

UK Learning College



Interview Tips

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Introduction

Your CV's primary job is to win you an invitation to an interview. But that's not all it can do. Your worst enemy in a job interview is time. Therefore, making the most of the time allocated to the interview is critical to gaining a competitive edge. How do you want to be remembered by the interviewers? As the candidate with whom they spent 75 per cent of the precious, never to be repeated time clarifying your skills, experience and achievements? Or as the candidate with whom they had an in-depth discussion about your ability to contribute to the organisation's future success?

Listing your jobs in chronological order and succinctly summarising your duties is not enough. Consider what an employer really wants to know before they even pick up the phone to talk with you. They want to know what difference you have made to your previous employers. They want to know how your skills, qualifications, abilities and know-how have been applied. And they want to know how your efforts have added value to the organisations for which you have worked.

If your CV satisfies these needs, the interviewer does not need to spend valuable interview time discovering what you did, how you did it, what you achieved and what difference your achievements made. The interview therefore starts at a much higher level. Interviewers can dispense with clarifying the basics because it has all been clearly explained to them. They can probe more deeply and you can engage them in a more advanced conversation about how you do things and why you do them in that way.

In short, the interviewer gets more from the experience. They remember you as the person with whom they had an interesting in-depth discussion. They perceive you as knowledgeable, insightful and competent as you really are. They understand you at a deeper level: your motivations and drivers, your approach to tasks, how you would fit their culture and how effective you are likely to be.

Some clients have asked whether this is dangerous: the more they know you, the more likely they are to decide against you. We suggest looking at it from the point of view of the more they know, the better the decision. If you aren't right for the job or the organisation, or if the job or organisation is not right for you, isn't it better to know before you start? There is nothing worse for a career than finding out three months after starting that there is not really a good fit after all. Unless of course, you find out three weeks after starting!

Revising your CV also ensures you have more time at the interview to fully explore the career opportunity and the organisation being presented to you.

Emphasise outcomes not activities

Often we take for granted what we do in our day to day work. Employers and recruitment consultants do not have the same depth of understanding about what you have done as you. They want things spelled out for them. They don't want to have to read between the lines. Your CV should explain everything they want to know.

When we discuss this issue with our clients, many ask whether including all this additional information will make their CV excessively long. People will read what they find interesting and useful. There are ways of formatting and designing your CV that make best use of the page. There are ways of expressing information to minimise the word count without diminishing the value of the information. Knowing what to exclude is also important. Knowing where to position information is often as important as what to say.

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Let's look at some ways of expressing achievements:

Before

"Developed and implemented a new data searching methodology."

After

"Reduced the time required to search the database by developing and implementing meta data structures."

The achievement in this example is not the development and implementation of the methodology, but the time saved by so doing. Anyone can see the benefit of saving time. But not everyone can see the benefit of the new methodology unless it is articulated.

Another typical way of presenting an achievement is:

"Successful tour of nine cities delivering key marketing messages to business partners."

Our Question: "So what?" What did the tour achieve? In what way was it successful?"

These are the questions that an interviewer would be duty bound to ask. The question consumes time and the answer pilfers even more. And having to explain the benefits of each achievement at an interview is frustrating. You want to get on with it, but they won't let you because you have not satisfied their curiosity.

The fact that the person toured nine cities is irrelevant. Saying that they delivered key marketing messages is irrelevant and wasteful. Why would you deliver an unimportant marketing message?

Let's satisfy the interviewer's curiosity by saying something like:

"Increased product sales and market penetration by 5 per cent after elevating our business partners' sales and marketing abilities through education programmes and advice and by providing more timely product information."

The achievement here was the increase in sales. The method was to improve the abilities of the company's partners. The process was education, advice and better product information. Does this take up more words? Yes. Does it deliver a more effective message? You judge. Could we have said even more than we have about how they went about doing what they did? Yes, but there has to be something left for the interview! It's a matter of judging how much information to provide.

The conversation at the interview can then start at a higher level by focusing on the content and process of educating the business partners, how they won the hearts and minds of the business partners and how they overcame any barriers in achieving this result.

If you do this for one achievement you will have one meaningful conversation. If you do it for all of them, the entire interview will have more depth. You will probably be so interesting that they will give you more time than your competitors!

Quantifying achievements

Some people ask whether it is always necessary to try to quantify achievements. It is always best to try to do so if possible. Numbers make sense to people. They provide a universal way of expressing the magnitude and value of an achievement.

Before

"Negotiated and implemented a Workplace Agreement with the workforce."

After

"Negotiated and implemented a Workplace Agreement that significantly reduced overtime claims and rectified numerous anomalies in employment terms and conditions, reducing confusion and conflict and saving the company around £50,000 annually."

At the end of the day, the company must believe that it will get value from the new agreement and it should, if it is a good business, attempt to measure the outcome. In this example, there was a tangible cost saving as well as intangible benefits (reduced conflict and confusion). Although it is difficult to quantify the benefit of less conflict and confusion, I doubt any employer would like to see more of them!

Review your CV and ask yourself these questions

Does it showcase not just your skills but your achievements?

Does it show your achievements in a clear, logical and quantifiable way?

Does it show the reader exactly what you have to offer?