

Writing a CV for People Living with Schizophrenia

A CV (short for curriculum vitae) called a resume in the US, is a short summary of your employment and educational history and is an essential first step in the job searching process.



Your CV is often the first contact you will have with an employer (Photo: joingate on Shutterstock)

In the UK today most vacancies that are advertised will have more applicants than places available. For low skilled jobs there will be an average of around 60 applicants for each job and for skilled jobs there will be around 20 applicants. The CV is the first contact you will have with the employer and it is important that it presents you in the best possible light so that you have a good chance of getting an interview.

For people with schizophrenia there are usually two major difficulties that confront them when writing a CV. The first is what and how much to disclose about their medical condition and the second is how to put a positive spin on what may have been a very long period out of work. Paradoxically in the author's experience it is the latter that is often the biggest problem. Whereas a lot of employers have procedures for handling applications from people with disabilities most employers will look on any period of unemployment longer than a few months with great suspicion. Below we will suggest some practical ways in which these difficulties can be alleviated.

Aims of CV Writing

When writing your CV you should be aiming to do three things:

1. Attract the employers attention.
2. Create a favourable impression of you as a prospective employee.
3. Outline your skills, qualifications and qualities in the most favourable light as honestly possible.

Try to think beyond what you have been doing or the qualifications that you have obtained and tell the employer about what you have achieved, for instance any positions of special responsibility that you have had or projects that you have successfully completed. Remember that boasting is perfectly permissible in the context of a CV.

What to Disclose About Your Schizophrenia

It is vital that the contents of your CV are honest and truthful. Don't be tempted to tell lies in your CV: it is a criminal offence and could land you in very hot water. However it is perfectly acceptable to boast about your qualities in your CV. This may be difficult. If you have spent the last ten years under assault from persecutory delusions and voices you may not have a very high opinion of yourself. It is a sad fact that in addition to all its other effects schizophrenia is a ruthless destroyer of our self esteem. It is important to overcome this and the first step in writing a good CV involves you identifying your positive qualities and presenting them in a good light.

It is not necessary to disclose your schizophrenia diagnosis on your CV any more than people with diabetes or high blood pressure would be expected to mention their condition on their CV. However if you have had a long period out of work because of your schizophrenia then an employer will want to know why. At this point it would be permissible to refer to this simply as a career break due to ill health. Now don't look on this totally as a negative because it also gives you an opportunity to tell the employer about good things that you have been doing during your time off sick. So here's how one person, David described his time out of work on his CV.

"2000 - 2008: Career break due to ill health

During this time I have been working as a part time volunteer in a charity shop where I have obtained an NVQ in retailing and also been studying for GCSE maths and English by distance learning".

In this way it can be seen that David has been extremely honest in his description but has used the disclosure about his ill health as an opportunity to tell the employer about what he can do and to present himself as highly eligible for a job in retail.

Later on if you are asked to attend an interview for the job the employer may want to know more about your health problem and you will both have the opportunity then to discuss it in more detail. Our information sheet about Job Interviews has some further guidance about what to do at that stage.

Your Time Out of Work

Next there is the issue of the long period out of work. This will be viewed very unfavourably by most employers. For this reason the job of writing your CV will begin many months before you come to put pen to paper. As soon as your thinking has improved and you are able, you should start to think about engaging in some useful occupation. This may include voluntary work for a local good cause or studying either at college or by distance learning. Both of these are very good for your CV as they will demonstrate to an employer that you are well organised and well motivated. You may also be able to get a reference from the charity or college which will tell the employer more about you and your attitudes. Many people with schizophrenia have found that voluntary work and studying have been an essential stepping stone between unemployment and full employment. However, remember that before starting any voluntary work it is important to speak to the Jobcentre first as there are rules around how much voluntary work you can do if you are claiming benefits.



Voluntary work for charities is a good way of improving your CV if you have been out of work (Photo:Thinglass on Shutterstock)

Volunteering can be an excellent way of improving your CV
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You may also like to think about undertaking some training related to the job that you are hoping to get into and in most areas there are schemes that can help with that. Our Information Sheet Sources of Help for Job Searching has some useful hints about getting help with training.

There are also qualifications that almost all employers will value and which are fairly easy to access for people who are out of work. The first of these is a Health and Safety Executive approved First Aid at Work course. This involves a three day training course with a test at the end and is run by the principal voluntary first aid organisations such as the Red Cross and St John Ambulance and by some local colleges and commercial training providers.

Similarly valued by all employers are fire warden training qualifications. These are available from commercial training providers and typically the course lasts about a day.

These sort of qualifications are an easy way of improving your CV and will get you noticed by most employers.

Criminal Records

A lot of people with schizophrenia end up coming into contact with the criminal justice system because of their disturbed behaviour and if they are not well enough to defend their case they can end up with a criminal record. Even just being detained at a police station as a place-of-safety will be recorded although not as a criminal offence. Many jobs that involve working with children or vulnerable adults or in other sensitive positions may be subject to a criminal records check and will be effectively barred to you if you have a criminal record.



A criminal record should be avoided at all costs: it will be a serious obstacle in the future (Photo: kenny1 on Shutterstock)

Even for jobs that do not involve contact with vulnerable people it is common practice for employers to ask if you have any unspent criminal convictions on their standard employment application forms and if you lie about this you will be committing a serious criminal offence.

There is in practice very little that can be done to alleviate this problem. Many employers have very little scope now for risk assessing applicants with criminal records and will simply reject them out of hand rather than take the risk of employing them. If you are able it is important that you make an appropriate defence to any criminal action brought against you and if you are convicted when you are ill consider the possibility of appealing the conviction when you are well enough to do so. If you are in this position then you will need to get good legal advice at the earliest opportunity.

Sometimes the police at the police station will encourage detainees to plead guilty in order to get it over with without too much fuss but be under no illusions a criminal record will haunt you for the rest of your life and you should take any steps that you honestly can to avoid it.

However if you have a criminal record and there is no chance of appealing the conviction then you may like to think about applying for employment with smaller local firms who may be less discriminatory in their recruitment process or to think about the possibility of self employment where your record will be of less significance to your work. There are government schemes such as the New Enterprise Allowance available which provide help to people who are thinking of starting self employment and who have a business idea that they want to try out.

Working for a large company should not be ruled out completely though as it is also worth bearing in mind that traditionally people with criminal records find it easier to find employment with large employers in some industries such as construction and engineering where a record is not seen as such an impediment.

The problem remains of what to say about a criminal record on your CV and there are no straightforward answers to this. What and how much you disclose depends on the nature of the offence and the type of job that you are applying for. The Unlock charity's website contains a useful disclosure calculator to help decide.

How Long Will it Take to Write My CV?

It is important to recognise that for someone with a severe and disabling illness like schizophrenia that has prevented them from working for a number of years writing a good CV that will present all of their qualities

in the best possible light is quite a challenge and should not be approached lightly. It may take a month of hard work to come up with a really good CV for your situation. It will involve a lot of research using the internet and textbooks to learn about CV writing and asking your friends and family to tell you about qualities and activities that they think would look good in a CV.

Making use of outside help is also a very good idea and there are a number of very good back-to-work organisations in the UK who can help with advice on compiling a CV such as People Plus (formerly known as A4E) and Tomorrow's People. A good first step is to ask for an appointment with an advisor at your local Jobcentre who can put you in touch with these organisations. Your local library may also know about schemes in your area. In short: don't underestimate how big a task writing your CV will be but done well it can unlock the first door to getting back into work.



Organisations like People Plus and Tomorrow's People can give you valuable help with jobsearching skills (Photo: Ambrophoto on Shutterstock)

Beware of CV writing services that charge a fee for writing a CV. Your CV needs to be tailored to you and to the individual jobs that you are applying for and a CV service will rarely be able to do that. You are the best person to write your CV as you know better than anyone about your own strengths and weaknesses. If you don't feel confident writing your own CV then try getting some help from the Jobcentre or one of the back-to-work organisations mentioned above.

CVs in General

This information sheet is about the challenge of writing a CV as it applies to people living with schizophrenia and we won't go into any detail about writing a CV generally as there are other sources which can cover this in much better detail such as the National Careers Service website. Some of the large on line job boards such as Reed Employment also have useful advice about writing CVs.

It is also a good idea to invest in some decent books about job searching in general such as *The Ultimate Job Search* by Lynn Williams which you can get on Amazon or borrow from your local library and is very comprehensive. However here are some general guidelines about CV writing:

- CVs should be tailored to the specific application. Don't expect one CV to do for all your job applications. Beware of CV templates that you find on the internet: your CV must be tailored to you and the job.
- There are several different formats of CV for people with different backgrounds. Make sure that you select

the correct type for you.

- Keep it brief, about two pages of A4 is about right.
- Nowadays CVs need to be typed. Handwritten CVs just won't cut it. If this presents a problem then get some help from the Jobcentre.
- Don't skimp on paper, invest in some good quality Conqueror type paper but on the other hand don't go in for gimmicks and definitely don't bind your CV, that is totally unnecessary and if anything may make it more difficult for the employer.
- Spelling and grammar are vitally important. If these are not your strongpoints then get someone who knows to check your CV over as well as making use of the spell and grammar checker on your computer.
- It is increasingly common practice now for employers to read CVs electronically so make sure that yours contains references to the specific qualities that they asked for in the job advert.
- Put as much thought into the covering letter as you put into the CV itself.
- Don't include your age, place of birth, religion, or a photograph on the CV unless it is specifically asked for by the employer.
- If you are sending your CV electronically include your name as part of the file name to make it easier for the employer to find it later. And avoid contentious sounding email addresses.
- Don't include any negative information in your CV unless it specifically affects your ability to do the job. Negatives are often best discussed face-to-face at interview when you can fill in more detail for the employer.

References

This Information sheet is based on the author's personal experiences.

Further Reading

The Ultimate Job Search, Lynn Williams, Published by Kogan Page.

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