Make it to the top!

Tips for a successful CV

If you speak to ten different people, they would all give you different advice about what your CV should look like. So why listen to us? Our guidance is grounded in research and extensive experience of how NGO hiring managers look at CVs to help make selection decisions.

Make it your own

A CV is personal and reflects your personality, but there are some essential sections that you should include: personal and contact information, an introductory profile, education and qualifications, work experience, relevant skills to the job in question, personal interests or achievements, and finally two referees. Remember that the sole purpose of a CV is to get you an interview.

Make a good start

Include a short introductory profile to highlight key areas of expertise. Include your attributes and goals to encourage employers to read the rest of your CV. The sad truth is that busy NGO hiring managers will spend just moments glancing over your CV, so be ruthless about what you include. Avoid using unquantifiable skills and back them up with the results of your actions.

You may include your date of birth, but it is no longer necessary, at least in the UK, since the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 made age discrimination illegal in the recruitment process. You do not need to state your nationality unless you are applying for a role outside your home country where there may be visa implications. Only state your university and professional qualifications, institutional affiliation, location and level of achievement.

Make it look good

Your CV should have your name at the top. You don't need to write 'CV' at the top; you want them to remember your name! Serif fonts are rarely used on the web - they are much less readable on screen. Use a clean font, such as Calibri, Verdana or Arial. Use one colour and one font throughout; colours and various styles can be eye-catching for the wrong reasons. Use bullet points and keep sentences short to ensure that you are explaining your experience clearly.

Make it logical

Start with your most recent role, and work backwards. Put dates in the same format and explain any gaps in your employment. Do not just list what is written on your job description. Instead, think about what you've achieved such as the quality of your work, your professional relationships, how you have improved organisational processes, or your impact on beneficiaries. What are you most proud of? Think about your personal contribution, not just what the team or organisation delivered. Don't feel that you have to list every exam you have ever taken or every activity you have ever been involved in - consider which are the most relevant or impressive.

Make it 2-3 pages

A good CV is clear, concise and doesn't waffle. A CV is a reassurance to a potential NGO that you are an adequate candidate so it's a chance to tick the right boxes; if everything is satisfied, there's a better chance of a job interview. Stand back and look at the overall appearance; is it professional, clearly and logically structured and does it summarise your main achievements?

Make sure you're honest

Although a CV does allow you to omit details (such as exam re-sits) which you would prefer the employer not to know about, you should never give inaccurate or misleading information. Blatant lies on your CV are likely to be uncovered when an employer checks your background and references. CVs are not legal documents and you can't be held liable for anything within, but if an employer picks up that you are lying, you will be rapidly rejected. You also may get caught out at the interview stage when you suddenly can't answer questions on what you claim to know!

Make it error free

Check your CV very carefully; are all the details accurate, such as dates and data? Employers look for mistakes on CVs and if they find them, it makes you look really bad. An error gives them the excuse to dismiss your application and you are unlikely to get an interview. Always use a spellchecker and ask someone else to double-check what you've written.