

Standing out from the crowd

Chiumento 2009 research into the recruitment market

How to maximise your chances of success in today's highly competitive jobs market

With over 2 million people now unemployed in the UK we have seen a dramatic change in the balance of power in the jobs market; just two years ago the talk was all about the "war for talent" and how employers were having to fight hard to secure the people they needed to drive their business.

Now the talk amongst recruiters is all about the challenges of handling levels of response unprecedented in recent times. Daily we hear stories of 5, 6 or even 700 applications for a single job.

In this type of market it is more essential than ever that candidates know "the rules of the game" when it comes to writing a winning CV. With recruiters potentially under an avalanche of applications you need to make sure your CV stands out. Equally important, you need to avoid the pitfalls that make rejecting your CV an easy option for an under pressure recruiter.

Every year Chiumento talks to a panel of over 100 recruiters – both employers and recruitment businesses – about what makes a good CV and how they manage applications and make selection decisions. Their views indicate a very real shift in practices – making it more important than ever that you are up to date.

Playing it safe

Both in-house and agency recruiters (over 80%) are spending more time scrutinising CVs than ever before. From an agency perspective we believe that this reflects the growing competition to fill the very limited number of vacancies available. Not wishing to miss out on any opportunity to win the business, the focus will be on putting forward only their top 3 or 4 candidates – those with the closest match to their client's needs. Similarly, in-house recruiters are being even more selective about who they invite to interview. Both can afford to be choosy now that there is no shortage of candidates.

Now more than ever it is important you apply for the right jobs – not just play a numbers game. You are far better off investing your time writing a great application for one job where you meet all the criteria rather than sending off 300 CVs and hoping one sticks.

So, before you think about applying for a job analyse the advertisement. Job ads usually make it very clear what the top 5 or 6 requirements are – and if you can't tick almost every box the chance are you will be wasting your time in applying. Time you could have invested in a more relevant application.

If you can tick every box make sure this stands out in your CV. Covering letters can get detached or lost – so make sure you put a summary of how you meet the key job requirements right under the nose of the recruiter at the top of your CV. Over half of all



recruiters value summary profiles. It also demonstrates how interested you are and that you have taken the time to understand the job and make the recruiter's life easy. Easy for them = success for you.

Practice makes perfect

Our survey shows that 72% of recruiters are now using structured interviews – often these will be competency based. This type of interview is based on the premise that what you have done before is the best indicator of what you will do in future. What is being looked for is clear evidence of your achievements.

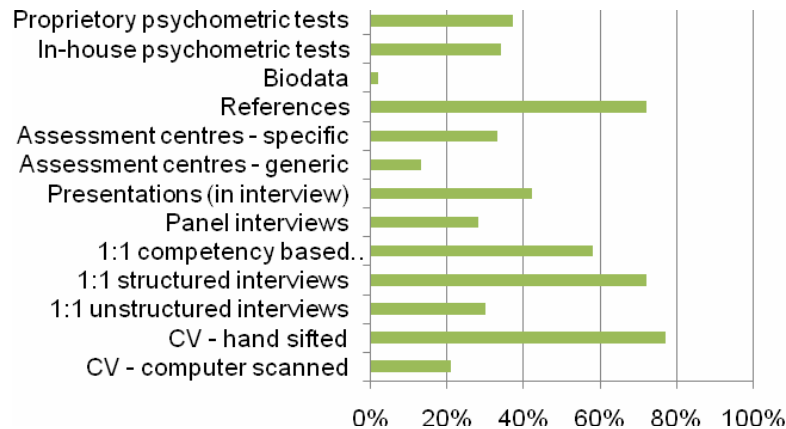
The great news is that it is relatively easy to improve your interview performance through good preparation. Many of the questions used are fairly standard and focus on a fairly limited range of competencies – such as team working, customer orientation and problem solving. If you go on to the internet you can find many good examples of competency frameworks – which will give you very strong clues about the type of questions you might be asked.

Having worked on the potential questions you can then prepare and rehearse your model answers. Remember, recruiters will be looking to:

- Establish your unique contribution – so always talk about “I” not “we”.
- Get hard evidence about what you did – so be prepared to quote hard information such as how long something took, how much it cost, the benefits of doing it etc.
- Understand how your approach was different or innovative – what is the value of employing you over someone else?
- Get a concise and clear answer – not a long rambling story without an apparent end.

Always remember too that when in an interview it is the quality of your answer that counts – not the spontaneity. Don't be afraid of silence – even a few seconds can feel a long time when the pressure is on. However this is far better than launching into the first thing that comes to your mind (and may well be a poor answer).

Typical recruitment



processes



Make it clear

Recruiters made it very clear in our survey that the top three things they wanted from CVs were easy to follow career history, clear examples of achievements (results not activities), clean and simple presentation (so no fancy typefaces, coloured paper etc). Few were interested in details of hobbies, leisure interests or photographs – so these are probably just taking up vital space that could be used to more effect.

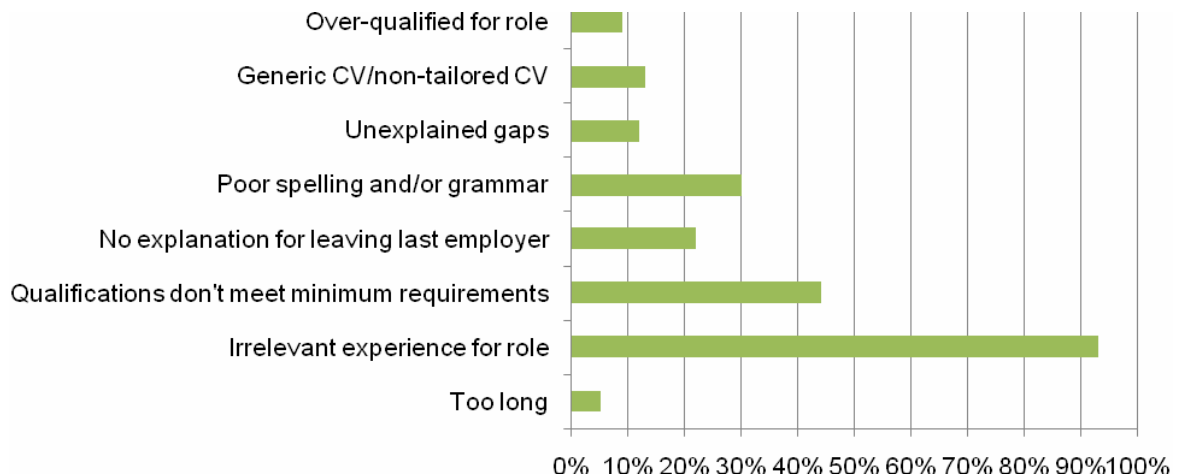
The number of people who value summary statements at the start of a CV has leapt since we started the survey in 2002 – and is now as high as 68% amongst in-house recruiters. Chiumento believes this is almost certainly in response to volumes of applications – helping recruiters quickly “select in” those who make an immediate impact with information directly relevant to their role. Just make sure that it is direct and relevant, and not long-winded and vague.

Trading up

Many more organisations (48%) are not rejecting the CVs of people who are over qualified – as long as their salary expectations are in line with the market. They see it as an opportunity to bring talent into their organisation, at a potentially lower salary level. This may sound like a one-sided deal, but once you’ve got your foot in the door you can prove your worth and achieve a more challenging role.

Note however, that 17% of recruitment agencies said they were most likely to reject a CV on the grounds of over-qualification. If you are applying for a role through an agency, make sure you sell your over-qualifications in a positive light such as your ability to hit the ground running and potential cost-savings in training for the client organisation.

‘Most likely’ reasons for rejecting a CV



Accuracy is everything



70% of recruiters said that candidates do not spend enough time preparing their CVs and overall, 88% would be 'most likely' or 'likely' to reject CVs for grammar and spelling mistakes. Use a spell checker and ensure information is clearly and neatly laid out. There is no excuse for a poorly presented CV.

Similarly, 80% of all recruiters value clear achievements but be careful not to claim things you can't substantiate at interview. With this in mind, a focus on quantified achievements will pay dividends. Take your time as it will come across in your CV and get you to interview stage.

Don't lie about why you left...

Both sets of recruiters (61%) believe that redundancy has lost its stigma and does not mean that a candidate will be discriminated against. In fact some recruiters see applicants who've been affected by redundancy as an opportunity to bring talent into the organisation and help their businesses succeed post-recession.

It is important to plan how you will position your reason for leaving at interview stage but you do not need to mention it in your CV.

.... in fact don't lie at all!

Be aware of the increasing governance around pre-employment checks. 48% of employers now use external expert providers to check information provided on CVs. So that university degree you never quite finished but claimed or that extra 6 months you added to a previous role to cover an employment gap, will be brought to light. Be honest, but be prepared to explain at interview stage.

With the growing employer awareness of candidate fraud comes an expectation that their suppliers will also ensure adequate checks. 83% of recruitment agencies verify CV information so if you embellish the truth once, they'll be less inclined to put you forward for other roles – don't do it!

Explaining gaps

Agency recruiters are particularly concerned that gaps in your CV mean you have something to hide. 65% of agencies expressed this view, whereas only 34% of in-house recruiters were equally suspicious. A number of respondents commented that unexplained gaps may imply a 'lack of achievements' or may simply be a result of 'poor presentation' - both in themselves shown to be popular reasons for rejection. So best advice is to avoid gaps and instead to explain any breaks in career dates.

If you are applying through an agency, make sure you get your history right so that you avoid gaps. If you do have genuine breaks in employment history, be prepared to explain them. You need to give the agency any back-up information so they can sell you to the client in the best way.

Taking it with a pinch of salt

67% of recruiters reckon people embellish their current salary package. Expect to be asked for P45/P60s to substantiate earnings – particularly if commission/bonus is a significant element of total pay. In fact, exaggerating your salary may be counter-productive in a market where starting rates in many sectors/disciplines are falling and you could end up pricing yourself out of the market.



Where recruiters reckon CVs are embellished



Top ten tips for candidates

1. Take your time on your CV, detailing all relevant experience with careful consideration of the role and required competences
2. Do not gloss over any gaps - external recruiters in particular do not like it
3. Make your CV stand out but not at the expense of its content. Recruiters are increasingly inundated with CVs so make sure your points are precise but also justified
4. Ensure your referees are aware of any applications you may be making so that they are prepared for any contact they may receive

5. Include a summary profile, in-house recruiters are particularly keen on its inclusion in a CV
6. Don't worry about asking questions about the recruitment process you are about to embark on – it is better to be prepared
7. Make sure spelling and grammar is of a high quality as mistakes are frowned upon and could be used as a reason to discount a CV
8. Carefully consider your positioning of your reason for leaving your previous employer. Redundancy does not have the same stigma as previous years but do be clear about the series of events
9. Be aware that recruiters are entitled to carry out checks on candidates, both Criminal Record checks and Credit Reference checks
10. Consider your options carefully and don't jump into the first role you find, out of fear of being left behind.