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Careers uncovered

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Introduction

Working on Guardian Careers, one thing that strikes you is the sheer amount of competition that candidates face.

The glory days, when jobseekers could rely on ticking the minimum requirements, are long gone. Having the basics is just the beginning - candidates must persuade recruiters that, out of the crowds of people who want to do the job, no one can do it better than them.

So to give you a helping hand, Guardian Careers has teamed up with Guardian Jobs to bring you a new version of our ebook. We have scoured Guardian Careers' top resources and compiled them into one handy guide, which will take you through all the stages of finding employment.

This new, extended and updated version includes a brand new section with advice on job hunting - as well as extra tips and resources on writing CVs, succeeding in job interviews and switching careers.

We'd like to thank all the experts who contribute to the site for their continued support, especially those featured in this book. We're incredibly excited about the year ahead and are looking forward to publishing more help and advice.

Kate Hodge and Martin Williams

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Finding a job

Part 1: Effective job hunting

Many people rush at a job search and apply for roles they have little interest in or are unlikely to be shortlisted for. Not only will this pretty much guarantee rejection, it will dampen your confidence. Similarly, if you approach agencies with a poor sense of your target job, you are likely to be sidelined. The third biggest mistake is to use up all your best contacts too soon when you're unclear how they can help. Slow down. Take time to look at yourself and your confidence levels, and consider how equipped you feel to summarise your strengths. Here are some top tips on how to approach your job hunt:

- **Think about what you're selling.** Do you know what you're looking for? Can you list your main skills and achievements? Which employers appeal to you and why? Don't go near busy decision-makers until you have answers to all these questions.
- **Plan for rejection.** In today's economy you will hear "no" a lot more than you hear "yes". To maintain your confidence and avoid becoming a job beggar desperate to take anything, cultivate resilience. But don't squander it by applying for jobs far outside your skills range where you're unlikely to get any kind of response.
- **Gather evidence.** Before you begin drafting a CV or stumble into interviews, list raw material from your past - without editing. Go over every part of your experience which looks like work, including part-time, temporary, unpaid posts and work placements, as well as your education and qualifications. This will help you when it comes to thinking about what jobs you could apply for.
- **List and research target organisations.** It's no use trying to impress employers if you have very little sense of what will press their buttons. Do your homework thoroughly before making any kind of approach. If possible, try to speak to people who know what the organisation is trying to achieve and the kind of people they're currently looking for. If you're trying to make a career change, seek out people who have made the leap before you, to learn the shortcuts and avoid the bear traps.
- **Use a multi-channel approach.** Make direct approaches to organisations who are not currently advertising. Build relationships with the right recruitment agencies, and talk to people in interesting roles and sectors. Above all else, don't kid yourself that spending all day in front of a computer screen is the best use of your time; get in front of people too. At least once a week, put on smart clothes and find someone to meet so you can practice talking about yourself and what you're looking for. It maintains your confidence levels and ensures you're remembered.

Part 2: Decoding job adverts

It sounds so easy: what could be simpler than applying for a vacancy via a job board? You can browse thousands of great opportunities from the comfort of your home. When you spot a good match, it's just a case of sending off your CV.

But with competition so fierce, employers are often swamped by CVs and have little time to read each one in detail. So candidates need to make sure they're doing everything possible to ensure theirs makes the cut. Here are some tips for improving your success rate:

Read between the lines

Before you look at job adverts, it's vital to have a good awareness of your skills, knowledge and experience, so that you can match yourself to roles that suit. As a general rule, if you can tick 80% of the boxes, in terms of what the employer is asking for, then it might be worth applying. But sometimes you need to read between the lines, as some of the adverts can seem very vague at first. Some people take the approach of sending off as many applications as possible. But there are strategies and techniques you can use to work smarter, rather than harder. Print out the job advert and go through it with a highlighter, picking out the key words and phrases. Then make sure those keywords appear in your CV and cover letter wherever applicable. There is no casual information in a job advert. People tend to get distracted by the job title and skim the rest. But every word they put in has been carefully crafted for a reason so you need to look very closely.

The way they talk about the job and the adjectives they use will tell you a lot. For instance, if it says it's fast-paced, then they are telling you exactly what kind of person you need to be: high-energy and good at working under pressure. If it asks for a particular skill, you not only need to have it, you have to be able to prove you've got it. Some skills may be more important than others in terms of weighting and you can sometimes make a case for why, despite not having something, you're still a good candidate. However, don't ignore any gaps hoping they won't notice: they will. You must specify how you meet everything they are asking for if you want to get shortlisted.

Apply for a position at the right level

Salary is usually a good indicator of whether the role is the right seniority for you. If it's considerably more than what you're on now, then this is probably a big step up. Also look at how the entire advert is constructed to understand the job level. Who does the role report to, how big is the company, how complex is the role, is it international or single country? If it is a big step up then you will need to prove that you can do a great job at that level, rather than hoping that they will just see your potential. It's usually more realistic to inch yourself forward in stepping stone roles rather than look for great career leaps.

Does it fit with your values?

You should also think about how the company is describing their culture, and what imagery are they using. Is this the kind of company that will fit with your values? What language is being used to describe the role? For instance, if the advert talks about an "aggressive pursuit of sales growth", that provides a clue to how you will be measured and the culture of the organisation. If the language is bland and non-descriptive, then it might suggest the organisation is just fishing for CVs by a contingency recruitment firm, rather than looking to fill a specific job behind the advert.

The job title is just the top line: you should really get down to what the advert is talking about. But you need to take adverts with a pinch of salt - remember that they're trying to sell the job so will only talk about the good bits. Ideally, try to talk to someone who has done the job. If you can't do that, LinkedIn can be helpful to see what responsibilities and skills people in the job have.

Match the skills and qualifications

Look for the qualifications they're asking for. Within that you can find clues about the sort of skills that they're looking for. As long as you can give evidence of each skill or attribute they're looking for, you're in with a shot. If you can't demonstrate absolutely every one of the skills required on the advert because you haven't had the role yet to do so, then it might still be worth applying. In your application, you can take the opportunity to say why you have the potential. Mention anything which demonstrates this, even if it's something outside of work.

Graduate jobs

If you're looking for a graduate job, they are not always flagged up as such. Instead, the training and experience which is required - as well as the salary and responsibilities of the job - will be a huge indicator of the level. Also, think about where the advert was: if it was advertised at a university, it's probably an entry-level role. But if it's advertised in a national newspaper, it may not be.

Part 3: Ask the experts

Know what you are applying for

Anna Pitts - marketing assistant and online researcher, Graduate Recruitment Bureau:

"There is sometimes confusion between recruitment consultancies and temping agencies, but they are completely different. Hiring organisations pay temping agencies a fee to find an employee - the agency then pays the hired candidate from the fee. This means that the temping agency operates between the employee and the employer on an ongoing basis. Recruitment consultancies, on the other hand, only match jobseekers and employers. The hiring company pays the consultancy a fee for this service but once a candidate has been hired, they are removed from the equation."

Don't get trigger-happy

Chris Smith - chief executive of MyJobMatcher.com:

"Very few people will simply apply for a dream job and get it tomorrow. Job seeking is about setting a number of good horses running and making sure you get the right ones home."

"Apply for the jobs you think are best and most relevant but be mindful not to apply for everything and anything you find. If you do, you will not only devalue yourself but you'll also get yourself in a muddle. There is no disgrace in not applying for a position you are neither suited for nor, more importantly, understand. Do you really want to be applying for a job for a "colour distribution technician"? It sounds very arty but it's actually a painter and decorator."

Stay positive

Harry Freedman - founder of the Career Advice Centre:

"To help stay positive, remember your achievements. You should have a bank of achievements that you keep for your CV anyway, so that every time you apply for a job you can include those which are most relevant. These demonstrate what you do when you are performing at your best and could come from any area of your life: work, family or social. Reviewing this list can help you recall the mood of success."

"A few days break from the grind of job searching might also do the trick. Others will find that a good workout in the gym helps to re-energise and motivate them. Some people will find their positivity through spiritual means, or with the help of friends or colleagues. Or maybe a professional or career coach will help to keep you motivated and on track."

"But remember, it doesn't matter how positive you are, there will always be times when things go wrong. Motivation won't solve everything. It's important to understand that the current job market is fiercely competitive and, in many cases, a bit of a lottery."

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Writing CVs

Part 1: CV templates

Every candidate, no matter how experienced, needs to make a great first impression with their CV. If you haven't had to apply for a job in the last few years, be aware that CV-writing standards have changed.

One shift has been the emphasis on relevance. Recruitment blogger Mervyn Dinnen says that one of the biggest mistakes you can make is failing to fully grasp the skills, qualities and achievements that are relevant to a new employer. Rather than focusing your CV on the past, with the usual chronological list of what you did and where, orient it towards your future; highlight the skills and knowledge you would bring to the new role.

Here are some examples of common CV layouts. Once you've identified which career description best fits your circumstances and experience from the options below, click on a word document CV template and start scribing.

Qualification-led CV

If you have recently qualified, either as a postgraduate or in further education, a qualification-style CV is for you. This format showcases your qualifications and further skills where relevant, placing experience or work history second – handy if you lack direct work experience.

Avoid focusing too heavily on your degree; you don't want to give employers the impression you might be happy remaining in academic life (unless you're applying for an academic job, of course). Draw out aspects of your studies that will be interesting to an employer, such as why you chose your course, what you got out of it and how you believe it would enhance your career.

Any way that you can back up your ability to apply theory to practice will be what interests a prospective employer the most. Showing life skills, which are also good work skills, will impress too. Focus on highlighting how you get things done. Your future boss will be interested in finding out how you would do the job, and you can communicate that even with a qualifications-based CV.

[*Download the qualifications-based template here*](#)

Going for a promotion?

The reverse chronology CV template lists linear work histories starting with the most recent. So, if you are continuing to climb the career ladder in the same industry or with the same organisation, this CV template is for you. Staying motivated and fresh in the same sector or with the same employer is a real achievement. Everybody admires endeavour and commitment; these are yours to claim.

[*Download the reverse chronology-based template here*](#)

Career switching CV

If you want to switch work sectors, it can be difficult to persuade a new employer that your skills are transferable. Listing your job history might actually work against you; in a tight market employers often look for candidates who have done a similar job in a similar organisation. If you face this problem, you may want to write a functional, skills-based CV. This avoids listing a job history, and instead sets out skills and competencies that closely match target jobs.

The focus is on a mix of skills, expertise, qualifications and attitude. It should demonstrate your ability to apply your knowledge and skills to different or developing sectors and roles. Don't let personal motivations for a career change concern you here - use the template to smooth your transition.

Avoiding your work history altogether, however, can be problematic: recruitment agencies and employers often dislike functional CVs because it's difficult to establish where and when you worked. So use this format with caution.

[*Download the skills-based template here*](#)

Freestyle guru or consultant?

This CV type is for individuals who freelance, contract and have a degree of expertise which makes them a valuable commodity. So, be it a plumber, vision mixer or interim manager, this portfolio CV template is designed to elevate your expertise and show how your superior knowledge helps businesses to get things done well, on time and on budget.

If you work in the creative sector you might want to consider how you present your CV. Perhaps, as well as a paper document, you could point prospective employers to your YouTube channel, website or online profile so that they can see your work or watch a video clip. Demonstrating your expertise through the way you promote yourself will impress, and a one-and-a-half minute video clip conveys an awful lot more about you than a four-page CV.

[*Download the portfolio-based template here*](#)

Part 2: Writing your CV

Writing your CV seems like it should be easy to do. How tricky can it be to write down where you've worked and what you did when you were there? But, in reality, it's far from straightforward. Writing your CV is an act of self-definition: it represents who you are in a work context and/or who you want to be.

People reveal far more about themselves in their CV than they realise. You can often tell which roles or activities people have enjoyed more than others because the language changes from positive and high energy to flat and functional. You can see which candidates appear more confident in their capabilities, talking easily about their achievements, rather than merely listing their job duties. It's also very common for a candidate's subconscious worries to find expression on their CV. For example, some individuals will feel the need to justify why they left a particular job, or candidates who are sensitive about their age or educational disappointments will often draw unnecessary attention to these rather than downplaying or omitting them.

Any career confusion also shows up loud and clear on your CV. It may be a perfectly decent CV on its own terms, but if it's irrelevant to the role being applied for, then the employer will assume that you have not understood the job. Sometimes candidates think that if they write a broad CV, which includes everything, it will give them more opportunities. The opposite is actually true: if an employer sees a generic CV, they'll assume you're hedging your bets, and this makes you a risky recruitment decision.

So how do you make sure your CV is saying the right things about you?

It's important to remember that while the CV is a personal statement, it's primarily a business marketing document and it needs to be professional and positive in tone, content and presentation. Here are some tips on how you can achieve this:

Profile

This is the earliest opportunity on your CV to show you have exactly what they're looking for. Include the key skills and experience you have that are relevant and avoid talking about your personality or softer skills unless you can back them up with evidence. For example, instead of saying, "strong interpersonal skills" write, "my strong relationship management skills enabled the retention of our key clients despite attempts by a competitor to lure them away".

Employment history

The information included under each role you've had shouldn't simply be a summary of your job description. Under each job, highlight activities you were involved in that relate directly to the job you are applying for. Include achievements, such as how you met or exceeded any targets and how you added value to the organisation. This could include additional income you helped to generate, costs you reduced, improvements in quality or the introduction of new ideas.

Wherever possible, try to quantify your achievements. For example, say your marketing idea generated a 10% increase in market share, or you saved the department £5,000 by switching stationery suppliers. No matter what role you worked in, you should find a way to demonstrate your positive impact on your team, organisation or customers.

Relevant skills and experience

If your earlier career history or extra-curricular experience is more relevant to the role you're applying for than your current role, use a heading like "relevant skills and experience" or "career achievements" to bring together the information and evidence. Make sure that this appears on the first page of your CV, usually before your employment history.

Avoiding the pitfalls

If you want an employer to get the right impression of you from your CV, then avoid these common mistakes:

- **Lack of relevant information:** many candidates make assumptions about what's important to the employer and so fail to provide the relevant information in their CV.
- **Insufficient evidence:** unsubstantiated claims won't work. You need to prove you have what they need, so provide examples.
- **Too generic:** many candidates write a broad CV because they want to keep their options open. But unless it's clear who you are and what you do, then recruiters won't know what to do with you.
- **Errors:** many CVs have errors in them and are often rejected on that basis alone. Your CV must be impeccably presented if you want to demonstrate your professionalism and attention to detail. Always ask someone else to check it over for you.
- **Negative information:** your CV should include only positive information. Never criticise a previous employer or refer to difficulties or disappointments unless you were able to turn them around.

- **Poor language:** the use of jargon, clumsy expression or clichés can sabotage the chances of even the most capable of candidates. Your communication skills are being judged by your use of language in your CV. Don't waffle, be precise and use positive action words such as "initiated this" or "created that" to reinforce the message that you're an upbeat, "can-do" type of candidate.

Put your reader first

Once you know what the company is looking for, it's much easier to decide what to include or leave out. CVs with impact match what you offer to the company's requirements. It can encompass many different aspects of your background - achievements, skills, employment history and so on - but it must all focus on the hirer's needs by pruning out the less relevant parts. For everything you include, ask yourself what point you are trying to convey to the reader and why.

Work out what to highlight

Identify what the company wants from an ideal candidate by researching the company and sector, and by considering the wording of the job advert. Address these key requirements in prominent places in your CV. As different roles have different requirements, your CV shouldn't be identical for each job you apply for. And when applying for more senior positions, your CV should also reflect different priorities regarding skills and career achievements.

Include examples that communicate your brand

Discovering what makes you unique enables you to differentiate yourself from other candidates. Your "brand" is the combination of the qualities, skills, achievements and values that you offer. Reinforce this image throughout your CV with supporting examples.

For instance, if you've identified that your ability to make difficult subjects accessible to a wider audience makes you an excellent editor, show how you've done this and what the results were. For example: "Edited a series of highly-complex technical manuals for a non-expert audience. Acclaimed for its accessibility and clarity, this series is now a market leader, selling more than one million copies."

Include enough examples of your achievements to prove your value (though avoid making it read like an autobiography). The more relevant your examples are to the employer, the more impact they will have.

Don't waffle

The shorter the CV, the more likely it is that an employer will have time to read the detail. Keep an eye on the length of your CV. For most employers, two sides of A4 is the standard. And at graduate level, a relevant one-page CV is fine. Employers are deluged with CVs, so if they see one which is three pages and more, they're likely to be put off. If it goes beyond two sides, it's probably too long.

Try glancing over your CV in 30 seconds: does the important information stand out quickly and succinctly?

It's important that your CV doesn't look too cramped by squeezing in information. If a CV is too dense, with tiny font and no breathing space on the page, it can look messy and unappealing. Instead of cramming in text, decide what the most relevant bits are and edit or merge it to fit. Can you make sentences shorter by removing unnecessary words? Can you group similar jobs under headings, or reduce old or irrelevant career history to a few lines of notable achievements?

The following information can almost always be deleted:

- Information that blurs the focus of your CV, such as very old or temporary jobs
- Date of birth, marital status, religion. There is usually no need to include this information. Indeed, it could be advisable to miss them off for the purposes of equal opportunities
- Interests and hobbies. Generally CVs do not require a whole section devoted to your hobbies. If you've achieved something noteworthy or relevant to the job through one of your interests, slot it in somewhere in your CV or covering letter. That said, certain types of employers may look at hobbies and interests to find people who stand out from the crowd. This will be covered in more detail later.

Emails and file format

Word documents look different on every computer: they can look fantastic on yours but terrible on somebody else's. Submitting your CV as a PDF file means they are the same on every computer. It also avoids the risk of your CV looking unprofessional and unintended changes being made during online submissions.

If you are applying for graduate jobs, don't submit a CV using your university email address as it is likely to expire a few weeks after you finish university. When using a personal account, however, make sure the email address you use sounds professional. No employer would accept an application from `sexy-hotstuff@hotmail.com`.

Wording your CV

Making your CV read well is critical. It should be easy for the employer to understand the points you're making and should be written in a way that demonstrates that you understand the sector. Your choice of words could be the deciding factor in whether your CV makes it through an initial screening. You can improve your chances with these tips:

- **Use relevant industry keywords**

This will show that you understand the industry and are operating on the right wavelength. For example, jobs in HR might specify experience in "recruitment" or "training and development".

Analyse the job description (and those for similar roles) to identify particular qualifications, skills or types of experience. To ensure you're covering all possibilities, include synonyms, examples or variations of the same word in both your CV and covering letter. Incorporate the keywords naturally in your CV so they also read well. Good places for keywords are your profile/summary, skills and work history sections. You can also use them as headings.

If you're changing career, it's especially important to choose keywords that are relevant to your target sector. Be careful how you describe skills and achievements gained in a previous career: you might need to rewrite these to align them more closely with your current career goals, or to minimise any doubts about the relevancy of your experience.

● **Avoid vacuous phrases**

Phrases such as “problem-solver”, “excellent communication skills” or “results-oriented” are more likely to be basic requirements of the role than keywords. Used without examples as evidence, they’re so general that they are almost meaningless. If you find that you’re filling your CV with phrases like this, scour the job description again to find more specific requirements. Choose the most important and address each one.

● **Avoid clichés**

Avoid using clichéd adjectives to describe yourself. Anyone can say they are a “passionate, intelligent, self-motivated team player”. Instead, use quantifiable evidence to support this so it comes across more naturally in your writing.

● **Write in specifics**

Including achievements in your CV illustrates your potential value to an organisation. Quantify the impact you had wherever possible. Rather than a bland “excellent communication skills”, prove it with a striking example. For example, “Translated dry insurance policies into jargon-free, customer-friendly mailing shots, resulting in a 20% increase in business”.

● **Remember the “so what?” factor**

Make a clear connection between what you write and what the potential employer wants to see. Find the business value of your degree or other experience: what did it teach you to do? How will that be useful in the job you’re applying for? For instance, if you did a business studies degree, you could say: “Trained to analyse complex data and identify greatest return on investment.” Or, if you did an arts degree, for roles where good communication skills are important, you could say: “Trained to research, summarise and present key findings clearly and concisely.” Your CV will be competing with others, so it needs to be relevant and address each specific requirement.

Avoid passive forms and dull sentences that start with, “I was responsible for...”. Instead, use vivid vocabulary that leaves an impression, such as “pioneered”, “championed” or “spearheaded” rather than “started” or “began”, for instance.

Provide background to your stories: describe the challenge or situation you found yourself faced with; detail the action you took; give the result. For extra impact, highlight the extent of your achievement by putting it in the context of industry norms or the current economic climate. But keep it short and sweet. The employer wants to know how suited you are to the role, not your life story.

What not to include

Deciding what to leave off can be just as important as deciding what to include. Your CV should be an advert for your skills, rather than a critique of your working life.

You don’t have to explain why you left previous jobs or mention health problems. Remember that anything you include may be discussed at interview so consider which jobs you can safely leave off. Your CV will be scrutinised at the interview stage so you should always be truthful, but you can still be selective about the information that goes in it.

Here are some other things you should keep to yourself to avoid damaging your chances:

- **Any hint that you're unsure about the job or your career choice**

Few people have a detailed career path mapped out in which a particular employer takes centre stage. But with such a large pool of applicants, employers will choose the one who seems most interested in them and their opportunity.

Make sure your CV is coherent, making sense of each step or career progression. If your work history is fractured, pull together more general career themes (such as customer service, marketing and so on) which are relevant to the job you're applying for. Then support these with selected details that show you have the required skills and experience.

You don't have to include every job you've ever had, although unexplained gaps in your employment may look undesirable. You also don't need to list your job history in chronological order - the most relevant experiences are not always the most recent.

Be clear (in your CV, cover letter and at interview) why the job and company appeal, and how they fit your career goals. If you're a recent graduate with a diverse work history or an unrelated degree, you'll need to explain why you think this role is the perfect match for your skills and interests.

- **Lack of confidence in your abilities**

Most employers want someone who can work with minimum supervision. Don't reveal a lack of confidence about the crucial, technical elements of the role. If you don't have much experience in one aspect of the job, don't flag it up in an obvious way. Instead, emphasise your ability to learn quickly or focus more on your other skills and experience.

- **Academic failure**

Some companies insist on a solid history of academic achievement. But others go straight to your experience section, overlooking academic qualifications. Don't let any educational shortcomings discount you - you don't need to broadcast a failed module or year, or poorer marks than expected. If you've got good qualifications, make the most of them. If you did well at university but poorly at school, consider only mentioning your degree. Or you could even miss them out altogether and write about previous employment experiences instead.

- **Illness**

Disclosing physical and mental illnesses and disabilities is a personal choice. Journalist Rich McEachran, however, has explored the possible negative effects of bringing this up before your interview. He wrote:

"A 2008 survey by Changing Faces showed that 90% of people questioned unknowingly associated negative thoughts with facial disfigurements. At the same time around 90% of the job applications in which I brought my disfigurement in to a positive light in the covering letter were rejected. Of course I cannot claim that me disclosing my disfigurement was the reason for the reams of, "Sorry. We received a high volume of applications. This time you have been unsuccessful. Best of luck," but it did make me wonder."

Ultimately, it's up to you whether to mention it or not, but you should not feel pressured to disclose if you don't want to.

- **Demands**

If you're applying for a full-time role, don't apply asking for part-time hours. Likewise, if you're applying for one type of role, don't drop heavy hints that you'd rather be interviewing for another.

- **Inability to get on with others**

Personality and attitude are crucial elements in candidate selection, so admitting that you found it hard to create good working relationships in a previous job will raise red flags. Avoid criticising previous managers, instead emphasise how difficult decisions were made mutually and make sure no note of bitterness creeps in.

- **School grades**

Deciding whether to include your school grades will depend on your age, your career experience and what other qualifications you have gained since. As you get older and more qualified, school grades generally become less important. In some cases, breaking down your GCSE grades will waste space on your CV. Instead, include the number of GCSEs you have and the grade range, eg, "10 GCSEs (A*-C)".

CVs for portfolio careers

If you have a portfolio career, freelancing or taking a range of short-term jobs, here are some tips on how to approach writing your CV:

- **Consider developing more than one CV.** Few arts professionals, for example, earn a living exclusively from the sector. For each type of job you apply for, you'll need to tweak your CV so that it is relevant to that particular role or company. And designing your CV in a straightforward, chronological way might not serve your interests if you've had numerous, temporary contracts or projects. Instead, consider different layout options.
- **Think from an employer's perspective.** Remember to demonstrate how you solve problems, and contextualise this using examples. Candidates who stand out are often those who can show an interest in the company: a brief cover email explaining your motivations and pulling out key details can help you do that.
- **Link to examples of your work.** For instance, within the design industry, it's mostly the strength of a portfolio that secures you work. Although some employers also like to see a well-rounded CV, it's essential to get your work out there on blogs and other creative sites.
- **Make sure that your online profiles effectively convey your skills and worth.** While LinkedIn has a section for projects, the overall layout probably serves more traditional career paths better than portfolio careers. Platforms, such as blogs and 3Desk, are highly customisable and allow you to demonstrate and quantify outcomes, add images, and link skills to each project.

Part 3: Spelling and grammar

Everyone knows that a CV with sloppy spelling and grammar could cost you a job, yet every day recruiters are handed applications that look like they have never been proof read. Here are eight top tips for getting the grammar right on your CV:

1. Don't rely on spellcheckers

A CV shows your employer what effect you will have on their company. But it should not show you're employer what affect you will have on there company. Both of those sentences might fly through a spellchecker without a problem, but one doesn't make any sense.

Spelling isn't everything; horrendous homophones can easily slip through the net and ruin an otherwise good CV. Carefully checking your writing could make the difference between a great new job and a grate knew job.

2. Don't over-use capital letters

Some People feel the Need to Capitalise every Important Word in a Sentence. OTHERS LIKE BLOCK CAPITALS, BELIEVING THAT THEY'RE CLEARER TO READ. In fact, research suggests that capitals are harder to read than lowercase. For employers who care about grammar, adding capitals incorrectly to random words could be a reason to bin your CV.

The rules can be debatable. Is David Cameron the prime minister, or the Prime Minister? The former fits with our style guide at Guardian Careers, but the latter is not entirely incorrect either.

When writing a CV, the crucial thing is to be consistent with your style, so if you've used a lowercase letter for a job title in one place, use lowercase each time you mention the job. But never capitalise when it is completely incorrect to do so. For instance, it's never right to cap up the word "job" or "employer" in the middle of a sentence.

3. Get your apostrophes right

Famed for their misuse, apostrophes are a real demonstration of your grip on grammar. While some people forget about them altogether, others try to make their applications more impressive by littering them all over the place.

The truth is that the rules are fairly simple, so getting it wrong on your CV will not send a great message to employers. Use apostrophes to indicate missing letters, a possessive, time or quantity.

4. Use the singular for individual organisations

It's easy to accidentally write about a single company in the plural if you're thinking about the people who work there. But if you are talking about one company, use the singular. If you work at the BBC, for instance, you are part of its team, not part of their team.

5. Keep it in the first person

If I start my CV in the first person, he should not suddenly start talking about himself in the third person. Job applications are all about selling yourself, so using I, me and my is standard practice. Do not refer to yourself as he, she or they (unless it's a quote about you from someone else). If you do want to write in the third person, keep it consistent. Don't flit between the two.

6. Get your tenses right

Most likely, this will mean talking about old jobs in the past tense and your current job in the present tense. Of course, there may be exceptions to this general rule, such as talking about a past event that occurred in your current job. The key, however, is to ensure it makes sense and avoid switching between tenses in the middle of a phrase. Muddling up your tenses is not only grammatically incorrect, it also makes what you've written confusing and hard to follow.

7. Explain your abbreviations

Some abbreviations are best kept abbreviated, such as GCSE. Everyone knows what it is, so writing General Certificate of Secondary Education isn't an effective use of space. But if it isn't obvious, write it out in full to avoid confusing employers with jargon.

Add the abbreviation in brackets after you first mention it, and use it thereafter. For instance, you might say you work at the National Careers Service (NCS) in your first sentence and then go on to simply say NCS. And you don't need to put points between capitalised initials like this: N.C.S.

8. If in doubt, avoid semicolons

Semicolons can be used when a comma is not enough, but a full stop is too much. They can also be used to separate items in lists.

But littering your CV with semicolons in the wrong places can be distracting; it can also look try-hard. If you're using them correctly, go for it. If not, stop. You do not ever have to use a semicolon, you can always use something else instead. So if in doubt, avoid them.

Part 4: Profiles and personal statements

A common feature of CVs is a profile (sometimes called a personal statement or career summary), outlining your skills, experience and aims. Some employers may ask for this to be separate from your CV. A profile isn't always essential, but it can be a useful way of summarising your CV, putting it into context and mentioning any additional points you want to include.

If written effectively, a profile can have a dynamic impact that will enable the recruiter to quickly identify the strategic value you can add to their organisation.

Dr Fiona Robson, senior lecturer in human resources management at Newcastle Business School, says:

"Personal profiles are particularly important where you don't have directly comparable experience to what the employer is looking for, but where you can show transferable skills. It may also be useful to share any important information which doesn't fit neatly into the normal categories."

A well-written statement can be very short - between 50 and 200 words. It is important not to ramble. Remember you always have your cover letter to include interesting and engaging information which will act as the gateway to the recruiter wanting to read your CV.

It's important to read the personal specification of the job carefully and ensure not only that your skills and experience match, but that you reflect this in your statement.

Many people wonder whether the statement should be written in the first or third person. There are no definitive rules about this, but writing it in the first person may be more effective because the CV is all about you. This doesn't mean, however, that you have to add "I" at the beginning of each sentence. The reader knows it's about you so avoid this type of repetition to keep the reader engaged.

For example an opening statement could read:

"As a highly-motivated and results-orientated manager within the luxury hotel sector, I have a proven track record of providing exemplary levels of service to a broad range of guests, including VIPs and high-profile individuals."

This example reads naturally and flows for the reader, whereas if an "I" was inserted at the start, while not hugely different, it would read more like a list. As you move forward with additional information it becomes difficult to break out of the format you have started.

As a general rule, it's best to break the statement into three sections:

1. Who you are

For example:

"As recent graduate from Durham University, with a 2:1 honours degree in media communications, I have undertaken several internships within leading organisations such as Bertelsmann and Times Warner. These placements have enabled me to develop specific media industry experience, and a transferable skillset in this fast-paced sector."

The above opening has allowed the recruiter to quickly identify where you are coming from, that you have had industry experience (something that may be in the selection criteria) and core transferable skills. This, in itself, could be enough for your opening statement, but it can be expanded upon by adding some additional information.

2. What you can bring to the table

For example:

"During a placement with Bertelsmann, I worked in the media division contributing to projects such as the award-winning China Max documentary. I managed my own research and participated in group project meetings. Utilising excellent communication skills, I developed and maintained successful working relationships with both internal and external staff."

3. Your career aim

"Looking to secure a position in a media organisation, where I can bring immediate and strategic value and develop current skillset further."

Remember to be specific and to-the-point. Don't just say you have the skills for the job, say what the skills are and how you have developed them.

Avoid ineffective personal statements by sticking to these top tips:

- Get straight to the point: avoid lengthy descriptions and make your testimonies punchy and informative
- Keep it between 50 to 200 words maximum
- If you have enough space, use 1.5 line spacing to make your statement easier to read
- Match person and job specifications with well-written copy
- Read your profile out loud to ensure it reads naturally
- Don't mix first and third person sentences

Part 5: Hobbies and interests - should they be included on your CV?

In the old days, a qualifications-based CV that highlighted your academic brilliance or a chronological CV showcasing your work experience was the way to go for most, particularly graduate, jobseekers. If you had neither of these two, you had to make do with a “functional CV” that no one quite knew how to treat, employers included.

This is no longer the case. Education and experience are still important, but the competition today is much tougher so employers have started looking to another part of the CV to distinguish one candidate from the next - your interests and activities.

Some employers value extra-curricular activities higher than others, but many companies, particularly those in client-facing industries, are seeking as diverse a group of graduates as possible. After all, the V in CV stands for “vitae” - Latin for life - and the interests part of your application is the ideal opportunity for you to prove you have a life.

Many employers are now scanning CVs for more offbeat interests as evidence of creativity, personality and enthusiasm. An intriguing list of free-time pursuits can also make up for lack of work-related experience, gaps in your knowledge, or even missing qualifications. The interests part is crucial to achieving what your CV really sets out to achieve - getting an interview. Don't bet on it swinging you the job, but it could get you on the shortlist.

Many careers experts normally recommend keeping information about your interests and activities to a minimum. But in his book, *The Rare Find*, George Anders discusses the shift towards the “upside-down” CV, where forward-thinking employers are now placing more value on the previously little-regarded element of what a potential employee does with their spare time.

A wide range of interests always looks good because the employer will want to see that you can fit into different environments with ease. In professions like accountancy, consulting and law, the importance of client relationships means employers are eager to find candidates with a variety of outside interests. A broad spectrum of hobbies suggests to an employer that you are able to get on with other people from different backgrounds and of varying levels of seniority.

The interests section can make it easy for the recruiter to understand you, your values and what motivates you. Why make an unsubstantiated claim like “I work well in teams” if you can demonstrate it by telling the employer you play hockey for a local club?

Many advertisements for jobs now specify a range of desired traits, so match these to your leisure interests. Offer variety and avoid lists. Specific detail is what makes it interesting to the reader, so give examples and emphasise any significant achievements related to your interests. If you are, for example, applying for a management trainee position, your interests should point out your interpersonal and leadership skills. Writing down “captain of football team” is not as good as, “While captain of my university football team I organised practices and led the team to a national final.”

There are a few no-nos. Mentioning your pets will make you sound nice but wet. Saying that you enjoy socialising with friends may be read as “enjoys getting drunk”, and saying you enjoy watching television doesn’t make you stand out from the crowd.

Should you lie? Of course not, but there are ways of making the most of even a pathetic ragbag of interests. For example, a passion for 19th century French literature sounds much more positive than an interest in “reading”.

Part 6: New approaches to CVs

Two trends that are beginning to emerge for jobseekers are: creating different types of CVs for different audiences, and developing “leave-behinds” for meetings and interviews.

1. Preparing your CV in different formats

A range of formats (such as one-page bios or mobile-friendly CVs) are effective in different situations. For example, a beautifully designed and formatted paper CV can make a great impact if handed over in a meeting with prospective employers, recruiters and networking contacts.

But if your CV is going to be viewed on a screen, ease and speed of reading becomes more important. Make sure your CV can be read clearly by using headlines and bold font to draw your reader’s eyes down the screen. Be as concise as possible: use very short sentences and abbreviations, and leave out words such as “I”, “we” and unnecessary adjectives.

On the other hand, if you’re applying via a job board, you’ll need to keyword optimise your CV to avoid it being filtered out. Don’t sacrifice readability in the process, though: stuffing your CV with keywords to the point that it reads awkwardly might get it binned when it’s read by human eyes.

A shorter (one-page, for example) CV or biography can be more appropriate than a “full” CV at industry events, such as conferences. You might want to give only a brief overview of your career and stand-out achievements, especially if it is going to be passed on to another person.

For careers or job fairs, where a standard A4-size CV risks being lost among all the others, an effective alternative is a business card with your name, contact details and job title on the front, and key skills or a career achievement on the back.

Don't neglect your online presence either. A personal blog or online portfolio is a good way to provide extra information about your background and links to your work. Platforms such as LinkedIn also allow you to embed information via slideshare presentations, files, and multimedia content. Video presentations can also work well, if professionally done. Meet The Real Me allows you to upload short video clips alongside your CV.

2. Leave-behinds

These help potential employers remember you after an interview or meeting. In a Guardian Careers Q&A on branding, one expert suggested creating something that showcases you work, that you can hand to your interviewer at the end of the interview.

Emily Carrick gives an example of a mini CV designed as a perforated booklet. "It was such a simple idea but felt more special and 'premium' than a A4 piece of paper," she says.

If that's not your style, you can also leave behind a simple portfolio, for example a page of project highlights, or any other material you prepared for the interview, such as a presentation or consultancy-type proposal.

Part 7: Using social media

Although a good CV is essential to a successful job application, having an active online presence is increasingly important as well. Many social networking sites provide great platforms to market yourself to recruiters and, with its CV-like layout, LinkedIn in particular gives the opportunity for companies to view your credentials and headhunt you.

With 92% of hirers using social media to recruit in 2012, using LinkedIn, Google Plus, Twitter or Facebook is a useful way to find a job. But use it wisely:

- Connect with companies you are interested in. Like them on Facebook, follow them on Twitter, join their group on LinkedIn. This will enable you to actively engage in conversations with the companies directly.
- Network. The etiquette of connecting on LinkedIn is far more relaxed than on Facebook. Do not be afraid to send messages to employers you feel can give you key advice.
- Ensure you have a suitable Twitter handle and Facebook name. Sometimes the choices made when you're younger don't reflect you as a young professional - get rid of CandyBabe29.
- Be pro-active. Actively seek companies and employers you are interested in, and express your interest by asking questions. The worst they can do is not reply to a tweet or a comment - nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- Creative? Start a blog or website to show your communication skills and link it to your social media accounts for more exposure.
- Keep it clean. Banish uncompromising photographs and delete any inappropriate comments. If you wouldn't say it to an employer, don't say it on social media.
- Don't bad mouth your ex-employer. Nothing is more unappealing to a potential employer than seeing previous signs of unpleasanties.

Despite the benefits of social media, you will still need a conventional CV as a career overview and introduction to employers, recruiters and network contacts. But it's not always CV first, LinkedIn second. Many times you can be found on LinkedIn first of all and your CV will only be read if the reader likes what they see. Many recruiters are now searching for potential candidates through LinkedIn so you could be missing out. LinkedIn should be used as part of an integrated job seeking strategy; it provides much more flexibility in the way you present your information, and you aren't constrained by two pages.

Remember to approach your LinkedIn profile differently to your CV. A CV is a static backward-looking document. Until we are actively hunting for jobs, most of us put it to one side once it's been written. A LinkedIn profile, on the other hand, is different: it's an active document that can be regularly revised as you add status updates, receive and provide recommendations and interact with others.

Used properly, LinkedIn can be a very effective way of raising your profile and marketing yourself. It's less about a list of what you have done in the past and more focused on letting people know what you can do. It can also be used as part of your job search strategy, seeking out vacancies, researching, identifying people for fact-finding interviews and so on.

Too many fail to get the best out of LinkedIn; their profile is incomplete, they don't have a photo and there is nothing compelling about the information they share. Registering for LinkedIn and not doing much with it is like joining a gym and expecting to get fit - you have to do the work.

LinkedIn Recommendations

The reader will at least skim through your complete profile - and eyes are drawn to the recommendations. Do you have any, and what do they say? The people who recommend you can be powerful advocates of you and your strengths. Moreover, if the recommendations are linked back to a person, there is a much higher level of trust. Providing recommendations is also important; it gets you noticed on other peoples' pages and demonstrates your judgement.

To use LinkedIn effectively:

- Write in the first person, not the third. Include insight into your personality and character, not just what you have done, and emphasise keywords and accomplishments.
- Include keywords throughout your profile. For example, copy-writing or social media.
- Take account of your company confidentiality policy and don't include any confidential details. If currently in work, don't tick the 'looking for job opportunities' box. You will still be found even if you do not tick it and it is important you don't make it obvious you are looking.
- Aim for five to eight recommendations, but get as many as you can. It's far more effective to have other people write a recommendation than you talk about how good you are.
- Improve your visibility by asking questions, providing answers and joining relevant groups.
- Join groups related to your background and desired goal so you can identify relevant jobs.
- Include a link to your LinkedIn profile on your CV and email signature to encourage people to find out more about you.

Part 8: Ask the experts

Your examples don't have to be groundbreaking

Hannah Morton-Hedges - careers adviser and head of Momentum Careers Advice:

"Types of competency questions are very common on application forms, online or otherwise. The theory the employer will be adopting is that if you can show an example of a time you have used that skill in the past, then they have every reason to believe that you will be able to replicate the use of that skill when - or if - you are working for them. Lots of people struggle to think up suitable answers to these types of questions and, in my experience, it is because they are over-thinking or over-complicating the question.

"The employer is not looking for an example so monumental that it changed the course of the company's success. Suitable examples are often the very small things that we are doing day-to-day in our jobs and, therefore, perhaps totally overlooking as skills. The important thing is that you are doing them, you are recognising that you do them and you are aware of their positive impact.

"If you don't have experience in the world of work (or work experience) to prove these competencies, don't forget that there is nothing wrong with using examples from extra-curricular activities or from academic situations. When you have decided on an example to use, make sure you break it down into the necessary detail: describe the situation, what you decided to do, how you went about this, what skills applied, what the finished result was, what you learned from the experience and so on.

"Use your CV to emphasise the areas of the job that you already have experience of, so that the CV reader will be convinced that you would be able to join the company and hit the ground running. If in doubt, don't forget that it is perfectly acceptable to contact the HR department and open a conversation with them about exactly what they will be looking for and how you should address your application. They will appreciate the initiative you have shown and your enthusiasm to get things right."

Break down each of the criteria for the role and have a clear and concise personal statement

Elizabeth Bacchus - career coach and founder of The Successful CV Company:

"A personal statement gives you an opportunity to provide specific details relating to the person and job specification advertised, to illustrate how you fit the criteria. Apply a brief paragraph at the beginning on why you are applying for the role and then break down each of the criteria as a heading, with measurable examples underneath of your experience in each of the given areas. This will provide a clear and concise personal statement that is easy for the recruiter to read.

"One size does not fit all when it comes to CVs. Unfortunately, a single CV is never going to tick all the boxes. We recommend having a core CV and then using this to copy and paste into a tailored CV for each role you apply for. Recruiters are looking for relevant candidates, which is why it is critical to tailor each CV for every application."

Bring out everything you've got

Clare Whitmell - business communication trainer. She also blogs about CV writing and job hunting tips on JobMarketsuccess.com:

"Bring out everything you've got to stand out. That could be work experience, voluntary work, side projects - and make them work for you on your CV or application. Don't get hung up by dates or job titles, and don't assume a less-than-perfect work history will count against you. It won't if you've got enough relevant experience and achievements.

"Get to the point. Write concisely. Avoid fluff and unsubstantiated statements. Nothing works better than concrete examples of quantifiable achievements."

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Cover letters

Part 1: Templates

The first thing an employer sees in a job application is your cover letter. It's the packaging for your CV and the first opportunity you have to stand out from the crowd. But too often it's a jobseeker's Achilles' heel. The candidate has often lavished hours on crafting their CV to make it as perfect as they can, only to produce the covering letter as an afterthought.

The thinking behind this is that the CV will do all the hard work for you and the covering letter will just play a supporting role. Wrong.

Here's an example of one of the most common cover letter mistakes:

Dear Mr Matthews,

I wish to apply for the (job title) vacancy, as advertised in (publication). Please find enclosed my CV, which I hope you will study with interest.

If you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Joe Blogs

This is all very nice - it's a clear and polite statement of intent. But why waste an entire sheet of A4 just to inform the employer you are applying and have attached your CV? In today's extremely competitive job market, the covering letter is an opportunity to highlight your skills and strengths. With the current CV mantra being "stick to two sides of A4", space is at a premium. So, if you're going to add a third page in the shape of a covering letter, make sure it justifies its existence, seizes the recruiter's attention and keeps them reading.

Writing a covering letter is not an exact science - it will depend on what you feel is relevant to flag up to the employer for the particular job. However, it's a good idea to use the following structure as a guide:

- First paragraph – lead with why you're interested in the job
- Second and third paragraphs – what makes you a strong candidate (personal characteristics, relevant experience, achievements and skills)
- Fourth paragraph – address any issues, such as career change, employment gaps, personal sabbaticals, for example.
- Closing – ask for an interview and thank your reader for their consideration.

And, of course, make sure you've added in your full contact details, including your phone number, email address and postal address.

Every covering letter should be uniquely tailored to the job you are applying for and should allow your personality to come through. Here are three sample styles for your letter, but remember, they are just a guide - don't use them as a template.

1. Standard, conservative style for sectors such as business, law, accountancy, retail.

Dear Mr Smith,

Please find enclosed my CV in application for the post advertised in the Guardian on 30 January.

The nature of my degree course has prepared me for this position. It involved a great deal of independent research, requiring initiative, self-motivation and a wide range of skills. For one course, [insert course], an understanding of the [insert sector] industry was essential. I found this subject very stimulating.

I am a fast and accurate writer, with a keen eye for detail and I should be very grateful for the opportunity to progress to market reporting. I not only have the ability to take on the responsibility of this position immediately, but also the enthusiasm and determination to ensure that I make a success of it.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this application and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Public

2. Standard speculative letter - vary according to the nature of the company.

Dear Mrs Jones,

I am writing to enquire if you have any vacancies in your company. I enclose my CV for your information.

As you can see, I have had extensive vacation work experience in office environments, the retail sector and service industries, giving me varied skills and the ability to work with many different types of people. I believe I could fit easily into your team.

I am a conscientious person who works hard and pays attention to detail. I'm flexible, quick to pick up new skills and eager to learn from others. I also have lots of ideas and enthusiasm. I'm keen to work for a company with a great reputation and high profile like [insert company name].

I have excellent references and would be delighted to discuss any possible vacancy with you at your convenience. In case you do not have any suitable openings at the moment, I would be grateful if you would keep my CV on file for any future possibilities.

Yours sincerely,

Phil Space

In the case of cover letters for jobs, the aim is to be original and show you have imagination, but understand what the job entails. Balance is essential: don't be too wacky, or it will turn off the reader. [This Youtube video cover letter](#) is an example of how unique and creative it is possible to be with your applications. But never send something like this to a more conservative company.

One thing that is paramount when it comes to your CV and cover letter is that they should work together and complement each other. The covering letter should draw attention to your key skills that are relevant to the job and then the CV should expand on that. Very often people make the mistake of writing about the two in isolation.

Part 2: Essential writing tips

For your covering letter, make sure you show:

- **Who you are and what job you want**

Begin with a clear indication of the job you're applying for and where you heard about it. If you have the name of a direct contact or referral, this is the place to mention it. Dropping a familiar name is an effective way of catching someone's eye.

- **What relevant skills you have and how you'll apply them**

In paragraphs two (and three, if needed), outline key aspects of the job and make direct comparisons with skills and experience you have. For example: "I see that this role demands the ability to reduce costs. As commercial manager at XYZ Ltd. I made real savings of almost 20% (£100,000) in my first full year".

- **That you really understand what's required of you**

Ensure you focus on the most important aspects of the role and relate them directly to recent and relevant experience. Remember, although this is your individual application for the job, do not attempt to write an application letter directly from the job advert.

- **Any additional skills you have**

In the next paragraph add any supporting information you feel is necessary, such as applied aspects of the role or any additional skills you can bring over and above the job specification.

- **A positive and professional attitude**

Ensure your tone is confident and positive but don't overdo it otherwise you may come across as arrogant or pushy. You're trying to get an interview, so you want to come across as a personable individual. Here's a positive example:

Dear Ms Matthews,

I wish to apply for the post of accounts manager as advertised in the November issue of People Management.

As you can see from my enclosed CV, I have more than 15 years' experience in company accounts, the last six of which have been in management roles. Together with my professional qualifications, proven track record and desire to advance further, I feel I am more than ready for the challenges your position offers.

- **You have taken time to get to know their business**

Try to find out the name of the person responsible for recruiting the role. Some key company information will also show that you've done your homework.

- **That you really, really want this job**

Finally, you should sum up by reaffirming your interest in the role, the company and the challenges ahead. Thank the recruiter for taking the time to consider your application.

Remember then to sign off "yours sincerely," rather than "yours faithfully". Your covering letter links to your CV, so they should both be in the same font and point size. Your tone is also important. Here are some key points to consider:

- **Make it personal**

What is it about you that makes you perfect for the role? If you sound genuinely enthusiastic, you stand a much better chance of wowing the hirer. Get straight to the why, with, "As a sales manager with 10 years' experience, I'd love to be considered for the position of sales assistant because..." for example, and then explain your interest.

Scott Davidson, a jobs website marketing manager, underlines the importance of research before you start writing your cover letter. He says: "A great way to demonstrate your creativity and get noticed could be in the way you research a prospective employer. So you've visited their website and found out what they do. Can you track down their recent press releases? Can you use networking websites such as LinkedIn to gain a greater understanding as to what the specific role contains?"

Adam Kaveney, creative director of The Writer, the UK's largest language consultancy, adds further advice: "The real chance to stand out is to find an interesting angle. Dig into what makes them tick. Talk about the things that make you tick, which you know will impress them."

Your covering letter is a great opportunity to let your personality shine through, he says. "Blend in personality traits with the skills/accomplishments that will be of interest - especially if they add extra context to your application. Adding this sort of personal information gives the reader a bigger picture than just a summary of the facts on your CV."

Eliminate waffle and jargon

Three or four short paragraphs is enough to draw out the most relevant strengths or achievements and show how you've used your skills. Keeping your letter concise and focused also proves the good communication and analytical skills that most employers prize. An employer doesn't want to wade through lots of long-winded, irrelevant text.

Avoid weak phrases, such as, "I believe I have the necessary background and experience." Be confident in showing how your skills and achievements will bring value. Write as you normally speak to make your letter sound both professional and human. And be sure to stay away from stuffy-sounding jargon.

Tie together any loose ends

If you're changing career or returning to work after a break, you can use your cover letter to explain any inconsistencies. A brief explanation might prevent your reader from coming to the wrong conclusion about gaps in your work history or job-hopping.

Always try to present any negatives in the best light possible. How has diverse experience developed your strengths?

Focus on the specifics of the role

Each covering letter should be tailored. Roles may vary in their requirements, so adjust what you write to highlight your ability to deal with the challenges of that particular role. Use the job description to help you target your letter in much the same way as you would for your CV. If the job description has such a long list of requirements that your letter risks becoming too long, decide which are the most crucial and focus on these.

Part 3: Ask the experts

We asked a panel of career advisers how jobseekers can ensure their covering letter survives an employer's cursory glance.

Draw out all the reasons you're suitable for the job and wave them under the employer's nose

Jo Moyle - careers adviser at Oxford Brookes University:

"It's not uncommon for graduates to worry that referring in a covering letter to experience and achievements mentioned on the CV will be repetitive and unnecessary as the recruiter will get to the CV eventually. The result can be a letter with bland, unsupported statements creating a distinctly underwhelming first impression that is anything but a good advert for the CV."

"A good covering letter should whet the employer's appetite to read your CV - and ultimately to meet you - by drawing their attention to your experiences and achievements which most convincingly showcase your skills and suitability for the role. No one is saying that doing this succinctly is easy - Mark Twain's famous remark, 'I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead,' says it all. But unsubstantiated, subjective claims are more likely to annoy than impress - so work out what the key pieces of evidence for your credibility are and use the covering letter to wave them under the employer's nose."

Think of your covering letter as a love letter, setting out why you and the employer are perfect for each other

Hannah Clements - careers guidance specialist at the University of the Arts London:

"Generic covering letters do not work, as they do not focus and give concrete examples or enable a prospective employer to see how you fit with them. You should be writing and telling them why you are for them and why they are for you - why you are the perfect match. If you are applying for a specific role, make sure you look at their criteria and match this to your skills and experience, giving examples of where you have developed these skills. Your examples can include previous employment, course projects, volunteering, and so on."

If a letter reads well, looks and feels good then it is likely that the recruiter will identify those qualities with the candidate

Phil Marsland - careers adviser at Leeds Metropolitan University:

"Consider providing a follow-up opportunity or action, for example, 'I will telephone you on the morning of...' or, 'I am available for interview...' Remember KISS (keep it short and simple). And finally, use good quality paper and a high quality printer. If a letter reads well, looks and feels good then it is likely that the recruiter will identify those qualities with the candidate. A good covering letter will not get you a job alone but it might encourage the employer to single out your application in preference to others."

If you don't ask, you don't get, so don't be afraid of speculative letters

Alexandra Hemingway - careers adviser at the University of Surrey:

"Everybody hates cold calls and junk mail. Knowing how they make us feel probably explains why writing speculative job-seeking letters can feel intimidating. But contacting employers gives you a good chance of getting noticed, so you just have to grin and bear the potential embarrassment of putting yourself forward uninvited. Planning carefully will make your application more welcome.

"Even without an advert to work from, you should be as specific as possible and tailor your approach carefully. The trick is to do your research into the target role and organisation, just like marketers do, so you give the impression of knowing your customer. This will make the reader take you seriously. Receiving a well-crafted, carefully considered speculative application will probably make the recruiter's day and, after all, if you don't ask, you don't get."

How to survive an employer's cursory glance at your cover letter

Lizzie Dove - head of careers and employment at the University of West London:

"Time spent on making your cover letter look good visually is bound to enhance your chances of getting your letter read. Make sure you've addressed your letter to the right person as failure to do so has the potential to annoy the reader. It could also cast a doubt about your attention to detail or your failure to find out how the company operates and who is hiring you. Use of a title such as Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr and so on is usually most appropriate in the first instance.

"If you are asked to attach your CV and covering letter to an email, it is important to remember that your email is the first impression you make. That includes your email address, so it is best to avoid anything quirky which may cause hilarity but won't get you the job. Keep the communication formal and don't be tempted to use 'hi', 'bye' and other casual English just because you're writing an email.

"Finally before sending, do a final check to make sure your letter will survive all aspects of the 'first impression test', giving you the best chance of success in the rest of the recruitment process."

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Interviews

Your CV has impressed the employer and you're through to the next stage: the interview. It's time to bring your CV to life and prove that you really are as good as your written application claims. Interviews are the most feared part of the application process and understanding what you need to do to succeed can be daunting.

But interviews are a brilliant opportunity to show the employer exactly why they should hire you. This is your chance to have their full attention and demonstrate your experiences and skills.

For most of the interview you will be talking about yourself, your career to date and why you are perfect for the job. But to avoid this coming across as a self-indulgent ramble, it's useful to think of your career experiences like a short story.

Part 1: Telling your career story

Storytelling in a job application has a similar psychological appeal to the stories we tell children to help them conquer demons and make sense of the world. Beyond their simple entertainment value, we relate to stories about characters facing and overcoming difficulties that are similar to the ones we experience.

Stories can transform the dry facts of your career into vivid accounts of your challenges and triumphs. Use them in your CV and at interview to make a strong, emotional connection.

Your "story" is your career to date

Present your career history as a chain of successes, skills and experiences to establish the value you bring. To do this, pull together elements from your background that define your personal "brand" - whether this is cost-saver, profit-maker, or market-builder, for example. Each milestone, promotion and accomplishment you highlight should reinforce your brand message and directly relate to the specification of the job you're applying for.

Use mini-stories to add the details

Long monologues about duties and responsibilities don't tell a hiring manager the most important story: how you made a difference in your previous roles, and crucially, what you'll be able to do in this role. Terms like "problem-solver" or "team-player" don't tell a convincing story either.

Instead, prove your strengths with success stories - and keep them brief. For each company or role, briefly detail your remit or scope and then highlight your achievements. Did you manage to turn around a failing product? Or establish new corporate partnerships? And what did you learn from the experience?

A stock of four or five stories illustrating your key strengths will make you a memorable candidate. Choose your stories for their relevance to the role you're applying for.

Use the Star technique

On the whole, interview questions tend to start with a variation of, "Tell me about a time when..." This may sound simple but, in the heat of the interview, it's easy to give an unstructured answer, miss out key details, or let the story peter to a halt. One way of avoiding this is by using the Star acronym to structure your response. Here's an example of how to use it for a candidate for a marketing executive role who might be asked: "Tell me about a time when you solved a problem to a tight timescale."

- **Situation** - set the context for your story. For example, "We were due to be delivering a presentation to a group of 30 interested industry players on our new product, but one of our key people got stuck on a train from Birmingham."
- **Task** - what was required of you. For example, "It was my responsibility to find an alternative, so it didn't reflect badly on the company and we didn't waste the opportunity."
- **Activity** - what you actually did. For example, "I spoke to the event organisers to find out if they could change the running order. They agreed, so we bought ourselves some time. I contacted others in the company and managed to make last minute arrangements to find a replacement."
- **Result** - how well the situation played out. For example, "We explained the problem to the delegates and the presentation went successfully with the changes. Although it was a bit rough around the edges, it was warmly received. As a result we gained some good contacts, at least two of which we converted into paying clients."

Involve your interviewer

Bring the interviewer into the story, if you can. Ask questions, like: "You're facing these sorts of problems here, how do you plan to respond to this?" and be aware of your interviewer's reactions, speeding up, slowing down, or answering questions as necessary.

Guide the interview

You may need to subtly move the conversation on to areas where you can highlight your strengths and suitability for the role. "That reminds me of when I..." or "If that happened to me, I would probably have..." can introduce success stories you want the interviewer to remember about you, or illustrate how you approach or solve problems.

Be interesting

It's important not only to make sure the things you're saying are interesting, but also consider the way you're saying them. A good presenter will modify their voice and gestures, or use pauses for dramatic effect. Do the same with your stories. Practise them so you feel confident, but be careful to avoid sounding over-rehearsed or static. Essentially, it's a matter of coming across naturally.

Vary the introduction

Use cues from your interviewer to launch into a story, such as, "Actually, that happened to me once", or "I had exactly the same dilemma in my last job." Maintain interest by including the real-life complexity of twists and turns.

Don't ramble

Use the Star structure and don't rush your speech; be selective about what you say.

Be honest

Give credit to others (if it's due) to enhance your own credibility and likeability. Talking in a confident and professional manner can be tricky if you're not used to it. Whether you're struggling from nerves or finding it hard to speak in a dynamic way, the key to improvement is practice.

Have a consistent message

Your entire performance should allay an interviewer's greatest fear - that of choosing the wrong person. Does your appearance, attitude and the way you reply give the overall impression that you are a safe hire? Your interviewer needs to be convinced of three things: that you can do the job; that you'd fit in (and be easy to manage); and that you want the position.

Better timing

Practise keeping your answers to two or three minutes. Find the right balance between being thorough but not boring the interviewer. Over-long answers mark you as a poor communicator.

Increased confidence

You'll sound more relaxed and natural if you've gone through the most likely questions on the technical aspects of the job as well as the more general questions.

Part 2: Preparing for interviews

When you've been invited for an interview, your thoughts naturally turn to giving a winning performance on the day. A bit like exams, interviews can creep up on you, but good preparation is the key to success.

Plan ahead

Although you cannot predict exactly what you will be asked, certain questions are more likely to come up. You'll probably be asked about whether you have the skills/experience to do the job, so make sure you can answer questions relating to the job specifics. The job advert itself is a good place to work out what they're likely to ask you regarding your professional abilities. You will also probably get some general questions so they can find out more about you, your future plans and so on.

Spend time before the interview reviewing your CV, to make sure you can connect your background (skills, accomplishments and learning curves) to the job and company requirements. You may also need to explain gaps on your CV, or the reasons why you left a company. These are common, general questions you should prepare to answer:

● *Tell me about yourself*

This, or any of the alternative introductory questions ("What sets you apart from other candidates?" or "Why should we hire you?") is an ideal opportunity for you to talk about how you're a good fit for the job. You can almost guarantee you will get a question like this, so prepare an answer, but be careful not to sound too rehearsed. Concentrate on how your experience, successes, or personal characteristics make you a strong candidate and avoid irrelevant information. Aim to talk for a minute or so, then check with the interviewer that s/he has enough information. Don't describe yourself using cliches like "I'm a team-player", but demonstrate through examples how you match the job description or ideal candidate profile.

● ***What motivates you? Why do you want this job?***

For this type of motivational question, you'll need to know what inspires you and keeps you happy at work. Select a couple of aspects that also highlight your abilities: winning new business; training people in new skills; identifying new markets; discovering new talent, for example.

● ***What are your strengths/weaknesses?***

Expect a question relating to your personal characteristics. Alternatives could be, "How would you describe your personality?" or "How do your employees/managers perceive you?" Choose the most relevant strengths to the job you're applying for. When answering the weakness question, avoid clichés like "I work too hard/I'm a perfectionist". Instead, choose a real area where you're aware you could do better, and say what you're doing about it. For example, "I tend to clam up in meetings, but if I go in with prepared points, I find I can contribute much more effectively."

● ***Where would you like to be in the next three/five years?***

This is a good opportunity to talk about your career goals, and link them to what the company offers in terms of promotion and career development.

● ***What did you like the most/least about your last job?***

Knowing what the role involves is important, as it'll help you frame your answer. Saying you disliked working for a disorganised manager will be counterproductive if you're interviewing for a similar position. Try to emphasise the positives. For example, "I enjoyed being able to help my manager be more efficient by organising his diary and correspondence" would be more appropriate in this instance. Although you need to show self-awareness of what you really dislike, it's not an invitation to criticise your previous company. A safe approach is to stick to generalities: "I like working with supportive colleagues/in companies which promote openness and transparency," or, "I dislike office politics".

Mock interview

One of the best ways to prepare for a job interview is to do a mock. If you know someone who is experienced in interviewing people, they might be able to help you. If not, don't give up on the idea: one way around this is to run your own mock video interview.

If you have a video camera, a camera on your mobile, or a webcam on your computer, then you already have the necessary kit. You may feel slightly embarrassed about seeing yourself on video but it's worth getting over this shyness as it can be a powerful way of improving your interview performance. You can be your own interviewer if necessary - read the questions out to yourself before answering them on camera. You could even pre-record your questions and play them back during your mock interview. Here's the process to follow:

1. Pick your questions

Use a mixture of common interview questions with ones that are tailored to the role you are applying for, using the job description and person specification to guide you. For example, if the person specification says the recruiter is looking for "excellent customer service skills," then the question may be: "Tell me about a time when you have delivered excellent customer service following a complaint". Questions that ask you to give examples of situations in previous work are common as they allow you to present evidence of a skill.

Start the interview with, "Tell me about yourself," and finish with, "Are there any questions that you would like to ask before we finish?". Six questions is a good start - though the more preparation the better.

2. Record your questions

This doesn't have to be too sophisticated - it's just a prompt for you to answer, but playing back recorded questions is closer to an actual interview than simply reading them out as you go. Leave a few seconds between each one so when you are playing it back you can pause it.

3. Record your answers

Play the questions, pausing after each one, and answer them to the camera, as if it was the interview. Try to be concise and speak for no longer than a few minutes on each one. For the "Tell me about a time when..." questions, you may want to use the Star acronym to structure your answer, as detailed earlier in this chapter.

4. Review your performance

Don't do this immediately: take a break, return to the footage after around 10 minutes and watch it twice. The first time, pause between answers and make notes. How fully did you answer the question? Was it convincing? How was your body language? Watch out for words that you repeat a lot - most people have an "um" or an "actually" that they over-use when they are nervous.

The second time, go back and watch through from beginning to end again, without pausing. How would you rate yourself overall? If there were three things you would change, what would they be?

Before the real interview

Prepare your interview outfit: shine the shoes and plan grooming things like getting a haircut. Dressing well can increase your confidence as well as boosting your professional image. Try on your interview clothes to make sure they fit, are clean and in a good state of repair. Don't leave this to the night before, and also get someone else to check your outfit over. Are you inadvertently showing more of yourself than is professional? Is your jewellery distracting? How do you look when you sit down? Interviewers can make all sorts of judgments about you based on what you wear and how you act, so it's important to get this part right.

If you aren't sure what to wear, go along to the company offices at opening or leaving times to get a feel for what people generally wear. Aim for the same level of formality, or one notch up. Otherwise, a business suit is appropriate for most sectors.

Work out where you're going, travelling times and transport options. If you can factor in more time and locate a coffee shop nearby, it may help to reduce travelling anxiety. Have a copy of the job description, the person specification on you as well as a couple of copies of your CV, all in a neat folder or portfolio case. Read through them again before you head in.

Take along paper and a pen to make notes during your interview. You won't need to scribble everything down, but make a subtle note if you want to come back to something at a later stage. Don't use your phone for this, as it could look like you're texting someone. Also write down a couple of pre-prepared questions to ask the interviewer, and a note to yourself to remind you to ask for two things at the end of your interview: the business card of your interviewer, and a timeframe for a hiring decision. Both of these will help later on if you need to find out about the status of your application.

Setting a good first impression

Never underestimate the importance of making a favourable first impression. Research shows that interviewers are swayed by how people dress, act and walk through the door - and that many managers make a hiring decision within the first 90 seconds of meeting you.

Eye contact, a firm handshake, conservative rather than fashionable clothes, good posture and a smile all count in your favour. Don't leave the first few seconds to chance. Ask a friend to assess the impression you make, which is ideally one of poise and polish rather than visible anxiety or over-confidence. Don't neglect your exit either. You might be relieved that it's all over, but remember professional courtesies and end positively with thanks and a handshake.

Likeability plays an important part in hiring decisions. Find something in common with your interviewer as a conversation starter. If you have similar interests, areas of knowledge or career paths, use this to create and build rapport.

Part 3: How to answer weird interview questions

Chances are you've never given much thought to how you might fit an elephant into a fridge or why manhole covers are round instead of square. Nor have most people. It's precisely because of their obscure nature that weird questions like this are becoming more common in job interviews. In fact, one survey found that two out of five candidates had been asked a "weird" question in their interview.

Such questions may seem entirely unrelated to a role but they can reveal a lot about a candidate's ability and personality so it's worth being ready for them. So how can you prepare for such odd questions? And how can you best respond in a cool and composed way?

The key is to take your time to think about the question and why they might be asking it. How can it relate to the company or the role? Is it a chance to show off your mathematical ability, lateral thinking or engineering know-how? Is it just there to test your personality and creativity? Apply a reasonable rationale to your answer and your efforts will be recognised.

Here are some examples of questions you could face and how you might answer them. There's no point in learning the answers because it's so unlikely these specific questions will come up. But tune into the thought process and how to respond to the unexpected.

1. "How many people are using Facebook in San Francisco at 2.30pm on a Friday?"

This question must have a factual answer, but the journey to working that out is complex. Think what it might mean to you in your role. If it's a digital marketing role, they may be testing your awareness of key audiences, and how and when they use social networks. Alternatively, they could simply be trying to get an understanding of how important you think social networks are in working life. Think about all the factors that could influence the answer and talk them through step-by-step.

2. "What do you think about garden gnomes?"

Not all questions are serious. You might be asked a question like this to show your sense of humour in an otherwise formal situation. It's still worth thinking about the question though, and how it might relate to your role. For example, you could say that you admire their reliability as they often stay rooted to the same spot. If you were going for an engineering or construction role you could question whether they have the right tools for the job and so on.

3. "If you were a Microsoft Office programme, which one would you be?"

While based on a common office tool, this question can reflect a lot about you, your personality and how you like to work. Access might suggest meticulous organisation, Outlook that you are a communicator and enjoy interacting with colleagues and customers, and PowerPoint might infer that you understand the world through visual impact and making bold statements and so on.

The important thing to remember with weird interview questions is that they are just one part of the process. Embrace them as an opportunity to expand on your potential beyond your CV and traditional interview questions and show your more creative side.

Remember, the interviewer is not necessarily looking for a correct answer. They're interested in how you react and the thought process that leads you to an answer.

Part 4: Asking questions in your interview

Asking the right questions at your interview can help to improve your chances of success and evaluate if the job is right for you. But knowing what to ask can be tricky if you have not prepared and planned ahead.

Get a good understanding of the role

Not all job descriptions give you a precise idea of what the job entails, so dig deeper at the interview. For example, if the person specification says "proactive self-starter", ask how much support you can expect. Or if it says, "works well under pressure", find out what sort of pressure it refers to. Would this be from customers, bosses or other colleagues? What causes it? This could be factors such as sudden changes of plan, unpredictable clients, and so on.

Use the opportunity to get a good idea of the basics, such as the demands of the job - hours of work, expected travel, whether it gets busy at certain times of the year, and the salary or benefits, if not already stated. Build up an idea of what a typical day might look like. For example, ask: "what percentage of my time would I be working on X or Y project/other responsibilities?"

Think about whether the job is one you want. Could you do it well from day one, or would you need extensive support? Does it offer the chance to develop skills and experience? Is it a logical step for your career, whether that's a promotion, or a career change?

Ask about other team members and colleagues. Who would you be supporting, liaising with or managing? How do the various roles fit together, and what impact does yours have within the department and the organisation as a whole?

Find out what's expected of you

What does success look like for your manager, and in the organisation? Ask specific questions about how to meet targets. For example: "What do you expect me to have achieved by the first six months?" Or, "What are the short and long-term priorities for this role?" These questions should then give you an opener to talk about how you've achieved similar things in previous roles.

It's also useful to find out whether the role is new, or an existing one but with increased responsibilities. How was the role performed before, and what changes or improvements would the interviewer like to see from the successful candidate? You can also ask what criteria the manager uses to determine whether goals have been met.

Ask about opportunities and organisational culture

If it's your potential line manager interviewing you, ask about their preferred management and communication styles. How do they like to see things done? Find out about professional development in the role, and opportunities for training or mentoring. What sort of people tend to do well in the organisation? What are some typical progression routes? The interview is also a good time to explore other priorities you might have, such as the possibility of flexible or part-time working, or any adjustments you might need.

What to ask at the end of the interview

The interview has gone well and is coming to a close. But then your interviewer turns to you and says: "Do you have any questions you'd like to ask?" This throws many candidates who have spent all their time practising answers for questions, and haven't thought of any to ask. It's a mistake you can easily overcome with a bit of preparation.

Below are the top ten questions you can use. But before you choose, be sure to consider the culture of the organisation you are hoping to join and the nature of the person doing the selecting. Adopt the right tone and convey a positive attitude - you want to ensure this opportunity works for you, not against you.

1. *What are the most enjoyable and the least enjoyable aspects of the role?*

This can show that you like to know what sort of challenge you are going to face and that you like to get properly prepared for it, all in the expectation of being able to rise to it.

2. *What do your most successful people find most satisfying about this part of the role?*

This question can serve two purposes. It can demonstrate your listening skills and associate you with being successful in the role and finding it satisfying.

3. *What types of training opportunities are available?*

This is one of the classic questions. It highlights that you are keen to advance your skills and add further value to a company.

4. *Is there a chance for promotion in the future?*

This is another classic question. In a similar vein, it emphasises a determination to make progress and to do so over the long term.

5. *Can you tell me how the role relates to the overall structure of the organisation?*

With this question you are drawing attention to a preference for teamwork. It looks as though you want to know where you would fit in and how your contribution would affect the rest of the company.

6. *How would you describe the work culture here?*

Here you are signalling that you want to be able to operate at your optimum and understand that for this you require a positive environment. In turn, this can indicate you are a good self-manager who is aware of how to get the best out of yourself.

7. *How is performance measured and reviewed?*

This question flags up that you appreciate the importance of delivering real results. You can be seen to be someone who understands the value of commitment, reliability and returns.

8. *What are the most important issues that you think your organisation will face? or You have recently introduced a new product/service/division; how will this benefit the organisation?*

These variations both show that you are interested, not just in the job, but in the employer behind it. It will be apparent you have done some research and are now eager to hear their analysis.

9. *May I tell you a little more about my particular interest in communicating with clients/developing new ideas/implementing better systems?*

This is a cheeky and obvious way of getting permission to blow your own trumpet but then that's what this interview is all about.

10. Do you have any doubts about whether I am suited to this position?

This is a rather more risky and brazen way of emphasising some of your strengths. It suggests you are open to constructive criticism and willing to learn from the experience of others. In addition, it gives you a real chance to address any weaknesses the interviewee may think you have.

Hopefully, it will allow you to finish on a high, re-stating why you think you are the right person.

Part 5: Interview psychology

If you've done all you can in terms of practical preparation (bought the suit, researched the company, rehearsed the questions) the next priority is to prepare mentally and you can use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques to help you.

CBT is a widely recognised treatment used to help people deal with psychological challenges. But you don't need a psychological problem to benefit from CBT - you can apply its techniques to optimise your mental strategy at interview.

One of the most important concepts in CBT is the notion that the way you view situations determines the way you feel and act (for better or worse). If you consider this in relation to your career opportunities, you will see that the way you think about the interview (before and during) will affect the way you feel emotionally, and thus influence your behaviour.

As a starting point, it's useful to identify common unhelpful thinking styles as they are a trap that unprepared interviewees frequently fall into. Consider whether you are engaging in any of the following:

● All or nothing thinking

Of course you want the job very much. But if you tell yourself that you absolutely must get it, chances are you'll increase the pressure and cause your anxiety level to rise even higher. Try to think flexibly and tell yourself that it's not a life-or-death situation. Even if you don't get this job, the experience will help you to refine your interview technique and place you in a better position for future opportunities.

● Emotional reasoning

Although CBT posits that the way we think affects how we feel, it's often a two-way process and our mood can influence our perception of the situation and our resulting behaviour. It's natural to feel nervous on the day of the interview because the outcome is very important. So it's helpful to acknowledge the butterflies as normal and then focus on the task in hand. Don't take this feeling of nervousness as a danger signal that the interview will go badly. Consider instead the benefits of a little adrenaline to sharpen your performance.

● Unhelpful interpretations

Interview panels are daunting at the best of times and the individuals involved can be inscrutable. Try not to take this personally. If you fixate on the interviewer's facial expressions and body language, you may imagine that they are forming a negative opinion of you and allow this thought to undermine your confidence. If they look a bit grim, tell yourself that it's due to their formal interview style and carry on regardless.

The ABC model is a simple diagnostic tool used in CBT. It will help you to identify any thinking errors you might make before or during the interview. You may wish to try this as a paper and pen exercise at first, but with practice you will become adept at carrying out ABC formulations mentally.

A = Adversity: the challenge - your personal goal

Try to identify which specific aspects of the forthcoming interview are causing you concern. This will help you to tackle each one head-on rather than being overshadowed by a vague sense of unease on the day.

B = Beliefs: thoughts or beliefs about the situation

Use the list of unhelpful thinking styles above as a reference and define any other negative thoughts you may have. Try to be as objective as possible when challenging these thoughts on the basis of their evidence, realism and usefulness. Once you have done this, develop a more constructive thinking strategy that will boost your confidence at interview.

C = Consequences: how you feel and act

Notice the way you feel when engaging in unhelpful thinking, for example, increased anxiety. Do these thoughts and feelings undermine your preparation for the interview, such as through a lack of focus?

Hopefully you will experience a reduction in anxiety after you have challenged your unhelpful thinking and be able to focus your attention on constructive action in preparing for the interview.

Part 6: Senior level interviews

No matter how much experience you have of being interviewed or conducting interviews yourself, that all-important meeting with the chief executive can make or break your move into senior management. How do you ensure you come out on top and differentiate yourself from other candidates?

Here are five key questions almost every chief executive needs to have answered in the interview, according to Hannah McNamara, an interview and career coach at HRM coaching. They may not ask them out loud, but you can be sure they're thinking of them.

1. Are you commercial?

Your technical skills may have got you to this stage in your career, but unless you have well-rounded commercial skills and business acumen, you are unlikely to progress further. To shine in the interview, talk numbers and results. Show that you understand what's going on in the business outside the confines of your own department and show financial intelligence.

When preparing for your interview, go back through your key achievements in your career and find out what the numbers were. It's not enough to say the work you did resulted in improvements - prove it. Show the return on investment for the projects and activities you led.

2. Are you strategic?

You may be fantastic operationally - and this is a good skill to have - but to bring in someone at a senior level, the chief executive needs to be satisfied that you can think and behave strategically. They are looking for someone who thinks further ahead than next week or next month. They want a person who understands the organisation's vision, mission and goals. If they don't have them documented, they may want you to help create the vision, mission and goals, so you need to show you're up to the job. Think about examples when you have behaved strategically and practise talking about what

you did. You probably won't be asked this question outright so you need to weave your strategic abilities into the answers to other questions - make sure you use the word "strategy" at several points in the interview. Look at the organisation's website to research their vision, mission and business goals and make sure you refer to them in the interview.

3. Do you understand our culture?

Every organisation's culture is unique. Even when you've worked at a very similar organisation, there will be differences in the way things are done. This is as much about understanding the organisation's values as the personalities within it. The chief executive needs to be satisfied that you are going to fit in and not rock the boat too much. This isn't about being a "yes" person; more about how well you will work with the other senior executives.

You can get a good feel for the culture from the website. Look at how they present themselves to the world: go through with a fine-toothed comb to see what they say and how they say it. Also look at how they have photographed the senior people in the organisation. These portraits can be very telling and also give you a good indication of the dress code.

4. Do you respond well to being challenged?

At a senior level, you are likely to be challenged on your decisions and the work of your department. Will you run out of the office in tears, explode in rage or deal with it calmly in an appropriate manner? You might be asked this question or, more likely, the chief executive will be challenging in the interview to test how you respond.

Be ready to back up anything you claim in the interview. Avoid giving vague answers as these are likely to be challenged. Deal with any difficult comments assertively but not aggressively - after all, this person could be your next boss.

5. Can I trust you?

As they say, it's lonely at the top, and the chief executive is well aware of the political games played at work. It can take a lot for the chief executive to open up about any development issues they have or any decisions they are struggling with. They need to trust that anything they discuss with you will be confidential and handled discreetly. Do you want to be seen as their right-hand person or the gossip who goes blabbing to the rest of the executive team?

Demonstrate that you have a trusting relationship with your current boss by not being drawn into any discussions about what you like or dislike about working with them. If you have been a sounding-board to a senior person in the past, let them know this is the case without divulging any confidential information.

To perform well in an interview with a chief executive, you need to think like a chief executive. If you were in their position, what would you be looking for?

This is an edited version of an [article that originally ran on Changeboard](#).

Part 7: The biggest interview mistakes

Can you do the job? Do you want the job? Will you fit in? These are the three most important questions for an interviewer. Avoid the following mistakes that will make your answers to them sound like a “no”.

Not showing an understanding of the job

Prepare for the interview by finding out all you can about the role, company and industry. Read up on the company’s history, milestones, values, products/services and customers. Also research the wider challenges and opportunities in the sector. Scour industry blogs, trade publications, the company website or LinkedIn page. Set up Google alerts for news and use Twitter to help your search.

Ask intelligent questions at the interview to clarify your responsibilities and to show that you’re someone who wants to make an impact. Ask about short and long-term priorities and how the role affects the organisation as a whole.

Not saying how you did something

Rather than just saying you possess particular experience or a skill, prove it. Practise your storytelling techniques to show how you achieved a result or used your skills.

Find specific examples from your background to match the job specification. These examples should already be highlighted in your CV, so expand on them during the interview. Preparing your examples beforehand means you’re less likely to get stuck for an answer or appear tongue-tied.

Not knowing why you want the job

Lack of enthusiasm is almost guaranteed to lose you the job. You must be able to say why the role and company appeal. Use the “tell me about yourself” question to show how your background fits. Be prepared for questions about your future plans and think about how you can answer honestly and thoughtfully without sounding bland, vague or over-ambitious.

Negative body language will counteract anything you say. Exude confidence in how you walk, sit or answer questions.

Coming across as unprofessional

Nobody wants to work with a complainer or a back-stabber. Never criticise a previous manager, colleague or employer. Aim to give the impression of a capable, team-playing professional who would fit in and not be difficult to manage.

Not following up

A post-interview thank you note is an excellent way to reiterate your strongest selling points, and the reason why you want the job. If you haven’t heard by the time you expected (get an idea of their timeframe during the interview), following up shows your commitment and ability to stay on top of things.

10 things not to say

1. **“Sorry I’m late.”** It goes without saying that punctuality is key. Your interviewer doesn’t want you to arrive for work 20 minutes late every morning, so don’t ever be late for an interview.
2. **“What’s your annual leave and sickness policy?”** It doesn’t look good if, before you’ve even been hired, you’re planning your absence.

3. ***“I’ll just take this call.”*** Some candidates think it is acceptable to take telephone calls, texts etc. during an interview. It isn’t.

4. When asked, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” never say, “Doing your job.” As much as this might be a genuine answer, you should try to build a response around the experience and responsibilities you would like to have gained, rather than threatening the interviewer’s job.

5. ***“My previous employer sucked.”*** Speaking negatively about a previous employer is not only unprofessional, but it could also reflect on your character. Your new employer may contact your former employer for references following an interview, so it’s never wise to burn your bridges.

6. ***“You make widgets? I thought you made cricket bats.”*** Failing to research your prospective employer fully is a big faux pas. Saying you’ve looked at their website is only marginally better – employers expect far more research.

7. ***“Bloody hell.”*** Never swear in your interview. It can happen, especially if your interviewer is themselves prolific with the profanities, but don’t let them set the standard of the interview. Remain professional at all times.

8. ***“I was very good at sorting out PEBs by using ARCs.”*** Don’t fall into the industry jargon of your previous employer or assume the interviewer knows anything about your experience. Instead, speak clearly about your skills and experience to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding.

9. ***“Do I really have to wear that uniform?”*** Any criticism of staff uniform will go down like a lead balloon. Do you think your interviewer enjoyed wearing that fluorescent green ensemble when they performed your role?

10. When asked, “What do you expect to enjoy most about this role?” never reply with any of the following: the perks, the pay, lunchtimes, my co-workers or the holidays.

Part 8: Improving your interview technique further

The majority of interviews don’t go that well - most people are bad at them. And the truth is that a lot of recruiters are actually not particularly good at interviewing either. So, if you prepare properly and are a good interviewee, the odds can be stacked in your favour.

To put in a good performance, think about planning, practice and positive psychology - all of which we’ve covered above.

But to take your interview technique to the next stage, consider these points:

- You need to understand your interviewer and why they are hiring. Just browsing their website is not enough. Work on understanding the organisational need and how you can add value. Look at the challenges and opportunities they face and show that your experience and expertise are relevant. Explore their market, their competitors and the changes taking place in the industry. Use your network to find information about the interviewer and their preferences, the company and its culture. Use LinkedIn and ZoomInfo to gather all the information you can.

- Rehearse your presentation so you don't get flustered, and know your CV by heart. Can you talk about yourself comfortably, concisely and with confidence? A good interviewee has learned his or her lines in advance and is focusing much more on delivery than on off-the-cuff replies.
- But remember, it's not a solo performance; make the interview interactive. People trained in interview techniques are told to use the 70/30 rule. That is to say the interviewer aims to talk for about 30% of the time allotted and the candidate talks for 70% of the time in response. But the smart candidate actually wants a 50/50 dialogue. You should aim for a conversation - directed along the lines you prefer - whereby you can play to your strengths. The interviewer can only go with what you give them. This is best illustrated by using the "what was your biggest business mistake?" question. Do you really want to tell them your biggest mistake?
- You're aiming for positive interaction. Make it easy for the interviewer by saying: "Have I told you all you need to know on that subject? Can I give you more detail?" Build a rapport and find some common ground. Remember that it's not a monologue, it is a dialogue.
- A positive outlook is crucial. Henry Ford famously said, "If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right". You're motivated, you've done the preparation and have the drive to succeed, so visualise success. Whether you call it confidence, self-esteem or self-belief, to shine at interview you need to show that you will make a good employee. Show that you are good at interacting and reading your situation, good at selling yourself and your ideas. There's no need to be nervous if you believe you are a good candidate for the role.

Part 9: Ask the experts

Practice makes perfect

Steve McLellan - careers adviser at Edinburgh Napier University:

"You might find it useful to think of your interview as a performance. And as with any performance, practice makes perfect. It might not always be practical to learn your answers like an actor learns lines, but you should certainly have considered the rough outlines of how you will answer any given type of question. You need to write down the questions you expect to be asked and then an effective answer for each.

"You then need to focus on how you will look and sound on the day. To judge this successfully, you should, at the very least, interview yourself in the mirror a number of times, using the written materials you have prepared. Be honest about how professional, credible and friendly you look and sound.

"Think carefully about your posture and use of gestures. The pitch, tone, clarity and volume of your voice is also important. Interview nerves can affect all of these areas, so just being aware of them can help you control them and therefore be more effective on the day.

"It will really help if you can find a trusted friend to ask you the questions - it might feel a bit strange at first, but the experience of speaking your words publicly should give you more confidence."

Know what you're applying for

Jane Standley - director of careers and student employability at Brunel University:

"Ask a hundred recruiters what disappoints them most about the people they interview and I can safely predict the top answer - lack of knowledge of their organisation. And for lack of knowledge, they read lack of interest. Interview over."

"Find out how the organisation you are applying for has developed in recent years, how its products or services and markets have changed, who its competitors are, what its ethos is and what the future holds. Then use that information intelligently. Interviews are not like Mastermind - regurgitating facts won't win any prizes. Instead, you need to demonstrate an understanding of what it all means for you as a prospective employee, what the challenges would be and the skills and attributes you'll need to make a positive contribution."

Make a good first impression

Tim Reed - careers adviser at the University of Kent:

"Three-quarters of interviewees fail within three minutes of entering the room. Interviewers are put off by weak handshakes, a lack of eye contact, poor body language, poor posture (slumped shoulders suggest a lack of confidence) and a grim demeanour. Many recruiters make early judgements about your trustworthiness, likeability, competitiveness and professionalism, and spend the rest of the interview confirming these opinions."

"You should shake hands firmly and warmly, but wait to be invited to sit down. Smile and maintain good eye contact with the interviewer. Try to relax without perching on the edge of your chair, but don't slouch either. Avoid fidgeting and using phrases like 'you know' and 'I mean'."

Never leave an employer feeling the company is just one of many you are applying to

Antonia Clark - careers adviser at London South Bank University:

"Each organisation sees itself as unique and wishes to project its own identity, so never leave an employer feeling it is just one of many companies to which you are applying. Having made it clear what you admire about the company, explain how you meet its requirements and could contribute wholeheartedly to meeting its goals. Tailoring your replies in this way injects a personal touch that is convincing and brings results."

What you're really doing in an interview is living up to your promise

Alexandra Hemingway - careers adviser at the University of Surrey:

"When it comes to interview advice, 'just be yourself' is a popular cliché that sometimes makes people roll their eyes. For once, though, the cliché is true."

"It's natural to be nervous about interviews and waste energy worrying about what you don't know. However, the fact you have been invited to an interview is definitive proof that the employer already believes you can do the job. If they thought you weren't good enough, they simply wouldn't waste their energy (or time and money) on getting to know you."

“What an interviewer aims to do is find out whether what’s written in your CV or application is genuine, and how well you’ll fit in. Are you as charming, intelligent and helpful in person as you seem on paper? Of course, they’ll also be testing your understanding, motivation and ability, most often by asking you to talk them through examples of your experiences that showcase the attributes the job requires. You’ll probably need to expand on what you’ve written and it’s a good idea to have some new examples ready, too. But as long as you’ve been truthful, what you’re really doing in an interview is living up to your promise.”

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Changing careers

Most people will find themselves at a career crossroads at some point in their lives. Perhaps they have outgrown their current job or it's a reaction to redundancy. Or it could be down to personal pressures or the arrival of a new boss. If you are in this situation and contemplating either a slight career redirection or a more radical change, here are some tips to help you onto your new career path.

Part 1: Deciding if you need a change

Be clear about what you want

What do you want to be different in the future, and what elements of your work need to remain the same. It's important to think carefully about this, otherwise there is a danger that you could replicate your situation. The key to making the best decision is self-awareness and planning, so make a list of your priorities, including any practical considerations, such as pay and commute time, the type of work you want to focus on and the environment. Ask yourself:

- What's important to you?
- What gives meaning to your life?
- What are your personal goals?
- What do you want from your career?

Self-awareness provides a solid foundation for a career action plan. It will also confirm whether or not a career change is definitely right for you. Sometimes this process can remind you about the things you like about your current job, so it may be worth exploring whether you can improve things where you are, rather than moving on. Perhaps asking for flexible working hours or more responsibilities to reignite your job interest could work. Or maybe you need to be assertive to restore some balance where boundaries have been overstepped.

Think about whether a complete career change is needed. Maybe a similar job in a different environment, or a slightly tweaked version of what you do now would work just as well. It can be difficult to view this objectively on your own. If you can, talk your options over with someone else to make sure your decision is well thought-through, rather than an emotional response to difficulty.

If you are already certain it's a new career you need, here are some questions for you to ask yourself:

- Do you already know what you'd like to do instead?
- What will your new career offer you that your current career doesn't?
- What are your transferable skills?
- What are your preferred work environments?
- Will you need to retrain and if so, are you willing and able to do what it takes?

- Are you willing to take a pay cut to pursue your new career if necessary?
- What obstacles might you encounter as you transition to your new career?

Psychological barriers

Switching careers can be worrying and stressful. How do you find something that's right for you? Will you get a job? And will you enjoy it as much as you think you will? While there are plenty of practical barriers to changing careers, start by tackling the psychological and emotional barriers.

It takes determination to retrain and launch yourself into a new profession. Wannabe career changers often hold themselves back by getting caught up on the "four F-words": finances, failure, friends and family. "If you're going to make a change, you need to overcome your fears," says Richard Alderson, founder of Careershifters. "But just being aware of them is a really good starting point."

Here are some tips for getting into the right frame of mind:

1. Recognise that you are not a type

Careers advice often rests on the idea that you are a "type" of person who can be matched to the "ideal" job. But you are not; you're a complex human being with multiple, often competing, priorities and values. So think in terms of your decision criteria. Clarify the most important things to you in an ideal future career, including what you need to earn, skills you want to develop, how much risk you can take and what kind of values you stand for. It's fine if your criteria conflict; the aim is simply to be very clear on what really matters to you.

2. Identify all your options before you analyse

When thinking about new careers, most of us think about the same old options. But the only way we can decide which direction is best is by understanding all the possible options. Often what is missing is some consideration of alternative careers - for instance, those not advertised or which are created from scratch. Generate as many options as possible, listing everything which holds some appeal. Then get out there: go to talks, read, explore and follow interesting leads. If something appeals, write it down. Your mind will immediately want to analyse, but try to resist for now.

3. Evaluate your options

Instead of asking which jobs you could do, evaluate your options using your criteria. Score every option against each of your criteria. This may take time, but the results are usually fascinating. Which options can you get rid of? Which options have come top? For the options you retain, do some more research and then re-score, gradually narrowing your options down to a handful.

4. Get into action

If you are in career paralysis, people tend to get "headstuck" - they are stuck inside their minds rather than stuck in reality. To get unstuck, we must get out of our minds and into our life. The key is to start replacing thoughts about a change with the experience of change. It is action that changes thinking, not the other way around.

Close the gaps

A new career path is usually built on stepping stones rather than one huge leap. Be realistic about the gaps that separate you from those who are already working in the roles you are interested in. Close as many of them as you can by acquiring the relevant skills, knowledge and qualifications.

Find some way to acquire relevant work experience to put on your new CV. For example, if you decide that you want to work in the charity sector, then your occasional donation to a good cause won't be enough. Look for opportunities that will give you some exposure to the operational challenges of the sector, such as joining a charity committee or actively lobbying for a cause.

Professional associations are also helpful for those who are new to the field. Many offer training, speaker events and publications to keep you up to date with industry issues and encourage networking. Find something which is appropriate for your new career, offer your help and use the experience to boost your CV and to build connections.

Opportunities close to home

Don't forget to leverage any opportunities with your current organisation that could act as useful stepping stones towards your new career path. You might suggest research projects that are relevant to your future career, such as looking at best practice in your industry, exploring new technologies or working with a particular customer group. Or you could volunteer to be a mentor, or get involved with employee communications and organise social events.

Keep an eye on internal vacancy bulletins and if anything suitable comes up, go and have a chat to the manager. You may not have everything they need, but unlike an external candidate, you know how the organisation works. They may be willing to train you up or give you some work experience until the new employee is appointed.

Career progression, not change

Prospective employers tend to be wary about career changers. They may be concerned about your lack of experience, your motives for career change or your commitment to your new career.

Avoid getting into lengthy personal justifications for your career change as these often raise more questions for the employer than they answer. Instead, position your career to date as one of natural progression as you discovered more about the things you were good at and enjoyed. Focus on your transferable skills and try to show how, even in unrelated roles, the seeds of your new career were already present.

A functional CV format tends to work better for career changers as they enable you to use the first page to highlight relevant skills and experience drawn from your entire career history.

Inside knowledge

Bring yourself up to speed with the trends and challenges relevant to your new career. Pay attention to the trade press and join relevant online groups so that you can learn the buzz words and prevailing concerns in your industry. When it comes to talking to prospective employers, aim to come across as someone in the know rather than a newbie.

Focus on networking, getting introductions to individuals who work in the field and contacting employers directly to offer your services. This more proactive approach takes effort, some luck and a convincing sales pitch to work. But it enables you to be considered on your own terms rather than direct comparison with lots of other candidates. It's also worth considering temporary work as another route into organisations you are interested in.

Part 2: Knowing what career to switch to

If you don't have a clear career path mapped out in front of you, how do you go about choosing the right role or sector? Do you pursue your passion at all costs (regardless of the state of the industry), or do you fall into a career by accident?

Standard career advice is to identify your marketable strengths, along with your interests and values. You then match these to companies that need your skills and where you'd enjoy working.

But when so many roles seem to require the same sets of skills and attributes, identifying sectors, companies or roles becomes more difficult. Here are other ways to approach your career decision-making.

Analyse your skills

Look hard at your skills, particularly those acquired outside work. What do you do well? What skills do you look forward to using in the workplace? Ensure you have plenty of up-to-date evidence of skills development, learning, and voluntary activities.

Creating a personal job advert

This strategy can help you on your way to finding your ideal job. But the concept is the opposite of the standard career search: imagine that newspapers didn't advertise jobs, but rather advertised people who were looking for jobs. Here's how to do it:

1. Write a half-page job advertisement that tells the world who you are and what you care about in life. Write down your talents (eg, you speak Mongolian, can play the bass guitar), your passions (eg, ikebana, scuba diving), and the core values and causes you believe in (eg, wildlife preservation, women's rights). Include your personal qualities (such as, you're quick-witted, impatient, lacking self-confidence).
2. Record anything else that is important to you - a minimum salary or the desire to work overseas, for instance. Make sure you don't include any particular job you are keen on, your educational qualifications or career background. Keep it at the level of underlying motivations and interests.
3. Make a list of 10 people you know from different walks of life and who have a range of careers and email them your personal job advertisement. Ask them to recommend two or three careers that might fit with what you have written. Tell them to be specific, for example, "You should do charity work with street kids in Rio de Janeiro" rather than, "You should work with children."
4. Look at the results. Are there any interesting surprises? You will probably end up with an eclectic list of careers, many of which you would never have thought of for yourself. And that is exactly the point - to help stretch your imagination. It also enables you to see your many possible selves: we assume that there is only one ideal job out there for us - our vocation - but the reality is that there are probably several careers that could offer fulfilment by bringing out different sides of who you are. Of course, faced with some of these unexpected options, you'll now need to narrow them down.

Psychometric tests and indicators

Originally devised by the Chinese to test their civil servants, psychometrics (literally mind measurement) were used heavily by the US and UK armies after the two world wars to establish what to do with all the enlisted men. Today, lots of recruiters use them to give an indication of how a candidate will perform at work.

Careers professionals say that psychometric testing is used in good faith by anyone on the brink of a substantial career decision - from the school-leaver to the mid-career professional. While it makes sense to pursue careers that play to your specific abilities, the results alone shouldn't define your career choices. They can, however, highlight where you are weaker so you know where to focus. For instance, many people say they want to work with people - but a test will show whether they want to help them, care for them, influence them or give them advice. "We all make assumptions about our abilities, but psychometric testing can throw up unexpected results that open new career possibilities," says Stephen Parker of CareerMatters.

There are some free tests online. Perhaps the best known is the Myers-Briggs test that suggests careers based on your results. Another test, the three-and-a-half-hour long Morrisby Profile, gives comprehensive careers guidance alongside results to throw up a dozen potential career options, drawn from more than 500 occupations.

Work out your top 10 jobs criteria

Develop a personal wish-list of the ingredients in your ideal job - think about key elements such as the kind of people you enjoy working with, the results you like to achieve and the organisation's working style. Then throw your values into the mix - what products or services matter to you? Look for jobs which match at least six out of the 10 criteria.

Mine your experience

Few people discover their ideal job through careers tests. Usually what's needed is a new way of combining ideas and past experience. Look at what you have found stimulating in the past - in work, study or leisure - and map that on to the world of work by asking about what people actually do.

Analyse market trends

Entire sectors are changing, jobs are disappearing and some skills are becoming obsolete while new roles emerge. Stay ahead of recruitment patterns and get an overview of which sectors are healthy, and which are predicted to shrink. Find out where companies are expanding, and which skills are in demand. Resources such as the Future Work Skills report are also helpful in identifying wider employment trends.

For example, a shift towards specialist skills is currently underway. The concept of a job is beginning to disappear, to be replaced by a need for expertise. Employers look for values, skills and fit, rather than experience. For jobseekers, this means that your long-term value and employability will depend on how much need there is for your specialist skills. Staying relevant means assessing and adjusting these, either through deepening them, or by turning them in new directions. Without a particular area of expertise, you'll find it harder to get work.

Avoid yes/no thinking

When you last heard about an interesting job, how quickly did you find a reason to say "no" to the idea? Explore the options thoroughly and don't let setbacks put you off. Ask a good friend to challenge you when you're tempted to trash your goals.

Look before you leap

Research before you job search. Don't rely on second-hand information about sectors; find out for yourself. Pick a couple of job ideas and ask around until you get a chance to talk to people who actually do the role. That way you really know what the job is like and you learn to talk the language.

Find people who love what they do and who can tell you what a career feels like from the inside. This also increases your visibility in the hidden job market.

Reflection

You'll need to do a certain amount of thinking to avoid falling into a role by accident. Pinpoint what you're good at, what you enjoy doing, and what you find interesting. Work out whether you have any particular values or needs that must be met. Talk to people who know you; Family, friends, tutors, and so on can often provide illuminating feedback.

A range of jobs and experience will give you a clearer idea of what you like or don't like; or what you find interesting, meaningful or challenging. Work shadowing, temping and freelance opportunities are all useful ways to gain this awareness.

Don't base a career choice on job titles alone. Roles change over time, and you may well have the chance to develop yours. For this reason, focus on finding companies where you feel you would develop professionally, rather than being led solely by job title.

Identify your levels of tolerance. No single job is always perfect - there'll always be a mix of what you love doing and what you don't. But work out how far you can compromise. For example, how much micromanaging could you, the "independent, resourceful problem-solver", accept? Identifying your non-negotiables in terms of working environments or management styles (and the ideal scenarios where you're most likely to flourish) is a good step to finding a satisfying career.

Consider less obvious choices

Your degree doesn't necessarily lock you into one career. Jane Artess, director of research at the Higher Education Careers Services Unit, pointed out that around six in 10 graduates are recruited to jobs where their degree subject "was not the deal-breaker".

Explore a range of sectors and companies. Ask for informational interviews or a chance to work shadow. Don't discount smaller or mid-sized companies either - these can often expose you to a wider range of roles and responsibilities than larger companies.

Act first, then think

"Job hopping" isn't always a disadvantage - especially at the early stages of your career when you're still working out what you like or dislike in a job. Instead, consider all roles as an opportunity to deepen your skillset and expertise.

Take a more long-term view of your career, and don't feel obliged to commit your entire working life to one company or sector. Remember: what you want or need from a job will evolve, and you should review your needs and ambitions regularly.

Experiment with different types of employment. Don't turn down temporary work or short-term assignments that could give you an "in" to a company, or the chance to work on an interesting project.

Part 3: Radical sabbaticals

The 30 job experiment

In her late twenties, Laura van Bouchout had yet to find her dream job. She had worked for several years organising cultural events in a number of jobs, but she was utterly bored by it.

In search of something more fulfilling, she decided to conduct an experiment. For her thirtieth birthday present to herself she spent a whole year trying thirty different jobs by shadowing and volunteering - a kind of "radical sabbatical". Among other things, she managed a cat hotel, then spent a week following an MEP, and found that working in advertising was unexpectedly exhilarating.

What did she learn from her experience?

"The more jobs I tried, the more I realised it's not a rational process of listing criteria and finding a job that matches them. It's a bit like dating. When I was single I had a mental list of qualities I thought my boyfriend should have. But some guys who met all the criteria on my list did nothing for me. And at one point you find someone who doesn't meet half your checklist but blows you away. I think that's what you have to look for in a job." Finding the right career, she believes, "is not about thinking and planning, but about doing lots of job dating, trying things out until you feel a spark."

In the course of her thirty-job odyssey, Laura stumbled upon the most significant insight to have emerged from the latest research into career change: act first, think later.

The biggest mistake people make in career change is to follow the traditional "plan then implement" model. You draw up lists of personal strengths, weaknesses and ambitions - perhaps with the help of a personality test. You then match your profile to particular professions and start sending out applications. But there's a problem: it doesn't usually work. You might get a new job, but despite your expectations, it's unlikely to be fulfilling.

We need to turn this model on its head. Instead of thinking then acting, we should follow Laura's advice, acting first then reflecting later. Just as we can't learn carpentry by reading a book, we can't shift careers without taking practical action.

Identify a range of "possible selves" - careers that might offer a sense of fulfilment, reflecting your talents, values or passions. Then you need to experiment with them in that unnerving place called the real world. Get out there and volunteer, shadow or take a training course, immersing yourself in experimental learning.

Organisational behaviour expert Herminia Ibarra says: "The only way to create change is to put our possible identities into practice, working and crafting them until they are sufficiently grounded in experience to guide more decisive steps. We learn who we are by testing reality, not by looking inside." A fatal error jobseekers make is "to delay taking the first step until they have settled on a destination".

For many people, of course, the idea of taking a radical sabbatical is too risky or intimidating. Laura supported herself by working part-time during her year-long experiment, but not everyone has that option.

There is, however, an alternative way to "act first and think later". You don't need to dramatically resign from your job on Monday morning and step out into the unknown. Instead you can pursue what are called branching projects or temporary assignments on the side of your existing job.

Disenchanted with marketing or banking? Then try teaching yoga or doing freelance web design at the weekends. If you enjoy it, keep doing more until you have the courage to leave your old job behind you. If it doesn't provide a spark, try something else.

In effect, you will have taken a number of small steps resulting in a big change, circumventing our natural aversion to risk. It may take some time to work your way through the several possible selves, but there is compelling evidence that it is a necessary part of successful change. "We short circuit it at our peril," warned Ibarra.

Now is the time to challenge yourself. What is your first branching project going to be? And what is the very first step you can take towards making it happen.

Part 4: Making the transition

Deciding what you want to do is only the first challenge of a career change. The next hurdle is how to make it a smooth and successful transition. To help, here's a step-by-step guide to make the transition to your new career an easier one.

Research

A vital first step in changing careers is to research your new career. Speak to people in the industry to gain a realistic insight into the culture, conditions, opportunities and challenges. As part of your research you should identify any skills gaps, transferable skills and qualifications or certifications required. Find out what others in your chosen new career have done. For example, what are their backgrounds, what was their progression route, what qualifications do they have?

Develop a plan

A good career transition plan provides a blueprint for a successful change. Start by setting your sights on your end career goal and map out the steps you'll need to take to get there. Allocate realistic timeframes to achieve your goals; accept that these may need to be adjusted as you work through your plan due to potentially unforeseen changes, such as the labour market or personal problems.

Grow your network

It's a good idea to join relevant professional associations, attend networking events, and develop connections with people and organisations in your new career area. This is a great way to learn about potential employment and training opportunities. Your network will also play a critical role in your research activities as they can provide insight into your new career.

Know the job market before retraining

If you know what you're up against it and you're still raring to retrain, ensure you choose a good course. Ros Toynbee, director of The Career Coach, says: "Don't just think that you can go off and do a qualification and it will get you a job. Not all courses are equal and many don't lead to jobs. Find out about the course's employability rate before you apply. You've got to be sensible, otherwise you could be setting yourself up for failure."

Obtain skills and qualifications

You may need to gain new skills or certain qualifications to prepare for your new career. If you are still working in your old job, and you hope to make a seamless transition to a new one, it will be necessary for you to gain the required skills and qualifications before you leave.

Once you've identified the qualifications you need, investigate your options including online and part-time courses. Although study combined with full-time employment can be challenging, it is possible. With careful planning, a commitment to your end goal and support of family and friends, you can gain the skills and qualifications you need.

Gain experience

A combination of qualifications and experience is more highly regarded than either options alone. One of the biggest challenges career changers face, however, is how to gain experience in their chosen new career.

If you are studying, it's likely there will be a work experience component in your course. Once completed, make sure you add your placement to your CV including your duties, projects and any achievements. Choose your host employer wisely, many employers recruit new staff through work experience programmes.

Your current employer may also be able to offer you opportunities. This can be filling in for someone on leave or taking on extra duties that help you towards your new career direction. Another way to gain experience is through volunteering or taking on short-term work contracts outside of your normal working hours or during holidays.

Be prepared to take small steps

"Take small actions to move forwards in directions that interest you," says Richard Alderson, founder of Careershifters. "Sometimes these small steps may not make sense when you're making them, as you don't know where they're leading, but you can connect the dots when you look back."

Make the leap

As daunting as it may be, the time will come when you will need to make the final leap into your chosen new career. Initially you might need to accept a lower income until you become established in your new field although, in some cases, you might be lucky enough to move into a higher paying role straight away.

If you need assistance making the transition to a new career, seek help from a qualified and experienced career practitioner. You can visit the Institute of Career Guidance website where you'll find a register of practitioners experienced in helping people change careers. You can also visit the career choices section on the Guardian Careers website.

Part 5: Writing a CV for your new career switch

One of the biggest challenges career changers face is demonstrating how their career history is relevant. The key is to downplay a lack of direct experience, while highlighting the applicable, transferable skills and accomplishments which apply.

Standard advice for career changers is generally to adopt a functional or skills-based CV - a detailed skills section followed by a briefer experience section. The idea is that the employer will be wowed by this and skip over the who, what and how of your work history. But employers often want and expect the detail found in a standard chronological CV, and not providing it puts you at a disadvantage. One solution is to develop a 'hybrid' CV with an expanded profile and skills section, and a chronological employment history.

View your career history through an employer's eyes

A successful career-change CV clearly shows how your career path to date is a consistent, natural progression of your talents and interests, leading you to the point where you've amassed the necessary skills and experience for your next move. You can avoid giving the impression that you're a directionless job-hopper or that you're floundering around for a career change by finding an underlying career theme and writing your career history around this. For example, if you're going for a marketing role, select and highlight any marketing elements from previous roles, downplaying all other, less relevant aspects.

Sell your strengths

Show confidence in your abilities. You may be at a disadvantage compared to others with more extensive, relevant experience, so showcase everything that positions you for the role. Quantifiable achievements; community, voluntary, part-time or temporary work; specific skills or added qualifications all count. Be selective; only include information that supports your new goals, otherwise you'll blur the focus of your CV.

Don't be tempted to leave out work history, however. Gaps can raise questions, so either account for the dates with a brief summary, or find something relevant to highlight. If you've been pursuing two different careers (perhaps in preparation for a career move) you can choose which roles to include and which to delete. Or you can include concurrent roles if you've gained relevant skills or experience from both.

Be flexible with layout

Prioritise key details such as qualifications, blue-chip company experience, or even a glowing testimonial. These can go near the beginning of your CV. Consider splitting your professional history into two or more sections, with anything relevant (including voluntary or part-time roles) positioned more prominently.

There is no single way to format a CV. The job description can help you decide what needs to be most prominent. One possibility is to use your skills as broad headings, giving supporting details under each skill, then following with a reverse chronological work history section. So if you were applying for an office administration role, organisational or communication skills could be broad headings, with experience and achievements listed under each, followed by your employment history. If your new career is not too different from your previous one, you could even use a standard chronological format, angling the details to match the requirements of the new role (without stretching the truth). Adding a profile can help you outline broad strengths such as management or leadership experience. You can follow this with a key results section to illustrate those strengths, or leave your achievements in your work history section. You can label CV sections as you find appropriate or even include new ones. For example, adding relevant civic or community service, ongoing education or leadership sections can help you stand out.

Pay attention to language

Don't use industry-specific jargon that might not be understood in a different sector. Consider including an explanatory sentence next to job titles.

Include a cover letter

This is the ideal opportunity to explain your career change and highlight what you bring to the role or company.

Part 6: Moving from the public to the private sector

It's been predicted that up to 500,000 public sector jobs could be cut by the end of 2015. This has led to an unprecedented number of public sector workers trying to make the difficult move into the private sector. This transition can be extremely challenging due to the different working environments between commercially-driven organisations and public sector institutions.

Candidates need to completely change their mindset in terms of embracing a new workplace culture when making a successful move to the private sector. The private sector is primarily focused on profit and is often free from many of the bureaucratic restrictions in the public sector. In the private sector, employees' main objectives are focused around financial performance and productivity. Projects in the private sector tend to be faster moving so it's important to show prospective employers that you have the ability to work efficiently in a fast-paced environment. Public sector workers who may not be used to this way of working could find this much more pressurised and stressful.

If, however, those wanting to transfer into the private sector plan their move strategically, it can result in a new and rewarding career with added benefits. Here are some tips to help you make the move:

- A focused and targeted approach is key. Before rewriting your CV it's important to understand what type of organisations you want to apply to, where you want to be located, what level you want to be working at and what your ideal position is.
- Avoid using public sector terminology. To illustrate that you are capable of making a successful move into the private sector it's important to use the right language, which is measurably different between the two sectors. Read job descriptions and person specifications carefully, comparing like-for-like jobs in the public sector so you can understand the different language used.
- Maximise your time when speaking to recruiters. Ask them if they have a good understanding of public and private sector employees and inquire what experience they have of assisting candidates transitioning.
- Social media must be part of your career development campaign. Embrace social media and ensure you are a proactive jobseeker. A Jobsite social networking study found that 93% of companies plan to use social recruiting, so it's critical to familiarise yourself with these types of online resources.
- Tailor your CV. Use genuine statistics or numbers to give examples of cost savings, productivity improvements, process improvements, reduction in waste or losses or improved customer services. This will all help to secure an interview in the private sector. It's important to break your CV down into skills, achievements and experience.
- Customers are not necessarily the same as service users. In the private sector a company's customers are where their revenue (and your salary) comes from, regardless of if they are individuals or other companies. It's important to illustrate the level of your commercial awareness in this area.
- Don't just look at job adverts. It's important to keep a regular check on job adverts, but it's also worth making a targeted speculative approach to organisations that you want to work for.

While the differences between public and private sector workers may seem wide, in fact they have never been so close as a result of the public sector pursuing best value. For instance, HR strategies more typically associated with the private sector - such as those promoting efficiency or encouraging staff loyalty - have been widely adopted in the public sector. Measures have also been introduced in the public sector that link individual performance with strategic objectives. Additionally, the privatisation of many public services has required staff to exhibit much greater professional flexibility and adaptability.

While it may be a candidate-heavy market now, stop worrying about what the rest will write or say and focus on you and the value you can offer.

Part 7: Moving from the private to the public sector

Moving from the private to the public sector can be complicated because the recruitment processes are often very different. You may be left wondering why your applications don't seem to be hitting the mark, despite knowing that you could do the job standing on your head. The truth is that to successfully apply for a public sector job you need to understand how the system works. Without this, skills and experience alone may not be enough.

How is the shortlisting done?

The deciding part of your application often doesn't lie in the detail of the form itself, or your accompanying covering letter. Rather, it's likely that your "supporting statement" will count the most. This is the document where you're asked to give evidence of the skills, experience and knowledge needed for the role. To do this well you need to meet each point on the person specification, giving examples to support and demonstrate your claims. Applicants will receive a tick, cross or perhaps a question mark against each of the criteria points, according to the contents of the supporting statement. This means you should address every single point mentioned.

How should I format my supporting statement?

Use a layout that makes it crystal clear which criteria you are addressing. You can use an order that mirrors the recruiter's requirements - shortlisters will like this because it makes it easier to locate the key information they need. It could also help your chances of success: under time pressures it can be easy to overlook a point which is hidden in the midst of a wordy paragraph. It's safer to dedicate a short paragraph or bullet points to each criteria, and work through them systematically.

Demonstrating your competencies

You can use your supporting statement to prove you have the required skills. Teamwork, using initiative and client-awareness, are usually desirable, but there are many other attributes they may be looking for too.

Think back to the Star technique, which is outlined in the Interviews chapter of this ebook, but which you can also use in job applications. Focus your evidence on one specific example that you can break down into detail, rather than talking more generally about a range of situations. It is not enough, for example, to respond to a competency requirement, such as flexibility, by saying: "I take an adaptable and pragmatic approach to my work." You need to prove it through a real-life example.

Keep a copy of your application

Completing applications like this may seem frustratingly time-consuming, but it does come with its benefits. You may not realise it, but completing your supporting statement has already helped you prepare for the next stage of the process; interviews often focus on many of the same criteria points. It's essential, therefore, that you keep a copy of both your supporting statement and the person specification and use them as tools in your interview preparation. Topics that come up for discussion should be reasonably easy to predict and the interview should be structured so that the same questions are asked to all candidates.

Part 8: Ask the experts

Figure out what it is you want

Sarah Byrne - online editor at Careershifters:

"Clarify what you would like to do next. What boxes aren't being ticked in your current role? What would you like your next role to give you? How would you like to interact with your colleagues, and/or clients? Do you want to stay within your current interest field or are curious about a new field?"

"Clarifying what it is about your work situation that isn't working will help. It may be your colleagues or boss who is creating the stress, in which case moving to another company could be the shift you need. It may be that you hate the commute and being in an office, in which case perhaps you could consider working from home, setting up your own business, or being a freelancer for a few different companies."

How to get work experience

Hannah Morton-Hedges - careers adviser and head of Momentum Careers Advice:

"All employers want work experience, but few are prepared to offer it. Depending on what it is you want to do, a number of qualifications such as NVQs do offer work experience as part of the course. Check out your local college to see what they have on offer."

"There are an increasing number of apprenticeships available which, like NVQs, offer the chance to gain qualifications and experience at the same time. Check out apprenticeships.org.uk for more information. Alternatively, volunteering can also be a great way of building work-based experience."

Do your research before you embark on extra qualifications

Lisa LaRue - runs career consultancy CareerWorx:

"Before you commit to a course it is always worth doing your research on what employers are looking for. You can do this by browsing job boards, talking to relevant employers/employees that you may know, or speaking to industry-specific recruitment consultants."

"A good career action plan should be guided by a specific, achievable goal and contain identified tasks to reach the goal. It's important to include timeframes for the completion of tasks and the achievement of the goal. Without allocated timeframes, it's far too easy for your career action plan to fall by the wayside."

Tailor your CV and highlight your transferable skills

Clare Whitmell - careers coach:

“Link your past to the present; pull out all the relevant aspects of previous jobs that are similar or the same. Downplay the rest. Draw out themes, too. For example, highlight all your admin experience if you’re moving into the admin field and make sure your achievements are relevant. Sometimes it can help to explain your career change, especially if it looks like a logical progression. So, if you worked in marketing and you’re now going for sales, emphasise the overlaps.”

“Cover letters are a good place to briefly describe your motivations for the job (whether that’s a progression or a career move). But the focus should be on what value you bring to the role, and for that to happen, you need to think from the employer’s perspective. What can you offer them? Why are you a strong candidate?”

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