VOLUME 01 · CV & APPLICATIONS

Build a CV That Recruiters Actually Read

A born-global field manual for getting past Applicant Tracking Systems and into the seven-second human scan.

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01 Introduction

> *Your CV is read twice. First by software that scores it against keywords. Then by a human who decides in seven seconds. Win both, or you don't get the interview.*

Every formal hiring process in 2026 funnels candidates through two readers. The first is software — Workday, Oracle iRecruitment, SAP SuccessFactors, BambooHR, Greenhouse, Lever, or one of fifty smaller systems. The second is a human recruiter who has 200 other CVs in the queue and seven seconds to decide whether yours is worth a second look.

Most candidates optimise for the human and lose at the software. A smaller group optimises for the software (keyword stuffing) and lose at the human. The candidates who get interviews understand that **the same CV has to win both reads** — and that the techniques for winning each are largely the same when you do them with discipline.

This guide is the field manual. It works in San Francisco, London, Berlin, Singapore, Sydney, Lagos, Nairobi, São Paulo, and Mumbai. Where a market or industry has a meaningful local twist, you'll find it in the regional appendix at the back. Otherwise, treat what's here as universal.

01 The two readers, side by side

What each one is actually scoring you on.

The Applicant Tracking System (ATS) is a keyword-and-context engine. It does not understand what you did. It scores how well your document overlaps with the job description's vocabulary, weighted by where in the document each match appears (headline > recent experience > skills > older experience > education).

The human is a pattern-matcher under time pressure. They scan five anchor zones — your name and headline, your most recent role title, your most recent dates, the right edge of the page (date scan), and a single zigzag through bold text. Anything outside those zones is invisible until they decide you're a "yes" or a "maybe".

READER	WHAT IT REWARDS	WHAT IT PUNISHES
ATS	Exact JD vocabulary, recency, standard section labels, parseable layout	Tables, columns, headers/footers, design fonts, infographics, custom labels
Human	Quantified outcomes, recognised brand names, clear seniority progression, white space	Dense paragraphs, bullet sprawl, design clutter, salary on the CV

The good news: the disciplines that win the ATS — exact terminology, standard structure, recency-first — are mostly the same disciplines that win the human. They only diverge on visual design (the human likes a bit; the ATS hates all of it), which is why a clean single-column PDF wins both.

★ **DIAGNOSTIC**

Open your current CV in a plain text editor. If it reads as garbled — section labels in the wrong order, contact details merged with a role title, dates floating between lines — the ATS sees the same garbled output. Reformat until the plain text is clean.

02 The structure that ports across markets

Six blocks, in this exact order, work everywhere from London to Lagos.

There is no single "best" CV format. There is, however, a structure that does not actively lose anywhere. It looks like this:

1. **Header** — name, role title (the role you want next, not necessarily the one you have), city + country, email, phone, LinkedIn URL. No photo unless the local norm is to include one and the role is non-corporate.
2. **Professional summary** — two sentences. The first states what you do. The second states the most relevant outcome you've delivered. Anything longer is wasted on the ATS and skipped by the human.
3. **Experience** — most recent first, three to five bullets per role, each leading with a verb and ending with a number.
4. **Education** — degree, institution, year. Move it above Experience only when you're a recent graduate or your degree is the strongest signal.
5. **Skills** — group by category (Languages, Tools, Methodologies). Keep tight. Lists of 30+ skills are noise.
6. **Certifications and selected awards** — only if relevant.

That's it. Two pages, single column, PDF. If the upload form requires .docx, save the .docx but keep the layout simple — design files are where ATS parsers hallucinate.

03 Quantification: the single highest-leverage edit

Numbers are the universal language recruiters and software both index on.

Open your CV. Count the bullets that contain a specific number. If that count is below 60% of your total bullets, you are below the median candidate at every employer above 200 staff worldwide.

Numbers don't have to be enormous. They have to be **real and specific**. A small number that's specific beats a big number that's vague. Compare:

- *Vague:* "Managed a team and grew the business."
- *Specific small number:* "Managed a team of 4 and grew sales from $180K to $310K in 14 months."
- *Vague big number:* "Drove millions in revenue."

The specific small number wins. Recruiters at every level — junior, mid, senior — pattern-match to specificity, because specificity is what they have to defend later when they champion you to the hiring manager. "I think we should interview them" is hard. "They led a team of 8 and shipped a $4.6M project on time" is easy.

> ★ **PRACTICE**
>
> For every bullet on your CV, ask: "What was the number?" If you can't answer, the bullet is weak. If you can answer, put the answer in. This single edit — applied to every bullet — beats any other CV change you can make in an hour.

04 The keywords trap (and how to win it honestly)

Speak the JD's exact language without keyword-stuffing.

The ATS rewards exact terminology overlap with the JD. This sounds like an invitation to keyword-stuff. It isn't — modern ATS engines (and the LLM scoring layers above them at most large employers) penalise stuffed CVs as obviously inauthentic.

The honest play: read the JD twice. The first read is for content — what does this role actually do? The second read is for vocabulary — which exact nouns and verbs does the JD use? Then rewrite the relevant bullets on your CV to use those exact words where you genuinely have done the thing.

If the JD says *"stakeholder management"* and your bullet says *"client relationships"*, change the bullet to use the JD's phrase — assuming it's true. If the JD says *"P&L responsibility"* and you have never owned a P&L, do not pretend; a recruiter will catch it in 30 seconds of conversation.

This is not gaming the system. It is translating your real experience into the vocabulary the system expects. A CV that doesn't speak the JD's language is invisible. A CV that speaks the JD's language honestly is shortlisted.

05 The seven-second human scan path

Where a recruiter's eye actually goes.

Eye-tracking studies (Ladders 2018, repeat 2020, ATS-vendor internal studies 2023-2025) all converge on the same scan path. A human reviewing 200 CVs at speed reads:

1. **Top of the page** — name, headline, contact (~1 second).
2. **First role title and dates** — what you do now, when you started (~2 seconds).
3. **Most recent education line** — for graduates and early-career; senior roles skip this (~1 second).
4. **The right edge of the page** — dates of every role, scanned vertically for tenure pattern (~2 seconds).
5. **One zigzag through bold text and bullets** — anything that visually stands out (~1 second).

That's seven seconds. Design your CV so that anything load-bearing — the role you want, the brand names you've worked at, the seniority signal, the most quantified bullet — lives in one of those five zones. Anything in dead zones (mid-paragraph in a role description, the bottom of page two, inside a sidebar) might as well not exist.

06 When to break the rules

Three contexts where the standard format is wrong.

Three contexts justify departing from the standard structure.

1. Creative roles

Designers, art directors, copywriters, brand strategists at creative agencies. Your CV can carry visual identity here — a clean, opinionated layout signals taste. Even so: keep one ATS-clean version on hand for the larger employers (WPP, Publicis, Ogilvy, Accenture Song) whose intake is still Workday.

2. Academic and research roles

Long-form CV, publications, conference talks, grants. The two-page rule does not apply. Standard ATS-clean format does not apply. The reader is another academic who will spend 20 minutes on your document, not 7 seconds.

3. Senior executive search

For C-suite and board roles, the document is often called a "biography" not a CV, and is supplemented by a search firm's interview. The format is different — written narrative, not bullets. If you're applying through a retained executive search firm, follow their template, not this guide.

Outside those three contexts, the standard format wins. There is no fourth exception.

08 Regional variants

Where the universal pattern shifts by market.

US/CA

United States and Canada

No photo. No date of birth. No marital status. One page for entry-level, two pages for mid-career, three pages only for senior with deep technical specifics. LinkedIn URL is mandatory; portfolio for design and engineering.

UK/EU

UK, Ireland, Western Europe

CV not résumé. Two pages standard. Photo skipped in UK; common in Germany, Switzerland, France. Right-to-work statement helpful for non-EU citizens. References "available on request" still expected at most employers.

GULF

GCC: UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar

Photo expected. Nationality, religion (sometimes), and marital status often requested on the form, not the CV. Specify visa status. Arabic-language summary helpful for some employers.

APAC

Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, Japan

Two pages standard in SG/HK/AU; rōrekisho (formal résumé) format expected in Japan. Citizenship and PR status critical for SG/HK. References must be reachable for AU employers.

AFRICA

African markets (UG, KE, NG, ZA, GH, etc.)

Two pages, PDF, photo optional. Right-to-work statement always. National service references (NYSC in NG, National Service in GH) for junior roles. ICAG / ICAN / SAICA / ACCA certifications in name line for finance.

LATAM

Latin America

Two-language CV (English + Spanish/ Portuguese) for multinationals. Photo common in BR/AR/MX, less in CL/CO. Date of birth still requested in some markets — provide on the form, not the CV.

Ready to put this into practice?

These are universal disciplines. Your specific gaps are not. Use the tools below to translate the playbook into a CV that wins your next interview.

CV Gap Filler

Tailor your existing CV to a specific JD with truthful, evidence-led content. Asks targeted questions section-by-section so you don't keyword-stuff.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/cv-diagnostics/

Free CV-to-JD Match

Score your fit against a real JD instantly. Shows ATS-style keyword overlap and the gaps to close.

myjobconcierge.com/

Cover Letter Drafting

Generate a cover letter draft tailored to the JD when the application form requires one. Edits in your voice.

myjobconcierge.com/ai-tools/cover-letter-drafting/

Career Guides Hub

More guides: interviews, salary, psychometrics, remote work, career pivots. Born-global, regionally aware.

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