

HR NZ

HR Guides

How to Prepare a CV

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Introduction

Ask an internet search engine how to prepare a CV, and it comes back with more than 5 million results. No wonder, then, that it's difficult to come up with universal guidelines for what is always an individual document. With so much advice available, it's clear there's no best or set way to prepare and present a CV, nor are there golden rules about what to include. Put "online CV" into the same search engine, and it offers more than 10 million results. That shows how the internet is now central to recruitment, and how the traditional CV has changed.

Curriculum vitae literally translates as "the course of life" — and so the traditional CV traced a path through an individual's schooling, tertiary education or other training, and employment, and added details about outside interests, sporting involvements, volunteer work, and such like. Today's CV is much more likely to be targeted at a particular job or organisation, or designed to promote the employment prospects of an individual.

There are two key guidelines for preparing a CV:

- Make it relevant – for the target job or organisation. CV readers — mainly employers and recruitment agencies — usually just want relevant and accurate information.
- Be accurate. CV writers will want to present themselves in the best possible way, but should remember that potential employers will almost certainly check the qualifications and work experience claimed by short-listed candidates.

Remember also that recruiters and employers receive great numbers of CVs, not all of them in response to a specific vacancy notice or advertisement. Rightly or wrongly, your CV is likely to be given a very quick read — it has a very short time to grab the reader's interest or attention. Don't use colours and pictures to achieve that; instead, make a good first impression with a document that appears well-organised and clearly laid out. And keep it short. Two pages or less is a good target — but include only what is needed to show you are qualified for the job or the organisation. Write in clear, simple and positive English. Your CV should be easy to read.

What do employers want?

The different objectives of CV writers and readers is clearly illustrated in a 2016 survey by the United Kingdom recruitment firm Michael Page. It identified the most important features of CVs, for recruiters and for the public generally.

What's important to recruiters?

- Detailing your achievements
- Not having typos or grammatical errors
- Writing in a professional tone
- Detailing your responsibilities
- Listing all job titles at the same company
- Using job ad keywords
- Using industry terms

What's important to the public?

- Keeping CV under two pages
- Volunteering experience
- Adding soft skills
- Listing personal interests
- Putting education or experience first
- Having worked abroad
- Having all qualifications
- Listing all skills
- Including personal statement

What should be in a CV?

It all depends. A CV writer should start by asking what the recruiter or employer wants. This may be found in a job post or advertisement, in a job description, or by asking for more information. Gather information about the organisation and its industry or sector (eg from its website, or annual report, or other publications). Tailor the CV accordingly.

Set out how the job seeker's qualifications, skills and experience meet the criteria set out in the job description and how the individual will, therefore, bring and add value to the organisation.

Employers increasingly provide templates or guidelines for CVs, or ask job seekers to complete an online application form. That is the ultimate tailored CV.

What information is relevant? Few recruitment agencies or employers will want to trace a job applicant's entire life history. Focus on those capabilities and experiences of the individual which are relevant to the particular job.

Leave out nothing that is relevant, but be careful not to include too much. For example, school examination results may be relevant information in a young job seeker's CV, but irrelevant 20 or 30 years later when that person has graduated from university and is applying for his or her third or fourth job.

Most CVs contain information under headings like these, but they are not all essential in every case.

Name, personal information, and contact details

Providing name and contact details is obvious. Whether you include age, sex, and family information is more difficult. Some people prefer not to provide that information; some employers remove from a job application any information that could trigger conscious or unconscious bias or discrimination amongst those making recruitment and selection decisions. Social media links might also be included — although that implies permission for the recruiter or employer to follow up on those links. If appropriate, give details of the individual's visa or residency status in New Zealand.

Statement of personal objectives

This is, typically, a brief statement designed to give the reader a snapshot of the individual. It might include recent work experience, future goals and plans, and reasons for seeking the advertised job or to work for the particular organisation. It is the first opportunity for the CV to grab a potential employer's attention by standing out from a crowd of hopeful job seekers. Be bold and determined, but avoid hubris and boasting. Be concise.

Skills

School leavers and others with limited work experience might place Education ahead of Skills and Work history. For others, this is a first opportunity to tailor the CV to the needs of the specific job or the organisation. Match the individual's skills to the requirements of the job or the organisation — in terms of formal qualifications, education and training programmes undertaken, work experiences, and skills and experience with technology and software. Include other skills with more general application (eg First Aid, languages, driver licence). Remember that work experience may reasonably translate into job skills (eg customer service, cash handling).

Work history

In most cases, include recent and relevant positions. List the most recent jobs first. List each employer, the dates of the employment, all the positions held and a brief description of each job's responsibilities. List the main activities and achievements, selected for their relevance to the job sought. Did the individual have responsibilities for budgets and finance?

Education

List the schools and educational institutions attended, the years of study, the courses taken, results, and the qualifications gained. Add more detail (eg the content of specific courses or research projects) where relevant to the particular job or organisation. List professional and occupational qualifications, continuing professional education courses and events, and attendance at significant conferences and courses. Include membership of professional, business, or trade organisations.

Achievements

List any relevant achievements (eg awards, positions held, projects undertaken) that are not covered elsewhere. These may relate to activities outside the workplace (eg voluntary service).

Interests and hobbies

Keep this section brief, and use it to identify any skills or experiences that might be of benefit to your job performance or to the organisation generally. General interests (eg reading, listening to music) are best omitted, unless the job is in a library or a music store. However, an employer might think that a person who coaches a sports team could have skills in organisation, coaching, and leadership. Similarly, a person who crews on board a racing yacht may well have team working skills. The key is to relate the interest or hobby to the employer's needs.

Referees

Many employers will wait until a later stage in the selection process before asking an applicant to nominate referees. If you include referees in a CV, they should be individuals who can confirm the information in the CV, or give the recruiter or employer more information to support the individual's application. Referees may be former teachers, employers, team coaches, community group leaders, and the like. Family members, on the other hand, are not very credible. Seek a potential referee's permission to be contacted for a reference. List the referee's name, position held and/or relationship with CV writer, and contact details.

What's the best format?

Employers and recruiters may be sceptical if a CV looks too good or too professional. They wonder if the document was prepared by a commercial firm — and is a good example of that firm's skills, but maybe not such an accurate representation of the subject of the CV.

Of course, if you're applying for a job as a graphic designer — go for it!

Countless consultants and websites offer to prepare CVs or provide templates so individuals can build their own. Simply put in your data, and print out a finished document.

But there are downsides to using commercial or online CV formats:

- A recruiter or employer might recognise the format as “not the individual's own work”, and discount it accordingly.
- The recruitment agency or employer might scan CVs into a database for ease of handling, ignoring any special efforts at presentation. Or your special design might prevent scanning of the CV.
- Employers who are focused on equal treatment and avoiding discrimination might be less interested in personal presentations than ensuring all applicants are asked for the same information in the same way.

Job seekers might save themselves time and effort by checking whether a target employer has a standard application form, which may be available to complete online.

Also check if the recruiter or employer has a preferred layout or standard form, and use it. That's especially important when CVs are to be submitted in electronic form. Despite all the hype about compatibility, conversions from one operating system to another, or from one software programme to another, are not always successful.

When thinking about how to lay out a CV:

- Aim to provide all the information sought by the recruiter or employer.
- Plan to organise the material in the same sequence as the job notice or advertisement.
- Keep the format simple and straightforward.
- Select from the most common fonts. And use only one of them.
- Use bold type for headings and italics for emphasis (or book titles).
- Use bullet points to break up large blocks of text, but avoid making the CV look like a PowerPoint slide.
- Be concise and specific. That comes from planning carefully what you need to say, and in what order.
- Use business English, avoiding casual or slang expressions, and emotive terms.
- Do not refer to yourself in the third person (eg “... and then he was appointed to the position of ...”).
- Check both the grammar and the spelling.
- Save the CV in both Word.doc and .pdf formats — most recruiters and employers will be able to deal with a CV in either of those formats. But don't ask them to retrieve your CV from a cloud storage account.

When the CV is finished, get someone else to read it through — checking for meaning, grammar, spelling, and sense.

Covering letter

A covering letter should be brief. It should simply state why you are sending the recruiter or employer your CV (eg in the hope there might be a suitable employment opportunity, in response to the advertisement for a widget operator, and so on) and why that person should read your CV (eg the enclosure will show how my skills and experience in these key areas — include three or four brief bullet points — meet the criteria for the job or the organisation).

Include contact details and an offer to provide further information or to be available for an interview. Note any times when you might not be available.

Making CV's available online

Do you want to? Having a CV posted on the internet has obvious advantages for people who are looking for the widest possible exposure of their availability — but has all the same disadvantages and risks that go with displaying any personal or private information in that worldwide forum.

There are many online options — a personal website, an online job board, social media such as LinkedIn and Google Plus, and so on. It's not much effort, and gives your CV exposure to employers and jobs you may not know about.

But there's an important first step. Remember that list of CV features important to recruiters at the beginning? It included "Use job ad keywords". That's because recruiters and employers search online job boards and other websites by using specific search terms — and your CV will not be hauled out of the mob unless you use those terms.

Recruiters use search terms (including industry or sector, job title alternatives, key skills, essential technical, professional or academic qualifications, and relevant experience) which reflect the essential criteria for the job. Their searching techniques are designed to produce the smallest possible number of highly matching candidates — that saves them a great deal of time.

The challenge for the CV writer is to ensure that a CV includes as many as those search terms as possible — and as specifically as possible. Thus, if true, it's better to list actual software programs (eg Word, Excel) than to say you have "a good knowledge of Microsoft Office".

More and more, the CV writer has to think like the recruiter or employer is thinking.

It might be a chore, but an employer should acknowledge every CV it receives – whether it comes unsolicited or in response to a specific job advertisement. There’s a model Employment application acknowledgment letter in the CCH New Zealand Workforce Manager modular series. [Click here](#) for access.



RICHARD RUDMAN

DistFHRINZ

This guide has been prepared by Richard Rudman, a Distinguished Fellow of HRNZ. He is the author of several Wolters Kluwer publications, including HR Manager - A New Zealand Handbook, the annual New Zealand Employment Law Guide, and CCH Workforce Manager.



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