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MAXWELL STEPHENS GUIDES

FOR CANDIDATES

The Perfect CV

What employers say they want from a CV, what sends one to the no pile, and how to act on it.

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The Perfect CV

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01
Introduction

Finding vacancies has never been easier. Search engines, LinkedIn and job boards put more roles in front of candidates than ever before. Getting past the CV stage is harder.

Almost every recruitment process has three stages every candidate must pass: the job search, the CV and the interview. Your CV is one of the two most important short documents of your career. It can open the door to an interview, or close it before you have spoken to anyone.

It deserves time and care, but to improve it you need to know what good looks like. So we asked our employer clients what they look for in a CV and what puts them off. This guide sets out what they told us, the patterns behind their answers and our advice on putting them into practice.

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Clear, concise and relevant wins the shortlist.

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02

What Sends a CV to the No Pile

We asked our employer clients a simple question: what makes you reject a CV? Their answers were remarkably consistent. Between them, they named:

1. Spelling mistakes, a font that is too small and a closing summary that rambles.
2. Unfocused, wordy writing that does not point to relevant achievements.
3. Too much irrelevant detail about previous jobs.
4. Frequent job moves or unexplained gaps in employment, together with spelling mistakes and overlong sentences.
5. A poor layout, an unprofessional email address and too much information.
6. A CV that is simply too long.
7. A mismatch between the candidate's experience and the role, and a pattern of changing jobs every year or so without a clear reason.
8. Bad layout and poor grammar, spelling and punctuation.
9. Contradictions within the document.
10. Anything wordy or disorganised.
11. Long CVs, unprofessional fonts and coloured text.
12. Spelling mistakes, arrogance and a poor layout.
13. A photo, and too many words crammed together.

Spelling and layout appear again and again. These are the easiest problems to fix, and the most damaging to leave in, because they tell the reader how carefully you work.

EXPLAIN THE GAPS

Short tenures and gaps are not automatically a problem, but unexplained ones are. A brief, factual line, such as a fixed-term contract ending or a restructure, answers the question before it is asked.

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Achievements, achievements, achievements.

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03

Creative Layouts: What Employers Think

Opinion on creative layouts was more divided. Employers told us:

- They are fine as long as they do not detract from the content and are easy on the eye.
- Any layout is welcome, provided the content does not suffer.
- It is best to keep it plain and simple.
- Everything should be easy to read, with the most important information at the top.
- They are not in favour.
- They are happy with them, because a personal touch helps show character.
- Some thought given to overall presentation is a good thing.
- They dislike them, because a CV should be easy to read and factual.
- A creative layout shows initiative and independent thinking.
- They like them, as long as they are tailored to the organisation being applied to.
- If the role is creative, the CV can be creative too.
- They are acceptable if the role calls for it, and one employer liked a photo in the top right corner.
- They hate them.
- They are a waste of time and irritating.

Our view: for most FM roles, a clean, conventional layout is the safer choice. Many employers now use applicant tracking systems that read CVs automatically, and graphics, tables and text boxes can scramble what the system sees. For UK applications, leave the photo off unless the employer asks for one.

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Every line on your CV should earn its place.

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04

What a CV Should Include

When we asked what a CV should contain, employers said:

- Enough detail to give a taste of the candidate, with tangible evidence but not too much detail. A fine balance.
- Relevant qualifications, past experience and achievements. Above all, achievements.
- Qualifications, contact details, relevant experience and references.
- Work history with the main tasks for the last two jobs, education and achievements.
- Name, contact details, key skills, a profile, career history and education.
- A summary of achievements relevant to the role, and career history.
- A well-considered introduction with a clear statement of intent, a complete employment history and a list of achievements.
- Name, contact details, education, experience and a personal profile.
- Current position, job history, qualifications and experience.
- Relevant experience, achievements and qualifications.
- Achievements, not a recital of job descriptions.
- Achievements, and a personal touch.
- Career history, education and references.

The word that came up more than any other was achievements. Employers want evidence of what you delivered, not a copy of your job descriptions. On contact details, a town or city is now enough; a full postal address is no longer needed.

> *Duties describe a job. Achievements describe the person who did it.*

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Proofread it twice, then ask someone else.

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05
The Ideal Length

Views on length were much closer than views on layout. Employers' answers included:

- No longer than two sides of A4, in a 12-point font.
- No more than two sides of A4, the answer given most often.
- A couple of pages, because readers quickly lose interest.
- No more than three pages.
- Two pages.
- Two to two and a half pages at most.
- Two to three pages, a view shared by several employers.
- Two to three pages as an absolute maximum.
- There is no ideal length.

Almost every answer falls between two and three pages, and two was the most common. If you have a long career, give most of the space to your recent roles and summarise earlier ones in a line or two each.

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Write for the reader, not for yourself.

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06

What This Tells Us

Clear patterns run through these answers. When you write your CV, make sure you:

1. **Keep it clear, concise and accurate.** Proofread thoroughly and make sure the document is relevant, easy on the eye and free of mistakes.
2. **Avoid contradictions, arrogance and irrelevant statements.** Every line should support your case for this role.
3. **Consider your audience before choosing a layout.** If the role is creative, you can reflect that. If it is more formal, take a traditional approach. Look at the organisation's website and tone, and tailor your CV to match. Either way, the document should present your strengths in a clear, concise and relevant way.
4. **Include the essentials.** Contact details, a career summary, your achievements, your qualifications and references.
5. **Aim for two pages.**

Before You Send It

- ✓ Spell-checked, and proofread by someone other than you
- ✓ Tailored to this role and this organisation
- ✓ Achievements stated, and quantified where you can
- ✓ Dates consistent, with any gaps explained
- ✓ A professional email address and a current phone number
- ✓ Saved as a clearly named file, such as your name and 'CV'

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Duties describe a job. Results describe you.

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07

Your Questions Answered

We then asked candidates what they most wanted to know about CVs and applications. These are our answers, drawing on the guidance above.

How do I show transferable skills?

If you are applying to a different industry or sector, think about who will read your CV and remove industry-specific jargon. Focus on tangible measures such as time, quality and cost. They mean the same thing to every reader, whatever their background.

Why do senior, experienced people get overlooked for roles they apply for?

Senior roles are among the most competitive, and there is often someone with equal or greater experience applying for the same position. In some cases a recruiter may see a candidate as overqualified, and worry that they will not stay motivated for long or will struggle to work with, or respect, the line manager. If you are applying below your last level, address it directly and explain why the role suits you now.

Why won't recruiters give feedback to unsuccessful candidates?

Recruiters often receive a very large number of applications for a single role, so you may only receive automated emails acknowledging your CV and confirming you have been unsuccessful. Do not be afraid to call and ask. Be polite, persistent and constructive, and you will be remembered next time. The aim is to become part of the recruiter's trusted pool of candidates.

Do recruiters ever hire someone who does not have the exact job title?

Yes, regularly. Recruiters do search by keywords, but that is only one of the methods they use. Capability, experience and achievements count for more than an exact title match, so make sure those are easy to find on your CV.

Is it possible to be too young or too old for a job?

No. In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 protects people against age discrimination, and that protection applies from the moment you submit an application, not only once you are employed. Employers should assess you on your skills and experience.

Why does my CV keep getting ignored by one particular employer or agency?

Pick up the phone, ask and find out. There may be a specific reason, or it may be coincidence, and a conversation will only help. Where it is appropriate, contact the relevant people directly through LinkedIn.

How do I prepare for a final interview when I have already answered lots of questions at the first stage?

It depends on the situation, but the key at both stages is to answer the question you are asked. If the panel members are different, do not be afraid to give the same answer you gave at the first stage when the same question comes up. Where a question allows it, think of two or three possible approaches and ask the panel which they would like you to explore. This shows depth of understanding and flexibility.

> *The best CV makes the reader's decision easy.*

08

Making Your CV Work

Most recruiters and employers look for the same qualities when they shortlist. The points in this guide give you a checklist to work through every time you write or update your CV.

Remember that CV screening and interviewing are a two-way process. Every candidate can make the recruiter's and the employer's job easier by being clear, concise and relevant.

If you would like a view on your CV or your next FM role, contact our team on 0207 118 4848 or at info@maxwellstephens.com.

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A good CV makes the decision easy.

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THE EVIDENCE

What the Data Says

What UK data shows about how hard it is to get an application noticed.

16%

UK applications submitted are up 16% and interviews needed to land a single role are up 18%, Totaljobs found in 2026.

Source: Totaljobs Hiring Trends Update, 2026

77%

77% of UK candidates say it's harder to get an interview than a year ago.

Source: Totaljobs Hiring Trends Update, 2026

66%

Two in three (66%) UK candidates don't hear back beyond an automated acknowledgement when they apply.

Source: Totaljobs Hiring Trends Update, 2026

55%

British job-seekers do not hear back from 55% of the jobs they apply for, according to Indeed research.

Source: Indeed research, reported by HRreview, 2024

92%

92% of the 497 FM vacancies Maxwell Stephens advertised from 2023 to 2026 showed a salary figure, giving candidates pay clarity up front.

Source: Maxwell Stephens analysis of 497 advertised vacancies, May 2023 – September 2026

Sources were checked in September 2026. Select a source to open the original research. Maxwell Stephens figures are drawn from our own published vacancies and placement records.

CASE STUDY

See It in Practice

Medical Defence Union (MDU) Facilities Management Support Coordinator Recruitment

The Medical Defence Union asked Maxwell Stephens to recruit a Facilities Management Support Coordinator, a role spanning planned and reactive maintenance, contractor management, health and safety compliance, office moves, CAFM systems and AutoCAD drawings. Roles that pair CAFM and AutoCAD competence with hands-on maintenance coordination are harder to fill than the grade suggests, because many candidates have only one side, and the systems skills in particular are rarely evidenced clearly on a CV. We ran a targeted search and assessed each shortlisted candidate's technical knowledge, operational capability and cultural fit. The appointed coordinator integrated quickly and strengthened compliance processes, contractor management, workplace projects and facilities administration.

It shows why the skills you have should be stated plainly and evidenced on your CV, rather than left for an employer to infer.

Read the full case study · Browse all case studies

FROM THE BLOG

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- Job Hopping for Career Development: How Often Is Too Often?
- Why You Should Always Ask for Feedback After an Interview

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Maxwell Stephens Recruitment is registered in England and Wales No. 02660883

CONTACT
t: 0207 118 4848

w: www.maxwellstephens.com
e: info@maxwellstephens.com

LONDON
Golden Cross House
8 Duncannon Street
Strand
London
WC2N 4JF