

CV basics – Overview

What is a CV?

Not such a stupid question. CVs are called many things (like resumé 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 every thing 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. That may sound like a lot of work, but an hours work to get a £75k+ return is not bad work.

How long will a recruitment consultant look at my CV?

Probably 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 hundred CVs arrive at Harvey Nash every day. 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

- **Time-based CV**
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.
- **Skills-based CV**
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

Facts. And only facts.

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. Use bullet points. Don't say you are a "world class leader" say "Head of 15-strong team in three locations worldwide. Implemented new training scheme that reduced turnover by 15% in three years."

Do not be tempted to lie.

If you are found out, you can be dismissed, and it is unlikely that the recruitment consultant will deal with you again. That does not mean you have to tell the whole truth — nor should you. There is no need, for example, to include details of exams you took, but failed.

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.

- Marital status
- Number/ages/names/sex of children
- Details of your primary school
- Your O/GCSE level subjects and grades
- Almost certainly your A level grades unless you are a very recent graduate
- Any exams/qualifications you failed
- Place of birth
- Nationality

- 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.