How to Write a CV

Mark Carden, Managing Consultant at Mosaic Search & Selection

Introduction

It is easy to get lots of advice on CV-writing, from all sorts of 'experts'. Much of it will be highly subjective, and some will be completely contradictory, but here are some recommendations from a recruitment professional. This is written from a UK perspective, but is also applicable to other locales.

Here is the summary:

- *CVs are scanned <u>very</u> rapidly, so brevity, clarity and positivity are key;*
- *readers are looking for <u>recent</u> work experience and <u>relevant</u> achievements;*
- *a <u>brief</u> personal statement is useful if it is <u>specific</u> and aimed at to the role;*
- *work-related experience and <u>achievements</u> should be clearly summarised;*
- *education history should be <u>summarised appropriately</u> for experience level;*
- *other activities and achievements should only be included <u>if relevant</u> to the role;*
- *<u>omit</u> headings, photos, logos, graphics, responsibilities, hobbies & references;*
- *everything <u>must be true</u>, or the candidate will be caught out and rejected.*

How CVs Work

The job of a CV (and a covering letter) is to <u>*get an interview*</u>. That is all. It must be able to stand up to later scrutiny, but it is primarily a sales tool to get that interview.

When a CV is received by a potential employer or a recruiter, whether in response to a job advertisement or as a speculative approach, it will be screened to determine if the applicant's <u>*recent work experience*</u> and <u>*relevant achievements*</u> suggest that the candidate is a good match for a position with the employer. Whether person doing the screening is a jaded HR person, a relatively junior assistant or a busy executive, they may only spend around 20-60 seconds deciding if each applicant is a *probable*, or *possible*, match, or should be *discarded*.

Those CVs that are judged to be a *probable* match will then be reviewed in more detail, perhaps by the hiring manager. If there is an insufficient number of *'probables'*, the *'possible'* CVs may then be re-examined to try to find a match.

So it is essential that the CV is sufficiently well-structured and clear for the screener to quickly and easily identify a *probable* match. It also needs to have enough interesting content to stand up to further reading if necessary.

Content

The content of the CV should be clear and brief enough to be scanned, and compelling enough to be quickly and easily selected as a *probable* match.

Contact Information

Start with name and contact information. Some people might consider leaving the contact information to the end, as it is not key to getting into the *'probable'* heap, but that can be a bit inconvenient for the administrator, recruiter or hiring manager later on, if the candidate is selected for interview.

Personal Profile

The next item to have is a short personal summary, giving impressive facts about who the candidate *is* and what they have *achieved*. This should avoid merely making vague assertions about generic admirable qualities. Everyone is hard-working, customer-focussed and self-starting, but only *some* candidates are MBA-qualified, award-winning or French-speaking. Early in a person's career this can include educational details, but later on it should be primarily about work achievements (although an MBA, PhD or relevant degree is probably worth mentioning).

Then the CV should include a short objectives statement, describing what the candidate is seeking and what they can offer in their next job. This should be expressed in terms of what the employer would get out of the candidate, not just saying what the candidate wants from the job. *"Looking for a new business sales position"* is not as compelling as *"Seeking to use established closing skills to win new business"*.

It can also be useful to provide a brief list of particular skills keywords, as this may help a CV to be found in a database search. But these are only worthwhile if they are real and specific skills, such as 'Javascript' or 'Cost Accounting', not vague assertions such as 'Dynamic' or 'Results-oriented'.

It is *not* recommended that a list of 'accomplishments by category' is included. This is typically an extract from the candidate's work experience, under headings like 'Project Management' or 'Sales'. Creating this separate list is duplicative, and takes up space, often pushing recent employment history down onto page two. These accomplishments should be vividly listed under each part of the employment history, and amplified in a covering letter, where specifically relevant to a particular role.
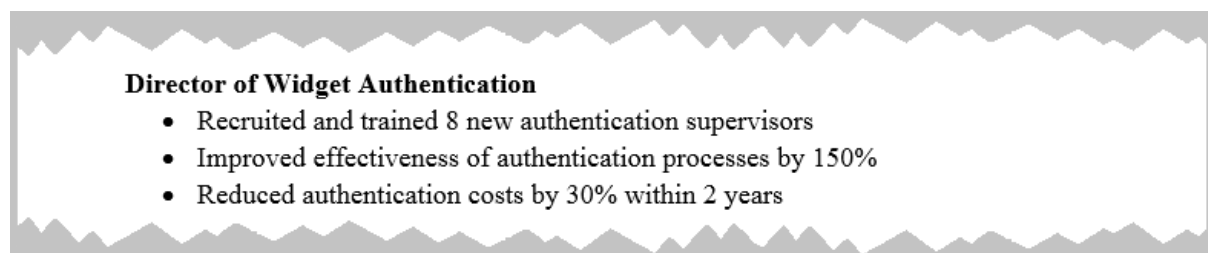
Employment History

The CV should list employment history, with a clear layout, placing the most recent employer and role first.

Each organisation, role and the dates employed should be shown in a simple clear heading layout. When giving employment dates, it is sufficient to just put years, and omit months,
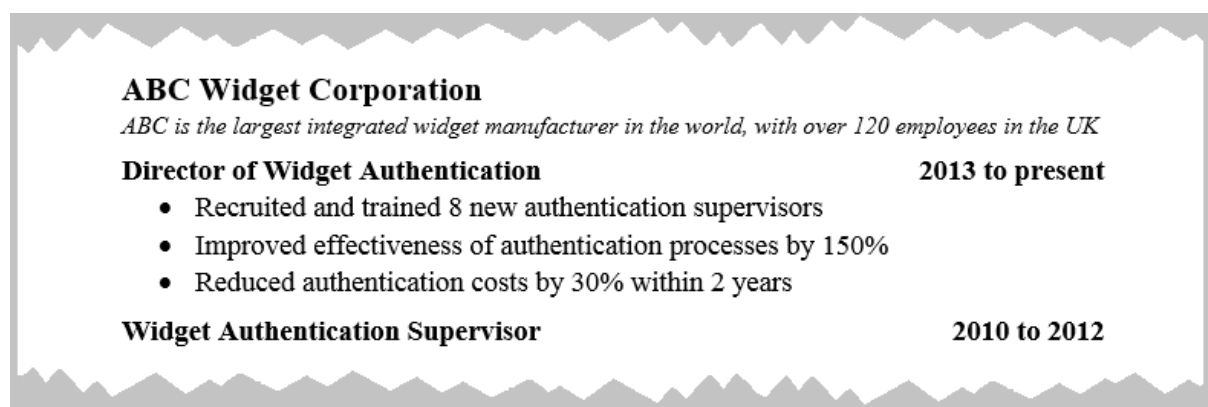
unless this is particularly significant. Leave out extraneous details, like company address, unless it is particularly relevant, although a city or country might be helpful in some cases. If an organisation is not well-known, add a one-line description of what the company does and give an indication of its scale, perhaps with a headcount or turnover figure.

ABC Widget Corporation   **2013 to present**
ABC is the largest integrated widget manufacturer in the world, with over 120 employees in the UK
Director of Widget Authentication

It may be appropriate to give a one-line clarification of the job role, but do not provide a boring job description or a list of responsibilities. List key actions performed and achievements delivered while in the role. Use the space to summarise the outcomes delivered, not how the time was passed. It is recommended that this is in brief bullet-points, not in an essay format. Start each bullet with an active, positive, word, such as 'Delivered' or 'Completed' – try to be consistent with this format to make it easier to read and process.

Director of Widget Authentication
- Recruited and trained 8 new authentication supervisors
- Improved effectiveness of authentication processes by 150%
- Reduced authentication costs by 30% within 2 years

If the candidate has had multiple roles within the organisation, set these out under the main organisation heading with appropriate dates. Consider collapsing multiple roles where the difference in responsibilities/seniority is slight.

ABC Widget Corporation
ABC is the largest integrated widget manufacturer in the world, with over 120 employees in the UK

Director of Widget Authentication   **2013 to present**
- Recruited and trained 8 new authentication supervisors
- Improved effectiveness of authentication processes by 150%
- Reduced authentication costs by 30% within 2 years

Widget Authentication Supervisor   **2010 to 2012**

Make sure the employment history is complete, and try to avoid any gaps. Work experience that is irrelevant, or very old, can be condensed into a single line.

Other Achievements

After employment history, put down any other work-related activities or achievements that are relevant and impressive. Committee memberships, publications and speaking engagements are common examples. Keep these brief and easy to understand.

Education History

Finally, list educational history and qualifications, also with the most recent first. Structure this in a similar way to the employment history, for ease of comprehension. Someone with over five years of work experience can drop the details of school subjects and results, unless they were particularly relevant or impressive.

Jetsam

Most CVs have a lot of things that can be 'thrown overboard', to increase the chances of the key messages being highly noticeable,

Don't waste space and hamper comprehension with:
- unnecessary logos or graphics – stick with a simple but attractive layout;
- unnecessary headings or text, such as "Curriculum Vitae" or "Phone:";
- saying "References Available on Request" – of course they are;
- excessive family, sport, hobby or pet information.

For UK applications, do not embed a photograph as it can come across as 'pushy' or 'cheesy', and some HR departments feel that this might support discrimination, so will have to do extra work to remove this. The inclusion of a photograph is more common in other countries, however.

Oher things to leave out are:
- Age and date of birth – an employer is not supposed to consider this, but it can only harm the ability to get an interview, and not help.
- Marital status and dependents – should not be relevant in getting an interview.
- Full address – this will be needed for a job offer, but not before. A general location can be helpful, but only if it is not likely to risk excluding the candidate from a position.
- Driving Licence – omit unless this is particularly relevant to the role.
- Nationality and Right-to-work Status – this is only useful if there might be a concern about this, for example if a candidate has a foreign-sounding name and overseas education or location, but has a local nationality or permits.
- Language skills are only worth mentioning if the level of competency would allow effective social and/or business interaction in that language.

Customisation

The content of a candidate's CV should be fairly standard, but it is worth customising the CV a little to suit each particular job application. It might be appropriate to adapt the personal profile and objectives statement to better match an advertised position, for example by highlighting a qualification or a particular foreign language skill where that is relevant. It might also be worth changing the order of skills keywords and key work achievements to highlight things that are particularly relevant.

It is important to keep track of the changes that have been made, by keeping a copy of the specific version of the CV that was used for each application. A candidate should bring that copy to an interview, so that interviewer and candidate are literally on the same page.

Truthfulness

The content of a CV must be completely truthful and accurate. While it is a tool solely designed to get to the next stage of the application process, and needs to be a persuasive sales document, it will be 'tested' during an interview and will become part of the application record for someone who is hired.

An interview will probably be unsuccessful if the interviewer finds any sort of deception in a CV. If it turns out that a claimed 'team of 10' was actually five direct reports plus three others with a dotted line, the candidate will probably not be hired. If it turns out that 'Harvard University - 2010-2011' was just 10 days of executive education over the New Year break, then the candidate will probably not be hired.

If a CV is found to be inaccurate *after* a candidate has been hired, that person may well be dismissed without notice, and could have a serious problem in finding a new position. Reportedly, Yahoo's CEO Scott Thompson was fired because his résumé said he had majored in accounting & computer science at college, but actually his major was just in accounting. News reports suggest that David Edmondson, CEO at RadioShack, had to resign in 2006, after 12 years' service, when it emerged that he did not earn a BA degree in the 1970s, as he had claimed.

Layout & Production

Keep a CV to no more than two pages; one page is enough or someone with less than five years of experience. It does _not_ work to do this by making the font too small to read or squeezing out all the 'white' space; it is better to edit out unnecessary content and headings.

Try to ensure that the most recent one or two positions appear on the first page of the CV, so that the reviewer does not have to turn the page to get a quick career snapshot.

Use proper formatting, and not just crude carriage returns for line spacing, and multiple tabs and spaces for horizontal positioning. Watch out for bad page breaks (not all printers

do pagination exactly the same way) and try to be sure that headings stay with their content and nothing is left 'hanging'. Learn to use a word-processor's formatting features. Leave white space (reasonable margins and generous line spacing) for clarity of layout and to give space for reviewer annotation.

Do not use very unusual, hard to read or tiny (under 10pt) fonts. Do not use graphics, logos, a complicated layout, tables or text boxes, as these are hard to read and confuse automated systems, unless (perhaps) with applications for design or communications positions.

Use colour and/or shading sparingly or not at all. Do not use light blue, and do not use red, dark or striped shading, as these often photocopy poorly.

Proof-read the document very thoroughly – just one spelling or typographical error could get a CV rejected by some screeners. Consider getting someone else, with the appropriate skills, to do this, especially if English is not your strongest language.

Make sure paper size is correct for the locale of the recipient, as many screeners print out CVs, even if received electronically, and the wrong paper size risks causing printing and formatting problems. The standards are A4 for most of the world, with Letter for the USA.

When sending a CV by email, send the file both as a PDF (for faithful formatting) and a Word document (for importing into databases).

Include the candidate name in the filename of the CV, so that the employer or recruiter can save it without changing the filename, and can find it amongst all the others.

Conclusion

To get selected for interview, a candidate mostly needs to actually have skills and experience that fits the job opportunity. But a good CV will help in this process enormously, especially if it is:

- Concise
- Achievement-oriented
- Clear
- Customised
- Truthful

Mosaic Search & Selection   **Executive Search for Publishers**