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Getting the job: the process

Here are some handy hints for writing CVs and getting through those dreaded interviews

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Applying for your first job might seem a daunting prospect . . . but I am here to help you prepare your curriculum vitae and answer those tricky interview questions.

Getting started

A good starting point in finding the right job is to make sure you have an up-to-date CV. The abbreviation “CV” stands for curriculum vitae which is Latin for “course of life”. The purpose of this document is to get you an interview. Basically, your CV describes you and must give the reader a clear idea of your achievements.

There is no right or wrong way to present your CV but most people limit it in length to two sides of A4. It should be typed and printed on good quality paper and it goes without saying that you should make sure that there are no spelling or typographical errors. Although in essence a CV is just a list, it is a good idea to try to angle the way it is written towards your target job. So you need to spend time planning the format and content.

You should always include a covering letter with your CV. A covering letter provides an opportunity for you to introduce yourself and the relevant skills you have. Your letter should include your full postal address and telephone numbers as well as an e-mail address if

you have one. It should be dated and signed and addressed to a named person and it should be clear from the letter for which position you are applying. Make sure that it is no more than one page in length.

It might be tempting to use an unusual or fancy layout or type face but this type of CV is usually more appropriate when applying for more creative jobs. Most jobs in the pharmacy sector will call for a professional approach. Try to keep it uncluttered and avoid squashing too much information on to the page by using a small type face as this will make it difficult to read.

So, where do you start? The most common layout for a CV would include the following information:

Personal details This section should include your full name (not just initials), address, telephone number and an e-mail address if you have one. It is up to you whether you want to include your date of birth and marital status.

Overview An overview is a one paragraph summary which paints a picture of your main achievements and which highlights your key skills and attributes.

Employment history Use the job description to pinpoint what the company or organisation is looking for, and try to link these skills and attributes to current

and past employment. You might not have much of a career history at present, so list any relevant work experience you have gained. In the future, when you update your CV, remember to make sure you account for any periods of unemployment — do not just leave a blank. This section is usually chronological with your current job first. Do not just list the jobs you have done; you must include the contribution you made.

Educational qualifications Again, list the most recent information first. Include A level grades but GCSE grades are less relevant. Show your degree by title and class.

Additional information This section should include details of any professional organisations of which you are a member. You can also elaborate on any computing skills you have or any second languages you speak. You might also want to list any publications in this section.

Interests Keep this short and do not make up interests because you might be asked about them at your interview. Be aware that too many out-of-work activities might indicate you have no time to work!

References These are not always necessary on a CV. It is up to you whether you want to include them. When you start your working career, your current employer should be one of the references but at the moment you can use academic references. Make sure you have asked the people involved beforehand so they are prepared. It is also OK to say “references available on request.”

A recruitment professional's point of view

Recruitment professional Nick Forte has some insight into how to write a good CV. Mr Forte has over 15 years' experience in the recruitment industry and his practice, IDD Services Ltd, is based in Cardiff. He says:

- ▶ There are two key points in preparing a CV — it must be concise and up-to-date — a classic mistake is that contact details are not updated.
- ▶ The easiest way to write your career

history is to think of it as a list with the most recent experience first. Start by taking a blank piece of paper and write a list followed by a concise description of each position. Try not to take up too much space because this is often an area of your CV which can trigger questions during the interview process. Then you will be able to elaborate on your experiences. Important things to include are specific experiences that you gained in each job.

- ▶ The interests section of the CV is the least important area of your CV, so shorten this section if you run out of space. Any charity or voluntary work is always appealing to employers.
- ▶ Key words to include in your overview are “computer literate”, “bilingual”, “experience of . . .”.

A pharmacist manager's point of view

Dr Robert Urquhart is chief pharmacist at University College London Hospitals NHS Trust, and he has significant experience of recruiting pharmacy staff of all grades. What does he say?

- ▶ Hospital jobs often require candidates to fill out an application form and the most important section is the “supporting statement”. Spend time considering why you should be chosen for the job and reflect on how your skills and experience are matched to the requirements of the job for which you are applying.
- ▶ Always read the job description before writing your supporting statement.
- ▶ A covering letter always creates a good impression and it should mention if there are any dates you are not available for interview.
- ▶ Make sure all information is presented in a logical order.
- ▶ Include details of any relevant projects, research or audits you have been involved with to help make your form stand out from others or give details of any industrial experience.

The interview

Now that you have produced an excellent CV, you will no doubt have been invited to many interviews! Most

interviews in the pharmacy sector will be formal and you will be expected to be well groomed and dress in a smart, professional manner. Always try to plan what you are going to wear in advance so there will be one less thing to worry about on the day of the interview. There are two basic rules that you will probably already be aware of:

- ▶ Be prepared
- ▶ Be on time

Arriving at the interview 10 to 15 minutes early will allow for any hiccups along the way. Sometimes the interview room can be some distance from the reception desk where you initially report.

The secret of a successful interview lies in the preparation, so you need to do your homework. You will need to find out as much as possible about the job as well as the company or organisation. Most companies and organisations will have a web site or can send you an information pack. Hospitals will have an annual report you can look at and many companies will have a public relations department that will be able to send you information. It is also important to try to keep up-to-date with any topical issues affecting pharmacy. You may be asked for your opinions.

What should you take to the interview?

- ▶ Your letter of invitation — this will give the time, date and location of the interview and the name(s) of the interviewer(s)
- ▶ You may be asked to bring relevant certificates or references
- ▶ Your CV or a copy of your application form
- ▶ Any notes you have made about the jobs and the questions you might want to ask. It is a good idea to think about potential questions you may be asked and jot the answers down
- ▶ A pen and note pad might also be useful

During the interview According to Nick Forte, body language is very important during the interview process. He outlines four key areas:

- ▶ Handshake — a firm handshake is good practice when greeting your

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interviewer and will give a good first impression

- ▶ Posture — leaning forward slightly will project the image of being more interested. Try not to fidget
- ▶ Eye contact — always try to look your interviewer in the eye when you answer questions
- ▶ Facial expressions — a friendly smile can show enthusiasm but you also need to convey to the interviewer that you are serious and professional

First impressions really do count. According to the Institute for Independent Business, people will decide on what they think of you within four minutes of first meeting and 75 per cent of the feed-back is based on body language rather than what you actually say.

You should always be polite to everyone you encounter, from the first person you meet when you arrive at the venue. Try to remember the name(s) of the interviewer(s) — this will show attention to detail. It is usually considered polite to wait to be asked before sitting down. In the interview room try to avoid slouching — this looks sloppy. Crossing the arms and legs can signal there is a barrier between those communicating.

Nick Forte warns that a successful interview is a result of the candidate being genuine and wanting the job. “A lot of people apply for jobs they shouldn’t be applying for,” he says. “New graduates may want to remain in their university city, so there really is no point applying for a job that is 500 miles away.”

Robert Urquhart agrees that candidates need to make sure that they actually want the job before applying. “Candidates need to make sure it is feasible for them to accept the job,” he says. There is no point applying for a job if the candidate cannot easily travel daily to work. Because there are always so many preregistration applicants to choose from, he always looks out for those people who have made the effort to find out about his department or have taken time to speak to previous preregistration trainees or other pharmacy staff. “Better still is gaining some work experience in the organisation you are keen to work for,” he adds. Listen carefully to the questions you are asked

and if you are not clear what the interviewer is getting at then ask them to clarify the question, he says. “If you are asked a technical question that you don’t know the answer to, show the interviewer that you know how to go about finding out the right answer,” Dr Urquhart advises.

Below are some key points to bear in mind during your interview:

- ▶ Do not interrupt the interviewer
- ▶ Never speak negatively of your previous employer
- ▶ Answer questions truthfully
- ▶ Speak clearly and do not rush your answers
- ▶ Include what you know about the company in your conversation
- ▶ Unless the interviewer brings up the subject of salary, do not mention it until you are offered the job
- ▶ Do not eat or smoke during the interview — even if you are invited to
- ▶ And do not forget to turn off your mobile phone!

Nick Forte points out that there are a number of “classic” interview questions aimed at finding out your viewpoint of your current colleagues and situation. “Never be negative about your current situation,” he says. This point might not be relevant to new graduates applying for their first jobs but later on in your career it will be well worth remembering.

Below are some questions you may be asked:

- ▶ Why do you want this job? This question will show how much research you have done. You should try not to be negative about your previous experiences.
- ▶ Can you tell me about any situation where you had to abruptly change what you were doing? This type of question aims at trying to get you to talk about a past mistake. A positive answer would outline a situation where you had to change what you were doing to make something work for the better and reveal your problem solving talents and creativity.
- ▶ What was the most difficult decision you had to make in your last job? Again, this question will reveal how you define the word “difficult” and will

reveal your analytical skills. Your answer should show how you handled a difficult situation in a positive way.

- ▶ Why did you choose a career in pharmacy? This question will give you the chance to show how enthusiastic you are about the profession.
- ▶ What did you think about your previous company? This question should not provide an opportunity for you to be negative about past colleagues. You need to focus on positive aspects.
- ▶ Do you work well under pressure? This question will give you the opportunity to demonstrate how you manage your workload and how you can prioritise tasks.

An interview is not only about the interviewer asking questions; you will have questions to ask, too. When the interviewer asks if you have any questions, this usually signals the end of the interview. This will give you a chance to clarify anything you are unsure of and will give you the opportunity to mention any of your attributes that you feel have not been fully discussed in the interview. It will be useful to take a list of questions that you might want to ask at the end of the interview but try not to give the impression that the list is too long. Subjects you could raise include training and career progression issues. You can use questions to show that you have taken the time to have researched the company. Leave a positive impression with the interviewer at the end of the interview. Thank the interviewer for their time and leave with a smile. ☺

Useful resources

- ▶ *Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services. Use this website to find out about your University’s careers service www.agcas.org.uk*
- ▶ *Great answers to tough interview questions. Martin Yate. London: Kogan Page; 1998.*
- ▶ *The 101 tough interview questions . . . and answers to win the job! Daniel Porot. Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press; 2000.*
- ▶ *Preparing your CV: how to improve your chances of getting the job you want. Rebecca Corfield. London: Kogan Page; 1999.*
- ▶ *Brilliant CV: what employers want to see and how to say it. Jim Bright and Joanne Earl. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall; 2000.*