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How to structure a CV for high impact

Introduction

In this article we go into more detail about how to structure a CV to create the highest impact and chance of being called for interview.

Previous articles

In previous articles we explained **how to write the killer CV** in addition to highlighting the **common CV mistakes** candidates make.

We also explained the **problems with generalised CVs** and explained **how to target your CV** for each position.

Also, after explaining all the theory, we have provided some real life examples by deconstructing real CVs and applying the techniques. See:
CVs Deconstructed: Applying The Killer CV Technique - Case Study 1
CVs Deconstructed: Applying The Killer CV Technique - Case Study 2
CVs Deconstructed: Applying The Killer CV Technique - Case Study 3

This article builds the motivation behind why a CV needs a high impact structure targeted directly to the position.

Motivation

Before we launch into the high impact strategy for structuring a CV, we will build motivation for the structure by discussing the purpose of a CV and then go on to consider the CV as being the same as a very short 20 second interview.

What is the purpose of a CV?

A CV is a marketing document about you, the product.

The purpose of a CV is to get the interest of an agent so they call you ('Wow, this guy is perfect!'). Subsequently, the job of your CV is to impress a potential employer so they call you for interview ('Wow, this guy is perfect!').

The agent or employer has many CVs to examine before deciding who to put forward for interview or to call for an interview. It is a boring task and the whole CV for each candidate is rarely read. Each CV is merely skimmed.

Who gets the interview and job offer?

It is important to realise that the employer will choose the candidate who has the best CV for the job, not necessarily the candidate who is best suited for the job.

It is unfortunate that in some industries, the better the candidates are at their jobs the less they know about sales and commercials. This results in poor CVs and job search as a whole. Chances are you know people who aren't as good as you, but always seem to get the best jobs. Let's change that!

A CV is a 20 second interview

The front page of your CV will be read for about 20 seconds before the reader makes the choice to turn the page and read more or put you in the reject pile.

Let's imagine you apply for a position and the employer decides to interview all candidates for 20 seconds each rather than read their CVs. They will then choose some candidates for second interviews.

Before the interview all you know about the job is from the job spec and perhaps a little more the agent has told you.

Let's suppose you get a 20 second speech to impress the employer.

A terrible 20 second interview

So, what would you say in 20 seconds to give yourself the chances of getting to the second round of interviews? How about these options:

Spend the first 20 seconds stating your name address and telephone number.

Even if you have 10 years experience start explaining where you went to school and what grades you got for woodwork.

Start explaining what you did in your last position down to every detail only to find that you don't manage to explain another previous role which was much more relevant.

Inform the interviewer of your nationality and the fact that you like squash and have a clean driving licence.

Tell the interviewer your life goals and explain what you would be looking for if they hired you.

Obviously all those scenarios above are ridiculous. But, how many CVs in circulation do precisely that?

A good CV should not be a life story starting from your birth that takes the reader chronologically though your life and invites them to pick out relevant details they might think will be useful to them. It is a marketing document.

A good CV will focus on using your skills to deliver value to a potential client, rather than telling the employer what you want to get out of the position. The employer is paying you to help them, not the other way around. Putting your career aims on a CV is like a salesman trying to convince you to buy their products because 'they will get good commission and be able to afford a lovely new home!'

Let's look at what might work well.

A high impact 20 second interview

Here's what the interviewer wants to conclude after a 20 second interview:

This person has the skills I require.

This person has experience of using the skills I require.

This person understands my requirements.

This person has provided benefit to previous clients using those skills.

Wow, this guy is perfect!!

In order to satisfy the above you need to tell the interviewer in 20 seconds:

I have the skills you need to help achieve your goals.

I know what goals you are trying to achieve.

I have used the skills before to achieve similar goals for previous clients.

I am perfect for the role!

Once this message has been delivered your chances are much higher than someone telling their life story.

Structuring the CV for the 20 second Impact

It is unlikely the reader of your CV will look at the second page in the first 20 seconds, so we need to satisfy everything they want on the front page.

To do so we need to convey the message that we are exactly what they are looking for (the profile), then summarise our skills (we have what you are looking for) and finally list some achievements (have done it before for other clients).

We will not go into detail here about how to write these sections as they are fully covered in the articles listed below:

How to Write a Killer CV
Targeting Your CV
How to Write an Achievement on Your CV

Here is an example of good front page for a CV:

JOE BLOGGS
1 main street, London ABC 123
Tel: 01234 5677889
Email: joebloggs@pleasespamme.com

PROFILE

Highly proficient **SENIOR ANALYST PROGRAMMER** with 10 years experience building Financial Risk applications for major blue chip clients using OO, C++, Oracle, UML, ADO. Full life cycle knowledge, including RUP, SSADM, and PRINCE methodologies. Now seeking next rewarding opportunity to make a successful impact in a customer focused team.

EXPERTISE

C++ (8 years)

Oracle (version xyx, 9 years)

OO, Rational Rose, UML, OCL

Design Patterns, Design By Contract

SSADM, RAD, DSDM, XP, SCRUM

(and so on – you need about 10 bullet points here)

ACHIEVEMENTS

Successfully re-engineered existing risk analysis application cutting down the run time from 30 minutes to 10 seconds. This enabled fund managers to real time risk analysis figures resulting in the company being more competitive in the market place, increasing revenues by 50%.

Taught and mentored junior developers in **OO techniques** resulting in significant productivity rate increases and less time to market. Increase in speed of development enabled IT to become more responsive to clients demands for change and enhancements.

Automated manual reconciliation of system data with market data resulting in task being completed with 100% accuracy in 1 minute, as opposed to 3 hours.

Beyond the First Page

After the reader has established you are perfect for the role by reading the front page, they might then turn to the second page.

They will do this for the following reasons:

Does this person have a good pedigree: e.g. always employed with lots of blue chip companies, or lots of short contracts with minor players?

Have they progressed through their career?

How long have they been using these required skills?

What is their education and training?

To avoid boring the reader this information should be listed on no more than two pages. Remember that you do not need to list everything you have done in detail. Go into detail on the relevant jobs and provide less detail for the irrelevant positions. You can group and summarise collections of roles if they are taking up too much room.

Here's an example of an employment section:

CAREER HISTORY		
May 2004 – Aug 2004	**Lead Business Systems Analyst**	**XYZ Ltd.**
(4 months – 1 renewal)		

Design and specification of standards and applications using OO / UML.

Worked within team across multiple projects.

Developed standards and processes.

Improved efficiency and quality of working within the department.

Nov 2001 – May 2004	**Business Systems Analyst ABC Ltd**	**XYZ Ltd.**
(19 months – 2 renewals)		

Created Object Oriented model describing the entire programming function of the company.

Model used to re-engineer bespoke application supporting the programming arm of business.

Liaised with both programmers and business users.

Mentored staff on use of Rational tools: Rational Rose, Soda.

Some points to note:

The dates are aligned down the left hand side so it is easy for the reader to see continual employment.

The duration and number of renewals is displayed so the reader can see clients must be happy because they renewed the contract.

The companies are aligned down the right hand side to make it easy to quickly read all companies worked for.

The job titles are aligned down the middle to make it easy to establish career progression.

Some key words are highlighted in bold. These are the skills the reader is looking for. They stand out during a scan of the page (higher visual priority).

Education and training together with personal details can be listed at the end of the CV.

Conclusion

Writing a good CV is a skill itself. The key is approaching the exercise as one in marketing and sales as opposed to writing an essay about ones life!

Ensure you target the position directly with your CV and get the message across in 20 seconds that you are perfect for the role.

Good luck with your job search.

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