How to submit the perfect job application

General Features



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How do you decide whether it is time to move on in your career – and if you do, how do you make the perfect application?

Key Points

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What is the issue?
Have a think about whether you really want to leave your current employer. Is it the role that is no longer right or the firm?

What does it mean for me?
If it is time for a change, do some basic planning. Write down what you like about your current role and would like to retain. Add in what you want from a new role.

What you are willing to give for this?

What can I take away?
If you have a job spec for a role, tailor your CV to it emphasising the elements of your current work which matches the requirements of the role.

Working from home across various lockdowns has given us the rare opportunity to pause and think about our lives and our careers, and to reflect on what we want out of life. Many of us had to isolate yet again during the Christmas holidays, as another round of Covid-19 swept across our families. Many of us are thinking about our future. This has all prompted a huge worldwide movement of employees described as ‘The Great Resignation’.

The New Year is the classic time for resolutions but many of us in tax don’t get the time to reflect until after year-ends and busy seasons are finished. I always feel that 1 February is like a mini New Year in tax, almost more than 5 April. (Though HMRC's decision to waive late filing and late payment penalties for a month may mean we have to wait until 1 March for the respite this year!)

If you are thinking about approaching the employment market, here are some top tips.

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it

Have a think about whether you really want to leave your current employer. Is it the role that is no longer right or the firm? Can you ask for an internal secondment? A pay rise or more flexibility in your working hours? Can you change department or investigate a promotion?

Don’t be embarrassed to ask. If you go to the external market and get a job offer, your current employer is likely to be keen to persuade you to stay and may well be open to a change in your current role. If your employer has to go to the external market, it will cost them money to replace you.

If you are considering a move because you want to move location – for example, moving to the countryside or to be closer to family – see whether your current firm can enable this. Can your role become remote worked?

The influence of Covid-19

Let us not forget that we are living in very strange times, and battling a plague which has forced huge changes to British society. Suddenly, catching a train or bus, going to a supermarket or meeting a client has become a very different experience – one fraught with worry and new routines, masks, handwashing and social distancing.

We can't do the things that normally give us some release from working at our desks, such as client lunches, foreign holidays, work drinks and celebrating successes such as promotions, births and weddings. Even meeting a friend for a chat at the watercooler has been curtailed for many of us.

In the background is a constant level of worry about whether we or family members will catch Covid-19. Layer on top the need to juggle childcare around 'bursting bubbles' and lockdowns. Even our everyday language has been transformed by this strange disease – think lockdown, Zoom calls, Teams meetings and PPE.

If you have actually had Covid-19, you may also be struggling with your mood. A research study by Oxford University showed that one in three people who have Covid-19 struggle with depression, mood disorders or more serious psychological disorders in the six months after infection (see bit.ly/33JbvWZ). More recent studies show that Covid-19 may be more of a brain related ailment than a respiratory one, as first thought. So be kind to yourself, and have a think about whether your feelings of unhappiness are really work related or are actually linked to living through a very stressful global event.

First steps

If you do decide that it is really time for a change, do some basic planning. Write down what you like about your current role and would like to retain and then add in what you want from a new role, such as location, study support, promotion, type of work, etc. Think about what you are willing to give for this. So will you relocate? Would you take a pay cut for a change in direction? Would you be happy to increase your hours? If, for example, you are considering a move from practice to industry, would you consider working more days in the office? It's useful to have this framework to help you decide on job offers when you receive them and to help you talk fluently when interviewing.

Once you have a framework for the sort of role you want, start doing some research. Think about the accountancy firms, law firms and in-house teams in your region. Have a look online at LinkedIn and get an idea of what roles are out there.

A note of caution: don’t apply for lots of roles through lots of different people. I recently put my details on an online portal to find a science tutor for my 15 year old son. Fast forward a week, and my inbox and voicemail are full of enquiries from tutors in the UK and beyond. I have completely lost track of who I have talked to and who I have discounted.

I’d advise against putting your CV on a generalist job board or CV portal, as that is the quickest way to lose track of your CV and who has access to it. Instead, talk to an experienced recruitment consultant. Get them to map the market for you and tell you what opportunities are available. Or if you see a role online, apply to that but keep a note of who is advertising it (the employer or a recruiter).

Before you give your CV to any consultant, friend or external party, ask them not to share it with anyone without your permission. Take control of the process to ensure that they agree every approach to the market with you. Your CV is a bit like your intellectual property. It should be valued and shared sparingly. If a consultant is going to change your CV into their format, make sure you have reviewed it before it goes out. You wouldn’t expect to send out a client’s tax return without them checking it over first.

If you don’t have a CV, ask a recruitment consultant for a blank template or work with them to create one. Make sure that your LinkedIn profile and CV align (so dates are right on both, for example). The first stage in any employer’s recruitment process is often to review CVs and check them against the online information available on the applicant.

The perfect formula for a winning CV

Your CV needs to sell your experience. Whatever your area of tax and whether you work in industry or practice, the same key things need to be covered.

- **Qualifications:** Include your education and professional qualifications: GCSEs, O Levels, Highers, A levels, degrees, postgraduate qualifications and all professional qualifications. Many employers won’t accept a CV if it doesn’t include details of GCSEs and A levels. One of my favourite bits of large firm intel is that your grade at GSCE maths is a better predictor of success in accountancy exams than your degree classification!
- **Experience:** A profile paragraph summarising your career to date is fine, but don’t fall into the trap of listing endless skills or competencies. Structure your

CV as sections of each employment and include details of what you did in each role. Your technical experience should be the largest chunk of each section, but also include any management and staff development experience, as well as experience of business development and marketing – or for in-house people, of broader influencing and commercial decision making. As a more junior candidate, your CV will be more weighted towards the technical, and the day to day drafting of compliance or advice. As a senior manager, your day may be split pretty evenly between, technical work, team management and client management/business development.

- **Technology:** I'd include a short section on IT systems experience, such as use of Xero, Sage Excel, PowerPoint SAP, etc.
- **Other:** I would always include a short section on your hobbies and interests outside of work. This is the bit that makes you sound most human. Don't just use what you included on your graduate CV from 10 years ago, though – do you really still play rugby?

If you have a job spec for a role, tailor your CV to it, emphasising the elements of your current work which match the requirements of the role. That is what recruitment consultants spends large chunk of their time doing – matching CVs to roles. Getting a job spec is a key part of the recruitment process as it can also help you to map what questions are likely to arise in an interview. But more of that in the next instalment of my tips for finding your dream job...

In her next article, Georgiana Head will share some tips on interviewing skills, and how to land your dream job.

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