

"Most applicants do not truly appreciate their weaknesses and certainly won't volunteer them"



Simon Panckhurst

"It's all in my CV"yeah right!

Simon Panckhurst raises doubts about the validity of the standard CV and its ability to predict job performance, and proposes an alternative approach.

"I am a team player, although also enjoy working alone." "Weakness – workaholic, and obsessed with getting it exactly right."

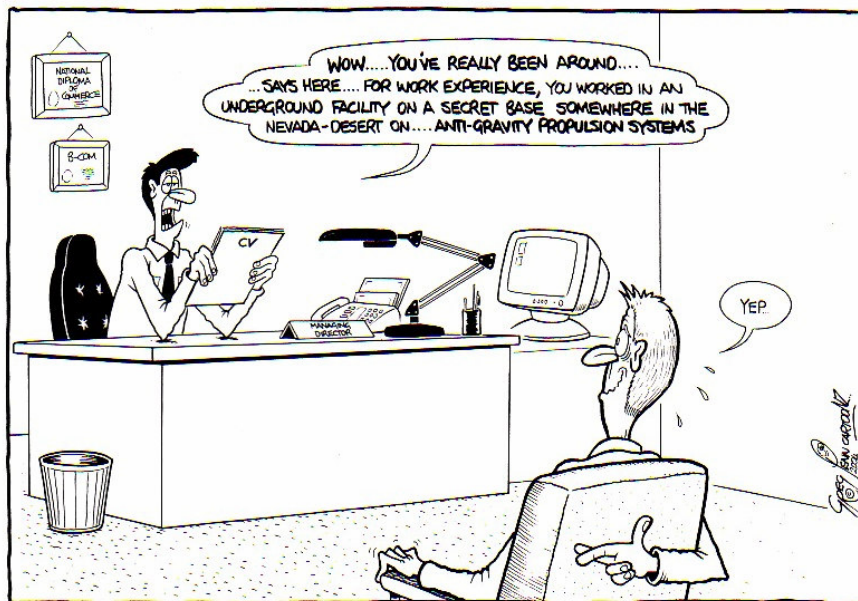
Practitioners can normally assume most job applicants want the job and therefore are only motivated to present themselves in a favourable light (although some CVs do challenge this basic assumption). Consequently real objectivity is uncommon.

Most applicants do not truly appreciate their weaknesses and certainly won't volunteer them. Nor are job seekers quantitative or objective about their skills and attributes – are you familiar with: "I respond to 67 percent of emails within 15 minutes of receiving them while the office average is 83 percent" or "strong communications and time management skills"?

The standard CV has always been prone to slight and significant exaggerations. A recent survey by Robert Half Finance and Accounting found a third of New Zealand recruitment managers said that candidates exaggerated on the real content of their former jobs while 24 percent inflated their management skills.

The reality is that even with the best intentions it is quite difficult for applicants to provide objective evidence of hard and soft skills and put it in a meaningful and useful context. It is expecting a lot for a job-seeker to completely understand and accurately detail the criteria of an "employee of the month" award not to mention make an objective assessment of the calibre of competing employees and the level of participation.

Little wonder that managers are often left feeling they are comparing apples with oranges and consequently default to 'similar to me' bias, or get swayed by flashy or well groomed CVs from well practiced or professionally



advised job seekers.

Research has, however, raised many of these same issues although focusing more on the job interview than the CV. It has long been known that the predictive validity of the unstructured job interview can be significantly improved by increasing structure. By asking all applicants the same questions related to job-relevant criteria or "competencies" and using a structured scoring format, better applicants should emerge.

Work sample tests are also known to be highly valid predictors of future success – hardly surprisingly given they require the applicant to perform a challenging but common work task and demonstrate their ability rather than write or talk about it. After all, assessment of sporting or cultural ability usually involves a demonstration of ability. Imagine All Black hopefuls submitting their CV with claims of: "I have good running and kicking skills and like to operate in a team environment."

By creating a simple but relevant work-related problem or scenario and requesting all applicants to solve it or comment on it and then submit their response as part of the job application addresses many of the inadequacies mentioned earlier –

such as lack of consistency and no hard evidence of skills and attributes.

Applicants can be asked to demonstrate their ability to: follow instructions; work through a simple or complex problem; logically analyse or reason; and draw relevant conclusions or recommendations. Relevant job related competencies should be clearly identified to all applicants and a request made to proactively demonstrate their ability to meet each particular competency in responding to the problem or scenario.

This extra information creates structure and consistency and provides relevant objective evidence, allowing short-listing decisions to be based on recently demonstrated ability. Biased, self-promoting statements of an applicant's perception of their skills and abilities can then provide nothing but light relief – "I have excellent written cumulative skills and strong attention to details."

Simon Panckhurst is director of HRdirection, a consultancy specializing in providing in-house recruitment solutions. www.hrdirection.co.nz