

The CV Challenge- a word to the wise!

A well-constructed CV is really worth the effort for everyone's sake. So for your own sake, give it some time.



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As someone who helps companies build their management teams, I read quite a few CVs on a weekly basis. Getting the CV's message right is important. It is an entry point to a new position/career opportunity. Get it wrong and it becomes a barrier. This is true at any level, but particularly so for those with more experience. A CV is a calling card. It is 'The' marketing tool that gets you that initial meeting/interview. It opens up a conversation that enables you to have a more in-depth discussion about you and your skills. A sloppily written CV does not give the impression that you want. A CV won't get you the job, but it can be a barrier to you getting the interview.

Now the last thing I want to do, is to add to the weight of wisdom on the internet about CV formatting and composition. A CV is a very personal thing and needs to reflect your character. However, from what I see, there is no real harm in repeating a few well-remembered rules.

There are a huge range of formats out there, in the ether that will tell you what it should look like and how it should be laid out. Therefore, there is no real justification for a poorly composed CV. The 'What Color is Your Parachute' books by Richard N. Bolles has great advice and examples, but there are plenty of others to choose from both in physical and cyber space.

However, for the more senior/experienced person, there are a few rules that should always be included in whatever layout or format that you choose to use.

Length: Max length – in Europe – not more than 2 pages. A CV does not need to contain your life story. It cannot be a complete day-by-day account of your career to date nor should it be. It needs to contain basic information like name, contact details (email address, mobile &/ landline, (always a good idea to include international dialling codes). While a position may be locally based, HR may operate in a different geography, as may your future boss. Make life for them as easy as you possibly can. By the way, in the USA, the convention is 1-2 pages, so you may need to adjust the length for US based firms.

Some people include an elevator pitch – a short summary about themselves and why they're great. This is a personal choice, as far as I am concerned. But if you decide to include one, it needs to be short. No great expanses of text. No floral prose.

But I have over 20 years' experience. How can you possibly see all that in two pages?

The answer is that you can't. The CV reader doesn't want your entire life history, either. They just need enough information to persuade them that you are experienced and interesting enough to meet and to have a proper discussion with. No company/organisation makes a senior hire based on a CV. The CV is merely the key to opening the door to your interview.

Basic information: Each position that you have held in your career to-date, should have some basic information easily displayed in it. Position Title, Company/Organisation name, Period of employment (start date and end date) are all-important, and need to be clearly labelled. Also having a one line explanation about the company gives the reader an understanding of the size of organisation e.g. turnover, employee numbers (approx.) and what the purpose of the company is/was. Don't assume that those doing the initial scan of cv's for a position have any knowledge of the broader world.

Under the headline information of each position that you have held, break it down into two major sub-headings

- Key Achievements
- Key Responsibilities.

Under each sub-heading, bullet point major points about each.

Bullet points: A bullet point should not be more than 10 words (or close to). Avoiding large paragraphs of prose or text in a CV is always a good rule of thumb.(write it as if you had to pay for each word to be printed – like a telegram (this probably ages me!). The reader, generally does not want to be told what to think, let your clearly, well written experience and skill-set shine through. This should be clear from the positions that you have held and the achievements and responsibilities that you have managed. Metrics are also good. Measurements or targets achieved by you that you will be able to stand over and which can be verified.

But I have had many different positions in my career. I'm still struggling with this two page format!

As you go back in your career, earlier positions have a less immediate effect on your career today. Something that you did 20-25 years ago is unlikely to be as relevant to your career path today. By all means include it, but keep it brief. The same is true of qualifications. The course name, the awarding institution and the dates that you started and finished the course is usually enough for a CV. Interests and other information, should also be kept to a minimum. Keep it clear, short and to the point.

Now that you have it, keep it up-to-date. While you will always need to amend it for any position you apply for, having it in a near-ready state, makes it a lot easier. While I cannot guarantee that you will get the position that you're applying for, on behalf of CV readers, everywhere we will be truly grateful. That in itself, will help set the right context for you to have that further conversation.

Eugene Ivory has over 25 years' experience managing and supporting multinational to early stage business. He has successfully served clients across a broad spectrum of global companies from financial services and consumer packaged goods to Medical and Technology.

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