

How recruitment agencies format CVs in 2026

— and what each method really costs

A practical guide for agency owners, managers and consultants who want faster, more consistent CVs without adding software, cost or risk.

INTRODUCTION

The CV is your product — so why is it an afterthought?

In recruitment, the formatted CV is the thing you actually sell. It is the client's first impression of a candidate and, just as importantly, their first impression of your agency. A sharp, consistent, well-branded CV signals a business that is thorough and professional. A rushed one, retyped under pressure by whoever happened to be free, signals the opposite.

Yet in most agencies, formatting is treated as low-value admin: squeezed between calls, done differently by every consultant, and rarely measured. That is odd, because the way you handle it quietly drives three things every agency cares about — the hours your fee-earners spend not billing, how quickly you get a strong candidate in front of a client, and whether candidate data is being handled safely.

This paper breaks down the five ways agencies actually format CVs today, the honest trade-offs of each, and the costs most teams never add up. There is a comparison table on page 6 you can use to sense-check your own approach, and a short list of questions to put to any vendor before you buy.

THE CORE IDEA

Every **20–30 minutes** a consultant spends reformatting a CV is time not spent sourcing, qualifying or placing. That is the cost that never appears on any invoice — and it is almost always larger than the one that does.

WHAT'S INSIDE

The five ways agencies format CVs	3
The hidden costs most agencies never count	5
The five methods at a glance	6
What good looks like in 2026	7
Five questions to ask any vendor	7
About Dresscode	8

SECTION ONE

The five ways agencies format CVs

Almost every agency uses one of five approaches, often more than one at once. None is obviously wrong; each trades a different cost for a different benefit.

METHOD 01

Consultants format their own CVs

The default in most small and mid-sized agencies. The consultant who owns the candidate reformats the CV into the agency template themselves.

THE APPEAL

No extra cost, full control, and the candidate's data never leaves the building.

THE REAL COST

Your most expensive, revenue-generating people spend hours a week on typing and layout — the lowest-value task in the business. Output varies consultant to consultant, so there is no consistent house style. Out-of-pocket cost is zero; opportunity cost is the highest of any method here.

METHOD 02

A dedicated admin or resourcing team

Larger agencies often hand formatting to an internal admin, resourcer or centralised support team.

THE APPEAL

Frees up consultants and produces a more consistent, on-brand result.

THE REAL COST

You are paying a salary for the function, CVs sit in a queue behind other work — adding lead time exactly when speed matters most — and it is a single point of failure. Holiday, sickness or a busy spell and the backlog grows. It is still fundamentally manual work.

METHOD 03

Outsourced or offshore typing services

Sending CVs to an external or offshore service that retypes them into your template for a low per-CV fee.

THE APPEAL

Cheap per CV and off the team's plate entirely.

THE REAL COST

Turnaround measured in hours or to the next day, which quietly kills your speed-to-client on live roles. Quality varies and still needs checking. And there is a genuine data-protection question about sending candidate personal data to a third party, often overseas.

METHOD 04

Do-it-yourself with ChatGPT or Claude

The newest habit: consultants paste a CV into a general AI chatbot and prompt it to tidy or restructure the content.

THE APPEAL

Flexible, and effectively free if you already have a licence.

THE REAL COST

It is still entirely manual — copy in, prompt, copy out, then fix the layout by hand — and there is no house-styled template behind it, so quality swings from CV to CV. There is also a data-governance catch: pasting candidate personal data into a consumer AI tool is exactly what your GDPR policy is meant to prevent, and it leaves no audit trail.

METHOD 05

Dedicated AI CV-formatting tools

Purpose-built software that parses a CV and rebuilds it in your branded template — fast, consistent and designed for the job. This is the right direction, but the category splits into two very different camps.

PREMIUM ENTERPRISE SUITES

Powerful and highly configurable, but expensive, sold on annual contracts, and they ask you to implement and adopt a whole new platform — often retaining your data in the process. Great for large organisations; heavy for everyone else.

LOW-COST SELF-SERVE APPS

Cheap and quick, but you still do the work: log in to yet another dashboard, upload, tweak, download. The price is low; the friction and the manual step are not.

THE GAP IN THE MIDDLE

Between the enterprise suite you have to roll out and the cheap app you still have to operate sits the option most agencies actually want: **done-for-you formatting with no new software to adopt**. The CV comes back in your template, fast, from a tool that works inside the email inbox your team already lives in.

It is worth being precise about why that middle ground matters. The two questions that decide whether a formatting solution actually gets used are not about features. They are: **does a fee-earner have to touch it?** and **does anyone have to learn anything?** Every method above fails at least one of those. A tool that answers "no" to both removes the task rather than relocating it.

SECTION TWO

The hidden costs most agencies never count

Whichever method you use, four costs tend to go unmeasured — and they usually dwarf the per-CV price you were comparing on.

~150 hours a year, per consultant

Spent formatting CVs instead of placing candidates. Based on eight CVs a week at 25 minutes each, over 46 working weeks. Across a team of five that is roughly 750 hours — about 100 working days a year that produce no fee.

1 • Lost fee-earner time (the big one)

This is the cost that hides in plain sight. A consultant formatting eight CVs a week at 25 minutes each spends over three hours a week on layout — roughly 150 hours a year, or nearly a full working month. Valued conservatively at £25 an hour, that is about **£3,800 a year per consultant**. Valued at what a fee-earner's time is genuinely worth once you factor in billings, it is a multiple of that.

2 • Inconsistency

When every consultant formats differently, clients receive a patchwork of quality. A consistent, branded CV is a quiet but constant advertisement for the agency. An inconsistent one undermines exactly the premium positioning you are trying to charge for — and clients notice it long before they mention it.

3 • Speed to client

On a live, competitive role, the first strong CV to land often wins the interview slot. Any method that adds hours of turnaround — a queue, an offshore round-trip, a manual DIY fix — can cost the placement outright. Set against a lost fee, every per-CV formatting price in this paper is a rounding error.

4 • Compliance and data protection

Where candidate data goes matters. Emailing personal data to an offshore typing service, or pasting it into a consumer AI chatbot, both create GDPR exposure — and neither leaves you an audit trail if a candidate ever exercises their rights. A properly built tool keeps data in-region, processes it transiently and retains nothing. Easy to overlook — until it becomes the only thing anyone wants to talk about.

WORK OUT YOUR OWN NUMBER

The figures above are illustrative. Put your own headcount, CV volume and salaries into the ROI calculator at cvdresscode.com/calculator and it will show you the hours, the working days and the annual cost for your agency specifically.

SECTION THREE

The five methods at a glance

A quick way to sense-check your own approach. Ratings reflect the typical case rather than the best possible implementation of each.

METHOD	OUT-OF-POCKET COST	FEE-EARNER TIME SAVED	SPEED TO CLIENT	HOUSE-STYLE CONSISTENCY	DATA / GDPR SAFETY
Consultants format their own	Low	Low	Medium	Low	High
Dedicated admin / resourcing team	Medium	High	Medium	High	High
Outsourced / offshore typing	Low	High	Slow	Medium	Low
DIY with ChatGPT / Claude	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Done-for-you AI, in your inbox	Low	High	Fast	High	High

Green = strong · Amber = mixed · Red = weak

THE PATTERN

The methods agencies default to for cost reasons — DIY and offshore — score worst on the things that actually drive revenue: fee-earner time, speed and consistency. **The strongest all-round position is done-for-you formatting that removes the manual step without adding a platform to run.**

SECTION FOUR

What good looks like in 2026

Pulling it together, a modern CV-formatting approach should tick five boxes. Most methods hit two or three.

✓ **No lost fee-earner time**

Consultants never touch the layout. Not a faster way to format — no formatting at all.

✓ **Consistent house style**

Every CV looks the same, and looks like your brand, regardless of who sent it or what shape the original arrived in.

✓ **Fast turnaround**

Formatted in about a minute, not hours, so you are first in front of the client on a live role.

✓ **Safe with data**

Processed in-region, retained nowhere, and defensible if a client or candidate ever asks.

✓ **Nothing new to adopt**

No extra platform, login or training. It works where your team already works.

BEFORE YOU BUY

Five questions to ask any vendor

Worth asking before you sign anything

1. **What does my consultant actually have to do?** If the answer involves a login, the manual step has been relocated rather than removed.
2. **How long does one CV take, measured end to end?** Not processing time — the time from the consultant sending it to the finished file being in their hands.
3. **Where is candidate data processed, and what is retained?** Ask for it in writing. "In-region and retained nowhere" is a specific claim; "secure" is not.
4. **Who builds the template, and what does a change cost?** House styles evolve. Find out whether that is a support ticket or a chargeable project.
5. **What is the commitment?** Annual contracts for a tool that hasn't proved itself in your workflow are a risk you don't need to take.

ABOUT

About Dresscode

Dresscode formats CVs to your agency's house style straight from your email inbox. A consultant forwards a CV to a dedicated address; a branded, consistently formatted version comes back in about a minute.

There is no dashboard to learn, no platform to roll out and no login — it works inside the inbox your team already uses all day. We build your templates for you, so the first CV that comes back is already right. Candidate data is processed in-region and retained nowhere.

It is deliberately the narrow answer to one expensive problem, rather than another system for your agency to run.

See it on one of your own CVs

Forward any CV to **trial@cvdresscode.com** and it comes back in a clean, formatted layout in about a minute. We process it and delete it — nothing is stored. No signup, no card.

A note on the numbers. Time and cost figures in this paper are illustrative, built on the following assumptions: 46 working weeks a year; a 7.5-hour working day; 1,725 working hours a year when converting a salary to an hourly cost; eight CVs formatted per consultant per week at 25 minutes each. They are intended to give you a defensible order of magnitude, not a quotation. Your own numbers will differ — the ROI calculator at cvdresscode.com/calculator lets you put them in.

Ratings. The comparison table reflects the typical implementation of each method as observed across UK recruitment agencies, not the best possible version of it. A well-run internal team can outperform a badly run tool.