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How to describe informal or family business work on a CV

Most Kenyan graduates have done real, skilled work in a family shop, farm, market stall or informal trade — and then left it off their CV because they did not know how to present it. This guide shows you exactly how to describe that work so that a hiring manager reads it as genuine experience, not a gap.

TOPIC	Job Search & Applications
READING TIME	12 minutes
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WHAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Identify which tasks from informal or family business work count as formal experience and why.
- Write a job title and employer line for a family or informal role that will not confuse a recruiter.
- Turn day-to-day informal tasks into achievement-based bullet points with numbers and outcomes.
- Decide which roles to include, which to shrink, and which to leave off entirely.
- Pass your CV through a quick self-check before sending it to an employer on BrighterMonday, LinkedIn or by email.

Who this is for: Kenyan job-seekers aged 18–30 who have worked in a family business, a relative's shop, an informal market stall, a small farm, or any other unpaid or cash-in-hand role and are now applying for their first formal employment.

Why informal work belongs on your CV

What recruiters are actually looking for

When a recruiter at a Nairobi company opens your CV, they are not checking whether your previous employer was registered at the Registrar of Companies. They are checking three things: can you do the tasks the job requires, can you handle responsibility, and can you show up reliably? Informal and family business work gives evidence for all three — but only if you describe it in the language recruiters recognise.

The problem is not the experience itself. The problem is how candidates describe it. Writing "helped in the family shop" tells the recruiter nothing about what you actually did, how much responsibility you held, or what the result of your work was. A Nairobi supermarket cashier who writes "handled daily cash reconciliation for a retail outlet with monthly turnover of Ksh 180,000" is describing the same kind of work far more usefully. The work is identical; the framing is what changes the outcome.

Kenyan hiring managers — especially in retail, logistics, banking agency work, microfinance, agriculture and fast-moving consumer goods — frequently value people who have handled real money, dealt with real customers and solved real problems without supervision. Family and informal businesses provide exactly that environment. Your job is to make that visible on the page rather than hiding it behind vague language or leaving the period blank.

The risk of leaving it off entirely

If you finished school or college in 2020 and your CV shows no activity until 2024, a recruiter reading it will assume one of two things: that you spent those years doing nothing, or that you are hiding something. Either assumption hurts your chances. Leaving informal work off your CV does not make you look like a fresh graduate — it makes you look like someone with an unexplained gap.

Filling that gap with honest, well-described work — even unpaid work in a family business — immediately makes your CV stronger. It shows continuity. It shows that you were building skills and accepting responsibility during that period. And it gives the interviewer something to ask you about, which is always to your advantage because you know the answer from lived experience.

How to structure the entry on your CV

Choosing a job title that is honest and readable

You need a job title for the role. Do not write "Family Helper" or "Volunteer" unless you genuinely did nothing beyond occasional assistance. Instead, look at what you actually did most of the time and find the closest recognised title. If you served customers and handled money, the title is "Sales Assistant" or "Retail Cashier." If you managed stock, ordered goods from suppliers and tracked what sold, the title is "Stock Controller" or "Inventory Assistant." If you ran the business while a parent was away — handling suppliers, staff, accounts and customers — the title is "Business Operations Assistant" or, if you did it for long enough and with enough independence, "Acting Manager."

These titles are not lies. They are the standard industry names for the work you performed. A recruiter at Naivas, Quickmart or a logistics company will immediately understand what those titles mean. They will not understand "helped run things at home." If you are unsure which title fits, open BrighterMonday or MyJobMag Kenya, search for jobs that match what you did, and look at the job titles they use. Copy the title that best matches your actual responsibilities.

For the employer line, write the business name if it has one — even an informal name like "Mama Wanjiku Cereals" is fine. If it has no name, write a description: "Family retail grain business, Githurai 44" or "Smallholder dairy farm, Eldoret." Add the location and the dates. Format it exactly the same way you would format a formal employer, because visually it needs to sit in the same space on the page without looking different or apologetic.

Writing bullet points that show what you actually did

Every bullet point under your informal role must do three things: name the task, give a scale or number, and state the result or responsibility level. The formula is simple: **Action verb + what you did + how much/how many/how often + what happened because of it.**

Start each bullet with a past-tense action verb. Kenyan CVs often begin bullets with nouns or vague phrases like "Responsible for..." — this is weak. Use verbs: managed, processed, reconciled, negotiated, ordered, tracked, trained, resolved, operated. These words signal competence immediately.

Then add a number wherever you can. Numbers do not have to be precise to the last shilling — reasonable estimates are fine. How many customers did you serve in a day? How much cash did you close with at the end of the day? How many items were in the stock you managed? How many suppliers did you deal with? How many staff did you coordinate? If you genuinely do not know, think about it: if you served roughly 30 customers on a quiet day and 80 on a busy Saturday, you can write "served 30–80 customers daily." That is honest and it is far more informative than "served customers."

Finally, say what the result was. Did stock losses fall because you introduced a system? Did customer complaints drop? Did sales increase during a period when you were in charge? If you cannot name an outcome, name the responsibility level instead: "sole person responsible for cash security after close of business" tells the recruiter something real about the trust placed

in you.

Worked examples — weak versus strong

Side-by-side comparisons you can adapt directly

Weak version (what most people write)	Strong version (what gets you shortlisted)
Helped in the family shop with sales and other duties.	Processed 40–60 customer transactions daily using a manual cash register; performed end-of-day cash reconciliation and prepared daily sales summaries for the business owner.
Worked on the family farm during school holidays.	Coordinated harvest logistics for a 2-acre maize and bean farm in Nakuru County; arranged transport to Wakulima Market and negotiated sale prices with three regular wholesale buyers.
Assisted with stock management and ordering.	Managed stock levels for 120 SKUs across dry goods and household supplies; placed weekly orders with four Nairobi-based distributors and reduced out-of-stock incidents by introducing a reorder-level notebook system.
Helped customers and handled complaints.	Resolved customer complaints as first point of contact; escalated unresolved issues to the business owner; maintained a complaints log that identified three recurring product quality issues, leading to a supplier change.

Example: M-Pesa agency work described correctly

Weak: "Worked at a family M-Pesa shop."

Strong: "Operated an M-Pesa agency outlet in Kisumu CBD; processed an average of 80 transactions daily including deposits, withdrawals and airtime sales; managed float levels and submitted daily transaction reports to the business owner; maintained customer confidentiality in line with Safaricom agency guidelines."

Why this works: It names the service (M-Pesa agency), the volume (80 transactions), the specific tasks (float management, reporting), and a compliance point (confidentiality).

Any recruiter hiring for a bank branch, a microfinance institution, or an agency banking role will immediately understand this experience.

Example: Informal tailoring or craft business

Weak: "Helped my aunt with her tailoring business."

Strong: "Assisted in running a home-based tailoring business in Gikomba area, Nairobi; managed customer orders and delivery timelines for 15–25 active clients; collected and recorded deposits and balance payments; sourced fabric from Gikomba market suppliers and tracked material costs per order."

Why this works: It names the location, gives client volume, mentions financial handling, and shows supply-chain awareness — all relevant to retail, fashion, logistics or customer service roles.

What to do when the situation is complicated

When you were not paid, or payment was irregular

You do not need to disclose your pay on a CV. No section of a standard Kenyan CV asks for salary history (and if an application form does, that is a separate question from whether the role appears on the CV at all). The absence of formal pay does not make the experience invalid. What matters is whether you performed real work with real responsibility. If you did, it goes on the CV as experience. If you were only occasionally helping out — carrying things, minding the stall for an hour while someone ate — that is not really a job entry; it is a minor supporting detail you might mention in an interview if relevant.

If the experience was unpaid but substantial — say, six months or more of regular involvement — include it fully. If it was very short-term or highly irregular, you can include it in a shorter form or fold several short informal roles into a single "Freelance and Family Business Support" entry covering the whole period, with a brief summary of the types of tasks you did.

When a family member will be your reference

Recruiters in Kenya are aware that family businesses exist and that family members are the natural reference for work done in them. A reference from a parent or sibling is not automatically disqualifying — but it does need to be handled carefully. First, list someone who can speak to your work professionally, not just confirm you are a good person. If your mother ran the business, she can describe your daily tasks, your punctuality and any specific responsibilities you held. She should be reachable by phone during business hours. When you list her on the reference page, write her name, her relationship to the business ("Owner, Wangari Cereals, Thika"), and a working phone number — not a WhatsApp-only number unless you are sure she checks it during the day.

If you can also list a non-family reference — a supplier who dealt with you regularly, a neighbouring business owner who knows your work, a teacher or religious leader who can speak to your character — include that person alongside the family reference. Two references are standard on Kenyan CVs. If one is family and one is independent, that is a reasonable and honest combination. Do not invent a reference; if the recruiter calls and the person does not remember you or contradicts your CV, the application is over.

When you ran the business entirely on your own

If a parent or relative was absent — working elsewhere, ill, travelling — and you were the one opening the business, managing staff, handling suppliers and closing at night, then you were performing a management role. Do not undersell this. The title in this case can be "Acting Business Manager" or "Business Operations Lead" depending on how much independence you had. The bullet points should reflect the full scope: staff coordination, cash management, supplier relations, customer dispute resolution, and any record-keeping you did. Highlight the duration — if you did this for three months while a parent was in hospital, say so. Recruiters understand family circumstances and will not penalise you for them; what they will notice is whether you rose to the occasion and can describe what that looked like in practice.

USABLE ARTEFACT — CV BULLET POINT BUILDER FOR INFORMAL WORK

For each task you performed regularly, fill in the blanks in this structure, then write it as a single sentence:

Element	Your answer	Example
Action verb (past tense)		Reconciled
What you did		daily cash float
How much / how many / how often		averaging Ksh 25,000 per day
Result or responsibility level		and prepared written summary for the business owner each evening
Full bullet point	Reconciled daily cash float averaging Ksh 25,000 per day and prepared written summary for the business owner each evening.	

Common action verbs for informal business roles: managed, processed, reconciled, negotiated, coordinated, tracked, ordered, trained, resolved, operated, monitored, prepared, recorded, handled, supervised, sourced, delivered, maintained.

Common numbers to include: number of customers per day, cash float amount, number of stock items, number of suppliers, number of staff supervised, size of premises, duration of role, volume of transactions per week.

Job title quick guide:

- Served customers and handled cash → Sales Assistant / Retail Cashier
- Managed stock and placed orders → Stock Controller / Inventory Assistant
- Ran the business while owner was away → Acting Manager / Business Operations Assistant
- Operated M-Pesa, airtime or agency banking → Agency Banking Operator / Financial Services Assistant

Managed farm logistics and sales → Farm Operations Assistant / Agricultural Sales Coordinator

- Handled bookkeeping and payments → Accounts Assistant / Bookkeeper

USABLE ARTEFACT — SEVEN-DAY CHECKLIST: GET YOUR INFORMAL WORK ONTO YOUR CV THIS WEEK

- **Day 1 — List every informal role.** Write down every business, farm, stall or family operation you have worked in, even briefly. Include the rough dates (month and year is enough) and the location. Do this on paper or in a notes app — you do not need a laptop.
- **Day 2 — For each role, list your tasks.** Write every task you did regularly: opening the premises, serving customers, counting stock, ordering from suppliers, handling complaints, training a younger family member, banking cash, anything. Do not filter yet — just list.
- **Day 3 — Add numbers to each task.** Go through your task list and write a number next to each one. How many? How much? How often? Estimate where needed — round numbers are fine.
- **Day 4 — Write the bullet points.** Use the bullet point builder above. Write one bullet per major task. Aim for three to five bullets per role. Start every bullet with a past-tense action verb.
- **Day 5 — Write the employer and title line.** Use the job title quick guide above to pick your title. Write the employer name (or description), location and dates in the same format as any formal employer on your CV.
- **Day 6 — Confirm your reference.** Call or message the family member or business contact who will be your reference. Tell them you are job-hunting, explain what the business role was, and ask if they are willing to take a call from a recruiter. Get their current phone number.
- **Day 7 — Read the full entry aloud.** If any sentence is vague, replace it. If any bullet contains the phrase "responsible for" without a number or outcome, rewrite it using the builder. Then update your CV on Google Docs, send it to your own email so you have a copy, and upload it to BrighterMonday or MyJobMag Kenya with the updated version.

PROVENANCE & ATTRIBUTION

Portions of this material were AI-drafted and reviewed by a SmartNet editor before publication.