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Top tips for effective cover letters

Think carefully about why a cover letter is needed or how it will be used by a potential employer. Who will receive the letter initially and what might its function serve?

This may differ depending upon the organisation. For example, in some organisations it may be Human Resources (HR) staff that may review your application, whereas in other organisations it may be the hiring manager themselves. With these items in mind, think about what your cover letter might look like and should contain. Should it be lengthy and detailed? Should it contain details from your resume?

Cover letters can be different

It's important to acknowledge that depending upon the organisation and the role, the requirements for a cover letter may look very different. There are two typical examples of a cover letter, these include:

1. **Generic, short cover letters:** These are typically one page maximum and seek to introduce you as a acandidate, an overview of why you are applying for the position (your motivation) and a high-level account of your educational background and aligned capabilities to the role.

2. **Cover letters that address the selection criteria:** These can be anywhere from 2 to 4 pages in length depending upon the job listing requirements and require you to address all the selection criteria within the cover letter.

By understanding the different types of cover letters, you are able to pick the most suitable letter that will help you to stand out for the crowd.

Tip 1: Read the application requirements carefully

The first step is to ensure that you carefully read the application requirements for the role. The job listing may specify the maximum length of the cover letter and the type of cover letter they want you to upload. For example, some positions may require you to submit a longer cover letter that addresses all the selection criteria, whereas other positions may require a resume, cover letter, and a response to the selection criteria document.

What if the listing does not specify the cover letter requirements?

On the job listing there will most likely be contact details (email and/or phone) of a staff member from HR or the hiring manager. If the job listing does not include the application requirements, be sure to reach out to the contact and enquire. Also, if there is no contact staff member listed, contact the provided organisation/department details to locate the suitable staff member to address your application to.

Tip 2: Write a customised cover letter for each job you apply for

It's not hard for HR staff or hiring managers to spot a generically written cover letter. They scan hundreds over a month and are acutely aware of all the *Build Your Own Cover Letter Templates* available on the internet. To ensure you stand out from the crowd, it is recommended that you customise your cover letter to address the criteria of the specific position and the values of the company that you are applying to.

For short cover letters

If the organisation is looking for a short-generic cover letter, carefully analyse the job listing and select two or three capabilities that you believe you align to and could bring value to the organisation. Provide brief examples of these and how they demonstrate the capabilities needed for the job you are applying for. For a generic cover letter, it is recommended to not exceed one page.

For cover letters that must address the selection criteria

If the organisation is looking for a cover letter which responds to the selection criteria, be sure to carefully identify the maximum number of pages you are afforded. Start with an introductory paragraph that specifies the role that you are applying for and why you believe you are a suitable candidate. In the remainder of your cover letter, be sure to either:

bold the selection criteria the first time they appear in the body of the letter or have headings and corresponding paragraphs for each of the selection criteria.

Tip 3: Use keywords

What if we told you that on many occasions your cover letter will first be read by computer software?

It's a fact that many large companies and organisations rely on **Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)** to vet or cull large numbers of cover letters and resumes that may not meet their standards. If you are uploading your documents to an online system, then it is highly likely they will undergo this process. ATS and front-line HR staff are scanning cover letters for keywords that address the specifications of the job listed. As the cover letter is a brief document, make every word count by including keywords that include your capabilities, relevant credentials, education and previous positions and employers.

Here are some examples:

Capability keywords

Words such as: led, designed, managed, programmed, implemented, built, taught, planned

Instead of writing:

UX design is one of my strengths and an asset I could bring to the firm

Try:

In 2019, I designed a web platform that brought usability and functionality to the hands of key users and stakeholders.

Results keywords

Words such as: increased, produced, decreased, upgraded, enhanced, improved, generated, created

Instead of writing:

I am a results driven person focused on delivering improvements in waste management system wide.

Try:

Last year, through the creation of a more efficient inventory, I decreased waste and stockpiling of goods by 25%.

Recognition keywords

Words such as: awarded, promoted, selected, recognised, chosen, credited, received

Example:

By graduation I was awarded _____ and credited with the publications of four peer-reviewed papers exploring sustainable design technologies.

Tip 4: Show yourself while remaining professional and polite

Your cover letter should be professional, well formatted and aligned with the job specifications. It should also be a unique selling or marketing point of your achievements, skills and personality that you will bring to the position. Cross functional communication, teamwork, being flexible, adapting to change are all critical attributes to possess, but avoid expressing them in clichéd, overused phrases like go getter, results driven, team player. Instead replace these words with the keywords suggested in Tip 3 in real contexts. You want to be seen as professional and polite, but not fake. These attributes are easily extrapolated by reading your experiences and achievements.

Some final tips

- Keep it to one page only (unless otherwise specified)
- Note the position and company that you are applying for
- Address your cover letter to the contact person
- Ensure that you read the job listing carefully and follow the steps listed
- Proofread and edit before sending

For further details, please contact:

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