

Hopping the fence: writing a CV the private sector will read

As many council staff dust down their CVs **Heidi Nicholson and David Welsh** give advice about how to ensure they are effective and up to date

I met an executive recruiter recently who said only a dozen of every thousand CVs he read were any good. The remaining 99% became nothing more than lottery tickets. Whether they received any serious attention, made any impact, and were passed to an employer, was luck. Otherwise they were in the shredder.

There are so many ways to write a CV badly. That explains why so few hit the mark. A few of these ways are common knowledge, such as using poor grammar and failing to keep the CV to a reasonable length. That makes it all the more surprising that these are some of the most common failings recruiters see. So few people really know their grammar. So few use three words to say something rather than a dozen. And so very few consider their audience before they start to write.

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in denial) they have always got a job in the end.

So they have, in better days (which is the lifetime of everyone reading this article), often after a longer wait than necessary, and with some great opportunities squandered along the way.

The cost of this ignorance is pretty stark. Unemployment is a pretty fearful condition and the stress, creeping sense of worthlessness and financial loss it produces scars many for life. It leaves few unchanged.

Many public sector professionals assume that their CV speaks for itself. They have been a director of this or that council in this or that specialism and everyone knows what that means, don't they? However, the knowledge base of recruiters has declined as the profession has grown bigger, younger and more generalist.

Even if it remains partially true in the public sector (no serious job hunter would run the risk though) it is very clearly not true when you are trying to leave the public sector behind. The public sector has a very particular language that the private sector does not share. Do a test. Look at your latest CV and consider every acronym, every organisation, every quali-

Heidi Nicholson and David Welsh have plenty of tips for an effective CV



fication you have on there. Ask yourself, if someone had never been in the public sector, would they know what these all mean?

Sure, people know what the NHS is and have at least some notion of "Council", but that is pretty much where it ends.

So, what to do?

Here are some tips.

- Plan your CV before you start to type it. Make sure every word is going to appeal to the audience that will read it.
- Be aware that while it's OK to have a "base" CV you are probably going to have to tailor each one you send out for its particular audience.
- Always start your CV with a single paragraph 'Professional Profile'. The first sentence needs to tell the reader what you are ('a board level director and leader of operational teams' for example). The next two sentences should introduce your greatest achievements and explain very succinctly what you bring to a new employer. It is good to finish by summing up your career objective in a single sentence, so the reader knows what you want to do next.
- For every organisation you have worked for, explain it in layman's terms. A district council isn't just a statutory body. It is a provider of multiple personal and business services with many highly complex relationships, employing thousands and managing a budget of tens of millions of pounds.
- Never, ever leave an acronym or professional jargon unexplained. A JAR is a glass vessel for storing jam in. A safeguarding board is used in construction to stop builders falling off scaffolding.
- Don't mix up a list of responsibilities and achievements. They are different things. Briefly explain

the responsibilities and spend much more time on achievements. Only pick achievements relevant to the job you are applying for. Commercial companies will be much more interested in money saved and external relationships forged than esoteric central government targets met.

● Get your grammar right. For senior CVs you are probably better off writing in the first person with

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personal pronouns, 'I', 'my' and so on, as that will demonstrate your written communication skills better.

This is just the start. The sister of one of our clients recently told us her new CV had gone a long way beyond copywriting and had understood her as a person, and strongly advocated her claims. It requires knowing yourself and knowing your audience. If you can, and follow the rules above, you are on the way to writing one of those dozen-in-a-thousand CVs. ■

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