

Cover Letters: Still a Chance to Stand Out

Many job seekers are unsure about the role and importance of a cover letter to accompany their resume in the modern-day job hunt. Now that the application process has mostly moved online, some candidates view the cover letter as a thing of the past. In fact, the necessity and value of the cover letter is increasingly debated.

Some hiring managers still use them to gain additional insights on candidates, while others do not find them particularly useful. Also, perhaps more significantly, the job application software used by some companies may not allow applicants to submit cover letters along with their resumes. And sometimes accompanying information simply does not find its way to hiring managers for a variety of other reasons. The importance attached to the cover letter also may vary from one company, industry and profession to another. For instance, companies that do not use resume-scanning software are more likely to find value in the cover letter because it can be an additional tool for helping them sort through and rank resumes.

When applying for any job in an ever-more competitive employment market, however, a strong cover letter can potentially increase your odds of being considered for a position, assuming you have an opportunity to provide one. Even if you are not able to submit one with an online application, candidates may want to forward a printed copy of their resume and cover letter by postal mail. Some career advisers have even advocated that job seekers consider putting on their best professional attire and hand-delivering their application materials to a prospective employer. Granted, this approach may not always be practical, but it could help your resume get noticed, especially if you know the name of the person to whom your materials should be delivered.

If a cover letter is an option, the next hurdle is to ensure that yours adds real value to your application. One point most hiring managers will agree on is that not all letters are created equal. A well-written letter can help candidates stand out, but a poor one can represent a lost opportunity. With this in mind, here are some do's and don'ts to follow when submitting a cover letter with your resume:

DO play the name game. Addressing your letter to the appropriate person – instead of “To Whom It May Concern” – shows that you’re interested enough in the position to have done some legwork. Sometimes the hiring manager’s name can be easily obtained by calling the company or searching its website for information. You may also be able to identify the right person by tapping into your network or through sites such as LinkedIn.com. Also, if you’re fortunate enough to have been personally referred to a company or hiring manager by a mutual acquaintance, be sure to mention your contact and explain why the person thought you would be a good fit for the firm or position.

DO keep it short. Hiring managers appreciate concise introductions that help them to quickly zoom in on the most relevant aspects of a candidate’s background. Keep in mind that you don’t get extra points for the length of your letter – in fact, the shorter, the better,

in the view of most hiring managers. Aim for two to three succinct paragraphs, especially if your cover letter is pasted into the body of an e-mail message.

DO address obvious concerns. If your resume is likely to raise questions or concerns about your suitability for the job – for instance, maybe you have strong accounting credentials but lack industry experience – confront the issue directly. Explain in specific terms how your skills and previous experience are easily transferable to a new environment or why a particular career change holds appeal for you. For instance, if you’re trying to move from public accounting into private industry, explain how your background in auditing gave you a broad understanding of industry-specific issues. By addressing possible obstacles head-on, you can use the cover letter to overcome objections to your candidacy.

DON’T rehash your resume. Perhaps the biggest mistake job seekers make in cover letters is that they simply recount details from their resume. This type of letter offers no additional insight for a hiring manager into why an applicant may be right for a position. Instead, highlight the experiences or qualifications you have that are most relevant for the position for which you’re applying. This shows that you’ve made the effort to relate your resume to the employer’s specific needs.

DON’T dash it off. Finally, a cover letter should be more than a hastily written prelude to an electronic attachment. Compose your message as carefully as you would your resume, and review it for flow, proper grammar and typographical errors. Ask others to proofread and critique it as well. Even though your cover letter may be sent as an e-mail, remember that it’s not an informal communication. Be sure to avoid casual language or electronic shorthand (e.g., “I know XYZ Company is an awesome place to work,” or “Pls see attached. Will call u soon.”).

Because the printed cover letter seems like it may be going the way of the typewriter, it’s not surprising that many job seekers treat these introductions as an afterthought or a superfluous element. But this may be a mistake. Especially in the current job market, it makes sense to avail yourself of every possible advantage to get the attention of a hiring manager. With this in mind, if you have the opportunity to submit a cover letter – even in e-mail form – seize it. Just make sure to craft one that truly helps your candidacy. It could provide the edge you need to get noticed in an increasingly crowded field.

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