Effective CVs and covering letters

Hints and tips

Incorporating the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD

Vitae resources: developing the
skills and careers of researchers

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Effective CVs has been written by Dr Sara Shinton

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Vitae
c/o CRAC
2nd Floor, Sheraton House
Castle Park
Cambridge
CB3 0AX

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Effective CVs and covering letters

Congratulations - you have found a job that looks interesting! Now the challenge is to convince the employer to interview you. Use the advert and job description to draw up a list of requirements and jot down the evidence you can give of meeting these requirements. If your application is speculative, you will improve your chances of success by researching the company to understand what they look for when recruiting and how to appeal to them.

Although every CV should be a unique document, there are some basic rules:
- Write the CV this particular employer wants to read, not the one you want to write.
- Always support claims with evidence and describe YOUR contribution.
- Give the CV a professional look and avoid spelling mistakes.
- Allocate more space to relevant information.
- Always accompany with a letter.

Length and appearance
The general opinion is that two pages is the optimum length for a CV. Give evidence of effective communication by sticking to this! However, do not cram every space – there should be an appealing balance of space and text.
- Bullet points are easier to read than paragraphs, horizontal lines can mark different sections and plain fonts are easier to read.
- You may need to mix font sizes in headings (larger) and areas like personal information (smaller), but always review a print-out.
- Good quality, plain white paper with black or dark colour ink is traditional, but professional. Avoid gimmicks like icons, photos or wacky designs unless creativity or design are relevant to the job.

Content
This sheet will focus on presenting your doctorate. For advice on the other sections of a CV, refer to the Vitae website at http://www.vitae.ac.uk/1372/Creating%20Effective%20CVs.html.

If applying for non-academic research posts:
- Highlight aims and achievements of research, drawing parallels with the employer where possible – ask yourself what they would see as interesting about your research.
- Describe relevant techniques or methods, including supervisor's name (particularly if the employer is involved in similar research) and funding body.
- Highlight any industrial or commercial relevance of your research and describe any links, such as CASE awards, consultancy work or industrial placements.
- Give evidence of a wider perspective – most professional bodies have special interest research groups which run events or discussion groups. Alternatively you may be involved in research-related activities with schools or the local community.
- Present your doctorate as professional training in research. Identify the skills associated with effective research (the Joint Skills Statement on the Vitae website will help), and give evidence of project management, communication skills, dissemination strategies and collaborative working.

If applying for other jobs:

- Describe skills gained which are relevant to the job being applied for, and give evidence. Research will have given you many transferable skills, but employers will need convincing, so be explicit – give numbers of people attending events you have organised, size of budgets you have managed etc.

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- Highlight the measures of your success – awards or additional funding received (ie bursaries for conferences or special projects), publications, presentations, membership of professional bodies and learned societies.
- Make it clear that you are leaving research to do something more fitting, and provide evidence of your suitability for this new career.
- Describe your doctorate briefly, but in accessible terms – perhaps as you would to a group of GCSE students. Highlight the relevance of your research to everyday life!

The skills question: Skills are an essential feature of your CV, but do you include a skills section? If the advert asks for particular skills, then you should provide evidence clearly. This can be in a separate section or in the descriptions of your doctorate and work experience. The Vitae website (www.vitae.ac.uk) contains more advice and examples, so you can experiment with different styles.

Personal statements? This has to be a personal preference. Some recruiters love them, others hate them! The key is to ensure that the CV supports the claims you have made about yourself and that the statement is based on the needs of the employer. See the examples on the Vitae website (www.vitae.ac.uk). An alternative is a 'career aim' of not more than 30 words on the job you want and why you are a good candidate. This can be useful for closely targeted speculative applications.

The covering letter: The letter is essential and puts the CV in context. Explain who you are, what you are applying for and how the application came about (advert, personal contact, reasons for speculative approach) and include information that is difficult to present on the CV (motivation for applying, impressions of the company from visits or contacts with staff). Draw attention to the highlights of your CV, being concise and expressive about why you are suitable. Unless stated otherwise, type a letter on one page of white A4 paper.

Final thoughts: Ask someone to look at your CV for a minute (no more). What are their impressions and do they recall your key selling points? If not, consider changes so that the essential information has the most impact.

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