

GONE IN SEVEN SECONDS

James Reed says that if a CV hasn't hooked its reader within seven seconds, it will get rejected. Here are the secrets to an engaging, relevant job application



While the UK has near-full employment, at Reed we receive more than 600,000 applications every week from people looking for their next job. If you extrapolate that figure, it adds up to a lot of reading for recruiters - and it's little wonder that it takes just seven seconds for someone to decide if your CV is going into the reject pile. While this sounds brutal, the good news is that you can learn techniques to ensure it will pass the seven-second test in future.

WHAT RECRUITERS WANT

If you've ever described yourself as a goal-driven, self-motivated multitasker in your CV, make a point of not doing so again. It's a description that recruiters have heard many times before, but doesn't actually say anything about you. A good CV will present you as the unique solution to a particular problem - the job on offer. This involves focusing on your special talents or unique selling points.

Recruiters' needs are remarkably few. They want to hear why you're the best candidate for the job. They want to know your mindset and personality. They don't need your entire life story. Your CV is a document with a single purpose: to get you an interview.

To assess whether your CV will perform this function, look at it objectively alongside the job specification. Do they match? If not, why not? Is this because you haven't got the right skills and attributes, or because your CV doesn't make them clearly known to the reader? It's worth thinking about what I call the 'fatal five' elements that can make or break a CV:

- lack of relevant work history;
- spelling errors;
- frequent job changes;
- not enough information; and
- poor layout.

None of these obstacles are insurmountable. You just need to know how to get past them.

FLYING START

Let's start with a list of things you'll need. It may seem obvious, but don't forget to include your full name and contact details. It's also an ideal time to get rid of that novelty email address you created as a teenager (eg, skippy99@xmail.com) in favour of something using your real name.

Poorly constructed CVs tend to fall into one of several categories, including those who send the same CV to everyone; those who are too modest; those who seem to have done it all or who are too ambitious too soon; and those who use wacky fonts and colours to mask what their application lacks. Recruiters can see through every trick. What they're looking for is a sharp shooter – someone whose CV aligns with the role on offer, has a cover letter that qualifies the contents of the CV and comes across as able to add value to the company.

Dredge your memory and trawl through your old CVs to make a thorough list of all your past jobs and the length of time spent in them. Recruiters want to know about your relevant work history. If you've had a long gap between roles or only a short career to date, you can supplement your application with information about voluntary work, relevant hobbies and interests. For example, if you have been a volunteer treasurer for a sports club, this shows both trust and money handling skills. If your only hobby is socialising, don't include it.

You can split your skills and educational achievements into general and specific categories like work-related training and qualifications, and soft and hard skills. This helps recruiters to isolate the information they need quickly – such as whether someone knows how to create Excel Pivot Tables.

Format-wise, recruiters tend to prefer a reverse chronological CV, with your most recent employment given first. But certain situations call for a skills- or function-based CV, such as if you're turning a hobby into a career or have had several short-term assignments.

WRITE YOUR CV

It can be tempting to try to cram a lot into your CV, but be warned – it should be no more than two sides of A4. Recruiters want CVs that are informative, yet concise, so avoid long, passive phrases, overly technical information and jargon.

Recruiters dislike clichés. They want assertive descriptions of your achievements and to see active words such as adaptable, committed, flexible and so on. Bullet points are a great way to structure your experiences and help with logical ordering. You could present three key achievements per

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employment. The longer you have been in work, the more concise you can be in your description of your educational achievements, freeing up space to give finer details about more recently acquired skills and experiences as a result.

Finally, you'll need to prepare an opening personal statement of no more than 150 words. Personal statements can strike real fear into the hearts of applicants, but when they play it safe, job seekers end up all sounding the same. If you're stuck, write out the answers to these key questions: who are you? What can you offer? What are your career goals? What makes you stand out? Why do you want this job? What achievement are you most proud of? These prompts should help kick your imagination into gear.

TAILORING

This recommendation is not popular, but it's essential to success: you should take the time to tailor your CV every time you apply for a job. Tailoring means you're more likely to be invited to interview, because you've already made a connection between yourself and the role. Targeted information in

your application also guides the interviewer towards asking you better interview questions. Don't be afraid to keep more than one CV on file as a prompt, but don't keep so many that they become confusing.

Before you start tailoring, do your research. You need to know the company – whether it has a mission statement, or uses particular key words in its literature or on its website. If there's a job description, pick it apart and work out which of your skills are most relevant. Make use of company review sites such as Glassdoor to inform your knowledge.

It's also worth bearing in mind that robotic process automation is starting to be used in HR, whereby the first round of CV sifting is done by computer/algorithm via an applicant tracking system. This is where knowledge of keywords becomes increasingly relevant, and where you should use acronyms with caution. Computers will be on the lookout for your hard skills in particular.

ALMOST FINISHED

Your cover letter gives you one last chance to shine and gives you the opportunity to let your personality come across, setting the scene for the contents of the CV. If there's one place to avoid being boring, this is it. The seven-second rule applies as much to your letter as it does your CV. Recruiters are increasingly viewing applications on smartphones, meaning you need to keep them scrolling down.

In addition to checking for grammatical and spelling errors, you will need to find out if your CV passes muster before you hit send on your application. So, perform the seven-second test on yourself. Turn it over, read for seven seconds and then turn it over again. Based on what you managed to read in that time, would you hire yourself? ●



James Reed, chairman of Reed, one of Britain's biggest recruitment brands. *The 7 Second CV: How to Land the Interview* is out now