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TOOLING UP CAREER ADVICE



Dave Jensen

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CVs That Open Industry Doors

By David G. Jensen
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As a professional recruiter, I look at over 300 resumes a week. And although I'm not anxious to spend my nights and weekends writing about them as well--my Tooling Up columns tend to focus more on career search strategies than on the minutiae of the job hunt--it is a really good idea to revisit this particular topic regularly. Many people have found that a style and content review of a CV is a good thing. It can help tighten and focus the document in ways that may make it a better fit for the chosen market.

Resume and CV writing is a huge subject, and thousands of books have been written about it. My goal in this column is to give you a brief refresher on some of the most common concerns that you may have regarding the preparation of your own personal "marketing materials." And please don't be put off by that description. Despite the low regard you may have for sales and marketing, it is exactly this job that a resume or CV needs to do when it arrives at its destination. Its content will either appeal or it won't. Your job is to take the excellent work you've done and feature it in a way that opens the doors you want opened. I'm not suggesting style over content; we both know that your abilities as a scientist will be very carefully screened when your letter arrives at a company. But given that a lot of "good science" does show up at the doors of industry firms nowadays, don't you think that you ought to improve the way that YOUR science is presented?

Resume Real Estate

Little details like the length of a CV can cause some grad students and postdocs sleepless nights. For the CEO and the undergrad with no experience, the old "one page at most" rule certainly applies. But everyone in between should focus on making the document as readable as possible and not worry about the length. After many years of reviewing CVs and resumes, I can tell you that problems don't occur when the writer went over or under a certain number of pages. It is when the writer can't keep things concise and to the point, or when they fail to put the important stuff "up front" that they lose out on reader interest. (The HR executives at the Director and VP level I consulted when writing this article all told me that any important information should be on the front page because they only have time to read the first page before moving into "scan" mode.)

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Delete the Following From Your Resume

Writing succinctly is an art, and nowhere does it make more of an impact than on a cover letter and resume. Here are some areas that often need to be excised:

Hobbies and Interests sections: I would suggest removing this area from a resume altogether, although many people would disagree with me. They believe that there is some value to showing a side of you outside of work. Perhaps it is the workaholic in me, but I don't really care if you enjoy hiking and travel. What I am looking for when I scan a resume is how well qualified you are for a specific job. Does it really matter that you enjoy bowling, biking, or brewing beer?

Academic CV relics: You should also get rid of all those oddities from the old-style academic CV. I mean, who really needs to know the names of your spouse and children, their birth dates, and your social security number? These things have just got to go if you are applying for jobs in industry.

Keyword lists: Some CVs come into our office with a special section on the document geared to the modern database search. Although it is true that companies do employ software that searches through your documents, I think that it's better to incorporate those "keywords" into the text of the document in a more natural fashion. But if you want to use a brief keyword list, try titling it "Skills and Techniques" and make it a separate section of the document.

So, don't shoot for a certain page length--but do (please!) keep it succinct. Once you've finished your final rewrite, go back and take another look to see if you can tighten it up just a little bit more. You don't need to drop whole sentences or sections just for the sake of brevity. But you should read each sentence or bulleted item to make certain that it is important and that it supports the entire application. The bottom line is that everything you include in a resume should reinforce the objective you've set for yourself or should support your application for a particular position.

The Style and Format of Your Marketing Materials: CV or Resume?

Any book about resume preparation can tell you about the different styles and in what situation they might be used. But as a general--and perhaps counterintuitive--rule of thumb, it is better *not* to be creative and unique with your personal marketing materials when you are applying for positions in industry, where prospective employers actually prefer some uniformity. People who read a lot of resumes don't react in the way that you'd hope when they come across a CV printed on mauve paper--or when the dates and positions are hidden behind a couple of pages of "skill areas." Instead, they'll lose interest. Look closely at the CV's that others of your level and experience are circulating. Make certain that you have something that stands out because it is powerfully written--and not because of your choice of font.

CV Distribution: How will you distribute your marketing materials? Hard copy? Fax? Or e-mail? What's best will be determined by the company you are writing to, and is usually mentioned in their ad.

Hard copies: I wish that I could show you what most recruiting and HR offices look like as a result of their neglect of hard-copy CVs. Because we have become spoiled by e-mail, traditional resumes now sit in large stacks waiting for someone to take the time to scan and/or file them away. Hard copies are OK when they are sent out to a specific hiring manager who doesn't have to deal with the deluge of the daily mail. Even then, however, hiring managers, who are just as busy as the rest of us, will tend to treat those hard copy CVs with less urgency than electronic versions that can be processed with a couple of mouse clicks.

Here are some other suggestions that deal with style and format:

CV vs. Resume: Regardless of your technical strengths and how many publications you have, your material should always reflect your ability to accomplish goals. Certainly, hiring managers will need to know about your technical proficiencies, but they are even more interested in reading about your accomplishments on the job. The traditional academic CV won't cut the mustard in this regard. But neither will the one-page resume.

It is the intermediate document that will best suit your needs in the long run. A modified CV that lists experience and accomplishments beneath each historically arranged job title. This material should then be combined with the usual credentials and publications--generally with the education listed at the top of the first page and the publications trailing at the end of the document. I'll be referring to this type of document from now on as the "CV."

Accomplishments: When you list each of your accomplishments in a CV, you need to do so succinctly, which means you'll have to focus on just the right information. Try this: use the acronym CAR (for Challenge-Approach-Results) to help clarify your thinking. Consider the problems you have faced (the Challenges), your unique contribution (the Approach), and the benefits that you have imparted (the Results).

Proper contact information: Your CV must have proper contact information at the top of page one. A lab phone number is fine, but many HR departments will not make telephone contact with a candidate at a work number. So make certain that your home information is present, and an e-mail address as well. More than half of today's job-related correspondence from companies arrives via e-mail.

If you must send a hard copy of your CV, then be sure to make it scanner friendly: use only white or beige paper and plain fonts (which scan best), and avoid font treatments like underlining and italicizing. Once again, let me remind you that this is the wrong place to be creative--unique resumes don't scan well.

E-mail copies: What great impact! Instantly your contact has that CV sitting in front of her, ready to read. And although there are still some problems with certain file translations and computers, I believe that the great majority of e-mailed documents reach their destinations in readable condition. About 15% of the time I have to fiddle with the document to fix a formatting irregularity or some weird font substitution. But I'm willing to do this, because the alternative (hard copies) requires me to get up off my chair and start searching through file cabinets. When given a choice between having your resume sitting in the file cabinets or in the company's database where it can be scanned for keywords, you'll definitely want the latter.

Word or RTF documents, e-mailed without compression (no ZIP files, please!), seem to be becoming the de facto standard. In addition, many people clip and paste the text of the CV into the body of the e-mail message "just in case." While I don't like plain text, it is better than a vintage 1985 Wordstar document that no one can open. And it is better than PDF documents. Of all the electronic documents that get e-mailed, PDFs look the best--you can preserve all the formatting and font selections and make your material print out beautifully. But the unfortunate thing about PDF files is that they cannot be stored in a corporate database and cannot be keyword searched. Therefore, if you send a PDF file, make sure you enclose either pasted ASCII text or a Word version as well. At least the keywords can be entered into the database, and searches will be able to pick up your name for a phone call.

Fax copies: Use the fax machine only when specifically requested by a hiring manager or advertisement. Fax machines produce copies that most often cannot be scanned, and they are losing the value that they once had for urgency. Faxes at our office often sit with the day's mail which, as I mentioned above, loses out in priority to electronic correspondence.

In Closing...

The biggest mistake that people make when in the throes of a job search is to believe that their resume or CV is the beginning and end of the process. That isn't the case. The resume is simply a door opener, much like an enlarged business card. There's no way that this document will actually land you a job. Therefore, don't fixate on the CV as the source of your job-search difficulties (or consider it the magic bullet that will solve them). It is certainly true that a poorly written document will hold you back in the job market. But I would far rather proffer to one of my clients a candidate with a marginal resume and the ability to sell herself than someone who has crafted a work of art but who can't communicate those strengths in person.

In future columns, I will address your cover letter and the important impact that it can have on a prospective employer. But don't forget that both the cover letter and the CV are used primarily as an introduction. Once you have your foot in the door, you'll need to focus on those practices that carry more weight in person--communication, interpersonal skills, and interviewing behavior--all of which will continue to be covered by both of your "Tooling Up"

columnists.

A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, David Jensen is the founder of [CareerTrax Inc.](#)

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