



# Résumé Advice

*Confusion and clarification*

By **David G. Jensen**  
Contributing Editor

LOTS OF ARTICLES AND BOOKS have been written about résumés and CV's, including previous pieces in this column. I generally avoid this topic; in fact, I haven't given a single "CV workshop" in two decades of presentations about science-career issues.

Why? It is often a no-man's-land of bad career advice, with no agreement on anything and books full of information that might work for a salesman, but doesn't work for a technical professional.

Should it be a one-page résumé or a multi-page CV for that job application? One adviser tells you that only one- or two-page résumés are the way to go, while another tells you that you will do best to simply modify your dated academic CV by adding an "Objective Statement" to the top. In each and every "Q," you will find "A's" that fall into a dozen different camps, editorializing on their preferences and how they would structure it if it were their document. Someone who cares about writing the perfect CV or résumé will find enough discrepancies to keep the résumé project going for months. Therein lies the problem: There's no such thing!

So, given my reticence about pursuing this topic, why have I decided to take it on now? It's because there is so much continued interest in this topic — I get questions about résumés everywhere I go. Besides, I have more than two decades worth of experience in looking at what most people agree is the right document, what I will call the industry CV. Let's dissect one!

## Should You Care About Writing The Perfect Résumé or CV?

I may sound unorthodox when I say that you really don't need to be *all that* concerned about writing the perfect CV or résumé. Managers are used to looking at documents that aren't perfect. I'd take a *good* résumé or CV over a *perfect* one any day of the week because the good one can be done in a short time, allowing plenty of time for networking—indisputably the single most important step in a job search—while writing the perfect document could take you (and your CV or résumé) out of circulation for months.

This month's column uses advice gleaned through dozens of interviews conducted in January 2007 with hiring managers, human resources execs, recruiters, and consultants working in many different science-related niches. As expected, I came across differing opinions—some of my sources contradict each other—but enough common threads emerged to give the reader plenty of confidence that the CV or résumé will do its job and not embarrass you. And that's exactly what you want it to do.

## CV or Résumé?

Don't get befuddled by the "résumé vs. CV" question. A résumé is just a really short CV, with a lot more self-promotion than a CV would dare include. It's something you'd use if you were looking for a sales job. A CEO might use a one-pager when looking for her own job. It's more like a really big business card, with just enough sentences about the last great accomplishment to "hook" the reader.

Many technical people do best with what we'll refer to from this point on as an "industry CV." This document has elements of both a résumé and a CV. It needs to attract interest and accurately describe what you can do for the employer. But it's not the same thing as an academic CV, which is an exhaustive, non-selective rehashing of everything you've ever done in your life — every publication, every presentation.

## Cantankerous Issues— And Some Areas of Agreement

The biggest area of differing opinion seems to lie in the recommended length for an industry document. Academic CV's can run eight pages or more for a scientist with a decade of experience; an engineer with similar experience can easily have a document of four-to-five pages or longer. While everyone I interviewed agreed that the lengthier academic CV would be inappropriate for industry, hiring managers have varying opinions about how much they want to see from their applicants:

- "I'd recommend no more than two pages," said Ken Kodilla, vice president of manufacturing at Neogen Corporation (Lansing, MI), "but more importantly, I think that formatting issues are critical." Ken went on to tell me that readability, in his opinion, is determined by how easily one read through a document containing unusual fonts, formatting and typos.
- "Two or three pages would be OK, just don't send me a too-long academic style CV. If you have 10 or 12 published papers, just list the three or four most important ones," says Dr. Burt Ensley, an entrepreneur and angel investor who has launched several companies, and who earned his stripes at Amgen.
- "I like to see three or four pages of information that is relevant to the job at hand, plus an appended publications list," said one director of research at a large pharmaceutical company

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who wished to remain anonymous. "But please don't send me a one-pager. Those just don't do you any good at all."

My own recommendation has always been to write this document as succinctly as possible. The average industry CV length for a technical person with a few years of industry experience is three or four pages, including publications, and I don't think any of my contacts, even those above, would have issues with a well-written and nicely formatted three-pager that includes publications.

### Elements of the Industry CV

Some people maintain the same basic document throughout all of their career. Others will trash it on occasion and do a rewrite every couple of years, focusing on the following categories:

#### Contact Information

Make it clear how to connect with you in your personal time. "Put it in bold text. H/R tells us that we can't make contact you at your place of work, so you will need to have home address and phone there for this purpose," said one of my anonymous pharma contacts, who adds: "And if you've got a Ph.D., make sure it's up there. You've earned it."

#### Summary

Many people commented that they are tired of the usual "Objectives" statement at the top of a CV. This really took me by surprise. That brief paragraph below the contact information is very commonplace (i.e., "Seeking a responsible position in an company lab doing cancer research.") But I found that most hiring managers believe that a "Summary" statement is preferable.

"I like to see résumés that start off with a summary of what they bring to the table," said Donna Dimke, senior director of human resources at Human Genome Sciences (Rockville, MD).

Pat Abbott, principal consultant at Venture Forward Partners, a Boston biotech consulting firm, agrees with Ms. Dimke: "Get a summary statement up front, to describe your area of specialty and a few of your qualifications, and then fill out the detail in the work experience paragraphs below."

#### Education

Jim Calvin, vice president at On Assignment/Lab Support (Princeton, NJ), says, "Make sure your educational information is easily decipherable and that it can be gleaned within the first few seconds of viewing the résumé, which means up front instead of after the Experience section." There was wide agreement on this one.

#### Professional Experience

Universally, hiring managers and human resources people want to see your work experience listed in reverse chronological order. Never, ever get into those alternative layouts you see written about in books for the lay public. "I sometimes see all these great things that someone has accomplished, but without the specific detail of where and when they have done those things," said Don Bergmann, senior vice president at Tengion Inc. (King of Prussia, PA). Bergmann is referring to the "functional style" résumé so often described in résumé books. It is

clear from everyone I spoke with, and from my own experience, that you veer from this reverse chronological order only at your own peril.

#### Publications

Here's another area where you'll find a great variety of opinion. Industry managers, in general, are far less concerned about seeing every one of your publications than the academic hiring committee you were trying to impress when you put together your first academic CV. I agree with Dr. Ensley, who said that only the most important of your publications need be present. The goal is to conserve space and keep it short and readable. You can always add, "Full publications list sent upon request."

David Bomzer, a senior H/R professional for a *Fortune* 100 company, reminded me that an industry CV "doesn't focus exclusively on technical knowledge. Your technical knowledge, education, thesis topic, and publications is usually *just the price of entry* for being considered." In an industry CV, Mr. Bomzer says, there's a subtle point-of-view difference. More on this point in this article's closing section.

#### Skills and Techniques

Many people include an area like this on their industry CV, and there is nothing wrong with it unless you go overboard. "Sure, I want to know what skills you have, but I want an honest assessment. If I see that you are 'skilled' in 50 different techniques, I know with some degree of certainty that you are being a bit lenient with the word 'skilled.' If you can do a technique right now without any help, then you are skilled in it," said Ken Flanagan of Genentech about this topic area. Most of my hiring-manager friends like to see skills in evidence on the CV, but they caution me that it can paint you into a box, so you'd best adapt your Skills and Techniques section to the job you are applying to. Better yet, incorporate this skills information into the brief descriptions you give of the work involved in each job listing on your document.

### A Subtle Point-of-View Difference Gives Your Document More Punch

Earlier, I described a résumé as having a great deal more self-promotion in it than a CV. The same is true of the industry CV, which aims to grab a bit of that promotion and focus it on the employer's needs. You certainly don't want to put out a CV that makes you look like a sales rep candidate (unless that's the kind of job you are applying for!), but you must consider the document you've prepared from the viewpoint of the reader. The industry CV needs to answer—or allow the person reading it to answer for him or herself—questions like these: What can this person do to help us solve the problems we are facing? Will this person bring a set of skills and abilities that mesh with what we have now?

In closing, let me give you the advice of an industry hiring manager and friend:

A mediocre CV (stylistically, not with respect to your actual expertise and accomplishments) and a lot of networking is guaranteed to get you a job. A stunning CV and no networking is equivalent to playing lotto.

—Kevin Foley, Ph.D.