Letter writing and CV savvy

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Preparing an effective cover letter and CV is a critical first step to making your next career move

Writing effective cover letters and curricula vitae (CVs) for potential employers can be difficult because you only have one chance to impress. It is important to present yourself favorably while being concise—busy hiring managers often do not have the time to wade through eight pages of detail about your career. Below we have compiled some useful tips that will provide you with a greater opportunity to stand out from the crowd.

Letter-writing techniques

An effective cover letter can give you a competitive edge in achieving that all-important interview. Employers will often base their initial assessment on the look, style, and content of your letter. Following a few simple yet effective techniques can help you avoid common pitfalls:

- Be clear about the purpose of your letter. For example, the aim may be to gain an interview, confirm dates, reinforce interview performance, negotiate terms or timescales, or simply to say 'thank you'.
- Personalize and individualize the letter. Tailored letters show you understand the employer's needs and also allow you to promote different aspects of your skills and experience according to what each employer is looking for.
- Keep the letter short and simple by telling the prospective employer what they want to hear, but only as much as they need to know.
- Use formatting techniques to embolden, italicize, or underline those attributes that show how suitable you are for the job, but don't allow formatting to become overpowering.
- Try to be warm and natural, yet direct

and businesslike in your style. Avoid being too formal by using phrases such as "should you wish."

- Avoid the standard phrases used in cover letters. For example, rather than saying that you "work effectively as an individual or as part of a team", provide a real-life example of where you led a team to a successful outcome or were empowered to complete a project alone.

CV savvy

Developing an effective CV is vital; long lists of attributes, qualifications, and courses can be tedious for the reviewer to search through to determine whether you have the right skills for the job. CV style is a matter of taste; some people include a photograph or use colored paper to make the CV more noticeable in the pile. Both tactics can work, but can also work against you; no photograph is better than a poor quality photograph and colored paper can make the CV more difficult to read or photocopy. More important to creating an effective CV are the following tips:

- Looks matter. Make sure your CV is presented clearly, neatly, and simply.
- Use headings to break up your CV into logical and easily read sections. Keep sentences short and, where appropriate, use bullet points to highlight key information.
- Use good quality paper and your CV should, ideally, be no more than 2 pages in length. Don't forget to spell-check your document! Nothing puts off professionals as much as poor spelling and grammar.
- Honesty is always the best policy! Research indicates that more than half of CVs may have inaccuracies; it is best if yours is not one of those. Be positive, but truthful, about your skills and personality. It is a good idea to stress special skills or experience early on in your CV. Keep to the facts and avoid making subjective claims that you can't support.

- Above all you must be happy that your CV is a true reflection of you as a person and is written in language that you would use yourself.

Begin writing your CV by designing the structure and deciding what information is needed and which skills are the most important for the position for which you are applying. Clearly and logically structure your CV so that employers can assess your details easily. We recommend including the following sections:

- Personal details (name, address, phone/fax): only assign qualifications to your name that are critical to your career.
- Personal profile: a three or four line overview is all that's required.
- Key skills and experience: list only relevant skills and experience and be prepared to back up your claims.
- Career history, responsibilities and achievements: start with your most recent job and work backwards.
- Education and qualifications: list academic and professional qualifications plus relevant studies or training.
- Personal information: personalize your CV as much as possible.

Finally, make sure your CV is distinctive, professional, interesting and always up to date. It is okay to have cover letters and CVs that are structured, but do not be tempted to use the same ones for every post. The reviewer wants to see skills that fit the advertised role, so make sure that you review each advertisement for key requirements and present them prominently. Lastly, always do some research, view the organizations' website and pick out snippets and values that you yourself hold and emphasize them, as this shows that you have taken the time to do the research but that you also have skills, values or ambitions that match those of the organization to which you are applying.

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