

Side Projects and Hobbies on Your CV

How to use them to highlight your value – or unintentionally give away key advantages.

Why side projects and hobbies carry more weight than most people think

Many CVs include a section at the end:

“Hobbies” or “Interests”.

It often reads:

Fitness

Travel

Reading

Formally correct.

But meaningless in terms of content.

And this is exactly where potential is lost.

Because:

Side projects and hobbies can be an extremely powerful part of your profile.

Or completely irrelevant.

Why are side projects relevant?

Employers want to understand:

What truly drives you?

What do you engage with voluntarily?

How do you develop yourself beyond your job?

Especially in cyber security, this is critical.

Many of the strongest profiles clearly show one thing:

Interest does not stop with the job.

The most common mistake

Side projects are either not mentioned at all.

Or described too superficially.

Example:

“Private interest in cyber security”

“Home Lab”

“Hack The Box”

Sounds good.

But:

What does that actually mean?

Without context, it remains a buzzword.

The reader does not know:

How deep your knowledge is.

How much time you invest.

What you have actually learned.

How real impact is created

A strong side project demonstrates:

Depth

Initiative

and tangible outcomes

Weak example:

Home lab for cyber security

Strong example:

Own home lab (since 2022)

Built an isolated test environment with Active Directory, SIEM and endpoint detection

Use cases executed:

Simulation of phishing attacks and analysis of detection mechanisms

Development of custom detection rules in Splunk

Key takeaway: Deepened expertise in detection engineering and incident response

The difference:

Before: buzzword

Now: demonstrable competence

Side projects are often the door opener

Especially for:

Junior profiles

Career changers

or candidates with limited professional experience, side projects can be decisive.

they show:

You do not wait for tasks.

You actively develop yourself.

You bring genuine interest.

Also relevant for senior profiles

Side projects do not only show skills.

They also reveal:

Mindset

Curiosity

and depth of expertise

Weak example:

Interest in cloud security

Strong example:

Private project: Analysis of cloud misconfigurations in AWS

Built a test environment with intentionally misconfigured IAM roles

Identified attack vectors and documented best practices

Transfer to the job: Improvement of internal cloud security guidelines

This shows:

Not just interest.

But translation into real business value.

Hobbies – useful or irrelevant?

The honest answer:

It depends.

Hobbies are valuable when they say something about you.

Not when they simply fill space.

Weak example:

Fitness

Travel

Gaming

Strong example:

Endurance training (marathon preparation)

→ demonstrates discipline, goal orientation and long-term commitment

Chess

→ demonstrates strategic thinking and pattern recognition

Capture The Flag competitions

→ direct relevance to cyber security skills

Important:

This is not about appearing creative.

It is about being relevant.

The three most common mistakes

1. Buzzwords without substance

“Home Lab”, “I am interested in cyber security”

→ without explanation, meaningless

2. Side projects without outcomes

You describe what you did, but not what you learned

3. Irrelevant hobbies

Listing everything that has no connection to your profile

How to review your CV

Ask yourself:

Do my side projects demonstrate concrete skills?

Is it clear what I have learned from them?

Is the level of depth and initiative visible?

Are my hobbies relevant – or just filler?

If not: Revise this section.

There is often more potential here than in entire job experiences.

Side projects are not a “nice-to-have”

They are a strong signal.

For motivation.

For willingness to learn.

And for genuine interest.

And that is often what makes the difference.

Next week: NDA & security incidents on your CV

How to present confidential projects – without breaching confidentiality.

This article is part of the cyberunity CV series for cyber security professionals in the DACH region.