

Guest comment: The art of CV writing

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Writing a CV isn't as easy as some people think, says Philip Beddows, partner at career mentoring firm IDDAS.

If you are spending your time by the sea over the summer, thinking about a change of view and employer at work, you will almost certainly need a new CV. But writing a CV isn't quite the easy task some people seem to assume it is - rather than a simple chronological record of events, a CV is a commercial proposition that pitches your suitability for a particular role. It needs to grab people, it needs to project your 'brand,' and it needs to show how what you've done before will lend itself to the role you're applying for.

One page or two?

The CV will always need to contain a few standard elements: your name, contact details, education and information on the jobs you've held and the dates you held them, with the most recent first. At times it can also be helpful to put a summary at the top of the page saying what you are, and what you're offering to the company - what your proposition is. The content of the first (and perhaps only) page is crucial: a CV is a bit like an advert - if you haven't grabbed people's interest by the time they've read down to the middle they're not going to read any further anyway. Banks and banking recruiters, in particular, just don't have time to spend longer making a decision - they often have hundreds of applications for one job.

Some say a CV should be no longer than one page, others that it should be two - the truth is the CV should be whatever length has the desired effect i.e. gets you an interview. You could decide to hedge by presenting a one page snappy executive summary, supported by another page or pages which detail your 'portfolio' of achievements; this is more often used for a corporate financier than an equity salesperson.

Quantify your achievements

If you hear someone ran in the final of the Commonwealth Games 100 metre sprint (or similar), you'll be interested. But if you hear that person ran in the final and they got gold, or silver, you'll be more interested still.

It's the same with CVs - you need to describe what you achieved and blow your own trumpet. Some people just say, "this was my role," "these were my responsibilities". But what people really want to know is what kind of impact you made. You need to describe what you achieved, and to give tangible evidence of your achievements.

Don't lie

In banking, CVs serve two purposes - firstly the trumpet-blowing one, and secondly as a checking process on which due diligence can be done on you. For this reason it is advisable to ensure you leave out absolutely nothing in your job history, and that you don't make mistakes. Some people might not be able to remember the grade they got for an exam or the dates they were employed in a job - don't make it up, banks will check and if they notice any inaccuracies it will raise the issue of integrity and create problems later on, including withdrawn job offers.

Filling gaps

If you have short gaps on your CV it could be advantageous to give your dates of employment in years rather than months. This way, time out of the market won't spook your potential employer and you will hopefully have an opportunity to explain yourself at the interview stage – it is a fact that some recruiters are fixated by gaps and want a 'perfect' career trajectory; some in the City do not see that careers can go in as many different directions as the financial markets, yet they keep investing in the latter.

The covering letter

It's no good having a great CV if you have a weak covering letter/email. The covering letter needs to explain why you're applying for a specific role or exploring an opportunity at a particular institution, and the CV should back it up. For example, job adverts usually have a list of the skills and attributes sought for the role; you'll need to match each thing asked for on the list with what you've got. It's like a game of cards – someone puts one down, you match it with a card of your own (hopefully a better one).

Finally

What you have just read is a quick canter offering some aspects of guidance on CVs. To conclude, one rule is always true when it comes to CVs – everyone has a view on what you should have put into your CV and how it should be presented. Never tire of perfecting your CV proposition and always adapt it for each reader, but avoid letting your network turn your CV into a camel!