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CV Checklist

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Introduction

We have prepared the following checklist and tips to help you make sure that your CV gives you the best possible advantage.

The checklist is by no means exhaustive, but if you follow these points, you will have a CV that is worth reading and maximises your career opportunities. Each point is important, and it is equally important to make sure that your CV incorporates all of them. Miss out on one or two and you could see your good work on the others possibly wasted.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are your achievements expressed in terms of the benefits and value you have added to your employers?

Many people talk about their achievements from a personal perspective rather than from their employer's. For example, some people include in their achievements that they were promoted to this or selected for that or won a trip or that they developed their expertise in a technique or methodology. While these are achievements (for the individual), what is missing is an indication of the value or benefit to the employer. Future employers want to know what contributions you have made in your career to the organisations for which you have worked. They want to know what you have done for others so they can decide whether you are likely to be able to do something of value for them.

Some people leave out the value or impact of their achievements. For example, we read many CV's where the candidate says something like: "Led a review of the company's sales function and recommended the centralisation of the order processing department." What is missing here is the impact or benefit. What happened because of the re-structure? Or, some people say: "Developed and implemented an effective induction program." That's fine. But what was the benefit or value of the induction program? What improved as a result?

2. Are your achievements clearly corroborated by evidence and examples?

The claims you make in your CV about your accomplishments and contributions are strengthened and have more credibility if you can provide examples and evidence. For example, if you introduced a method that improved workforce productivity, what indicators demonstrate that productivity increased and what was the benefit of the increase in productivity? If you reduced error rates, by what percentage? If you improved your employer's reputation in the market, what evidence indicates that this occurred and what was the benefit to the firm of this improved reputation?

3. Have you indicated how you achieved what you did?

One of the frustrations an employer or recruitment consultant faces when reading a CV is when the method, approach or strategy adopted to get the result is not clear. This is important because employers will want to know whether your approach or style would suit their culture and way of doing things and whether you adopt strategies that seem sound and logical.

For example, if you increased sales by 10%, how did you do it? There are many ways of increasing sales. The value of the achievement is obvious, but was it achieved by penetrating existing accounts further with the same services and products or by introducing new products to existing clients or through a marketing campaign that attracted new clients? Or was it achieved by increasing the number of salespeople? The how can often be as important as the what.

4. Are your key strengths and abilities obvious and demonstrable?

A CV is like a brochure. You are the product. This means that the benefits of inviting you to an interview must be obvious from the outset. An effective approach is to summarise your competencies, skills, areas of expertise - the "offer" - up front. The rest of the document should then corroborate and expand on your offer and provide examples to substantiate what you claim to be your key strengths.

This last point is important. We have seen too many CV's where the person claims to be an excellent contributor to a team, only to find no evidence in the rest of the document to suggest that they had ever worked in a team (see point 5 below). I recommend the key strengths section be limited to those attributes, qualifications, areas of expertise and knowledge that really are your strong suits. This means that a list of 30 (and I have seen this) so called key strengths is unlikely to enhance your credibility.

5. Are your strengths linked to your achievements and accountabilities?

For example, if you claim to be an effective leader, then your experience and achievements should verify this. In this case it would mean, at the very least, that you have had significant experience in being responsible for managing the performance of one or more teams during your recent past. At best, it would mean that you have improved the performance, morale, motivation, and turnover rates of the teams you have led.

6. Does it encourage the reader to read the rest of it after they've read the first half page?

There is a corporate myth that your CV will only get 30 seconds attention. This is not true. Some CVs only last 15 seconds before they reach the circular filing cabinet. It takes most people about that long (some claim even less) to form an opinion about you based on your CV. If they like the first half page, what it says about you and how it depicts you, it will stimulate them to make the effort to read the rest. It's a bit like a newspaper or magazine article. If the headline and the first few paragraphs interest us, we are more likely to put effort and time into the rest.

Therefore, ask yourself: "What is of interest to my reader in the first half page?" Most people ask the reader to read their home address, e-mail address, phone numbers, date of birth, marital status, name of their kids and dogs and all sorts of detail before they get to the heart of the matter. Put your contact details in the header or footer of the document. Many people start off with their qualifications and education. Why? This is of little interest to the reader at this point. If they don't like what you have to offer, they won't care where you live or how to contact you or that you have more degrees than a thermometer. The first half page or so should be like a teaser. It should stimulate interest and arouse curiosity. You can achieve this by providing a brief career overview and setting out your offer up front.

7. Does it explain what you do beyond your job description?

One of the main weaknesses we see in CV's is when people provide the reader with a list of duties or tasks and think that is all the reader wants to know. In many cases, the reader will already be familiar enough with the nature of the work you have done to know what your duties were. For example, if you are a Financial Accountant for a commercial enterprise, the reader, either a Recruitment Consultant specialising in finance roles or a manager in charge of the company's finance or accounting function, will have a reasonably good grasp of what a Financial Accountant does. In fact, if you were to examine position descriptions for the Financial Accountant of 50 different organisations you will find an 85% overlap. Just look at the job advertisements for ten or so positions in your own field of expertise and note the similarity between the position requirements.

Therefore, you need to ask what you can tell the reader that they might not know and that will interest them. I am not saying that your responsibilities or duties should not be concisely summarised, but an effective resume will deliver more than this. The reader will want to know what you were accountable for ensuring or achieving, what value your current and previous jobs were designed to add to the business of the organisation, the level, nature and scope of your accountabilities, your decision-making authority and the impact the job has or had on the organisation.

8. Is it well-structured and organised?

There should be a logical flow and structure to the CV. You can read 11 books on writing CV's and find 12 opinions on the best way to structure and organise them. At the end of the day, the reader needs to know where you worked, when you worked there, the nature of the business of the organisations for which you worked (unless they are household names), what you were accountable for ensuring or achieving and what contributions you made or value you added. They need to know what you have to offer and how to contact you.

Many people agonise over whether to use a functional or chronological or hybrid format. The CV books will advise you what is most suitable for different situations. The main issue is whether the document has a structure that leads the reader from the general to the specific and whether it allows the reader to gain a quick overview if they want to and whether it provides easy access to the details if they need them.

9. Is it visually appealing?

Some people go to extraordinary lengths by using sophisticated graphic design programs, charts, photographs, clip art and so on. Remember, you are probably going to send your CV by e-mail. Therefore, it should be created in Microsoft Word (saved as one version earlier than the current version, since organisations might not upgrade their version as soon as it comes out), only use fonts that come standard with Word and produce it in black and white, since most organizations will use a black and white laser printer and your efforts in selecting nice pastels will look a bit washed out. Clip art is cute, but cute is not usually what you want to sell.

Word has plenty of capacity to allow you to be a little creative in format and design. However, unless you are a graphics expert, we recommend that you keep things simple. Flamboyant attempts at "design" often fall flat unless you are trained. Some people try to create fancy cover pages. These are largely a wasted effort. They add no value. Remember, substance over form. Don't use fancy borders and other special "effects". These distract the reader from what is important and can unwittingly create suspicion in the reader's mind.

We recommend using a different font for headings and text. For example, you might use Arial or Tahoma bold for the headings and Times New Roman or Garamond plain for the text. Use tables to create plenty of white space to help the reader scan the document and reduce eye fatigue. We usually recommend making the line of text around two-thirds to three-quarters of the width of the page - short lines are easier to read and improve concentration. Use font sizes that are easy to read. We have seen people use 9-point Arial or even 9-point Arial Narrow in an effort to minimize the number of pages used. This can only annoy the reader.

A four or five page well laid out document that is easy on the eye and leads the reader smoothly through the information is more effective than something crammed into two pages that makes it impossible to find anything and requires the reader to make a superhuman effort to deal with the information.

10. Is it likely to differentiate you significantly from the rest of the candidates?

This means that if you were to take your name from the top and replace it with someone else's, would it make a difference? A CV should reflect your individuality, your unique achievements, your combination of skills, expertise, achievements and contributions. It should set you apart from the other applicants.

11. Is the language simple and straightforward?

The most persuasive writing is typically the easiest to read and understand. If your CV is full of jargon and technical terms or phrases that are only commonly used by a handful of people, the reader will reach their tolerance level much sooner than you want them to. I appreciate that some jargon is necessary. However, there are two issues to consider.

Firstly, not every recruitment consultant or senior manager or Human Resources Manager will be as intimately familiar with the terms and jargon as someone who uses it all the time. Therefore, write for a somewhat broader audience than your colleagues or immediate manager. Someone once told me that they would not work for anyone who did not understand the technical side of the job as well as they did. They are still looking!

Secondly, an employer and recruitment consultant will want to know whether you understand the broader business implications of what you do, not just the terminology and technical aspects. By talking to them in more general business terms you create an impression that you understand more than your field of specialisation. This creates an even better impression that you might be a candidate for promotion in the future.

Some people have MBAs and other post graduate business or commerce qualifications. If you know someone who does, you may find something strange happens to their speech and writing patterns. The word "strategic" appears in every other sentence and twice in others. Perfectly adequate, simple terms and phrases become tortured and vague so that the reader must read three times before they think they know what is being said. People are impressed by CV's that express achievements and accountabilities in clear, concise, unambiguous, direct, active terms.

12. Does it criticise your employers?

Hands up anyone who has ever worked for an organisation or a boss they didn't like or who made dumb decisions or who treated people badly or who were incompetent and so on. Make sure there is no criticism, even implied, of your current or former employers in your CV, justified or not.

Open Learning College provides a Free CV Refresh Service to all our students. To enrol on one of our courses, please call and speak to one of our advisors on 0844 357 7777.

Good Luck with your Career!!!