How good is your CV?

How to write a CV
that gets you noticed

bfpeople

CURRICULUM VITAE

Contents

Introduction

Even in today's highly linked-in, digital and social media world, your CV is still your passport to a new job. It is your sales and marketing document which sets out your stall and makes your pitch to prospective employers. A poor CV will limit your chances of getting noticed, being invited for interview and securing your ideal job.

And just as in every other aspect of sales and marketing, the emphasis has shifted – your CV isn't just about telling how great you are. Recruiters and hiring managers mostly want to know what you can do for them.

It is well documented that your CV is only viewed for a few seconds before the decision is made whether to interview you or not. So it's worth spending time to get it right.

In my career in recruitment, and as a hiring manager, I have seen more CVs than I care to think about. But very few have been memorable, and most of those that do come to mind do so for the wrong reasons.

This problem is not confined to entry level and junior staff – plenty of bad CVs of Directors and senior managers come in to my inbox every week.

Writing an effective CV that gets you noticed is not difficult. You don't need to pay for a CV writing company to produce one for you. In my experience, they rarely do you justice and never reflect you as an individual. Apart from being able to spot the professionally written CV and standard templates straight away, it is always frustrating to be in an interview with someone who is a total "mismatch" with the way their CV is written – it is obvious when the language used in the CV doesn't match with their spoken words. Spending your money on new clothes for your interviews is a much wiser investment.

If you feel you need help with putting your CV together, enlist someone who knows you well, who will be honest with you – and who can spell!

Your CV should be a very personal document – something that tells your story effectively and quickly.

This short guide will help you make sure you choose the right layout, style and content to make sure your CV gets noticed - and placed in the recruiter's "Yes" pile.

Layout and structure

First impressions count

Before putting pen to paper it's worth spending time to think about the overall design and layout of your CV document.

Do you want a plain text CV, a largely graphics-oriented document or a fully interactive, online CV like Robbi Leonardi's (click the link to open this online)?

Whichever you choose (and much will depend on whether you are in a creative, commercial or technical role and the industry sector you work in) there are some key points to remember:

- The person reading your CV has one main question - **can you do this job (or do you have the potential to do it)?**

- She is quickly trying to build a mental picture of who you are, what you have done and how you might fit their specific requirement

- Given that, assume that the first thing someone reading your CV will look for is your current job role and employer

- Make it easy for the reader to find the information she needs to make the right decision about you

- Spell out what you have achieved in your career so far and what you can contribute to a new company and/or this job

- Don't waste valuable space with superfluous information

- Make it easy to contact you

Graphic/creative CVs

If you work in a creative job or industry, then the temptation can be high to show off your skills with an original or graphic CV layout. While this can be an effective way of making an impression (and demonstrating your Adobe and design skills) it does have potential drawbacks.

Many recruitment firms and large companies use computerised systems – applicant tracking systems (ATS) or their customer relationship management (CRM) software to automate the receipt and management of job applications.

These systems will parse the information in your CV, but are mostly geared up for reading text-based documents. They recognise phone numbers, email addresses, dates of employment and so on, and place the information in the relevant database fields. They can also identify key words and skills that appear in the document – and companies often use the system to filter the most relevant candidates for the role based on "required" skills. Don't assume that your CV will always be read first by a person before deciding to interview or reject you!

If you are keen to make your CV stand out through innovative design, do bear in mind that the ATS might not appreciate your talent. Be careful to avoid using unusual fonts and placing important text in images which the system will not read.

If you are a designer and applying directly to a creative agency or business, then there may be a good chance that your CV will go straight to the person hiring you. In this case, feel free to go to town with your creative ideas. But, if you are applying to a large organisation, to a big recruitment firm, or through a job board, it is highly likely that automation is involved. A more traditional format, with a clear link to your online portfolio or website will reduce the chances of your application not getting seen solely because the system didn't understand what you sent.

Always remember that substance is more important than style – don't sacrifice information for illustration.

Preparing your CV content

Remembering what you have done

Before you put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, you should carefully plan what you want your CV to look like and say about you.

Time spent on gathering and preparing your content at the outset is time well spent and will reduce the chances of your CV landing in the interviewer's "round filing cabinet". It will also make it easier to adapt for different opportunities.

Most people only review their CV when they need to – when they start looking for a new job, or get a call from someone like me. But you should keep it updated regularly: while you are happy and successful in a role, adding promotions and noting your achievements as they happen.

But if it is a long time since you looked at your CV, or if you are starting from scratch, how do you begin to pull together a great document?

Start by getting your chronology right. Write down the dates of all the jobs you have had – be specific about months and years. This may be tricky, but it is worth spending the time to get this right.

Write a very brief (a few sentences at most) synopsis of each of your roles. Focus on what the **key purpose** of the job was, rather than a long list of duties. Think about the different types of roles you might apply for – perhaps you are interested in functional (e.g. sales or technical) leadership AND general management opportunities. If so, write paragraphs that suit both options, that can be copied and pasted into the document you send for each application.

Lots of jobs and/or gaps in employment?

The world of work is different than it was 15 or 20 years ago. There are few industry sectors that have not been affected by the global financial collapse in 2007, by the effects of austerity that followed and, at the time of updating this book, the current coronavirus pandemic.

That all means that many people have lost jobs and have had periods of unemployment through no fault of their own – sometimes on multiple occasions. Most sensible recruiters and hiring managers understand this – and even expect it.

If you do have employment gaps in your history, for any reason, or if you have had several jobs in a short period of time, our advice is to include all the information in your document. If you have had a run of bad luck and been made redundant on several occasions, then do say that in the document. Similarly, if you have changed jobs after a short time for a good reason, then you might explain it here.

If this does apply to you, then do make sure you include any voluntary work or other activities you have been doing during your time in between work.

My firm has been in business for 30 years this year and we receive many "updated" CVs. More than a few mysteriously "lose" a job or two in the new version, or periods of unemployment become "consulting". Most recruiters and employers have the same

experience. Don't be tempted to extend the dates of other jobs to cover periods of unemployment or to wipe short-lived roles from history, as it's highly likely to come back to bite you.

You should assume that your career history and the dates of employment you present in your CV are going to be checked thoroughly. There are an increasing number of cases of CV and qualifications fraud in the news. I wrote about this in a blog on the **bfpeople** website. So many companies now use background and qualification checking services to vet candidates before employment.

It is far better to explain any gaps or short-lived jobs than to be caught out and lose credibility in the recruitment process - or to miss out on a great job offer because your integrity is in doubt.

The importance of achievements

Now you need to write down everything you can recall from your history that you would describe as a personal or professional achievement. This is where most CVs fail as they read more like a job description, consisting mostly of a long list of duties.

"Identifying new commercial opportunities and driving growth" tells me nothing. What commercial opportunities did you identify and what growth did you achieve?

Similarly, *"Restructure of labour within the workshops"* or *"liaising with production and design departments"* does not help your reader – the recruiter or hiring manager - understand what you have done. To be meaningful, it all needs to be quantified and some examples are given below**.**

This is no place for modesty. You should give yourself some applause and celebrate your experience. Your achievements need to demonstrate what you have done and where you have made a difference for your employers. Most importantly, you need to convince the interviewer that you will be able to do what they are looking for in this role.

Many of us find blowing our own trumpet difficult, and thinking about what we have done well can be painful. But it is important and worth doing.

Always seek to include quantifiable numbers, for example:

- Grew turnover by £2.3m over 3 years, through new business sales and 30% increase in repeat business

- Increased EBITDA by 20% over 2 years

- Increased plant efficiency ratings from 75% to 92% within 18 months through better utilisation of staff and training

- Created an inbound marketing strategy which doubled sales enquiries (to 300/month) in 6 months resulting in the need for two additional staff

- Reduced the cost of waste by £50,000 last year

- Designed campaigns that received 6 industry award nominations in 2 years, winning 3 of them

These examples give some indication of what you have done, not just the things you were responsible for. Note the use of key "action verbs" such as **"increased", "reduced", "created", "saved", "transformed", "delivered"** and so on. You can Google "action verbs" to get some further inspiration.

Quantify the achievement where you can with a monetary value, percentage or other measurable and indicate the timescale – did it happen over weeks, months or years.

If you have ever used SMART Objectives in your work then think along similar lines - Specific, Measurable and Timebound elements are very relevant to describe the achievements you want to include in your CV.

Whether you are starting from scratch or updating your CV, invest some time in recalling and listing your achievements. Most of us don't think about what we have achieved, or the things we do at work day to day. It is definitely worth spending an evening or two with a blank sheet of paper or your computer.

Create a "bank" of all the achievements you can recall. Where have you made a difference? What have you done that contributed something to the business beyond just turning up for work? Depending on your discipline and level, this might cover a lot of areas (e.g. commercial, financial, management and leadership). Remember, that this will also stand you in good stead for your future interviews. This exercise will be invaluable when you are faced with all those "tell me about a time when you…" interview questions.

You should be able to produce a fairly long list of examples. Prepare them as short bullet points, not sentences or paragraphs. You won't use all of them in your CV, but

they can be readily cut and pasted into each CV you prepare for different job applications or situations.

If you are just starting your career, or are in a junior role, then you might find this process daunting. If you are struggling, then consider what contribution you have made. Have you initiated a new system, or suggested some improvements to a process or product? Think about how quickly you have learned new things, how you have built relationships with customers, suppliers or internal staff. Try and describe more than the duties listed in your job description.

Remember that employers are looking to see what **you** will bring to their business over and above other candidates – not just a list of things you think you are good at. Make it easy for them to put your CV in the right pile!

Once you have your career history and achievements lined up, you can decide on the best layout and format for your CV document.

Chronological or skills based?

When laying out your document, you have a choice of using a chronological or skills-based format.

The traditional chronological CV outlines the details and your achievements of each job individually, in time order. This format works well if you haven't had too many jobs, your history shows a solid progression and you are looking to stay in the same industry and role type.

If using this, always start with your current or most recent job and work backwards towards your earlier roles. Please don't begin your CV with your first job .

The skills-based format highlights your skills and achievements all together in one longer section and then simply lists your employers and the relevant dates below. This structure is more suited to people who have had many jobs, perhaps in different sectors. It suits consultants or freelancers, or those who are applying for roles in a different industry than the one they currently work in. It also works well if you are returning to work after a period away. Here is the opportunity to highlight your key and/or transferable skills and make your case to be considered for the role.

Both work well and are a matter of personal choice and you might want to experiment to see what works best for you. Whichever you choose, focus on providing the information the recruiter or hiring manager wants.

It's all about the content

What to include - and exclude

Once you have decided on a general layout style and listed your career history and achievements you can focus on what you might include in the document you will use as your "standard" CV.

It is worth remembering that your CV should not be a fixed document – it is something that should change for each specific application you make. The content for each will be focused on the requirements of the job you are applying for.

Structure and content – the basics

"Recruiters spend an average of 6 seconds scanning a CV before deciding if the candidate is worth calling in for an interview."

TheLadders.com

- Several "eye-tracking" studies show that most recruiters look quickly for the same information on CVs before making their first decision about you: your name, your current and recent job titles and companies, how long you have been in your most recent roles, and your education

- Get to the point quickly: use the valuable space at the top of the page to make me read on. Don't use it for your home address, or to list the GCSEs you got 15 years ago.

- Two pages is good but, whether it is shorter or longer, make sure that all the information is relevant. Think "quality over quantity" every time. I would rather get a four-pager full of relevant information and achievements than two pages that tell me nothing about you

- However, don't use a small font to squeeze your career onto two pages. A CV in 8pt Times Roman will not endear you to any hiring manager or recruiter

- Make your contact details and location clear. An email address, mobile number and home town or postcode are essential, but are missing on CVs we receive more often than you would think. Name and contact details work well in a footer also – make it easy for people to reach you

- If appropriate (and ONLY if appropriate) add links to your blog, social media accounts, online portfolio etc.

- Use normal capitalisation for your name i.e. Sally Smith, and throughout your document. If you've ever received an email from a recruiter starting Dear SALLY, it is likely that your CV has your name in all capital letters and the database parses it that way.

- You don't need to put your home address on the document – and if you are placing your CV on online job boards, it inadvisable. A postcode (or at least the first part of it) is helpful to both humans and ATS databases

Sally Smith

sally.smith100@email.com | 07123 456789 | Based in Frome, BA13

- You don't need to write "curriculum vitae" on your document – it is pretty clear what it is

- Please make sure that your email address does not hinder your chances. If you use a very "personal" gmail, or similar, address among friends and family, think about the impression it might give your prospective employer, who does not yet know you. I have seen some strange (and some truly eye-watering) examples over the years: if this applies to you, get a specific email account to use in your job search only – but do remember to check your inbox regularly.

- Unless specifically required to do so for some jobs/employers, you should not put your date of birth on your CV – however old, or young, you are
- There is no need to add your photo – it will not (or should not!) change whether you make the interview round. Some organisations cut the photos (and other identifying information) off CVs before shortlisting meetings to avoid any chance of bias. So keep your beauty to yourself, unless specifically requested by the hiring company
- Don't include details of referees at this stage (unless specifically requested in the job advert) – and don't say "References are available upon request". When we want them, we will ask you for them
- Are your qualifications important to the role or your profession? If so, they should be prominently placed in your layout. If not, then relegate them to the end of the document. And only show your relevant qualifications – we still receive many CVs that show each individual school qualification from many years ago at the start of the CV. This is outdated, unnecessary and literally a waste of valuable space
- Be careful if you use text boxes, unusual text effects, logos or images and you plan to save your CV as a Word document. These do not always display consistently when opening the document and they often print poorly too.
- If you are using anything other than simple formatting then save your file as a pdf document. This means that it will display as you intended and give you the best chance of getting your message and ideas across.
- Don't be tempted to create a CV in Excel (it has been known) or to save it as a JPEG. Complicated layouts and unusual file formats may not always be easily read by applicant tracking systems and might reduce your chances of being noticed.
- Some recruiters will want to edit your CV before they submit your details to their clients. This editing will range from adding their logo and taking your name off to completely reformatting your CV in their house style. Given all the above, it is advisable to stick to Word or PDF formats.
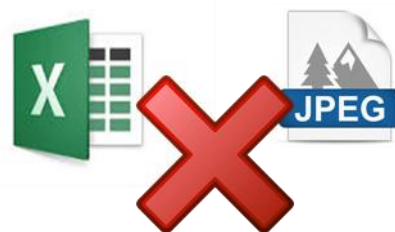
Based on the information above, does your CV pass the "6 second rule"? Is it immediately clear to a reader what you do and why you might be relevant?

Profiles and Objective Statements

There is a lot of debate about whether you should write a personal profile, or a statement outlining your career objectives, to open your CV content. A standard part of the CV format for decades, many recruiters now think the summary statement is superfluous. Others believe that it is an important part of the document – giving you the opportunity to make your "elevator pitch" for the job. Either way, the eye-tracking research mentioned earlier shows that the Summary paragraph gets little attention from most recruiters.

I suggest that there is no harm in crafting a short, well-considered pitch reinforcing what you can bring to the role and employer. If you are going to use one, then keep it brief and do try to avoid clichés and unnecessary phrases.
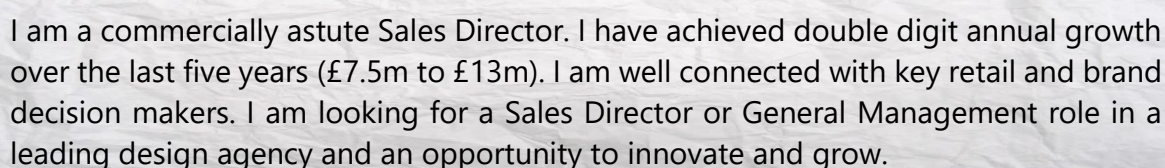
I see countless *"highly self-motivated, professional, dynamic, team-players with outstanding leadership, communication and motivation skills"* on paper who, of course, turn out to be nothing like that when I meet them. Most readers will take such self-promotion with a very large dose of salt. Or ignore it completely.

If you are staying in the same industry and role, or applying for a specific job, then a brief profile indicating your background and some key achievements can be helpful.

If you have limited work experience, are keen to move into a different industry or job role, or if you are making a general or speculative application to a company or recruiter, then a statement outlining your objective, or career goal, and some relevant supporting information may be a good idea.

If you do choose to write a summary statement, remember to keep it short and (based on the eye-tracking research mentioned above) that readers will want to get to what you do and who you work for as quickly as possible.

Here are two decent examples of a summary statement I received recently:

I am a commercially astute Sales Director. I have achieved double digit annual growth over the last five years (£7.5m to £13m). I am well connected with key retail and brand decision makers. I am looking for a Sales Director or General Management role in a leading design agency and an opportunity to innovate and grow.

My objective is to apply my 12 years' of national news journalism, ability to work calmly under extreme deadline pressure and scrutiny to a PR or Communications Manager role.

Short. To the point. And easy for me to quickly see, in the first example, that this person might be a good fit for the role they had applied for. The second example shows clarity about what they want to do, and what they might bring to the job.

Your career history

Of course, this is likely to be the most important part of your CV – what you have done and who you have done it for.

When writing your career history, think about the best way to lay out the information so that it is easy to read and quickly understandable. How you do it is up to you, but make sure that it is clear which companies you have worked for, what job title(s) you had and the dates of your employment.

Career History

Acme Design Agency Limited (www.acmedesign.com**)**
2010 – Present: Creative Director
2008 – 2010: Head of Design

The above example shows the reader a couple of key things. Firstly, that the candidate has had two roles in the time they have been there (they have been promoted) and it also provides a website link to learn more about the company they work for. This is an often-overlooked thing: unless you work for a well-known brand or business, you should assume the reader knows nothing about the companies you have worked for.
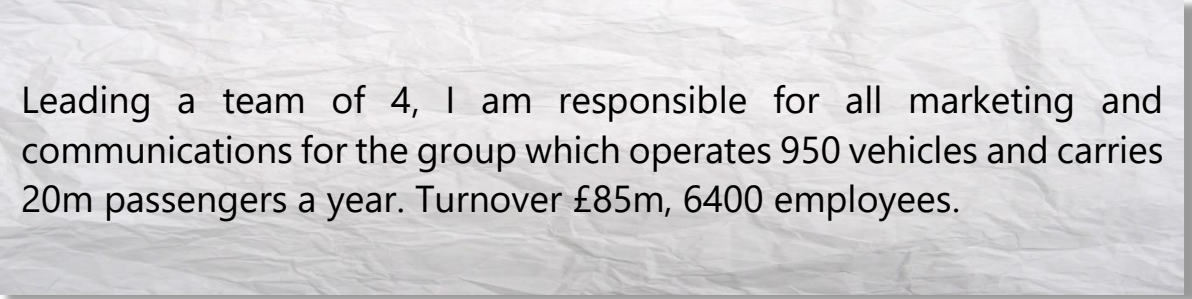
Even if you work in, and are staying in, a niche industry the recruiter or hiring manager may be new to it and so may not know your company. A website address with a hyperlink really helps the reader to put what you do in some context.

Your job purpose

Before you launch into listing your achievements, a brief paragraph outlining the context and your job purpose is really useful.

How big is the company (employees and/or turnover)? What is its primary business? What is your job purpose? The answers to these questions helps the reader to picture what you do and can see how that relates to what they are looking for.

> Leading a team of 4, I am responsible for all marketing and communications for the group which operates 950 vehicles and carries 20m passengers a year. Turnover £85m, 6400 employees.

When all the information above is provided for each of your job roles, it helps to give context to your application. It shows how your career has developed, whether your experience is in small or larger firms, and a sense of what your responsibilities are likely to have been.

Your responsibilities and achievements

Now you can populate your CV with the achievements you spent many hours at your desk remembering and writing down.

Whenever you send your CV in response to a specific position, whether it has been advertised or you have heard about if from a recruiter or on the grapevine, you **must** tailor your document to the role and the company in question. That means using only the most relevant achievements you have gathered in your preparation exercise.

Most job adverts have bullet points highlighting the key duties and requirements of the job. They are also quite clear about the experience they hope to see in candidates. Very few adverts really "sell" the role – but that is a subject for a different book.

You should produce your CV to "mirror" those bullet points as much as possible - illustrating your experience and achievements in each area. Remember the key point from above: use your CV to show what **you** can bring to the role that makes you a better choice than others.

Treat your application and CV submission as a first interview. The company is asking questions of you in the advert or job description – can you do x, do you have experience of y and so on. You must answer those questions with your CV. Select the best matches from your catalogue of achievements and make them the most prominent in your CV.

You may not be able to cover all the requirements but, unless you are a poor match for the role anyway, you should be able to pick off most of the points.

Look at the points you cannot answer directly and consider how you can respond to those questions in another way - either by demonstrating some closely related, relevant experience, or with a response in your covering letter. If you can't sensibly respond to anumber of the key requirements, then consider whether this job is a suitable fit for you.

Remember, keep it relevant and to the point. Give good examples that illustrate your experience and achievements and you should have a CV that will give you every chance of making the cut.

How far back should you go?

I am often asked by "more mature" candidates how far their CV should go back in their job history. There is no requirement to show your entire career and the suggested length of time shown will depend on your age, your industry and how relevant all your previous jobs are to what you do now (or the role you are applying for).

Assuming you have been working long enough, you should show your last 10-15 years of experience in detail, the rest in summary. If your career demonstrates continued progression and relevant achievements then include that information.

What about Education, Interests and Hobbies?

While recruiters are always interested in your education, we are generally less concerned about which primary or secondary school you attended - at this stage at least. Don't use valuable space in listing every school qualification and their grades (unless you've recently left). Give me the key facts about your relevant professional qualifications, further education and any appropriate training and development.

In most cases, your education and qualifications should be listed after your career history/work experience. If you are applying for roles where specific qualifications are mandatory, or if you have very little post-education experience, then they can be on the first page.

We see many CVs where people add their qualifications after their name e.g. John Smith BA(Hons). As above, unless essential for the role in question, this is unnecessary. Your degree in Media Studies 20 years ago might be interesting, but it might not make you unique and so should appear later in the document.

The same applies to interests, hobbies and volunteering. Use them if they are relevant, noteworthy, or make a suitable discussion topic. Many of us have outside interests that add something to our experience, or shape our values in a way that is helpful at work. If you hold a responsible position in a group, or organisation, outside of work (or use skills such as project management, financial, sales, marketing etc.) then it is worth noting. I once received a CV from an "unqualified pilot". As always, consider the relevance to the role and whether the information will support or enhance your application.

General and speculative CVs

Not every CV you send will be in direct response to an advert. If you are sending a speculative approach direct to a company or to a recruiter, then you will need to make sure that you pick the experience and achievements that most reflect the company and/or your ideal role. You can also use a summary statement at the start to outline the kinds of roles and organisations you are interested in.

As discussed above, many recruiters and employers now use technology to manage their candidate databases. There has been a growing tendency for some candidates to "stuff" CVs with key words that will be picked up by the software in a search for candidates. I have even found "invisible" text (white text on a white background) on electronic CVs in the hope that they will be picked up by the software in order to appear in more searches.

Call me old fashioned - at **bfpeople** we read all the CVs that come into the business ourselves and we, not computers, decide who we select for interviews. My advice will always be to make your CV read well, rather than fill it full of buzzwords for the computer's benefit. Even if the keywords work, someone will read your papers before deciding to call you in for interview. Write them a compelling document that shows what you can bring to their business and you will have every chance of making it.

Covering letters

Many consider the covering letter to be outdated and surplus to requirements. If your CV has all your contact details and covers the key questions the recruiter or hiring manager will initially have, then there is no need to duplicate this in a covering letter. Unless, of course, one has been requested in the advert.

We have some clients who like candidates to write separately and so specify that a covering letter is included. There are a surprising number of people who ignore this instruction. Read the advert carefully and do what is asked.

If no covering letter is requested, then do at least write a few words in your email to support your application. It doesn't need a lot, just a couple of points to introduce yourself and begin to build a relationship.

It is now possible to apply to advertised jobs with a click of a button, for example on LinkedIn.. An option given is to apply using your LinkedIn profile, rather than submit a CV. I encourage you to think carefully before doing this.

For most people, their LinkedIn profile is very different from their CV. It serves a different purpose – and often has very little information to help a recruiter decide if you are a good fit or not.

One click applications are the lazy option and generally suggests that the candidate could not be bothered to think about what they are applying for - that this is not important enough to spend some time crafting their response. Do yourself, and the recruiter or hiring manager, a favour: show that you have made an effort and have given your application some thought.

Summary and checklist

A good CV still plays an important part in securing your next job. You can improve your chances of getting to interview, at least, by producing a document that convinces the hiring manager or recruiter that you are worth seeing. From there, it is up to you.

I have chosen not to include a standard CV template in this guide. I am not a fan of boiler plate CVs and the document should reflect you. But, there are plenty of templates available online – and lots more advice if this does not suit you.

Following the process above will stand you in good stead, but to finish off, here is a checklist of the minimum you need to include in your CV to make your application stand out:

- ❑ **Contact details:** Are your name, mobile number, email address and location all highly visible?
- ❑ **Irrelevant details**: don't include your full address, date of birth, photo, school qualifications (unless recent) or other personal information
- ❑ **First impressions:** Is your document well laid out with consistent fonts and styling?
- ❑ **Six second rule:** Is it immediately obvious what you do and why your application is relevant? Does your CV make the reader want to know more?
- ❑ **Summary statement:** Is it relevant and without clichés, jargon or "padding"?
- ❑ **Career history:** Have you started with your current/last job and worked backwards through your experience?
- ❑ **Employer information:** Is it clear who you work for, what they do, and have you included a link to their website for all recent roles?
- ❑ **Your position:** Is it clear what your job is and what the main purpose of that role is?
- ❑ **Achievements:** Are they SMART? Have you quantified what you have done using £, % or some other measurable? Have you indicated a timescale? Are the achievements relevant for the role you are looking/applying for?
- ❑ **Integrity:** Is your CV truthful and complete? You should always assume that your entire career history, qualifications and achievements will be verified – either by the employer or a 3rd party background checking company

About the author

John Hamilton is Managing Director of **bfpeople** and has more than 20 years' experience in executive search, assessment, leadership development and career management.

He works with clients in most industry sectors to improve performance and deliver bottom line results through people. He has produced and published research on leadership and coaches individuals and teams, supporting development and/or career change.

John is a regular speaker on topics ranging from leadership, recruitment, coaching, psychometrics & assessment, team dynamics, and career management. He has appeared at conferences and seminars in UK, the Middle East and Asia Pacific. He also writes for magazines and trade publications for the retail, design, technology and public sectors.

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bfpeople finds leaders and develops talent, working with ambitious companies and individuals. **bfpeople** offers executive search, assessment, leadership assessment & development and executive coaching.

bfpeople.com | hello@bfpeople.com

+44(0)333 202 2225

London | Derby | Glasgow