

CV BASICS

What is a CV?

- Not such a stupid question. CVs are called many things (like resume in America) but whatever it is called (and you do not have to write — and in fact should not write — "curriculum vitae" on it any more than you write "letter" on the top of your letters) there are a few very simple rules that you ignore at your peril.
- A CV does one thing, and one thing only. It gets you an interview for a job.
- A CV is not a potted biography. It is not a record of everything you have ever done. Think of it as a piece of highly-targeted direct mail. Direct to the one person who is going to put you on a short list.

What should my CV contain?

- Only things that are germane for the job for which you are applying. You should produce a unique CV for every job for which you apply. A single general, one-size-fits-all CV will not do.

How long will a recruitment consultant look at my CV?

- Initially between 30 seconds and a minute. Really.
- What that means is you must have maximum impact and present information — not opinions, not puff — in the most succinct, direct and easily digestible manner.

The Golden rule of CVs

- If you pay no attention to anything else in this article then remember this. Your CV should be no longer than 2-3 pages.
- Less is more. Two is much better than three unless you are a very senior director/CEO when it is just about acceptable to go to a third page.
- There are almost NO circumstances under which a CV should be longer than three pages. Several CVs arrive at Executive Connections. Most of them contain information that is unnecessary, clutters up your CV and, for those who have paid attention to the two-page rule, has meant they have not included other, more important information.
- All recruitment consultants have horror stories of the six, nine, ten, even 14 page CVs. Candidates with 14 page CVs will remain candidates for a long time.

What is a recruitment consultant looking for?

- He or she will have a clear idea in their own head of the background and skills they are looking for. The first thing they will look at is the last employer you worked for and what job you were doing. If that experience is relevant, they will look deeper at your CV at what other experience you have.
- If the information is presented in a clear, immediately accessible way, you stand a much better chance of being selected for interview. If the information is buried deep in several pages of closely typed, poorly laid-out, badly spelt text, then no one is going to bother.

How do I organise my CV?

There are two main types of CV

1. Time based

- The traditional, and for most people, preferred layout. Arrange your career history with your current/most recent job first and work back. Make the job title and your employer clear. If your job title does not really explain what you did, then expand on it to provide enough detail. Jobs held more than 15 years ago should be very briefly dealt with.

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

2. Skills based

- Organised around your skills. May be more appropriate for some one who has moved jobs a lot or has significant experience gleaned from other areas, such as voluntary work. Also useful for candidates contemplating a major career switch so that previous experience needs to be put in context to make it relevant. Members of the Armed Forces may find it relevant. Commanding an aircraft carrier or drawing up plans to invade Iraq may need some interpretation for the civilian world. Not a popular format with recruiters.

What to put in:

1. Facts. And only facts. Do not be tempted to lie.
2. Whatever format you adopt, stick to the facts. Tell the consultant what you did, what your achievements were and provide the evidence for it. Avoid flannel.
3. Use bullet points. Don't say you are a "world class leader" and leave it there, provide objective, factual examples to back it up.

Things you can safely leave out:

The following list is not definitive. And don't forget, this kind of information can be presented later in the application process if you make it to the interview list.

- i. Marital status
- ii. Number/ages/names/sex of children
- iii. Details of your primary school
- iv. Your O/GCSE level subjects and grades
- v. Almost certainly your A level grades unless you a very recent graduate
- vi. Any exams/qualifications you failed
- vii. Place of birth
- viii. Nationality
- ix. Hobbies and interests. If you have represented your country in the Olympics, have written a best-selling book, or hold the record for the largest stack of 2p pieces balanced on your nose while uni-cycling then you may include them. If your interests are gardening, DIY and golf, as most people's are, then leave it off.

HOW SHOULD I FORMAT MY CV?

What should my CV look like?

- The cardinal rule of CVs: Your CV should be no longer than 2-3 pages

Why the obsession with two sides?

Two reasons:

- It shows you understand what a CV is for, and can order your thoughts and structure them in such a way as to convey the image you wish and
- No recruitment consultant has the time to wade through page after page of your personal details. They want the facts and just the facts.

Structure

- Put the information the recruitment consultant needs first. That means your name (but not your address) and your employment history, starting with your most recent position.
- Education, your home address, hobbies and pastimes, and all the other information goes at the end. Until you have been selected for interview, your address is not needed.

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

- Make sure your contact details are clear however. You do not want to be selected for interview and then find that no one can get hold of you.

Layout

- For most people, unless you are going after a position in a creative industry, stick to a very simple, clear and straight forward design. Always keep in mind that your CV is going to be scanned. It will be a very key discipline to keeping it clear and readable, and should discourage you from the excesses of Microsoft Word's layout tools.

Typeface

- Choose a clear, straight forward font. On the PC, Arial and Times New Roman are a good choice. You can use both — perhaps using Arial as your headline font, and Times New Roman as the body text. Do not use more than two font families in a document - although with careful use you can make use of Arial Black and Arial Condensed.

Type size

- Fonts should never be used at less than 10pt - a typical broadsheet newspaper uses 8.5pt type - anything less than that and first the OCR will not pick it up, and secondly you are not going to make the person reading it terribly happy.

Type styles

- Although there is no problem in using bold fonts, be sparing in the use of italic. OCR software can be fooled by italics. Avoid underlining for the same reason, and under no circumstances use black - or indeed any other colour - boxes with white text in them. The OCR will almost certainly fail to read the text.
- The same goes for shadow, outline and any other of those bizarre tpestyles that Word allows you to use. That typographic disaster zone "Word Art" - which allows you to make you name appear to be shaped like a ball - is best left to publishers of the village newsletter and the corporate sport and social club, where it is much admired.

White space

- Allow your text some space to breathe. Do not be tempted to set 1cm margins on the basis you can get more on the page. It will look cramped and unprofessional.

Consistency

- Devise a style sheet and stick to it. Think about the hierarchy of headings — section headings: Profile, if you have to have one, Career and achievements, education, other information; then how are you going to present your job titles (dates, Job title, company name).
- This is where the use of different fonts can help. Use differing weights and font sizes to help the reader pick out the key information. Perhaps 14 point Arial for the main sections headings, then 12 point Arial bold for the second level headings, with 10 point Times Roman for the main body text.

Printing and paper

- If you are sending in a paper CV (as opposed to sending a word attachment) then consider very carefully the quality of paper. You should use at least 100gsm paper, typical photocopier paper is only 80gsm and tends to look a bit flimsy. Conqueror weave is a very popular choice. Stick to white paper as your CV will almost certainly be photocopied.

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

- Preferably use a laser printer, although an ink jet on its highest setting on good quality paper is probably indiscernible. Stick to black and white.

Email

- Like it or not, Microsoft Word is the de facto standard. If you do not have Word, then send you CV as an RTF document. Do not send other proprietary formats (.wps etc). Remember if you use a Mac to put the file extension on the filename.
- Be very, very aware of the file size. You can check this in Word by selecting File / Properties from the menu and then selecting the General tab. Any CV over 100K is big. Be wary that graphics and pictures can take a huge amount of space (not to mention are distracting from main content of the CV) - consider removing them. Anything over 200K may actually not get through because of firewalls etc.

Language

- Use bullet points
- Keep sentences short
- Active not passive verbs
- Stick to facts, not opinions
- Use standard job titles, not company specific ones. This will increase your chances of your CV being found in a key word search

SHOULD I HAVE A PERSONAL PROFILE STATEMENT ON MY CV?

"I am a versatile, pro-active, board level executive with wide range of skills encompassing sales management, marketing, operation efficiency and corporate planning. Having worked in highly pressurised situations I have shown the necessary skill set to bring complex situations to a fruitful conclusion. I have been instrumental in orchestrating and managing teams during complex and innovative sales of technologically advanced..."

What are profile statements?

- About half of CVs received by Executive Connections have some kind of statement similar to the examples above on them. There seems to be a view among candidates that these kind of statements are needed.
- In a straw poll with HR managers, - not a scientific poll admittedly, but illustrative – very few said that personal profile statements they influenced their opinion on the candidate's skills and experience.

Do you need one?

- No.

Should you have one?

- That is up to you. Space on your CV is precious. The rule about CVs being about two sides, and certainly no longer than three should be a golden one. Therefore do you want to waste precious space on an area that is unlikely to be read?
- However, many candidates feel it gives a useful overall summary of themselves. If you do want to include one there are some factors you must keep in mind. If you get it wrong, you can end up worse off by including a statement than if you had not put anything at all.

Keep it factual

- Although it may sound impressive to describe yourself as a "hands on proactive team player with business acumen and entrepreneurial flair who strives to exceed" it is, even if true, just so much flannel. Keep in mind: "Says who?"
- In much the same way that there is no point newspapers describing someone as famous (if they are famous then you already know it, if they are not, then by definition you can't make them famous just by saying so) a list of your personal qualities does not become true just because you put them down on your CV.
- This is an area where you can damage your chances. Too much of this kind of thing and interviewers are going to get suspicious. The question to ask yourself when considering what to put down is "what would the converse say about me?" No one is likely to be looking for a low-achiever, or someone who is not a team player, or sets low standards. This is definitely a case of less is more.

Keep it short

- The grim truth is that recruitment consultants are going to spend at most a minute reading your CV when compiling a long list. A huge slab of text at the top of the page is not going to be read. Keep it to around three, bullet-pointed, sentences. One to outline in the most general terms your career to date including your current (or last) employer ("8 years experience in FMCG sales & marketing where I advanced from brand manager to sales manager at xyz company"), one to highlight your most significant experience ("Spent 2 last years in the company developing an international business network") and one of your most significant achievements ("Through this network, the company's sales abroad doubled to the target 14% of overall sales")

Words to avoid in your statement

- Anything that sounds like management waffle. Eg proactive, entrepreneurial (unless you are really an entrepreneur in which case call your self something else), hands-on, high standards, any sentence containing the phrase "core competencies", visionary, excellent, achiever, dynamic, veteran, drive, tenacity, outstanding, motivated, pressure, results-oriented, problem-solving, enthusiasm, creativity.
- And above all do not refer to yourself in the third person.

Other points

- Layout is very important. Make your statement easy to read, in a simple, clear font (Times Roman or Arial are good solid fonts that scan well) at a reasonable size (nothing less than 10 point, nothing more than 12pt). No shading, no boxes. Short sentences with good use of white space.

To conclude:

1. Keep your CV to two pages – three maximum.
2. Make your CV look modern.
3. Keep the font size at least 10.
4. Go for a more "modern" font (a sans serif one like Arial is always a good bet). Avoid including a picture (good advice regardless of your age!)
5. Avoid any phrase that may sound overly formal or 'pompous'. Different people have different views on this of course, but here are examples that we feel generally fall in this overly formal category:
 - i. CVs written in the third person (e.g. 'John has in-depth experience....')
 - ii. Covering letters with phrases like 'herewith'
 - iii. Use of the phrase 'curriculum vitae' rather than less formal abbreviation 'CV'

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

- iv. Use of the phrase “I have over twenty years’ experience” – recruiters are – of course – after quality (i.e. what you did) not quantity (how long you did it for)
- 6. Above all, make your CV a good one. A good CV highlights your strengths, is relevant to your target audience and is easy to read. We will feature an article of General CV writing rules later.