

A CV that does the job for you

By Mark Hunter

Nobody enjoys applying for a new job. Embarrassing self-aggrandisement, combined with an overwhelming fear of rejection, make the whole process a little too much like asking someone to dance. Why should anyone take to the floor with you?

Because you make the decision easy for them, says career coach John Lees. "Your CV message needs to be clear and uncomplicated and has to prompt the reader to do something positive," says Lees. "To shortlist you, to see you or to recommend you. They have to see all your key information straight away for the best chance of success."

Lees stresses that few employers can afford to spend much time reading each CV they receive. To stand out, your application must make an immediate impact. However, this does not mean using flashy typography and silly gimmicks (Lees mentions one employer who received a CV with a teabag attached and a message: "Have a cup of tea while you read this.")

In contrast, engineers' CVs tend to err in the opposite direction. "Many of the engineers' CVs that I have seen have tended to be quite dry," he says. "They focus on tasks and projects, which is fine, but doesn't really answer the basic question: 'Why you?'"

"Yes, you may have the basic requirements to do the job, but so will a lot of other candidates. So what do you have that they don't? What other kinds of work experience do you have? Do you speak another language? What else is there in your life that could make you stand out?"

One particular area often forgotten by applicants in technical specialities such as engineering is to emphasise not only that you can do the job, but also that you will be able to get on with your new workmates. "Engineers do tend to underplay soft skills," says Lees. "This is an important aspect of any job. You will need interpersonal skills, need to be a team player and need to consult with other people. If you can demonstrate this in your CV then that could make the difference between getting an interview and not."

Another common mistake is in the layout of the CV. Rather than a long, rambling list of previous roles placed in chronological order, Lees recommends a short, sharp approach in which the most important information is placed in the first few paragraphs. For a recent graduate this should emphasise work placements and job experience. "The CVs of most recent graduates are upside down," says Lees. "There's too much on qualifications, which are unlikely to differ much between applicants. The employer will probably be more interested in where your job experience has come from."

Do's and don'ts

Do

- keep it short – most employers prefer a CV of no more than two pages
- use plenty of white space and a clear modern font such as Arial
- include a covering letter. "This is one of the most important parts of your CV," says Lees
- include an email address
- include relevant information on non-work activities
- tell the truth
- use the spell-check and check your grammar.

Don't

- use coloured paper, lots of different fonts or silly gimmicks
- over-sell your abilities
- cut and paste from another application. Or if you do, remember to change the company's name
- use clichés and jargon
- include irrelevant personal information – such as the names of your children
- use obscure acronyms
- send an old CV updated in pen.

Lees' book includes a number of simple do's and don'ts to consider when preparing your CV (see panel). But, perhaps surprisingly for a man who has spent the past 20 years offering professional careers advice, one of his principal recommendations is to avoid professional CV writing services. "It's very easy to go to a recruitment consultancy and get your CV professionally written. But that is a very passive process – you're not really thinking about what the employer wants. There's also a strong resistance to professionally written CVs among employers in the UK – they think they are too polished, not personal enough, and all look the same."

John Lees, one of the UK's best known career coaches, has written a step-by-step guide to writing the perfect CV. Why You? CV Messages To Win Jobs (McGraw-Hill, £9.99) outlines some of the best, and worst, ways in which you can apply for a new position.

- **Student & Young Professional has three copies of the book to give away. Simply write your name and address on a postcard and send it to S&YP CV competition, c/o Jackie Herbert, The IET, Michael Faraday House, Stevenage, Herts., SG1 2AY**