service role – and every single one might have the right skills. So you need to demonstrate that you have that elusive ‘X’ factor. What makes you better than the other applicants? ‘I was rewarded for my excellent feedback with a mention in the company newsletter’ is a nice thing to read on a CV. Were your achievements recognised? If so, talk about it!

Ask yourself whether there is anything on your CV that requires explanation. Are there any lengthy periods of unemployment? Don’t just leave them blank, or worse still, try to cover them up; ‘during this period I was seeking employment’ is better than nothing, and let’s face it, not that uncommon in these difficult times. But even better is demonstrating that you were not idle during that period. Did you do any temporary work, or voluntary work? Did you gain any qualifications? If so, mention it. Another issue is if you are applying for a permanent role, having a lot of short term roles in your immediate past can ring alarm bells in a consultant’s mind. Don’t be afraid to explain it – ‘This was a temporary role that I undertook while seeking a permanent role’ can be a positive thing – perhaps indicating that you were willing to step outside of your comfort zone in order to stay active while looking for work. If you are looking for a change of direction in your career, make sure you explain it, either with an opening statement on your CV or via a cover letter. For example, ‘I enjoy working with SQL server in my current role, so I am interested in moving into an SQL database administrator role in order to further my skills.’ This shows the consultant that although you might not be an exact fit

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for the role you have applied to, you are genuinely interested in the opportunity and this might just make them pick up the phone.

Following redundancy a few years ago, I was invited in for a chat with an agency. The consultant there told me I ought to remove the months from the dates of my employment from my whole CV – in order to disguise the fact that there were a couple of months here and there where I had not worked. I was quite surprised by this, and I did not take her advice. Nor did I engage with this agency again. Be honest on your CV, because if it materialises at a later stage that you have not told the whole truth, you will wish you had just been honest from the beginning. In most cases, employers will take up references for you, so they will find out what they need to know. Don't try to disguise periods of unemployment, and don't pretend to have skills or qualifications that you don't have – you will get caught out, and the consequences could really affect your future prospects.

Size isn't everything. Since school days, most of us have been told to keep our CVs to two pages – and this is okay in some instances. When you apply for a role, see if there is any advice on the particular recruiter's website on CV length. Do they insist you keep it under two pages? If so, you should do what they say. Personally, I have seen IT CVs over five pages that are concise, well written, relevant and informative, that I have not been tempted to edit down in the slightest. Don't go overboard though, a never-ending CV detailing 50 short-term contracts spread over 35 years is not appealing either – you can afford to be brief about roles from the distant past that are no longer relevant to the application in hand. If your CV is longer than the proverbial '2 pages', that is okay, but make sure it is for the right reasons, not because you have gone into too much irrelevant detail.

If you are unsure, get a second opinion. Spelling and grammar mistakes in CVs can be for any number of reasons – but the consultant who reads it will not care what they are. All they will see is a poorly written CV – which is particularly difficult to understand in the days of PC spelling and grammar checking tools! If spelling and grammar is not your strength, or indeed English not your first language, don't worry. Use the PC tools at your disposal, and ask someone for a second opinion – even if you have good spelling and grammar skills, they might pick up on something that you have missed. It is always good to have a proofreader. And for 'fine tuning' your CV, why not ask someone in a professional capacity what they think; perhaps you have a friend who works in a role similar to the one that you are applying to? A recruitment consultant will generally be able to give you some advice too, based on their experience of reading CVs.

Finally, with all of the above points in mind, let your experience and achievements do the talking. Unless your hobbies and interests are relevant to the role, don't go into too much detail about them. Achievements are nice to mention, 'I enjoy karate and recently achieved my brown belt', but don't provide any more information than that. A snapshot of your hobbies is enough to generate interesting questions at interview stage, whereby you will get the chance to expand upon the information you have provided and let your future employer find out more about your personality.

It is undoubtedly more difficult to find work than it was a few years ago. With more applicants for every job, candidates are under more pressure than ever. However, we also have a lot more tools at our disposal to help us – it is not so long ago that we were sending CVs by post and waiting weeks for a response. A well-written CV is the first step towards success – get it right first time and make your CV work for you.

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