

The Sydney Morning Herald

March 1, 2010

MyCareer
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Ban the Buzzwords

By David Wilson

So you sent your masterpiece of a CV to that firm you wanted to impress and never heard back? What a surprise.

Studies have shown that the average employer spends just 20 seconds or less skimming through each CV received. Because of the volume of CVs received, there is no time to be nice. The employer may just wearily hit the delete key, causing the document to evaporate - just like the applicant's dreams.

Instead of dud credentials, the reason for an application being rejected may be insincerity. The average CV is infested with clichés that make the author sound like a used-car salesperson. If you want to boost your chances of landing that dream job, you must raise your game - eradicate clichés, however they appear. Clichés may take the form of an independently trite single word or a hackneyed phrase that signals little except buzzword bingo talent.

Puncturing the pretension, a crack team of experts names and shames a selection of clichés that must be shunned at all costs. Learn what makes the verbal repeat offenders so repellent and how to make your CV "sing".

Six CV clichés from hell:

Team player with a can-do attitude

In CVs and cover letters, show don't tell, says executive consultant Stefanie Smith. Focusing on outcomes proves your point and packs more clout than general bragging because your capacity for accurate self-evaluation is a mystery to the hirer. Boasting about what a can-do team player you are has little impact. "You really are a team player? Terrific," Smith says. "Share an example of how your participation contributed to a team triumph. You really have a can-do attitude? Fantastic! Tell about a situation where your attitude saved the day or knocked the client's socks off. Stick to the facts. Making subjective judgments about your personality or communications style is a waste of a reader's time and your document space."

Excellent verbal and written communication skills

If you enlist this phrase, your communication skills badly need work. "Specify the results of your vaunted verbal ability", says Smith, who says the phrase is a generic judgment and should be left out. That said, if you craft winning client proposals or publish articles that earn industry attention, describe outstanding examples. Avoid patting yourself on the back for skills expected of you. If you are deft with Microsoft Office, OK. "But explaining how you employ advanced PowerPoint skills to design visually effective training materials or use Excel to create dynamic financial models is much better."

Objectives

Remember that a single word can be a cliché. Objectives (read: "aims") is one example. Candidates often open with the "O" word "because it feels great to see your goals leading the way," Smith says. Her "objective objection" towards the approach is that it means you lead with your needs. The purpose of a CV, which she describes as a "print ad", is to convince readers that you can meet theirs. Start with a mini-profile that spells out how you can be useful. Avoid appearing egocentric.

Resolved customer concerns promptly and tactfully

"Really?" says career manager Annemarie Cross in response to this waffle. "Well, that's hardly a stand-out quality," she says, adding that everyone claims to be a customer-service wizard. Unsupported, the phrase does little to highlight your skills and could prompt the reader to disregard the whole statement. Spell out and bold the monetary value of what you did. Show its benefit to the company in question so the key features in your revised statement stand out, Cross says.

Goal-oriented, self-motivated individual

Again, this phrase is so overused it could make the reader think the opposite, Cross says. The last thing you want to do is raise concerns that you may be ineffectual, she adds. Try something like: "Only person from a 100-strong team of sales executives to consistently exceed sales key performance indicators by 55 per cent." Spell out the facts. Enable the hirer to see how your thrust benefited the company. "Measurable figures sell."

Hard-working with exceptional organisational skills

Everyone claims to be an industrious and effective planner, according to Cross. "Would you presume anything else?" she says. An employer is unlikely to entertain hiring a quitter who struggles to finish assignments. Again, the cliché under scrutiny could backfire, implying just that. Show what your labour achieved and the monetary benefit. Prove that you have the claimed skills.