

Winning That Job – Why a Great Application Is About More Than a Good CV

An interview with Tim Crowden, Executive Coach and Founder of Coaching and Leadership

There is no shortage of advice about writing a successful job application.

Search online and you'll find countless templates, CV builders, artificial intelligence tools and articles promising to help you stand out from the competition.

But while presentation matters, a polished document alone won't necessarily get you an interview.

What matters most is whether your application tells a clear, credible and compelling story about who you are, what you've achieved and the contribution you can make.

We spoke with Tim Crowden, executive coach, former senior public servant and founder of Coaching and Leadership, about what employers are really looking for, why capable people sometimes struggle to communicate their strengths, and how to prepare an application that gives you the best opportunity to progress to interview.

Tim, what do you think makes a winning job application?

I think the first thing to recognise is that a job application isn't simply a summary of your employment history.

It's an opportunity to demonstrate why you're a strong candidate for a particular role.

And that requires more than listing your previous positions, responsibilities and qualifications.

A good application helps the reader understand three things: who you are professionally, what you've achieved and why your experience and capabilities are relevant to the position you're seeking.

It should also give them a sense of your potential.

Employers aren't simply recruiting someone to perform the duties of a vacant position. They're looking for someone who can contribute to the organisation, respond to emerging challenges, work effectively with others and potentially develop into a future leader.

That's why I encourage people to think beyond the immediate vacancy.

You're not simply applying for a job. You're demonstrating the value you can bring to an organisation – now and into the future.

You've written recently about why employers recruit. Why is that important for applicants?

Because understanding the employer's perspective fundamentally changes how you approach your application.

At first glance, the reason an organisation recruits seems obvious – it needs to fill a vacancy.

But employers are generally looking for much more.

They want someone who can fulfil the requirements of the role, deliver good outcomes, respond to current and future challenges, contribute positively to the team and demonstrate leadership potential.

And leadership doesn't necessarily mean managing people.

Organisations need individuals at every level who can exercise good judgement, influence others, take responsibility and contribute to a positive workplace culture.

When you understand those broader expectations, you can start positioning your skills and experience in a much more meaningful way.

Rather than simply telling the employer what you've done, you demonstrate how your leadership, skills and experience prepares you to make a valuable contribution.

Why do capable and experienced people sometimes struggle with job applications?

It's something I see regularly in career coaching.

People may be highly capable, experienced and respected within their organisations, yet struggle to communicate those qualities in a job application or interview.

Sometimes they're too close to their own experience.

They know what they've done but haven't necessarily reflected on what made their contribution valuable, what they learned or how their leadership has developed.

Others understand the recruitment process very well.

For example, applicants in the Australian Public Service may be familiar with the APS Values, the Integrated Leadership System (ILS) and the capabilities expected at different classification levels.

But knowing the framework and being able to position yourself authentically within it are two different things.

The challenge is bringing together your skills, achievements, experience, leadership approach and career aspirations into a coherent professional story.

And that story needs to be supported by evidence.

I generally encourage people to work through five steps.

Step 1 – Understand the organisation, the role and why you want it

Before you start writing, do your homework.

Read about the organisation, its purpose, strategic priorities, challenges and future direction.

Look beyond the job description.

Annual reports, corporate plans, strategic statements, public speeches and organisational websites can provide valuable insights into what matters to the employer.

If you know someone who works there, consider having a conversation with them to better understand the organisation and its culture.

Then ask yourself some important questions:

- Why do I genuinely want this position?
- What interests me about the organisation and its purpose?
- How do my values align with those of the organisation?
- What challenges is the organisation likely to face?
- What strengths and experiences would I bring to the role?
- How would I contribute beyond simply performing the duties?

These questions help you determine whether the role is actually right for you.

They also help you prepare a more focused and persuasive application.

And there's another benefit.

If you progress to interview, you'll almost certainly need to explain why you want the job.

A strong answer should demonstrate genuine motivation, an understanding of the organisation and a clear connection between your capabilities and what the employer needs.

Step 2 – Develop your professional and leadership story

This is probably one of the most important steps.

I often ask clients a deceptively simple question:

"What's the one thing you want the selection panel to remember about you?"

It might be your ability to lead complex organisational change, develop high-performing teams, deliver challenging programs or bring people together around a shared purpose.

Whatever it is, your application needs to communicate that message clearly.

But it also needs to be authentic.

I regularly see applications filled with broad statements about being a strategic thinker, an outstanding communicator, a collaborative leader or a results-driven professional.

The problem is that almost anyone can make those claims.

What makes your application persuasive is the evidence behind them.

For example, rather than simply describing yourself as a collaborative leader, demonstrate how you've brought together people with different perspectives, navigated competing priorities and achieved a meaningful outcome.

Your professional story should also reflect the level of the position you're seeking.

As people move into more senior roles, employers increasingly look for evidence of sound judgement, the ability to work with ambiguity, awareness of broader organisational systems and the capacity to influence outcomes beyond their immediate responsibilities.

A compelling leadership story doesn't just describe what you've done. It demonstrates how you think, how you lead and the difference you've made.

Step 3 – Make your experience relevant to the role

One of the most common mistakes I see is treating a CV as a chronological list of positions and responsibilities.

Of course, employers need to understand where you've worked and what you've been responsible for.

But that information alone rarely distinguishes one applicant from another.

I encourage clients to consider each significant position they've held and ask:

- What was the purpose of my role?
- What were the major challenges?
- What did I personally contribute?
- What changed because of my involvement?
- What capabilities did I develop that are relevant to the next position?

Then develop a short, clear statement about each role, supported by selected achievements.

The important word here is *selected*.

You don't need to include everything you've ever done.

You need to include the experiences that best demonstrate your suitability for the position.

For senior applicants, this may mean placing greater emphasis on strategic leadership, organisational impact, judgement, stakeholder engagement and the development of others.

For emerging leaders, it may involve demonstrating initiative, accountability, collaboration and the ability to take on increasingly complex responsibilities.

The objective is to help the selection panel see the connection between your previous experience and the contribution you could make in the new role.

Step 4 – Demonstrate achievements, outcomes and impact

This is where a good application can become a compelling one.

Employers want to know what was the outcomes of your achievements – not simply what you were responsible for.

There's a significant difference between saying:

"Responsible for managing a major organisational change program."

And explaining:

"Led a cross-functional change program that streamlined business processes, improved service delivery and strengthened collaboration across the organisation."

The second statement gives the reader a much clearer understanding of your contribution and the outcomes achieved.

Where possible, I encourage people to quantify their achievements and turn them into outcomes or impact.

That might include improvements in performance, reduced costs, increased productivity, improved stakeholder satisfaction or the successful delivery of a complex initiative that made a difference to the community, international relations, enabled new ways of thinking that changed policy.

The important thing is to demonstrate what changed and why it mattered.

A useful approach is to think about:

Context – Action – Outcome – Impact

What was the situation? What did you do? What was achieved? And what difference did it make?

For leadership positions, I also encourage people to reflect on the thinking and judgement behind their decisions.

What competing priorities did they need to balance? How did they respond to uncertainty? What perspectives did they consider? What did they learn?

These insights can reveal considerably more about someone's leadership capability than a simple list of achievements.

And remember to be clear about your personal contribution.

If an outcome was achieved by a team, acknowledge that. But explain the particular role you played in enabling its success.

Step 5 – Edit, refine and test your application

Once you've developed the content, it's time to make sure the document communicates your message clearly.

Presentation matters.

A well-structured application with consistent formatting, readable fonts and clear headings makes it easier for the selection panel to identify your strengths.

But avoid being distracted by elaborate templates, excessive graphics or complicated layouts.

Substance should always come before appearance.

I encourage clients to review their applications with a few questions in mind:

- Is the application clearly tailored to the position?
- Does it address the advertised requirements and assessment criteria?
- Have I demonstrated outcomes rather than simply listed responsibilities?
- Is my personal contribution clear?
- Have I provided evidence to support my claims?
- Are my sentences concise and easy to understand?
- Have I removed unnecessary jargon, acronyms and vague statements?
- Am I overselling my experience – or underselling it?
- Does the application sound like me and is it in my voice?

And, of course, check spelling, grammar, dates, names and consistency.

One particularly useful technique is to read your application aloud.

You'll often hear awkward sentences, repetition or unclear messages that you might miss when reading silently.

I also encourage people to ask someone they trust to review their application.

Not simply to correct the grammar, but to answer a more important question:

"After reading this, what do you understand about me, my strengths and the contribution I could make?"

If their answer doesn't reflect the message you intended, there's probably more work to do.

What about using artificial intelligence to prepare a job application?

AI can be a particularly useful tool, particularly for improving structure, identifying repetition, refining language and helping applicants compare their experience against the advertised requirements.

But I would offer one important caution.

AI can help you write an application. It cannot create the experience, judgement or leadership capability that the application needs to demonstrate.

One of the risks is that people end up with beautifully written applications that sound remarkably similar.

They're polished, full of impressive language and technically well structured.

But they lack personality, genuine reflection and convincing evidence.

And if you progress to interview, you'll need to substantiate everything you've written.

I encourage clients to use AI as a supporting tool rather than allowing it to become the author of their professional story.

The experiences, examples, achievements and reflections must remain their own.

Applicants should also follow any instructions the employer provides about the use of AI and take care not to enter confidential or sensitive organisational information into public tools.

Authenticity remains one of the most important qualities of a strong application.

Is a good application enough to win the job?

No – and that's an important distinction.

The purpose of the written application is generally to demonstrate that you're a credible candidate and give the selection panel sufficient confidence to invite you to the next stage.

But recruitment is a broader process.

Your CV, written pitch, interview, referee reports and any other assessment activities need to tell a consistent story.

I've seen people prepare excellent written applications but struggle at interview because they haven't thought deeply enough about their experiences, achievements or leadership approach.

Equally, I've worked with highly capable individuals whose written applications simply didn't do justice to what they could offer.

That's why I encourage people to think about the entire recruitment process rather than treating the application and interview as separate activities.

The reflection you undertake while preparing your application should also help you identify strong interview examples, clarify your motivations and communicate your professional capabilities with greater confidence.

You've developed a program called *Winning That Job*. How is that different from simply getting help with a CV?

Winning That Job grew out of my experience working with people who had the capability and experience to succeed in more senior or different roles but weren't necessarily positioning themselves effectively through the recruitment process.

It's not simply about producing a better CV or learning a few interview techniques.

We work with participants to understand what employers are looking for, identify their strengths and achievements, develop their professional and leadership story, and communicate that story persuasively throughout the recruitment process.

A particularly important part of the program is helping people connect their experience with the expectations of the role they're seeking.

And because everyone brings different experiences, career aspirations and development needs, our workshops are highly individualised.

We regularly deliver *Winning That Job* workshops through The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra and online, tailoring the program to the participants and the recruitment opportunities they're pursuing.

Individual career coaching can also provide an opportunity to explore particular challenges in greater depth.

The objective is not to give everyone the same formula.

It's to help each person present their capabilities authentically, confidently and effectively.

Finally, what's the single most important piece of advice you'd give someone preparing their next application?

Don't start by writing your CV.

Start by understanding the role, reflecting on your experience, identifying the contribution you could make, and engaging with a wide range of potential referees.

Ask yourself why the employer should be interested in you – not simply because of the positions you've held, but because of what you've achieved, how you've approached challenges and what you've learned along the way.

Think about the professional and leadership story you want to tell.

Then make sure every part of your application helps communicate that story.

And don't assume the selection panel will make the connections for you.

A winning application doesn't simply tell an employer where you've been. It helps them understand what you could bring to where they're going.

About Tim Crowden

Tim Crowden is an Executive Coach, International Coaching Federation Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and founder of Coaching and Leadership.

Following a 32-year public sector career, including 16 years in the Australian Government Senior Executive Service and senior leadership appointments in Australia and internationally, Tim transitioned into executive coaching and leadership development.

With more than 1,700 hours of documented professional coaching experience, he partners with executives, senior leaders, managers and teams across government, business and other organisations.

Tim established The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra at the beginning of 2025.

Through **Coaching and Leadership**, Tim and his colleagues provide executive coaching, career transition support, leadership development and highly individualised *Winning That Job* workshops. These services help participants understand their professional capabilities, prepare for new opportunities and navigate important career decisions with clarity and confidence.

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