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Blog » **CV Potential: Build Your Best Curriculum Vitae**

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CV Potential: Build Your Best Curriculum Vitae

A strong curriculum vitae takes time and planning to construct. Aspiring physicians and researchers need to present themselves in the best possible light on paper, as the CV is integral to applications for nearly all opportunities. By following a few general guidelines, students and fellows can ensure that their CV stands out in a good way.

Make Connections

A successful career is not built by one person alone. Mentorships and networking are critical for many aspects of professional development. The right mentor can help you define the proper path and make smart choices when it comes to building your CV, in addition to providing letters of recommendation.

Sima Saberi, MD, an endocrinologist and co-director of the Glycemic Collaborative Practice Team at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital, encourages the pursuit of multiple mentors.

“It is helpful to have a team of mentors because different colleagues can serve different mentoring roles,” she explains.

Mentors help with everything from research to publishing to networking, and it is unrealistic to expect a single person to assist with every aspect of career building. If you have two or more experts guiding you, then you also have multiple resources for feedback on your CV. Each will offer unique insights based on their experiences.

“A great mentor will help open doors or at least give you advice on how to open doors. An outstanding mentor will advocate for you when needed,” says Saberi.

To find the right mentors, you have to network. Sometimes these relationships form out of a professor-student scenario, but there are plenty of other ways to cultivate these bonds.

“Attend any early career forums that are available at your institution or at your national meetings,” says Saberi.

Lectures and conferences are also great opportunities to introduce yourself to potential mentors.

“Try to find people to work with that have a track record of producing successful mentees,” she goes on. “Just because someone has a reputation as a high-powered researcher or clinician doesn’t mean that they will be the right mentor.”

Often, the “right” mentor will become apparent after a few interactions. If a potential mentor is responsive and seems to take an interest, then the relationship is off to a great start. If not, then you may want to continue networking and seek other potential mentors.

Join the Club

For some individuals, shyness and introversion may hinder their desire to network. But, you have to overcome these fears and to learn to be a “joiner” in order to assemble a well-rounded CV.

“You should try to become involved in task forces or committees with your national organizations—either at your local chapter level or the national level,” Saberi emphasizes. “This is a chance to meet colleagues and to gain new skills.”

A role in societies and other institutions looks great on paper too. It demonstrates commitment to important initiatives beyond the laboratory or exam room. As a part of a task force, you are able to help shape your chosen field in a specific way while simultaneously getting experience that will bolster your career.

“Volunteering for organizational leadership increases project management abilities, but is also important for promotions and for networking,” Saberi continues.

Hiring committees will want to know about your professional memberships, conferences attended, volunteer work, and leadership roles—all of which can be checked-off the list by participating in organizational activities in your field.

Boost Those Bylines

Everyone in academia has heard the phrase “publish or perish.” While perhaps a bit overdramatic, these words do hold some truth, especially in medical research.

“In academic practice, one needs a certain number of publications for promotions,” says Saberi. “But continue to publish whether you are in academic medicine or not.”

She currently works in private practice, but makes sure to also pursue projects that lead to publication. “Publishing provides one with a means of maintaining diversity in one’s CV and makes your name known to colleagues in the same field.”

Those in the clinical arena can focus on case reports, literature reviews, and quality improvement projects. Presentations should be included as well, and you may even decide to have subsections dedicated to publications outside of journals and conferences, such as articles written for magazines, websites, or medical blogs.

Dividing your publications into categories is generally a good idea, unless you are just starting out and do not yet have many publications. Some subsections to consider are: original research, case reports, reviews, poster presentations, and “other” publications, which would include work like magazine articles.

Quantity is not more important than quality, though. Ideally, fellows will garner one or two lead authorships among their publications, which will speak greater to their abilities than a long list with no lead author credits.

It is also crucial to aim for publication in the right journals. Prestigious journals are of course a big plus, but niche journals can also help demonstrate the focus and direction of your career. When deciding which journals to submit to, mentors become critical once again.

Keep It or Cut It

The hardest part of constructing a CV can be editing. What to include, and what to leave out?

Matt Green, medical publishing director at BPP University School of Health in the U.K., has three words to say when it comes to cutting down a curriculum vitae: Relevant, clear, concise.

“The person who is shortlisting candidates for interview will have on average only two minutes to review your CV in the first instance,” he wrote in an article for BMJ Careers.

Because of this, candidates need to customize their CV for the position they are applying for. You do not want your most relevant accomplishments to get lost in a sea of unrelated bullet points. The person reviewing your CV should immediately see that you are qualified for the role, and then you can elaborate on your experience during the interview process.

Green’s rule of thumb for the length of a CV is that it should be “as long as it needs to be.” That means just the information that makes sense for that job application. The final product could be anywhere from three to eight pages.

He also says to ditch the cover page, which can distract from the rest of the CV. Additionally, he encourages individuals to stick to classic fonts like Times New Roman and Arial, and to minimize italics and underlining. The goal is to create a clean and easy to read document.

Green also wishes applicants would use bullet points instead of blocks of text and maintain consistent style throughout the document—layout, spacing, and structure should remain the same.

What Not to Do

Avoiding pitfalls is equally important to making the right choices for your CV. Even if you manage to everything else right, one big mistake could make the difference between a “yes” and a “no” from a hiring committee.

Green says to never embellish or fabricate any information. It can be tempting to exaggerate one’s accomplishments in hopes of an extra edge, but dishonesty is a nonstarter. If you can’t back up a claim, don’t make it.

Saberi encourages aspiring endocrinologists to take an open approach early on in your career.

“Don’t turn down opportunities to become involved in new projects or committees,” she says. “Also, don’t pigeonhole yourself into one track. Keep all of your options open.”

Saberi says that the initial years of a medical career should be a time of exploration. You may not know that you enjoy a certain aspect of working in medicine until you try. Many leaders started off in a different area than the one they ultimately ended up in. Flexibility allows for a broader range of experiences and better knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, don't run yourself into the ground trying to build the perfect CV. Work-life balance is critical and physicians and researchers are constantly grappling with the many demands on their time. Saberi offers some strategies for achieving at a high level without sacrificing other life priorities.

“Organize your time carefully,” she says. “Prioritize deadlines—make ‘to do’ lists if needed—and remember to take some time for yourself to prevent burnout. Some find that they do their best work early in the morning or late at night when the bustle of family life is quiet. Or, if you have multiple interruptions at work, close your office door or physically go to a different location to allow quiet time to read and write.”

The foundation of an excellent CV is, of course, outstanding work. There are many factors that define great work, but the best work tends to come from individuals who enjoy it. If you allow yourself to reach the point of burnout, it will be tough to regain momentum in your career.

There is no such thing as a perfect CV and, according to Green, it should instead operate as “a career road map that enables you to identify and deal with any gaps in your experience and to respond to opportunities that may arise unexpectedly.”

The most important part of career building is to continue progressing while staying sane in the process.