



CV Writing – A Guide

Few would disagree that preparing a CV is a massive chore. Most lawyers have trouble remembering what they were doing last month, let alone 2, or 20, years ago, and it can be hard to decide how best to summarise your life and professional experiences into a few pages of A4.

That said, for all but the most senior level recruitment, a CV is still the vital first step in most job applications and it is well worth spending time considering carefully the content and construction of this important document.

Whilst it is true that, on occasions, a lawyer with a particularly strong pedigree could probably secure an interview from a scribbled note on the back of an envelope, the job of the CV is to do more than simply get your foot in the door.

More often than not, your CV is the first chance you have to make a positive impression on your potential future employer and it's a shame to waste such a good marketing opportunity. A poorly prepared CV really can disengage its reader and put even the strongest candidate on the back foot when it comes to interview. At the very least, your interviewers may have concerns prior to the meeting about your attitude, style and whole approach to the recruitment process; at worst, you might not even get to meet them in the first place!

Although it can take a while to produce a CV you are happy with, you will find that the time you spend now will benefit you enormously when it comes to the interview preparation stage. Not only will you have already refreshed many long distant memories, but you will have also had to give a lot of thought to the experiences, responsibilities and achievements you wanted to include in your CV and which are likely to be the ones you are most keen to talk about at interview. This really is a massive head start.

We have seen thousands of lawyers' CVs in our time and have received helpful feedback from many law firm clients as to what makes a good one. Although we have set out some guidelines below, it is important to remember that there are few hard and fast rules and no such thing as the 'perfect' CV. Every individual – and certainly every recruiter! – will have their own style and preferences and you should tailor your CV to suit you.

You may wish to download our suggested CV template from our website.

Presentation

Your aim should be to create a CV that is clear, concise, pleasing to the eye and easy to read and which emphasises the information you are most keen to get across. Don't forget your target audience (generally partners and HR) and remember that they may initially only scan the document and will want to be able to find the information they are looking for quickly.

Tips:

- Keep the layout simple, clear and consistent. Using bullet points, sub-sections and headings can help, as can bold, underline, italics etc.
- Word process/type (don't handwrite unless requested to do so) and use a pleasing and sensibly sized black font (10-12 point).

- Check spelling, grammar and sense carefully. Use word processor spelling and grammar tools and ask friends or family to proof read the document.
- Keep your CV to a sensible length. The received wisdom is 2 pages, but we think you often need more. As long as the content is relevant and the layout clear, 3 or more pages is acceptable.
- DO NOT include a photograph (unless requested to do so), no matter how good you look in a feather boa or Bermuda shorts (yes, we've seen both!).
- Avoid graphics, icons, colours and fancy borders etc.

Content & Structure

There is a certain amount of information that pretty much every law firm employer looks for in an applicant's CV and which you simply have to include. However, there is still scope to express yourself and a well thought out and carefully drafted CV will create maximum impact.

Tips:

Personal Details

- Start with personal and contact details (full name, date of birth, address and contact telephone and email). You may also include nationality, visa status (if appropriate) and marital status.

Education and Qualifications

- Educational history and professional qualifications should follow, including name of institutions and dates attended in reverse order (e.g. university before school). List subjects, grades and passes (for A-Levels and above; total number +/- grades is sufficient for O-Levels or GCSEs). If you omit grades they will be requested or assumed to be poor. Include admission date.

Career History

- The next section of your CV will generally contain your career history, with each position listed in reverse chronological order, and including the names and locations of employers and the dates of employment.
- For each period of employment, start with a brief description of the organisation. This is less important for high profile law firms, but can be very helpful when you have worked at smaller, niche or lesser known practices or companies with which the prospective employer may be unfamiliar. Three or four lines are normally sufficient.
- You should identify the position held/role undertaken and should provide details of the experience gained in each organisation. This is the area most often overlooked by lawyers when preparing their initial CV draft - probably because it is undoubtedly the most time consuming. Prospective employers are acutely aware that lawyers of a similar vintage may have enjoyed very different experiences and exposures in private practice and really do want to get a feel for the applicant's actual legal experience. It is important that you include a reasonable level of detail, outlining the range and variety of work you have been involved in and your level of expertise. Clearly, you will probably wish to include your more interesting/sexy/challenging work, but do try to convey a general flavour of each role and do not neglect the mundane, yet often crucial. Somewhat less detail may be required for senior applicants.

- Prospective employers do like to see examples of actual deals/transactions/cases that you have worked on and the type of clients you have worked with. Do not include client or project names if you are not comfortable doing so (for example, if these are not in the public domain and/or could breach client confidentiality), but do try to provide generic descriptions instead (e.g. Career Counsel = a specialist, niche legal recruitment and careers advisory consultancy). Make sure that you spell out your personal involvement and responsibilities in the matter.
- For each position held, you should detail your involvement in non fee-earning activities such as business development/marketing, client entertainment, professional support, supervisory and management responsibilities and sporting or social events. This is extremely important information which law firms will be keen to investigate.
- Detail relevant internal and external training courses and seminars that you have attended. You may wish to refer to your CPD record generally.
- Do refer to particular achievements and/or high points in your career.
- When trying to remind yourself of matters you have worked on, don't forget to make use of (electronic) time recording records, old bills, client relationship records, departmental and team marketing information etc.
- There is no need to include reasons for leaving each position on your CV and it is often easier to deal with these at interview. However, if you are concerned at how the frequency of particular moves might be perceived - and you can explain the move(s) clearly, concisely and sensitively on paper - then you may wish to tackle potential negative perceptions head on in your CV.
- Following - for senior lawyers, prospective employers will obviously be very interested in potential client following. This is a sensitive and complicated issue which is best discussed in detail with your recruiter, but it is something that can be addressed in a CV. Depending on the circumstances, you may wish to make reference in your CV to estimated total following and/or to categories of client which you believe may/will follow you to a new firm; it may even be appropriate to mention named clients. However, if you are in any doubt, it is probably best to avoid specifics at this stage and leave it to your recruiter to discuss the issue with prospective employers; following is a matter that will, in any event, inevitably be dealt with at length at interview!
- Management/Billing information - some candidates choose to include details of their own billing and/or utilisation performance in their CV. Although this does not seem to be information that is necessarily expected by prospective law firm employers, it can be helpful if your performance is strong. In any event, it is information that is often sought at interview (particularly by smaller firms) and so may be worth gathering.
- Business Plan - partner candidates will generally be required to produce a business plan at some stage in the recruitment process. Increasingly, senior associates, too, are required (or decide themselves) to produce a short form plan. Ideally, a business plan should be prepared at least prior to interview (it's amazing how it tends to focus everybody's mind!), but sometimes it can help to attach the plan to the initial CV application. We advise on the content and structure of business plans and help candidates draft a plan that is appropriate to the requirements of the prospective position.

Additional Information

- The third and final section of your CV should deal with any additional information you wish to include that does not fit within the other sections.

- We suggest:

Achievements

- *Don't be shy here – most people's achievements outside of work are relatively mundane; not everyone runs marathons or climbs Everest.*

Positions of Responsibility

- *It can be hard to 'lose' the school prefect or the 1st XV rugby captain positions from your CV, but there may come a time when you have to let them go. Is that time now? Not necessarily, but ask the question.*

Languages

- *Genuine language skills and levels.*

IT Skills

- *Increasingly assumed these days, particularly for junior lawyers, but often worth mentioning.*

Memberships & Appointments

- *Professional bodies, panels, clubs, societies, charities etc.*

Publications

- *Journal articles, books, reference guides etc*

Interests

- *Some recruiters advise leaving these off. We disagree. Everyone needs some outside interests – even lawyers! What is more, your passion may even be shared by your interviewer(s) and it's much more relaxing talking about Liverpool FC at interview than it is share option agreements.*

Miscellaneous

- Depending on the circumstances, you may wish to attach or append certain additional information to your CV. For example, foreign qualified lawyers may be advised or required to attach academic transcripts and/or confirmation of VISA status, trainee solicitors could attach training contract supervisor assessments, unemployed lawyers may append 'open' references etc.

General tips

- Many general CV templates suggest a Personal Profile or Summary paragraph at the start of a CV. Generally, we don't recommend these for private practice lawyers and law firm clients tell us they prefer an objective, factual CV. More often than not, this paragraph consists of a series of self-serving statements describing qualities which a potential employer will be looking to test at interview in any event. If your CV is well constructed and presented, the reader should easily be able to find plenty of hard 'evidence' of these attributes throughout. That said, Profiles or Summaries can work and many people would disagree with us.

- Generally, place your emphasis on more recent positions, experiences and achievements wherever possible.
- Make sure there are no gaps or breaks in your CV which are unaccounted for. These can lead to confusion. Often the worst is assumed.
- Do not embellish or exaggerate any aspect of your CV. Definitely do not lie. Your professional integrity is paramount and you may well be found out.
- Keep your CV updated.
- There is no need to include details of referees at this stage. These will generally be requested and taken up post offer. References should be marked "Available on request", but you may wish to speak to referees in advance, however.
- Make sure your CV is fit for each and every application. If necessary, tailor it appropriately to the particular requirements of the firm and position.
- Humour. Most will tell you it's a big 'no no'. We're not so sure. But if you do decide to go down this route be careful and definitely don't overdo it.
- A CV is no place for undue modesty. Use positive and confident language wherever possible and do not shy away from trumpeting your achievements. However, do be careful not to oversell yourself and, most importantly, make sure you are able to back up any claims you make in your CV at interview.

Further help

Career Counsel is a specialist recruitment and career adviser to the legal profession.

If you need any further advice or assistance on how to prepare your CV, have questions or comments on any aspect of this Guide, or would like to discuss your career options, please do not hesitate to contact us at:

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Tel: (0117) 927 7636
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